

Harry Potter and The Third Key

By

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Prologue

The Magi were defeated. The Wizards, led by Salazar Slytherin, had finally swept the last traces of their Barbarian blood off the face of the planet; the last stand being made at Hoag Ward, a remote moor in the Northern highlands. 'Proof, then, that brawn is no match for brain,' he thought, as he surveyed his surroundings.

He knew that there were voices that had disapproved of his methods in the battle, but *Avada Kedavra* was the only weapon the primitives appeared to understand; Slytherin had little time for weak-minded liberalists, apologists who seemed to live purely to dream up new limitations to impose upon their own power.

Such reasoning did not make sense to Salazar; they were what they were. The liberals lacked the vision to see what power they could ultimately command, being too concerned with protecting the Muggles, who, though even more primitive than the Magi, were more numerous than the Wizards.

The Magi's stone circle was still intact - it would have to go; he disagreed with Rowena Ravenclaw on this point - she had been arguing that they should preserve the feature, that demolishing the structure now was nothing more than vandalism.

"Don't you see?" he'd asked, "we have evolved beyond the Magi stage - there's nothing they can offer that we do not already possess. We've proved that the precision and subtlety that is our art is superior to their bludgeon-like crudity. There is no possible gain in leaving a door open to our descendants to abandon all that we have learnt and return to these Barbarian ways."

The problem turned out to be the central stone. 'Boulder' seemed inaccurate a term - it seemed more like a large pebble. Perfectly smooth and uniformly black, it was the sole remnant of the original circle, the shattered fragments of which had been thrown into the lake.

They tried levitation charms at first, but they'd had no effect. A transportation incantation had been singularly ineffective. Slytherin had hurled lightning bolts at it, Hufflepuff had attempted to dissolve it with corrosive potions. Gryffindor had tried to pulverise it with a storm of boulders. After each attack, the stone remained exactly where it was, seemingly unchanged.

This resilience troubled the wizards. What kind of dark magic could create such an indestructible object? And what was the purpose of such a thing? News reached them that similar stones had been discovered at the fall of the Strang and Box-Bat sects...

"So, my friends," said Slytherin, "we are left with this puzzle. The three centres of the Magi's power all appear to have these stones as central elements in some kind of shrine." They were standing to one side of the object in question - it was cold, and Ravenclaw was warming the group with a small fire of blue flame, that sizzled as the drizzle fell.

"Clearly, these things are of some significance to the Magi," his contempt for the Magi was clear as he nearly spat the word out, "and as we cannot seem yet to destroy it, nor move it to a safe place, I feel we must protect it, and its brothers, in the sites they are now. We must prevent any possibilities of the primitives regrouping - so that means either destroying, or, in

this case," he indicated the stone with a vague wave of his arm, "isolating, any focal points they may try to rally behind.

"We should not dismiss this as an innocent trinket; the Magi went through the trouble of dedicating the stone circle to them. It *must* have some significance. I therefore suggest that we post a guardian at each of the stones, to prevent any deluded fools from attempting to re-open the door we have only just closed."

"What sort of guardian did you have in mind?" enquired Hufflepuff, "the forest about us would provide good shelter from Muggle eyes, and there's the lake, too."

Slytherin nodded, thoughtfully, "This is true, and such wards and guards will be useful, but I was actually meaning to post a senior wizard as a guardian."

Gryffindor laughed. "You're getting paranoid, Salazar. There's nothing here..." he made a show of turning round to survey the desolate landscape as he spoke.

"Nothing here, but this stone," corrected Slytherin.

"...nothing here but this stone, then. What, would we assign wizards and witches to keep watch during periods of sabbatical? I can't see too many volunteers for that."

Slytherin turned to Ravenclaw; "Rowena, maybe now is the time for your plan to be executed. I suggest that we found a school here in Hoag Ward - the headmaster would also keep care of this soakstone."

"Soakstone?" asked Gryffindor.

"Well," Slytherin shrugged, "it seems to soak up everything we can throw at it. Anyway, a school - I believe that Rowena is right - the way to ensure that magic does not again return to the barbarian hordes of the Magi is to ensure that our descendants all receive instruction in how to harness and utilise their abilities."

"And," added Hufflepuff, "we could encourage the Bulgarians and the French to do likewise with the Strang stone and the Box-Bat one. Three schools of witchcraft and wizardry..."

"It has a certain elegance," continued Slytherin, "since we would be keeping the Magi at bay on two fronts - denying access to these soakstones, and also ensuring that they cannot recruit, by teaching those magic born the route to the Higher Path."

And so it was that the schools of witchcraft and wizardry were born. Not, as the legends told, out of a philanthropic desire to promote learning, but, instead, as a mechanism to ensure that a defeated enemy could not again rise to a power that threatened the wizard's hold on the magical world.

Over time, the names softened and the schools grew, to become Hogwarts, Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. The Magi were considered extinct; a crude, primitive ancestor to the rule of the wand.

The soakstones, however, stayed exactly where they were, completely unchanged. Waiting.

Chapter 1:

Which wizard had a number one hit in the WWN charts for six consecutive weeks during the summer of 1973 with 'While Wizards Weep'?

As the sun set on another remarkably unremarkable day at 4 Privet Drive, Harry Potter sat gloomily staring out of the window. Approaching his fifteenth birthday, his jet black hair remained stubbornly wild, and although his eyes were notably green (from his mother, by all accounts), it was the scar on his forehead that distinguished him - a lightning bolt shaped scar, the relic of his encounter with the evil wizard Lord Voldemort as a baby.

For Harry was no ordinary teenage boy - he was a wizard. And, it seemed, he couldn't even manage being an ordinary wizard, either; the last year just gone had seen him not only nominated as a joint champion of his school, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but also actually win the Triwizard tournament, against opposition from two other schools - Durmstrang and Beauxbatons.

To cap that off, he'd then ended up facing Lord Voldemort in a wizard's duel, and had barely escaped with his life - as he recalled those last moments of battle in the graveyard, Harry felt a surge of guilt again, as he remembered grabbing hold of Cedric's body, so that it could be returned to his parents.

More than anything else, what Harry wanted was to belong to a family. His parents had been killed by Lord Voldemort before his attack on Harry had mysteriously backfired, and crippled the Dark Lord. For this reason, Harry was famous in the wizarding world - it was a fame he would happily swap with anyone; he felt as though his very fame made people think he was public property, to be ogled at, whispered about, fawned over.

Not, mind you, that there was much fawning over him going on right now, at 4 Privet Drive. It hadn't taken long for Harry to recall his place in the Dursley household. That place was in the wrong.

The Dursleys were Harry's only living relations, and for this reason Harry had lived with them ever since that night when his parents had been killed. And if Harry thought he'd got a bad deal here, it was nothing compared to the injustice Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon thought had been delivered upon them when he'd been left on their doorstep that fateful night.

Although Harry now had an actual bedroom of his own (for the first ten years, he'd been forced to sleep in the cupboard under the stairs), Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had now had 14 years of practice to get their withering contempt for Harry and 'his *kind*', as they put it, honed, and clearly felt it would be a waste to let any opportunity to remind Harry of this slip by.

Conversation of any kind concerning magic was banned in the Dursley household. Any attempt to raise, even tangentially, a topic near the M-word would always result in Uncle Vernon turning puce with rage and hissing "There's.... no.... such.... thing... as....*Magic*."

Harry had tried conversation on what he thought were safer topics, and asked Dudley, his cousin, how school had been this past year. Glances had been exchanged around the table, before Uncle Vernon had said "I never thought I'd say this, but Smeltings just isn't the institution it was in my day."

"You're quite right dear," simpered Aunt Petunia, "they just couldn't see talent when it was presented to them," she added, affecting a hurt tone. Dudley, Harry noticed, was keeping quiet at this point. "All that nonsense about his weight," his Aunt continued (Dudley was still nearly as wide as he was tall), "was just a smokescreen to cover the fact that they were prejudiced against the boy."

"So," said Uncle Vernon, taking over the narrative, "Dudley's been attending Curragh's since Easter. It's a *little* more expensive, but I'll not have my son's talent so flagrantly ignored by those bumbling fools at Smeltings any more."

Harry did his best not to smile - the only talent Dudley seemed to have, apart from being the butt of magical jokes courtesy of Hagrid, or Fred and George Weasley, was one for being a fantastically stupid, fat spoilt pig. Nonetheless, it clearly seemed a sore topic (Harry could have sworn that Uncle Vernon had winced at the words 'little more expensive'), so he let the matter drop.

"Speaking of fees, though," said Uncle Vernon, in his best 'by-the-way' tone of voice, "that...*place* you go to can't be cheap. Who's paying for it all?"

Harry had long been dreading this particular question. His parents had left him a small fortune in wizard money - gold Galleons mostly (seventeen silver sickles to a Galleon, twenty nine Knuts to a sickle), all safely locked away inside a vault in Gringotts, the Wizard Bank. Although Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia wouldn't have anything at all to do with magic, Harry was pretty sure that they wouldn't consider a massive pile of gold to be anything in the least bit magical. So he extemporised.

"Well, it's quite simple really," explained Harry, earnestly, "the, wi---erm, I mean we," (the word 'wizard' was also verboten at 4 Privet Drive) "have this bartering system with charms, so you buy books in return for agreeing to cast..."

"YOU WILL NOT DISCUSS THOSE.. THAT... THOSE...THOSE THINGS IN THIS HOUSE," thundered Uncle Vernon, in a splustering rage. Harry winced, dutifully, but was secretly relieved that he seemed to have bought the whole idea.

And so it was that Harry was watching the sun set on 30 July - his last day of being fourteen. He wasn't particularly looking forward to his birthday - the Dursleys had never, as far as he could recall, given any indication that they knew what day his birthday was, and as for presents, cards or cake? Forget it.

Nonetheless, Harry knew that Ron and Hermione wouldn't forget his birthday - last year they'd sent cake as well, to fortify him through Dudley's diet regime (which in a fit of solidarity, had been inflicted upon all the inhabitants at Number 4). He had hoped to visit one, or both of them over the summer, but it seemed as though that wasn't going to happen this year - the Weasley's were visiting their Charlie, who was studying dragons in Romania,

whilst Hermione had been invited to stay with Viktor Krum, the famous (in wizarding circles) Quidditch player, in Bulgaria.

Right on cue, a tiny owl came buzzing through the window, flying round Harry's room in a near hyperactive frenzy. Hedwig, Harry's own owl, glared at the intruder, Ron's owl Pigwidgeon, or 'Pig' for short. Harry eventually managed to convince Pigwidgeon that he should deliver his message, which was a short note from Ron:

"Hi Harry!

Happy Birthday - hope the Dursley's aren't Muggling you to death. Romania is great! Charlie's working with a team who are studying a nest of Norwegian Ridgebacks! Hagrid would go nuts if he saw how many eggs there were here! Mum, dad and everyone say 'Hi' - see you on the train.

Ron"

Although pleased to hear from Ron, Harry was slightly disappointed that he wouldn't be seeing him until the train back to Hogwarts - he'd hoped that he might be able to stay at the Weasley's house for the last week or so, but, clearly, they didn't think they'd be back from Romania in time for guests.

Two owls arrived simultaneously, and there appeared to be some minor argument as to who should present their message to Harry first. Pigwidgeon, meanwhile, was puffing himself up impressively, no doubt to remind everyone that he'd actually delivered the first message of the evening.

Harry unfurled the note that had been attached to a black owl with greyish markings - he'd not seen one like it before, and as he read the letter, he realised why:

"Dear Harry

I hope this arrives with you in time - I'm not sure whether Durmstrang's owls will be able to find you as quickly as a Hogwart's one. I'm having a very interesting time staying at Durmstrang with Viktor - the grounds are very eyecatching.

Anyway, Happy Birthday for the 31st (which I hope hasn't already happened!) I'll see you on the train, write soon!

Lots of love

Hermione

ps - Have you started writing your speech?"

Harry puzzled over the curious wording of Hermione's letter; an 'interesting time'? Not 'good' or 'fantastic' (although, now he thought about it, he wasn't sure Hermione would do 'fantastic'). Oh well, they'd be able to catch up on the train. And what did she mean, *have you started writing your speech?*

The third owl, a large barn owl, extended its leg, to reveal a scruffy paper written in large, uneven handwriting that was immediately recognisable as Hagrid's:

"Happy Birthday Harry!

Hope you're well, and that dolt Dursley is behaving himself. I'm sending you this from France, I'm currently staying at Beauxbaton's with Madame Maxine. We've been travelling about a fair bit, and there's a lot more to do - can't say much more, Official Hogwarts Business.

See you back at Hogwarts!

Hagrid"

Although delighted to have heard from all his friends, it hadn't escaped Harry's attention that they were all currently on holiday (even if Hagrid was on 'Official Hogwarts Business'). Hermione in Bulgaria, Ron in Romania, Hagrid in France... and Harry at Number 4 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey, he mused, feeling a little sorry for himself.

A fourth owl flew in, taking Harry completely by surprise. Even Hedwig looked mildly alarmed at the new intruder - she was already having to share her water with three (Harry fervently hoped that Aunt Petunia wouldn't spot the expanding army of postal owls currently residing under her roof).

"Dear Harry

I hope you're OK - just wanted to say "Happy Birthday."

Speak to you soon.

Cho (Chang)"

Harry's heart did somersaults, and a huge grin spread across his face. He'd got a note from Cho - as if she needed to remind him who she was with the '(Chang)' bit!

Cho was Ravenclaw's seeker - she'd be a sixth year in the new term, a year above Harry, even though she was shorter than him. And exceptionally pretty (Harry thought). Coming back down to Earth, Harry reminded himself that Cho had been going out with Cedric during the triwizard cup - Cedric had died, killed by Lord Voldemort at the end of the third task, a loss for which Harry felt partly responsible.

Voldemort hadn't wanted Cedric. He'd wanted Harry - he'd set up the whole tournament so that he would get Harry, and when Cedric unwittingly arrived at the same moment, Voldemort had unhesitatingly killed him. Outright.

Yes, he thought, he had a lot to explain to Cho... The initial thrill that Cho must have made some sort of effort to work out when his birthday was soon dissipated - she could have looked up the birthday of The-Boy-Who-Lived in any number of textbooks; nonetheless, she still sent him a note, didn't she?

Harry re-read the note again, trying to sense any hidden meaning behind her chosen words. *I hope you're OK - just wanted to say "Happy Birthday." Speak to you soon.*

His thoughts were interrupted this time by the arrival of a pair of owls, carrying a parcel suspended between them. Hedwig, glaring at Harry as though he'd deliberately planned this, left her perch and floated off into the night. Just the six owls, then; Harry tried not to imagine the looks on Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon's faces if they could see his room at this point. Still, he hoped that once the owls had fed and watered they'd be on their way.

Harry opened the parcel, which was from Sirius, his godfather, who also happened to be an escaped convict from the wizard prison on Azkaban. Sirius was actually innocent, but the authorities weren't swayed by his case, so he remained on the run.

"Happy Birthday Harry!

Hope the Muggles are treating you OK - I've been moving about a fair bit this summer, can't say too much, hope to see you once term's started.

Snuffles"

'Snuffles' was Harry's code name for Sirius, an animagus whose animal form was that of a huge black dog. Sirius was still a wanted man, after all, so it made sense to take reasonable precautions.

The parcel contained two bottles of Butterbeer, Harry's favourite drink, and a bar of Honeyduke's chocolate.

As Harry sipped some Butterbeer, and re-read Cho's note for about the hundredth time (*Speak to you soon*) - just in case he'd missed any hidden meaning, he reflected that, actually, being 15 wasn't bad at all...

He wondered, slightly uneasily, exactly what Hermione meant by 'speech'.

The following morning, however, life at Number 4 Privet Drive put him firmly back in his place again, as they all sat around the table at breakfast, completely ignoring the fact that Harry had turned 15 that day.

"Dudley - go and get the post dear, thank you," said Aunt Petunia

"Make Harry get it," said Dudley, his mouthful of bacon, sausages, baked beans, fried egg and toast (the diet appeared to have been a passing fad).

"Harry - get the post," ordered Uncle Vernon

"Make Dudley get it," said Harry, getting in the spirit of things.

"I will NOT tolerate your insolence in this house" thundered Uncle Vernon - "go and fetch the post boy! That *place* you go to might not have instilled the meaning of hard graft in you, but,"

and his voice dropped to a dangerously controlled whisper, "mark my words, boy, by the end of this holiday we'll have instilled some sense of a work ethic into you."

As he went to fetch the post (two bills and a postcard from the seemingly perpetually holidaying Marge), Harry strongly suspected that Dudley wouldn't recognise a work ethic if it bit him on the ankle.

Having transferred schools at Easter, Dudley found himself in the quite unexpected, and clearly wholly unreasonable situation of being required to do some homework across the summer. So, having finished his third breakfast, Dudley brought his school bag to the table, and started to pull out his exercise books. Harry, who had never seen Dudley willingly embark upon any academic endeavour in his life, watched in amazement.

This would prove to be a mistake.

"Maths. I *hate* maths," said Dudley, gloomily, as he opened the textbook. His eyes drifted across the table to meet Harry's, "make Harry do it."

"Harry, you'll do Dudley's maths for him," trilled Aunt Petunia.

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but was silenced by a furious scowl from Uncle Vernon. With belated alarm, Harry could see Dudley processing thoughts in his head; it was a ponderous process, but Harry was sure that the end result would be inevitable...

"I hate history, too," Dudley continued, miserably...

"Harry, do Dudley's history essay."

Dudley opened his French textbook with a heart-rending and pitiable sigh. Harry knew exactly where this was heading...

"Well then," said Aunt Petunia brightly, a few minutes later, once all Dudley's schoolwork had been transferred to Harry's care, "that's killed two birds with one stone; Duddykins' homework gets done AND we keep *you*," (on 'you' she shot a venomous look at Harry) "out of trouble for the summer."

"Quite right," added Uncle Vernon "I've always said that children need to have a break from the rigours of schoolwork for their holidays; let off steam, express themselves. Make the most of being 15, Dudley - you can't spend your life working through your holidays."

Harry rather felt as though he, as the bird, had been killed by two medium sized boulders: not only was he now lumbered with doing Dudley's homework (on top of Hogwarts'), but his cousin was being given carte blanche to rub his face in it by having as ostentatiously good a time as was humanly possible.

He trudged back upstairs to his room, Hermione's voice in his head explaining earnestly how doing Dudley's homework would be an excellent opportunity to broaden his knowledge. Maybe he was doing Hermione a disservice, he thought... Perhaps.

No sooner had he sat down at his desk, and opened the maths textbook, however, than the walls of the house shook with the sound of a huge explosion. Harry was halfway to the loose

floorboard, ready to dig out his wand when the theme music told him that the cause of the commotion was not, in fact, an undesirably close apocalyptic event, but just Dudley getting to grips with *Gratuitous Violence and Senseless Carnage III* on his Playstation.

Harry hammered on Dudley's door - "Can you turn the sound down?" he hollered, "After all, I'm trying to do *your* homework".

"There will be no shouting in this house," shrieked Aunt Petunia, in the face of all evidence being to the contrary, from the foot of the stairs, "and you leave Dudley alone - you know he doesn't like being disturbed when he's on the computer."

"But I can't hear myself think to work," protested Harry.

"Well then," she replied, "why don't you go to the library?"

"But it's two miles away," Harry started, before being cut off.

"Listen, you ungrateful wretch. Lord knows, your uncle and I have been more than accommodating of you, but we will only bend *so* far; the walk will do you good, anyway."

Harry, who had been flummoxed completely by the 'more than accommodating' statement, decided that discretion was definitely the better part of valour, and started gathering Dudley's books together to take to the library, making a mental note to ask Professor Sinistra exactly which particular planet his Aunt and Uncle were likely to have come from - and if it was anywhere near Earth.

Actually, the Muggle library wasn't that bad - it wasn't Hogwarts, of course, and Ron and Hermione weren't there either, but it was definitely an improvement on Number 4.

Harry had spread his books, no, Dudley's books, he corrected himself, across a table, and was methodically working his way through the mathematics exercises. It seemed straightforward enough - you read the chapter, followed the examples, and then substituted the numbers in the questions for the numbers in the examples to get the answer.

He got up to stretch his legs, and somehow ended up in the educational reference section. As he scanned the shelves, he saw that the library had Dudley's maths text book on the shelf. And next to it, there was *the accompanying answer book*. As Harry reached out (just to have a look), Hermione's voice appeared in his head:

"Harry, no WAY! That's cheating!"

Unfortunately, she had competition from Ron's voice, who had no such qualms "C'mon Harry, it's not as if it's even YOUR homework! Plus no-one can complain if you get 100% for Dudley's homework, can they?"

As Ron and Hermione's voices bickered in his head as to the correct course of action, Harry noticed the librarian watching him with an expression of distrust. He left the book on the shelf and continued scanning, trying to look casual. He returned to his desk, the librarian wearing a disapproving scowl reminiscent of Crookshanks, Hermione's cat.

Moving on to physics, Dudley's assignment simply said "Explain what is meant by the phrase 'Conservation of Energy'. Harry looked at the paper blankly, took a deep sigh and started to read the appropriate chapter of the text book. As he read, the root of it all seemed to be that although energy could change state, the sum total of energy in the Universe was apparently supposed to be constant.

The topic intrigued Harry - he assumed that the book was written by Muggles, but wondered nevertheless whether the concept held true in the wizarding world. Where did the magic energy come from? Where did it go? How much of it was there?

Returning back to Privet Drive, Harry had to contend with the usual array of domestic chores before embarking upon his own homework in the evenings - completing assignments with quill and parchment would almost certainly have got him thrown out of the library.

And so the days passed - Harry would spend the daytimes in the library, and the spare bits of the evenings in his room, completing his Hogwart's homework. Dudley's homework hadn't actually taken that long, apart from the French, which left Harry completely clueless... however, suspecting that Dudley would be no less proficient at the subject than he was, Harry wasn't unduly worried.

And every day, he re-read Cho's message: *I hope you're OK - just wanted to say "Happy Birthday." Speak to you soon.*

Chapter 2:

Where would you find a bezoar?

Harry watched Uncle Vernon's car (a newer, bigger, shinier and certainly more expensive one than last time) speed off into the distance, before turning to the Leaky Cauldron - he had three days until the Hogwart's Express would be leaving.

It was the same room as last year. The mirror remembered him: "hello dear," it wheezed; glancing at his reflection (which is where the voice had come from), Harry instinctively tried to flatten down his hair, "thought you'd have given up on that by now, dear," it sighed.

Harry spent the next two days in Diagon Alley, gathering supplies for the new term and looking out for friends. He ran into Seamus at Florean Fortescues, who introduced his sister, Colette, about to start her first year. Harry felt slightly embarrassed that he hadn't known that Seamus, with whom he'd shared a dormitory in Gryffindor for four years, even *had* a sister.

He saw Pansy Parkinson and Blaise Zabini, but as they were both Slytherins, they clearly seemed to have a Harry-sized blind spot. Not so Padma and Parvati Patel, who both said Hi, even if Harry and Parvati's date at the Champion's Ball hadn't exactly been a roaring success.

Everywhere he went, he kept an eye out for Cho, but he hadn't spotted her yet. *Hope you're OK, she'd written, speak to you soon...*

Bookwise, Miranda Goshawk's *Book of Standard Spells Volume 5* was predictable enough (and yes, they *did* go up to Volume 7, Harry confirmed with the book seller), but there was also *Elements and Energy: An Introduction, Intermediate Transfiguration*, and *The Inner Eye II: Sifting the Vision*. This last one had been firmly under the 'optional' column in Harry's mental book list, but he'd spotted it heavily reduced in the bargain bin at Flourish and Blotts, so....

The window of Quidditch Racing Supplies featured the Palomino, an entirely new design of Quidditch broom, Harry read, with superior braking ability, and ultra-pliable three-core stem to aid dives and spins. Harry reminded himself that he already possessed the Firebolt - and even though it didn't boast an 'ultra-pliable three-core' stem (Harry didn't actually know what one was, but it certainly sounded good), he had to admit it was still the best broom at Hogwarts. The Quidditch cup had been abandoned last year, to make way instead for the Triwizard cup - Harry was looking forward to picking up the game again.

Hermione turned up the 31st, with Crookshanks and her parents in tow. Harry was vaguely unnerved by Mr Granger's advice that "starting off with a joke usually works well, but it *does* depend on the audience." He'd forgotten to ask Hermione what on earth she meant by 'speech' - all he could do for now was play along until her parents had gone, and then question her. He had a sinking feeling that the answer would lie somewhere inside *Hogwarts: A History*.

Ron had sent an owl to say that they'd be travelling to the station direct, so Harry and Hermione took a Muggle taxi to the station. Harry had sent Hedwig up to Hogwarts before he

left Privet Drive, thereby reducing some of the luggage he had to contend with, but between them they still managed to nearly fill the black cab. Harry felt a lot less conspicuous without Hedwig and her huge cage - after all, plenty of people travelled with cats, didn't they?

They met up with the Weasleys on Platform 9¾. Fred and George were updating Lee Jordan on developments in Weasley Wizard Wheezes - Harry wondered with vague unease exactly how they were going to top Canary Creams (or, more pertinently, upon whom they were going to demonstrate how they'd achieved this). Fred (or George) managed to discreetly confirm with Harry that they had, as requested, used some of the 1,000 Galleons Harry had 'anonymously invested' in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes (his Triwizard winnings) to buy both Ron *and* Ginny new dress robes "...and a special extra for Ron," he'd finished, conspirationally.

Ron had grown over the summer - he was now approaching 6 foot, and had also thickened out as well.

"Lots of hiking in Romania between the different nesting sites," he'd explained, when Hermione had commented that he certainly looked fit after the break. Harry, still the shortest boy in the year, began to resent having spent the entire summer in the library. "You wouldn't believe the stuff we saw - there was this fantastic fight between two Norwegian Ridgeback males for a mate..." he continued, and began to recount the spectacle for Harry and Hermione's benefit. Harry relaxed back in his seat, glad to be in the company of his friends after the summer, and looking forward to the new term (probably uniquely amongst 15 year old boys, he reflected, with a smile).

A thought struck Harry "Hermione, why aren't you in the prefect's compartment?" he asked - it was a foregone conclusion to the entire year that Hermione was Gryffindor prefect.

"Well, mainly, I wanted to travel with you two - I haven't seen you all summer," Hermione replied, "but also, guess who's Slytherin prefect?"

"Not Pansy Parkinson!" exclaimed Ron.

"Nope. Try again."

"Blaise?" suggested Harry.

"Nope. Malfoy."

"Malfoy? *Draco* Malfoy?" asked Ron, as if there were hundreds of Malfoys at Hogwarts. In their fifth year. In Slytherin.

"The one and the same. Anyway, Justin's Hufflepuff prefect, and Lisa Turpin is Ravenclaw's. I only hope it doesn't take too much of my time away from revision."

"Revision?" asked Harry, blankly.

"This is the year we take our O.W.Ls!" exclaimed Hermione, evidently horrified that revision wasn't the first thing on Harry's mind.

"Well, technically, Hermione, I think you'll find that the OWLs are actually in June *next* year," corrected Ron, which made Harry feel much more comfortable. Hermione was not to be daunted, however.

"Well yes... but that's only nine months away, and there's *so* much to cover," she continued, "anyway I've drawn up a revision timetable..."

"A what?" cried Ron indignantly, "Hermione, we haven't even ARRIVED yet, and you're talking about revising for exams that are the best part of a year away!"

"You can't be too prepared. The O.W.Ls have a real bearing on what careers we follow after Hogwarts, and I, for one, intend to take them seriously." Hermione had turned into scholar mode.

This made Harry think - he'd never given any consideration to what he might actually *do* as a qualified wizard (besides, events to date appeared to have been doing their best to ensure that such a notion would be of academic interest, anyway - he'd been in mortal peril at some point in each of his four years so far). Professor Moody, no - Barty Crouch, posing as Mad-Eye Moody - had suggested that Harry consider training as an Auror, but Harry wondered how seriously he should take career advice from a Death-Eater.

Remembering the closing events of last year, Harry got up "I'm just going to take a wander up and down the train," he said.

"Looking for anyone in particular?" asked Ron, slyly.

Harry felt his face flushing. "Er, well, Cho sent me a birthday card..."

"Well well, *Champion* Potter," drawled a familiar voice.

"Bugger off, Malfoy," said Ron by way of greeting. Draco Malfoy, *Prefect* Draco Malfoy, dressed entirely in immaculately tailored black showed no sign of moving, as he leant against the door.

"You think that Chang's going to forgive you for killing Diggory?" Malfoy directed his question directly at Harry, ignoring Ron and Hermione completely.

"I... did... not... kill.. Cedric," hissed Harry, "Voldemort killed him."

"So *you* say," responded Malfoy, with a shrug of his shoulders to indicate how much Harry's words counted to him. Harry noticed that Malfoy hadn't flinched at the mention of Voldemort's name - but then, he hadn't expected that he would.

"Why don't you ask your precious father? He. Was. *There*." countered Harry, punctuating every word. He was pleased to note that Malfoy wasn't able to shake *that* off quite so easily.

"You want to be careful about making those sorts of allegations, Potter," he hissed, "as.."

"Well Draco," interrupted Hermione brightly, "are you going to ask me out or not?"

Malfoy looked stunned, and Harry noticed the briefest traces of pink flash across his face.

"It's just that you're clearly not here to talk to Ron or Harry," persisted Hermione, fluttering her eyelashes.

"I'd rather snog a hag," retorted Malfoy, somewhat limply, before disappearing down the corridor.

"Nice one, Hermione!" said Ron, before checking "you weren't, I mean, you don't... you weren't *serious* were you?"

"Of course not! But it got rid of him, didn't it? Harry, you OK?"

Harry was standing at the doorway - Malfoy's accusation, false though it was, had struck a nerve. As Draco said, people only had Harry's word that Voldermort had risen again.

"He's right, though, isn't he?" asked Harry, "I mean, that's what people are thinking, even if they're not saying it...."

Hermione and Ron looked uneasily at each other. Ron recovered quickest.

"But she sent you a birthday card, didn't she? And she's never done that before right? What have you got to lose?"

"Ron's right," encouraged Hermione, "She made the first move - she got in touch with *you*..."

Sometimes, the deliberation is harder than the act itself, and once Harry had set off from their compartment, he felt slightly more confident. Right up to the point where he reached Cho's compartment, in fact, whereupon all nerve lost him completely, but not before he'd been spotted by one of her friends, who had, in turn nudged Cho. She made her way to the door.

"Hey Harry, how are you?"

"Er, fine thanks. I mean, thanks for the note on my birthday. I was thinking about you," Harry was aware he was speaking too quickly, and could feel the heat rising in his face once more. Cho came out of the compartment, and closed the door, and stood looking out of the corridor's window at the passing scenery. She really was exceptionally pretty: Harry suddenly felt three times his normal size, and impossibly clumsy, as he tried to work out where and how to stand.

"So how have you been?" Harry asked.

"I've been OK," Cho replied, "really. For the first couple of weeks, I was kind of numb, almost as though I was scared of not missing him, if you know what I mean."

Harry wasn't sure if he did know, and didn't feel best qualified to be in the conversation at all, apart from being the only person who would admit to have seeing Cedric's death at first hand.

"It's my fault Cedric was there at all," said Harry, dully. He tried to explain how the Third Task had ended - seeing the spider about to attack Cedric, agreeing to grab the trophy simultaneously, and then discovering too late it had been a portkey. He skipped over Voldermort (Cho flinched every time he mentioned that name) describing Cedric as 'the spare', and didn't relay any of the names of the Death-Eaters.

He explained how Cedric's, what, ghost? had appeared as he was locked in the duel with Voldemort, and how it was Cedric who'd asked that Harry return his body (as he was explaining this, he was suddenly struck with the horrible thought that Cho might ask if Cedric had mentioned her at all - fortunately, she didn't).

For a long time, they watched the fields flickering past the window.

Eventually, Cho said "It's not your fault, you know".

"I told him to take hold of the trophy at the same time as me," Harry persisted, glumly, "I should have just grabbed it myself, but I never wanted to be Champion - Cedric was the real Champion."

"You faced You-Know-Who in a duel, and lived!" said Cho, "Now *that* is a champion."

"It was a fluke," Harry said, "Ollivander told me that our wands both had the same core. I was just lucky, not deserving."

Cho didn't seem to know what to say to that, so they returned to the scenery. Fields had briefly given way to forest.

"I'll be glad to get back. Quidditch is back again this term, of course," she said, finally breaking the silence, "and, if I remember correctly, I owe you one for beating me to the Snitch the last time around."

Harry smiled, "We'll see about that. This year's cup has Gryffindor's name on it." The conversation seemed to have ended, so he added "I'd better get back to my compartment," but didn't move.

"OK." They stood awkwardly for a few seconds, before they both opened their arms to give each other a wordless hug, Harry still feeling as though he was several sizes too big - Cho had a natural grace that made him feel stumbling and clumsy.

They released, and Harry took a step back; "I'm glad you're OK," he said - he was about to add something else, but in the end just shrugged.

"You take care, Harry." Cho reopened her compartment door and slipped back in. Harry wandered back up the train until he came to the doorway space at the end of the carriage. There he stopped, alone with his thoughts as he watched the trees pass by. Nothing would happen between him and Cho - he knew that now, but, at the same time, he counted her as a friend. Daylight was beginning to fade as he made his way back to Ron and Hermione's carriage.

"How'd it go?" asked Ron, eagerly.

"Hmm." said Harry, with a shrug, hoping Ron would take the hint and shut up.

Hermione eyed him carefully. "Are you OK?" she asked, gently.

"Yeah, fine" he replied, and returned to staring out of the window as dusk fell, Crookshanks on his lap, purring softly as Harry scratched him just behind the ears.

"First years this way, please" Professor McGonagall's crisp voice carried across the Hogwarts platform. Harry exchanged looks with Hermione.

"But Hagrid always collects the first years," said Harry.

"Maybe he's still in France," suggested Hermione, "you know, negotiating with the giants or whatever."

"Wonder who'll be taking Care of Magical Creatures, then?" asked Ron,

"Knowing our luck, probably Snape," said Harry. The three laughed - Professor Snape, unpleasant as the potions master was, would almost certainly not be a stand in for Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures lessons. Still, having felt that they'd established a base line for their expectations, they headed off towards the carriages that would take them to Hogwarts itself.

As the carriage set off on its route to Hogwarts, Hermione suddenly turned to Harry.

"Where's your speech?"

Harry's blood froze, and he turned to face Hermione "I forgot to ask you about that! What speech?"

Hermione looked at Harry in disbelief. "You mean, you haven't prepared anything?"

"What speech?" asked Ron, instantly making Harry feel much less inadequate.

"Honestly. Haven't you two read *Hogwarts: A History*?" Ron and Harry exchanged glances.

"Nope," said Ron, "and we really don't need to, because you tell us everything anyway."

Hermione was about to respond with some cutting reply before Harry reminded her of his plight.

"Hermione, what speech?" he pleaded.

"Well, it's just that it's traditional for the returning Hogwarts champion to make a speech at the opening dinner," she explained.

Harry froze. "What, tonight?"

"Yes, tonight."

"Now??!" panic was mounting.

"Yes now! Honestly, if you'd thought to do a bit of background reading over the summer, you wouldn't be in this predicament," Hermione's sympathy for Harry's plight appeared to be evaporating fast.

"But I don't know what to say!" exclaimed Harry.

"And *that's* why you're supposed to prepare speeches," said Hermione, before taking pity on him, "Well, you don't have to say much, do you - just a 'welcome back to Hogwarts, have a good year' or something..."

Harry relaxed, slightly - Hermione was right (of course). Short and simple. That was it.

The carriages arrived at the front steps of the school, and the students disembarked - Harry realised that the first years had also come by carriage, instead of by boat. He wondered if Professor McGonagall had some particular aversion to the water - after all, her animagus form *was* a cat, wasn't it?

"Hey Harry, the gargoyles are moving!" Ron was pointing at the school wall, where sure enough, the gargoyles were watching the arrival of the new students. As most of the gargoyles were just gruesome heads with no body, they simply swivelled and watched as necessary, but the full-body gargoyles were actually walking, or crawling, up and down the building.

"That's creepy," said Hermione, with a shiver. Harry was forced to agree with her, the whole effect was distinctly sinister.

They made their way to the Great Hall, before Professor Flitwick, the Charms master, grabbed hold of Harry's arm.

"Hello Mr Potter, nice to have you back with us - we've got a seat at the top table for you," he explained as he shepherded Harry past the Gryffindor table, and up to the staff table. Any hope Harry had that Hermione had been mistaken was finally dashed as he walked numbly on towards his fate.

As if being in public view for the entire proceedings wasn't enough, Harry realised with horror that his place was next to Professor Snape.

"Good evening, *Champion* Potter" Professor Snape's demeanour seemed unchanged from last year, and he managed to make 'champion' sound as though it were some heinous insult. "I trust you had a pleasant summer..."

"umf," replied Harry, trying to quell rising panic. Ron and Hermione were giving him sympathetic looks, but they couldn't be too obvious about it, as Snape had now turned his hawk-like eyes to the Gryffindor table, almost daring them to give him an excuse to deduct points from the house cup.

Sorting passed in a daze, as Harry desperately tried to think of how he would compose his speech - he did see, however, that Seamus' sister had been put in Ravenclaw.

As Professor McGonagall cleared the Sorting Hat and stool away, Professor Dumbledore stood.

"Welcome to another year at Hogwarts," he said, his silvery beard seeming to sparkle in the candlelight, "and I find that for the first time in many, many years, we have a Hogwarts

Champion, Harry Potter, whose duty it is to provide the opening speech of term. Harry..." Professor Dumbledore motioned to Harry to stand, which he did, even as he was simultaneously willing the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

"Er, good evening everyone," said Harry (a fairly safe start that he'd determined quite early on in the evening), "I really wasn't expecting to have to do this," (another safe, simple statement that had the added benefit of being completely true), "and so I won't keep you long."

Harry was now beyond the text of the lines he'd worked out, and would be winging it from this point forward.

"I'm now entering my fifth year at Hogwarts. It's a very special place."

Harry paused, trying to think where he was headed with that thought. As he wasn't entirely sure, he decided to change tack: "Perhaps most of you know that the word 'champion' can also be a verb, meaning 'to promote', or 'to believe in'.

"Although I am somewhat reluctant to call myself *The* Hogwarts Champion, as I think there was a far better candidate than I, who was taken from us last summer," Harry paused momentarily, and glanced at the Hufflepuff table - he didn't need to mention Cedric by name, "I would have no hesitation in calling myself a champion *of* Hogwarts, and all that it stands for.

"Through my time here, I've learnt that Hogwarts prizes the individual's endeavour, and does not assess its students purely by their background. When Professor McGonagall first greeted us, back as first years some four years ago, she explained that our houses, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and of course Gryffindor," he nodded in turn to the appropriate tables, "would be like our family.

"That has certainly been the case for me, and, I would guess, for many of you here also, but I would also go further, and say that Hogwart's has been a home to me in more ways than any other place I can remember, and I hope that it shall continue to inspire trust as well as Slytherin ambition, Hufflepuff loyalty, Ravenclaw shrewdness and Gryffindor bravery in all who come through its doors."

A camera flash went off, and Harry made a mental note to kill Colin Creevey. Very, very slowly.

"I said that I had no hesitation in calling myself a champion of Hogwarts, and I hope that all of you here today would agree with that description for yourselves."

Harry had said about as much as he could think of, and tried to think of a way to close.

"and, er, um, I mean, that's it." he said, weakly, and sat down, to enthusiastic applause from the students (he did think that Hermione and Ron were overdoing it a little, although it was no surprise to see the Creevey brothers apparently in rapture unbridled in having had the privilege of hearing the Boy Who Lived's first formal speech).

"Nice speech, Potter," commented Snape, without any discernible emotion whatsoever, as Professor Dumbledore announced the start of the meal proper. The food that materialised on

the table looked delicious, but Harry felt too conspicuous, seated at the head table, to eat, and just nibbled, glancing occasionally to see the Gryffindor crowd enjoying the welcome back feast.

He was more interested, anyway, in the staffing announcements that normally followed the meal - the new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher would undoubtedly be the severe looking woman on Professor Dumbledore's left (Snape and Harry were to his right), but there was still no sign of Hagrid, nor any indication of who would take his place.

"I trust that we have all enjoyed this evening's meal," announced Professor Dumbledore, by way of introduction, "there are just a few start of term notices I wish to read out."

"As always, I would like to remind *all* students that the Forbidden Forest remains strictly out of bounds. This year, this also extends to the lake as well." So that explained why the first years had come by carriage, thought Harry. He wondered why.

"I would like to introduce students to Professor Vellum, our new Defence Against the Dark Arts tutor," Professor Dumbledore indicated, as Harry had guessed, the woman sitting on his left. "but there are two further notices to make.

"Firstly, our gamekeeper, Rubeus Hagrid, is currently engaged on business away from Hogwarts, and will not be returning for some weeks yet. Under the circumstances, then, our caretaker, Argus Filch," and at this point, Professor Dumbledore indicated Filch, who was standing at the back of the Great Hall, "has kindly agreed to take on Hagrid's teaching responsibilities."

Harry was aware that his jaw had dropped, and quickly closed it. And they thought Snape would have been bad.

"Secondly," continued Professor Dumbledore, seemingly unaware of the stunned silence his announcement had created, "many of you will recall Fleur Delacour, the Beauxbatons champion. I am delighted to inform you that Ms Delacour will be joining us in the next few days, to lend assistance to Professor Snape, the potions master." Harry couldn't work out whether this was good news or not. Ron's face, though, was a picture of optimism, he noticed.

"And that is all. Prefects will lead the first years to their dormitories - I trust the rest of you will have no difficulties in finding your way about the place."

The hall started to empty - Hermione was clearly in her element as a prefect, Harry thought, as she marshalled the Gryffindor first years. He half wondered if she was going to make them line up in alphabetical order.

"Welcome back, Harry," it was Professor Dumbledore, "and may I congratulate you on your speech?"

"Er thank you, Professor," Harry replied, before confessing, "I hadn't realised I would have to make a speech at all."

"Sometimes it's better not to dwell on such things," Professor Dumbledore continued, before asking, casually, "and I take it you had a pleasant summer. No headaches or such?"

Taking this as an oblique reference to the way his scar appeared to hurt when Voldemort was active, Harry confirmed that nothing had happened "it was fine. Very quiet."

Most of the Gryffindors had already made their way past the Fat Lady by the time Harry finally made it up to the dormitory. Ron was waiting for him, with a face of pure disgust.

"You're not going to *believe* what the password is," he said, despairingly.

Harry threw Ron a puzzled look - the prefects chose the house passwords for the year. Ron sighed, and turned to the painting.

"O.W.Ls" he said, with a heavy voice. The Fat Lady let them pass.

Chapter 3:

How many Knuts are there in 7 Galleons and 6 Sickles?

Once inside the Gryffindor Common Room, Harry scanned the fifth year timetable, and was dismayed to learn that the Gryffindors were *still* being paired with Slytherin for Potions and Care of Magical Creatures in addition to Runes, Scripts and Lore (whatever *that* turned out to be) and Astronomy.

Herbology and Transfiguration with the Hufflepuffs, and this year they were being paired with Ravenclaw for Defence Against the Dark Arts and Charms... Harry's reverie was cut short by Colin Creevey, chairperson, secretary, founding (and, Harry hoped, sole) member of the Official Harry Potter Fan Club: "Great speech, Harry! Did you have it written down? 'cos I'd really like a signed copy for my collection..."

Despite years of non-committal shrugs and sly palm-offs to try and diffuse Colin's enthusiasm, Harry still hadn't figured out a tactful way of telling him to get lost. Colin's rampant adulation had a habit of rearing its head at exactly the wrong moment, and had dealt many a blow to Harry's campaign to move out from the title of The Boy Who Lived.

But even the attentions of Colin (and Dennis, his younger brother) couldn't dislodge the warmth Harry felt as he sat back in one of the arm chairs: he was back at Hogwarts. He was *home*...

1 September fell on a Friday, which meant that the school year began with Astronomy (the theory part, anyway - actual observation took place on Thursday nights). Professor Sinistra kicked off with what was to become a familiar speech in the opening week: "This is the year you take your O.W.L.s, and I must emphasise the importance of *thorough* revision of *all* the topics studied to date...."

As Professor Sinistra outlined the dire consequences of failing to gain an O.W.L in Astronomy (the end of civilisation as it was known, as far as Harry could determine), Hermione nudged him to show where she'd scheduled Astronomy in her colour-coded revision timetable. There were times when Harry was really grateful for Hermione's studious nature, and he and Ron knew full well (although Ron might be more hard pressed to admit it) that Hermione had been instrumental in ensuring that they'd done as well as they had in the past years. All that said, however, she did have a tendency to overdo things from time to time.

Judging by Ron's reaction to Hermione's timetable, colour-coding went somewhat beyond 'overdone', and indeed, appeared to clear 'over the top' by some considerable margin to boot.

Although it was scheduled as a 'double', Professor Sinistra always restricted Astronomy lessons to half the allotted time, reasoning that they spent the remaining half in observation in the Astronomy Tower one night of the week. Harry and Ron weren't bothered by the rationale to this, the key fact to note was that they had a 'free' on Friday mornings.

"It's not a 'free'," corrected Hermione, crossly (she was somewhat miffed that her careful revision planning hadn't received an overly enthusiastic welcome from the boys), "it's a 'revise and study' period."

"To the library, then," commanded Harry, in mock-heroic tones. The trio made their way to the virtually deserted library (clearly, most of the fifth years appeared to concur more with Ron and Harry's assessment of the imminence of exams than Hermione's), but as they made their way past the stacks to their favoured table, a figure talking to Madam Pince caught Harry's eye.

"Malfoy!" hissed Harry, diving behind a book stack to take cover, tugging at Ron and Hermione to follow suit.

"Draco? Where?" asked Hermione, puzzled by the need for seclusion.

"Not him," whispered Harry, "*Lucius* Malfoy."

"Oh," whispered Hermione, understanding Harry's desire to keep out of sight; they all knew that Lucius Malfoy had been one of the first Death Eaters to return to Voldemort's side once he'd been resurrected at the end of the Third Task.

But even as Hermione, sandwiched between Ron and Harry, expressed her comprehension of the situation, the two boys were exchanging puzzled glances. Something wasn't quite right. They both turned their gaze onto Hermione.

"*Draco*?" hissed Ron, somewhat suspiciously, "since *when* were we on first name terms with that slimy git?"

Harry silenced the pair. Madam Pince had obviously disappeared off to locate a reference for Malfoy (well, he was both a governor and a former student, Harry supposed), who used this opportunity to swap a book on the desk for one in his hand. The librarian returned, shaking her head, and adding a shoulder shrug, indicating, presumably, some form of apology that she hadn't been able to find the reference Malfoy had been looking for.

The Death Eater himself didn't seem to fussed by her lack of success, and then left the library, sweeping past the hidden trio with the patented Malfoy stride. Harry's eyes narrowed in anger; 'You. Were. There,' punctuating each word even in his thoughts. It was probably nothing, but Harry thought it might be worth mentioning to Professor Dumbledore, next time he saw him.

After their free, correction, revise and study period, it was Care of Magical Creatures. As the students made their way towards Hagrid's hut, suspicion was clearly evident on the majority of faces as to what, exactly, Filch might have planned for them.

Harry was hardly the first person to have noticed that Care of Magical Creatures always seemed to involve dealing with creatures that were more than adequately equipped to deal with the travails of life unaided. Still, this undoubtedly could be attributed to Hagrid's, well, let's be frank, obsession with dangerous creatures.

Universally reviled though Filch was, Harry reasoned that he would at least have some sense of self-preservation which would prevent him from selecting some monstrously psychotic beast for the class to study. And Flobberworms were, you know, quite interesting, in their own right, he thought, optimistically.

Unfortunately for Harry, Hagrid had planned ahead.

"Right then," growled Filch, in his customarily cheerless manner, "as yer know, 'agrid's off on business, an' won't be back fer a few more weeks yet. So 'e left me instructions fer each o' the classes. As you lot are doin' yer O.W.Ls this year, he's got a special project fer yer.

"Now they've not 'atched yet," Harry, like every other fifth year Slytherin and Gryffindor at that precise moment, immediately started ruling out potential beasts, "so 'agrid left it to me to cover the early lessons.

"So, the first thing yer got ter do is choose 'n egg an' build a nesting pen fer it... 'agrid reckons the pens should be 'bout six feet wide, twen'y feet long, an' should go 'bout five feet into the water. 'agrid says you'll want ter make 'em quite strong."

Everyone was following the same path of logic. Egg born - could be bird or reptile. A holding pen that included water - it was probably amphibious. Given Hagrid's history, Harry felt that they could safely discount waterfowl (no matter how tempting it might seem to be charged with the care of a Mallard duck), which left some kind of reptile. Factoring in Hagrid's love of row upon row of sharp teeth, and the need for the holding pens to extend into the water, the spectre of a crocodile was looming uncomfortably prominently in Harry's mind.

Nonetheless, the class set about constructing the pens as advised, *Accio'*ing wood, wire and other pieces as necessary. It was, actually a refreshing change to apply magic to building something tangible and permanent. They were outside, it was a pleasant day, and Filch hadn't given anyone a detention. Yet.

Neville's was a disaster - in the end the rest of the Gryffindors all ended up building Neville's pen as a collaborative effort, whilst the Slytherins looked on with disdain. Suddenly remembering that this was indeed a joint lesson with them, Harry looked around to see how Malfoy was faring - it seemed odd that there hadn't been any barbed comments yet. Almost out of character, in fact. Maybe being a prefect was getting to him.

"Right then," said Filch, "now the pens are done, y'need t'dig a shallow 'ole in the ground, an' place a warmin' charm there. Yer want to keep the egg nice 'n warm until it 'atches, see?" It was abundantly clear from people's faces that they had yet to be convinced of the merits of cossetting an as yet unidentified monster.

It fell to Blaise, then, to ask the killer question: "excuse me, Mr Filch," (and didn't *that* sound strange?), "but what, exactly, are the eggs from?"

A nasty, knowing smile flickered across Filch's face, "'agrid didn't say, tell the truth. 'e did say, though, that y'ought t' read up on crocodiles, eels, scorpions, dragons and snakes. Thought you'd find that 'elpful, 'e did." The class exchanged wary looks; this didn't sound promising.

"Right then, 'ere's the eggs," Filch was holding a covered basket, which seemed to be crackling. Filch removed the cover, and everyone stood exactly where they were. "Well c'mon then, pick yer egg and put it in the pen."

The eggs themselves were about the size of ostrich eggs, but had patches of iridescent colour that seemed to shimmer against the black of the shell in the morning light. A vague purple aura surrounded the basket, and every now and again bright blue sparks would arc between shells. Frankly, they didn't look welcoming.

Gryffindor bravery coursing through his veins, Harry made the first move, and stretched out his hand to pick up an egg.

"No! No! No!" exclaimed Filch, clearly horrified, and wheeling the basket out of Harry's reach, "y'don't want to *touch* 'em - they'll give yer a shock. Use yer *wand*," he explained, as though this should be obvious to all but the most boneheaded Muggle.

"Oh, right," said Harry, trying not to look as stupid as he felt, pulling out his wand, "*Accio Egg!*" he commanded, eyes widening with alarm; static electricity rippled across the egg as it lifted away from its brethren - a sharp crack was heard across the air as the filaments of energy finally snapped back into the basket. Harry's egg floated through the air, sparking occasionally until it landed in the nesting pen, the red, blue and violet patches shimmering across the surface as it lay in the soil.

Ron gave Harry a wary look: "I have a *very* bad feeling about this..."

Dean seemed to be in complete agreement, "we're going to need a bigger boat..."

Divination Studies followed lunch. The only reason why Harry had stuck with Divination was on the off-chance that Professor Trelawney might have another accurate prediction concerning Voldemort. Plus the homework actually wasn't that bad - Harry supposed he might almost say it was an entertaining challenge coming up with new ways to die ("Trampled by a herd of Hippogriffs is good!").

On the down side, Divination studies was scheduled on Friday afternoons, immediately after lunch, and there was a real danger that he might not manage to stay awake for the entire lesson. Still, you had to take the rough with the smooth...

As expected, Professor Trelawney's Inner Eye had foreseen that they would be taking their O.W.Ls in the summer, and she strongly suspected that casting stones would feature in the examination. Ron and Harry exchanged their trademark rolling-eyes-in-Divination look, Neville looked plain terrified, whilst Parvati and Lavender scribbled frantic notes with faces of rapt attention.

Casting stones actually turned out to be an enjoyable pastime - each table was given a velvet bag containing seven 'stones'. These actually seemed to be just like Muggle dice, except that instead of numbers they had different symbols on them. The stones were cast on to the table, and, by reading the runes, and their relation to one another, dire portents of doom were soon being seen by one and all.

"Two!" said Dean on the next table, quietly, but firmly. Harry frowned, and tried to hear more clearly - there weren't any numbers on the stones.

Seamus clearly seemed to be doing some thinking, before he responded, "OK, I'll see you two, and raise you two..."

Meanwhile, Ron had realised that the seven stones could each represent Quidditch positions, and was trying to explain to Harry how the Fox-Twist pass was employed. The explanation of the Garrard Defence was cut short by the arrival of Professor Trelawney at their table. Harry swept up the stones, and placed them in the bag, before casting them with what he had to admit was a satisfying clatter.

Professor Trelawney peered at the resultant amalgamation, as Harry counted down in his head, 'Five... Four... Three... Two...'

"My dear!" shrieked the Professor of Divination Studies, throwing her hands up in horror. The class all turned their eyes on Harry's table, albeit without much haste; the cynical consensus was that Harry probably had the lowest life expectancy of the year, what with the resurrected Dark Lord having something of a personal vendetta with him, and if Professor Trelawney predicted Harry's demise often enough, there was a decent chance that she would eventually be proven right.

"Yes?" asked Harry, with all the inquisitiveness of a sedated Flobberworm.

"It is written in the stones," exclaimed the Professor, breathlessly, "you will lose a battle..." she bent her head even closer to the table, to inspect the stones' alignment. "Yes, a duel. A duel with a Dark Witch."

Although he could see that Ron was biting his lip to stop himself from shrieking with laughter, Harry was at least prepared to give the stones, if not the Professor, the benefit of the doubt. Nonetheless, it wouldn't be a Trelawney prediction unless, "and do I die?" he asked.

To the class's surprise, Professor Trelawney didn't reply immediately. She walked around the table, studying the stones from different angles, clucking her tongue. The class held its breath. "No.... well..... the Inner Eye is clouded. The Life Stone," a long fingernail tapped the object in question, "shows you live, but the Power Stone shows you vanquished. This is most strange, most strange...."

So, thought Harry, he would lose a duel with a female Death Eater, but he wouldn't die. He then berated himself for even listening to the mad woman, and went back to tracking Seamus' growing fortune as he continued to clean Dean out; "OK, raise you five..."

Back in the Gryffindor Common Room, Harry challenged Ron to a game of chess as they waited for Hermione, who was at a Prefects' meeting. Alicia (Quidditch Chaser and now Head Girl) came over.

"Hey Harry," she said, "the Quidditch Cup is on again this year, and now that Oliver's gone we need a new Keeper, and a new Captain. We," she nodded her head in the direction of Angelina, Katie and the twins, "were thinking it would make sense to hold Quidditch trials as

soon as we could - our first match is in six weeks' time, and I guess everyone's out of practice after last year."

Harry agreed - the Triwizard Tournament had meant that there had been no Quidditch matches at all last year. He'd been looking forward to flying all summer, and couldn't wait to get back out on his Firebolt.

"So," Alicia continued, "how about we hold trials on Sunday? We don't want to waste any time if we're going to be ready to beat Ravenclaw..."

"Sunday's fine," said Harry, looking at Ron, who nodded enthusiastically.

"Yeah, Sunday's good - I'd like to try out for Keeper."

"Well it's not just Keeper that's up for grabs, you know. We're all seventh years now - Harry's the only person in the team who won't be leaving next year - so we ought to be thinking about who's going to replace us all next September if we're going to keep this winning streak going."

"Yeah that's true," said Harry, nodding, "ow!" he exclaimed as Alicia playfully hit him on the shoulder.

"You were *supposed* to say that we were irreplaceable, Potter," she rebuked, jokingly, before returning back to the seventh year group.

Harry's chess pieces were muttering at his lack of strategy as Ron claimed checkmate when Hermione got in from her Prefects' Meeting. "You know," said Ron, cheerily, "I don't think I can think of a more splendid way to top off the week than spending an hour every Friday evening in the company of the Amazing Bouncing Ferret."

"Hey, I just realised," exclaimed Harry, as Hermione settled down into the third armchair, shooting a friendly scowl at Ron, "I never asked you about Bulgaria."

"Don't ask," said Hermione, affecting a weary sigh.

"That bad, huh?" Harry asked, sympathetically.

"Worse," said Ron, perhaps a tad *too* cheerily, "she told me about it on the train."

"Well," started Hermione, "by the time we actually *got* to Durmstrang..." despite her earlier protestation, it seemed she was more than happy to talk about her trip to Bulgaria, and the three of them spent the rest of the evening chatting.

Chapter 4:

When Alexor Artemis revealed her true identity to the Grulls in the WWN soap 'Wands, Whiplash and Whirlwinds', what relation did she claim to Gustav Grull?

Sunday afternoon saw the Gryffindor Quidditch team, together with a gaggle of hopefuls, approach the Quidditch pitch to select their new Keeper. Harry and Ron had turned up early, mainly so that Harry could reacquaint himself with his broom.

Ever since his first flight, chasing Malfoy to recover Neville's Remembrall back in their first year, Harry felt like he'd been born to fly. He could genuinely say that his flying was completely carefree, he thought to himself, as he swooped down in a series of twisting spirals, before Alicia's amplified voice interrupted his train of thought: "*Ahem!* If our seeker could tear himself away from his love-in with his broomstick, perhaps we could begin?"

Face flushing, even though he knew that she was only teasing, Harry landed and joined the Gryffindors, as Alicia explained the selection process. "Right, what we're going to do first is find a new Keeper. So, myself, Angelina and Katie will act as the opposing team's Chasers, and you each get to face ten shots."

There were four candidates for Keeper - Ron, and then two fourth years, Matthew Spencer and Colin Creevey, and a third year, Karen Kellick. Harry was pretty sure that Colin, who was Muggle-born, was only trying out for the position of Keeper because he might then be in the same team as the Boy Who Lived. Groupies, Harry thought sourly, were overrated.

As it turned out, Ron was head and shoulders above the three other candidates - Matthew (who preferred to be called 'Matty') wasn't bad, and Karen was actually quite good, but Ron was the obvious choice. And whilst you had to admire Colin's guts for trying, he was the first to admit that he'd been hopeless.

Once the Keeper's position had been determined, they opened the try-outs up to the outfield positions - as Alicia had explained, most of the team were seventh years, so there would be a wholesale rebuilding at the end of the year. The idea was to include all the reserve players in this year's practices, so that the team would be functioning as a unit for the next season. Clearly Alicia was one for forward planning.

Matty and Karen were obvious choices for Chasers, and were joined by a third year, Sophie Miller. Seamus, a natural flier, was selected as Beater, and it therefore seemed obvious to choose Dean as the second - Fred and George wouldn't stop reminding people of the importance of a strong Beater partnership, and Seamus and Dean had been practically inseparable since first year.

That just left the position of Reserve Seeker, which went to Ginny Weasley. "At this rate we're going to end up being Weasley United!" quipped Fred (or George), although, Harry reflected, given Fred and Angelina's status, not to mention Lee's adoption as the virtual Weasley triplet, and his attachment to Katie, they weren't far off being Weasley United this year.

"Right then," said Alicia, "it looks like we've sorted out most of the positions, and so we've only got one place left.... and that's team Captain."

"But I thought you were Captain," said Harry, "after all, you're the one who organised this session and everything."

"I can't be Captain," replied Alicia, "and I wouldn't want to be, either, I've got enough on my hands with being Head Girl."

"Too right!" agreed George, "it'd be even worse than having a Captain who was a *Prefect!*"

"Oh the shame," concurred Fred, "Quidditch Captain is an honourable office, and you can't sully it with the likes of Prefects or Head Girls." The team smiled wryly - only Fred and George could make the word 'Prefect' sound like the most heinous insult.

Alicia took these barbs in good spirit, and continued, "and we all agree," sweeping an arm that included the seventh years, "that it's silly appointing a Captain for only one year."

Alarm bells were starting to register in Harry's brain. There were only two players on the team who weren't in the seventh year, himself and Ron - not only did he not want to be Quidditch captain, but he also remembered Ron seeing himself as Quidditch captain in the Mirror of Erised in their first year. Even though he knew Ron would never say so directly, Harry was aware that his fame (however unwanted) and money were a sore point - and to end up being Quidditch Captain would just be rubbing salt into the wounds.

"Well then," said Harry, jumping in with both feet, "Ron's got to be the obvious choice, hasn't he? I mean, he's grown up playing Quidditch with half the team already, plus he understands tactics, and the Keeper's really well positioned to keep an eye on the game as it develops..." he hoped he hadn't sounded too gushing. Ron was torn between looking eager to take the position he'd so coveted since starting Hogwarts, and properly embarrassed at Harry's praise.

"Well, it's between you two," said Alicia, "but we don't need to decide just yet." Seeing Ron's crestfallen face, she quickly added, "It's just that we haven't actually seen you play in a full match yet, Ron, and it'd be asking a lot of someone to be Captain on their debut."

Fortunately, Katie broke the awkwardness of the moment, "Right then, we've got an hour of practice time left, so let's play First Team against Reserves, and practice some moves. We won't play with the snitch, but Harry, can you play Reserve keeper?"

"Er, yeah, sure," said Harry, "we'll take the school end, then." As he turned to march over to the three hoops, however, he saw a solitary figure sitting in the Ravenclaw stand. "Ginny, would you mind playing Keeper?" he asked, "I think I'll just watch - I'm not much of a Keeper anyway."

"Erm, are you sure?" asked Ginny, "it's just that I haven't actually got a broom of my own, and we're using all the school brooms that we'd brought with us."

"Oh, that's no problem," said Harry, "here, use mine." He grinned as he saw Ginny's eyes light up.

"I can borrow the Firebolt??" she asked, "Harry, are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure! I'll be up in the stands," he added, with a vague gesture of his arm.

"Who's that up there?" asked Ginny, following his gaze, "are they spying on us?"

"I don't really think they're trying to spy," said Harry, as he left Ginny with the Firebolt, and walked over to the stands.

Harry climbed up the stairs, feeling slightly traitorous to be using the Ravenclaw seats to watch the practice. She was sitting at the front of the stand, and although she gave no indication that she was aware of his presence, Harry carefully settled down in the seat next to her.

"Hey Cho, how's things?"

"Strange to think that the maze was here, isn't it?" Cho asked, softly. Harry, with a start, realised that he hadn't actually given it a second thought. The labyrinth that had been planted on the Quidditch pitch for the Third Task had been completely removed, and there was no trace of evidence to suggest that anything untoward had happened barely four months previously.

He and Cedric had gone in first, as joint leaders, then Krum, then Fleur. Apart from the champions once they were inside the maze, that was the last time anyone at Hogwarts had seen Cedric alive...

Kill the spare. A flash of green light, and Cedric was dead. Voldemort had risen, and The Boy Who Lived had failed; worse, Harry had to live with the knowledge that it was his blood that had given Voldemort the power to live.

"So another pair of Weasleys in the team, then?" she asked, breaking the contemplative silence.

"Yeah, Ron's Keeper, and Ginny is our Reserve Seeker. Hang on, you're the enemy," he teased, "I can't go away and give House secrets to you, of all people!"

"I didn't think anyone would be here, actually; I just wanted some time to myself..."

"Oh, well I won't.." started Harry, getting out of his seat, before Cho stopped him, laying a hand on his forearm.

"No, don't go. It was nice of you to come up here."

Harry settled back in his chair, and watched Ron stave off another attack from the Reserve chasers. "Have you had Defence Against the Dark Arts yet?" he asked, changing the subject, "I just wondered what the new Professor is like."

"Mmm, yeah, Vellum. We had her before lunch on Friday," replied Cho, "she's really... tall. But then, I would say that, wouldn't I?" Cho flashed a self-conscious smile, but whereas before the summer - before the Third Task, before Cedric - Harry's stomach would have been doing somersaults, now he was just glad that she was able to smile.

"Anyway," Cho continued, "I don't think Dumbledore was happy about the appointment.."

"What?!" exclaimed Harry, "But he's the headmaster! How can he not be happy?"

"The governors appoint the teachers, Harry," she explained, "and from what I hear, after Dumebllore appointed a werewolf, and then we had that fake Moody, they decided to have a stronger say in the new post."

"I liked Lupin," said Harry, somewhat defensively, who equated 'school governor' with 'Lucius Malfoy' in his mind's eye, "he was the best teacher we'd had."

"Well yes, he was nice," admitted Cho, "and he seemed to know his stuff, but, you know, he was a *werewolf*..."

"He wasn't Snape though, was he?" Harry tried a change of tack, since he didn't want to get into an argument with Cho over Remus.

"Well no, that's true," she said with a grin, "can you imagine two Snapes? We'd all be in minus points for the House Cup!"

The question of Captaincy seemingly forgotten, Ron and Harry got back to the Common Room to let Hermione and Crookshanks know that Ron had made the team as Keeper.

"That's really good!" she exclaimed, "but don't let the Quidditch get in the way of your revision," she cautioned, deflating the moment somewhat. The table was strewn with Arithmancy papers; considering that they'd only been back three days, her devotion was a bit overwhelming. Crookshanks took the momentous news with customary indifference, and returned to licking his paws.

"Oh Ronniekins," called a voice, interrupting Ron before he could set Hermione straight as to the question of where his priorities lay (Hermione would probably have disagreed anyway). Fred and George were approaching the three - one of the twins was holding something behind his back.

"Hello Ronald," said the other twin (probably Fred, Harry thought; he could see why Mrs Weasley liked to knit initialled jumpers for them), "we've got a present for you to celebrate making the team!"

Ron looked nervously from twin to twin - it was impossible to read the expression in their eyes, and it was pretty much a Golden Rule in Gryffindor Common Room conduct; never, never, *ever* accept a present from the Weasley twins. If it didn't turn you into a canary, or enlarge your tongue to gargantuan proportions, it would surely do something else.

"Don't be so nervous, Ronald," said the twin-Harry-thought-was-Fred, soothingly, "we're your brothers! Would we harm kin?"

"Yes," chorused Harry, Ron and Hermione, with the firm certainty of people with years of hard evidence to back their case.

"Well, maybe we've turned over a new leaf," suggested the twin-that-might-be-George, "and simply wish to share our new found joy with our likkle brother. As they say, 'virtue is its own reward'..." Ron's eyes narrowed into an expression of extreme suspicion.

"Congratulations on making the team," said probably-Fred, handing over a long, wrapped package, beaming.

Ron took the present suspiciously, looking from brother to brother, "so is this dissolving paper? Or exploding spellotape?"

"Oh the suspicion!" cried let's-say-he's-George, affecting mortal hurt.

"Not bad ideas though," noted his counterpoint, "we should make a note of that..."

Curiosity got the better of him, and Ron unwrapped the parcel, to find a Nimbus 2001. His jaw dropped, "guys! I don't know what to say!"

"Well, a customary respone would be 'Thank you, you're my heroes, I worship the ground you walk on, and three heartfelt choruses of 'I am not worthy'..."

"We know it's not a Firebolt, or a Palomino, but it's still a good broom - your old Shooting Star was on its last twigs," explained his twin, earnestly, but he needn't have worried, as Ron was transfixed.

"This is *bloody* brilliant!" he exclaimed, eyes mesmerised by the smooth wood and the 'Nimbus 2001' logo at the tip. A puzzled expression crossed his face, "but how did you guys afford it?"

"We've got an anonymous investor in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes," the-twin-that-was-probably-Fred explained, "and we were able to pick this up at Diagon Alley in their end-of-year clearance."

It didn't seem as Ron had heard the explanation, however, as he'd returned to gazing, mesmerised at his new broomstick, "cool....." he murmured, dreamily.

Harry was writing a short note to Sirius, letting him know the Hogsmeade weekend dates in case it was possible to meet up; he hadn't seen him since being in the Hospital wing after the Third Task. As he considered that point, Harry was starting to believe that his life had been divided into two - there was Before the Third Task, and there was After the Third Task.

Strangely enough, it bothered him that there'd be no dark activity (well, none that he'd heard of) in the intervening time. Why would Voldemort go through all the trouble of capturing Harry, and using him in some sacrificial resurrection scheme to then fall silent? Realising that he was tempting fate, it seemed odd that his scar hadn't hurt, and that he hadn't had any dreams or visions.

His instincts told him that the silence was not a good omen, and that when the darkness did come, it would be stranger, and more terrible, than anything that he'd experienced to date. Belatedly, then, Harry was beginning to wonder if Fudge had been correct to suppress

Voldemort's return (well, not exactly 'suppress' so much as disbelieve point-blank); if Harry was getting this nervous, no doubt the wizarding world would have been jumping at shadows all summer if they'd heard what had happened.

He decided to relay Cho's gossip (stressing that it was unsubstantiated) about Vellum. He didn't expect Sirius would have heard of the new Professor, but it was worth a mention all the same.

Realising that he was missing Hagrid, Harry wrote a short note, explaining that Filch had given them the eggs to look after, and that they'd built the pens as instructed. Harry was tempted to ask what exactly would be emerging from the eggs, but decided that would be cheating - if Hagrid *chose* to tell him in any reply, well, that was different, wasn't it?

Having signed off, Harry headed off to the owlery - he sent Hagrid's letter with Hedwig, which had the added bonus of meaning that she wouldn't be upset that he was using one of the school owls to send the letter to Sirius. He really hoped that one day they'd catch Wormtail, and would then be able to prove Sirius' innocence; deep down, though, he wasn't really sure how realistic a proposition that was.

Chapter 5:

What was Janet's first spell?

Monday morning started off with Charms with Ravenclaw. Professor Flitwick was his usual cheery self, regaling the students with horror tales of O.W.Ls past. If Harry hadn't been used to Flitwick's perpetually cheery manner, he would have sworn that the Professor was getting some kind of serious kick from how awful the June exams were going to be.

The lessons themselves were getting noticeably more complicated in the fifth year, and in Charms they were starting to cover some fairly advanced magic. "Of course," explained Professor Flitwick, "we can't bestow intelligence upon things. Inanimate objects, no matter how many charms we put on them, will never be able to think for themselves."

Professor Flitwick was a wonderfully animated creature, and despite his tiny size, he always seemed to fill the classroom with his enthusiasm for the subject. "However," he chuckled, "what we *can* do is charm objects to present the *illusion* of intelligence. Our studies this year will be concentrated on developing and refining this skill."

The remainder of the lesson revolved around charming a box to open and close on being tapped. This was a lot harder than it looked, and the best Harry could manage by the end was for the box's lid to start chattering like cartoon false teeth. He tried to be good, however, and not think of what objects in Dudley's room would particularly benefit from such a charm.

After the break, Harry ruminated that there was pain, there was torture, and then, at the very bottom of the pit of despair, there was double Potions with Snape and the Slytherins.

"As you will be aware," announced Snape, by way of preamble, "this year will see you attempting, and I use the word advisedly," he glared at Neville, "to gain an O.W.L. in the art of Potions.

"I suppose it is probably too much to expect you all to devote the required discipline to achieve a pass," Harry wondered if Snape was going to glare at anyone other than Neville during the course of his pep talk, "and suspect that still others will feel that their privileged life at this institution to date," and *now* Snape's sneering glare fell upon Harry, "will mean that no further effort is required on their part.

"So I see my role this year as being one to disabuse *anyone* holding the notion that an O.W.L in Potions is a simple thing to achieve. You will be expected to create potions this year with care, reverence and precision. Of course, I hold no delusions as to your abilities in this subject, or," and again it was the Gryffindors who felt the harshness of his glare, "more pertinently, lack thereof.

"As our esteemed Headmaster was kind enough to mention at the welcoming feast, I will be assisted this year by Fleur Delacourt, who will be joining us from Wednesday.

"Now, this morning we will be brewing a sustenance potion, as outlined in the summer reading I set. Can anyone," next to him, Harry detected Hermione's almost instant reaction as she started to put her arm in the air, "*apart* from Miss Granger," Hermione slowly retracted her hand, "name the principal ingredients..."

As the lesson wore on, and Gryffindor's house points took their customary beating from the Potion Master's wrath, Harry was left in no doubt that the events after the Third Task did not outwardly appear to have changed his demeanour...

"Potter? *Champion* Potter," again the sneering title, used as some kind of insult, "I'm waiting for your answer..."

Caught like a rabbit in headlights, Harry could only stammer, "I don't know, Sir," in response to Snape's unheard question.

"Really?" queried Snape, with his customary snarl, "I would have expected a true champion to have actually *read* the set texts for summer, rather than bask in glory across the holidays. 20 Points from Gryffindor," Harry wondered if any house had ever finished the House Cup with points in the negative, "and you would be advised to pay attention in my lessons in future. Yes, Malfoy?"

"The beeswax is used to thicken the consistency of the potion, Sir," Malfoy managed to answer in his customary drawl, indicating that the question had been so rudimentary it was almost beneath explanation. The smirk at the end of his answer was purely for Harry's benefit, however.

"Thank you, Malfoy - a text book answer. 10 points to Slytherin..." at this rate, Slytherin were going to have the House Cup sewn up by Easter.

"That was *so* unfair," protested Ron, as the Gryffindors made their way to lunch, "he's even worse than last year."

Even Hermione, who normally did her best to give even Snape the benefit of the doubt, felt moved to voice sympathy, "and he really seemed to have it in for you, today, Harry. The beeswax wasn't even *in* the summer reading..."

"I hope I misheard that comment, Miss Granger," the protestations were cut short by Malfoy's trademark drawl, "as I'd hate to have to take points from Gryffindor for questioning the professionalism of the staff."

"Yes, Malfoy," responded Harry, "'cos I'm sure you'd find that *really* distressing," the tone in his voice indicating that he suspected anything but.

By now the students had reached the Great Hall, and Harry and Hermione frogmarched Ron to the Gryffindor table before Malfoy's taunting got to him. "What's with Malfoy these days, anyway?" asked Harry, as they dodged Nearly Headless Nick bemoaning his rejection from the Headless Hunt to any first year who would listen, "I mean, for Malfoy, that was almost polite!"

"Polite? That scumbag?" exclaimed Ron, looking at Harry as though he'd expressed a fondness for Canary Creams.

"Well come on, he even called Hermione 'Miss Granger'," responded Harry, attempting to mimic the Malfoy sneer as he did so.

"I just think he's taking his responsibilities as prefect seriously," sniffed Hermione, adding pointedly, "which is more than I can say for certain other persons."

"What?" asked Harry, disbelievingly, "are you trying to suggest that Malfoy's going to go all... all *Percy* on us?"

Ron's face was almost split in two by his grin, "Oh my," he said, his face lighting up, "revenge is sweet...."

As Professor Binns droned tonelessly on, "...and the Goblin Revolution of 1673 was led by.... anyone? anyone?" Harry wondered if *anything* - Snape turning up in a tutu, say - would dissuade him from his stride of perfecting the ultimate cure for insomnia.

Nonetheless, at least Professor Binns had given them an interesting project to count towards their O.W.L; each student had to produce an assignment of between 20 and 30 feet (Hermione had to be forcibly restrained from expressing her disappointment at the word limit) on a topic *of their choice*. Harry could hardly believe his luck, and spent the rest of the lesson devising a shortlist of suitable topics; the Four Founders, perhaps? Or maybe he could consider the roles of Parselmouths (they can't all have been evil, to date, surely)?

The rational, logical, excuse-me-we're-fighting-a-war-here part of his brain was telling him that he ought to choose a topic related to the Dark Arts - it may be that some vital clue to finding a weakness in Voldemort's armour might be discovered. With a start, Harry realised he was sounding *way* too like Hermione, and shelved that idea.

Glancing at Ron's parchment, to his left, Harry could see that Ron was having to make a decision between several contenders, "Quidditch through the ages," (but he thought that had been done), "Quidditch: the role of the Keeper from ancient times to the present day", and, most creatively, Harry thought, "Notable Undertalented and Over-appreciated Seekers in the History of Quidditch, with Particular Emphasis on Contemporary Bulgaria."

To his right, however, it seemed as though Hermione was going to physically burst with the pent-up enthusiasm to embrace the limitless possibilities the project format offered. Somehow, he just knew that she was going to be sprinting to the library as fast as decorum would allow to make a start. Fortunately, Harry and Ron had Quidditch practice, so with a little luck Hermione might have come down off her academic high by the time they got to the library.

Well, Harry reasoned, there had to be a first time for everything, right? He turned his attention, or at least part of it, back to Professor Binns, "and this battle was called.... anyone?.... anyone?... The Battle of Blotten's Tongue, where the victors were... anyone? anyone?" Harry's head was lolling, and he brought it back up, blinking sharply. The blinks became longer, and his head started to loll once more before sleep finally overcame him.

Post on Tuesday brought a reply from Sirius, though nothing from Hagrid. Sirius didn't actually say where he was, of course, and though he couldn't make the first Hogsmeade weekend, he did say that he would try his best to meet up with Harry for the second weekend in December. Harry considered the reply glumly; he'd really hoped that he'd be able to see his Godfather sooner than that, but still, a wanted man couldn't exactly have a free social life.

The second reason for Harry's lack of enthusiasm for Tuesday was that the first lesson was Transfiguration, with Professor McGonagall. It wasn't that Harry didn't like Professor McGonagall, he did; strict but fair, and she did buy him that Nimbus 2000 in the first year. No, Transfiguration was hard, and despite his father's obvious talent in the discipline (he'd been an animagus), it didn't seem to be getting any easier.

But the real reason for Harry's reluctance to get moving was that this would be the first lesson with the Hufflepuffs since term had started.

"Look, come on Harry, we can't be late," said Hermione, who, with Ron's almost voluntary assistance was trying to cajole some life into him.

"We *know* we're with the Hufflepuffs," said Ron, "and I can see how you might find that a bit difficult after, er, you know, the Third Task..."

"Cedric died," said Harry flatly.

"Er, yeah Harry," said Ron, awkwardly, "um, y'know, we knew that..."

"Then *say* it," said Harry, exasperatedly, "everyone's tip-toeing around me. And Cho," he added, "pretending it didn't happen. Or, at least, doing their utmost not to mention it..."

"Yes, Cedric died," said Hermione, gripping Harry's arms, and looking him directly in the eye, "but *no-one* blames you for that. You did the best you could, which was more than anyone else here would have managed," she continued, "and if you continue to mope around like this, then Vol.. V... You-Know-Who has won."

"Voldemort," having grown up, almost uniquely in the world he now considered home, in complete ignorance of his legacy, Harry had never attached any fear to referring to Voldemort by name. He'd tried to get Ron and Hermione to overcome their fear, using Dumbledore's argument that to fear the name simply served to increase the fear of the man (was he a man, anymore?) himself. For their part, they were trying, but it was obviously taking them some time.

"Hey Harry, we've got Transfiguration with your lot next, you coming?" Justin, the Hufflepuff prefect, had come over to join the three. Some small part of Harry's mind suspected that Justin's friendliness was some part of a pre-orchestrated move to demonstrate that Hufflepuff didn't hold anything against Harry for Cedric's death. Most of his mind, however, was delighted that at least someone from Cedric's old house didn't hate him, and, bracing himself for what the rest of the day might bring, he set off.

Transfiguration had been relatively painless, and the Hufflepuffs had, for the most part been pleasant to Harry. So it was with slightly more buoyant spirits that he lined up with his classmates for Defence Against the Dark Arts.

"Welcome to this year's Defence Against the Dark Arts class," announced Professor Vellum, eyeing the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor fifth years assembled before her. "I am well aware of the... unfortunate history of previous years' classes," she continued, "but you will find the nature of this year's lessons somewhat different to my predecessors'."

As Cho had mentioned, Professor Vellum was a tall woman, nearly six foot, towering over everyone in the class but Ron. It was hard to judge her age; older than Snape, certainly (which, Harry deduced, meant that she was therefore older than Sirius, and Lupin). Probably younger than McGonagall. Her eyes were almost black, but whereas Lupin's energy and enthusiasm had been evident there, Vellum's face was almost a mask. It made Harry slightly uneasy, even though he couldn't explain why.

"Now, after four years of betrayal in this subject," Harry's head snapped to attention at these words, and Padma Patil had actually put her hand up (leave it to a Ravenclaw to ask the pertinent questions), "yes, Miss...?"

"Patil. Padma Patil," Parvati's twin introduced herself, "I didn't quite understand what you meant by four years of betrayal..." Padma's voice trailed off as Vellum's previously inanimate eyes burned to life and fixed her with a piercing glare. The rest of the class shrank back into the chairs in an involuntary expression of mutual sympathy.

"I would have thought that after discovering that your first teacher had been possessed by the Dark Lord, then having been subjected to that dreadful imposter in the second year, and a werewolf, no less, in the third year...." Vellum paused, "well, need I go on? You've been taught by imposters and frauds these past four years, and the governors.. Yes?" she glared at Harry, who had raised his hand.

"Excuse me Professor, but I don't think that Professor Lupin, who taught us in the third year was either a fraud or an imposter." Harry's sense of injustice had been triggered by Vellum's implied slur on Lupin, and, against his better judgement he'd decided to make a stand. Gryffindor bravery could be a double edged sword.

"Thank you, Mr Potter," it came as no surprise to the class that Vellum knew who *he* was, "but I'm sure it did not escape your attention that Professor Lupin was a werewolf, did it not?"

"But werewolf or not, he was still a good teacher," Harry persisted, although the initial surge of bravery was rapidly subsiding, and he fervently hoped that Vellum would drop the matter. Instead, she went in a completely unexpected direction.

"An excellent point, Mr Potter, and this brings us very neatly to the subject of our first lesson," there was the scraping swish of metal on metal as Vellum drew a sword, that she had presumably been carrying in a scabbard within her cloak. With a lazy flick of her wand, the sword floated in mid air, just in front of the first row of desks. "Now, can anyone tell me what this is?"

As always with a seemingly obvious question, the class remained silent, suspecting that there was more to the situation than met the eye.

"Come on," sighed a plainly exasperated Vellum (it occurred to Harry that she'd probably met the same response from her other classes), "it's not a trick question. What is it? Yes, Mr...?"

"Dean Thomas," replied Dean, lowering his arm, "well, it looks like a sword. A Muggle sword," he added. Harry smiled inwardly at Dean's forethought to protect himself with the phrase 'looks like'.

"Yes, that's correct, Mr Thomas," Vellum confirmed, displaying a trace of a smile, "it's a sword," but the smile vanished almost immediately, as she then asked, "is it Good or Evil?" she was looking at Dean, clearly expecting an answer.

"Well, erm, it's a sword..." repeated Dean, somewhat lamely.

Vellum's eyes, now hawklike as they searched for prey, swept the room. "Can *anyone* tell me whether this sword is Good or Evil?"

All eyes fell on the one, absolutely reliable source of answers, "Hermione Granger, Professor. The sword can't be Good or Evil by itself, it depends who's using it," Hermione's voice trailed off as Vellum's eyes, which had initially lit up at the first part of the explanation, had dimmed to disappointment at the end.

"Almost right, Miss Granger. Almost," Vellum plucked the sword out of the air, and then span it around her wrist before bringing the point down to the floor. Beside him, Harry heard Ron murmur his approval. Harry had to agree, she certainly knew how to handle a sword.

"It is not the *person* who defines whether this sword is Good or Evil, it is the *act*. Some of the most heinous of crimes have been committed with the best intentions, and the most despicable soul on the face of this Earth may yet produce an act of selfless good. This sword," and again Vellum flicked the weapon around her wrist, the blade spinning as she did so, "is a tool. It can be used for Good or Evil, and it is the responsibility of the user to make that decision."

Vellum paused, to let these words sink in. "Now, you're probably wondering what on earth sword-play has to do with Defence Against the Dark Arts. Well here's the answer... *everything*."

Harry blinked.

"Just as this sword is neither Good nor Evil, the same is true of magic," Vellum explained, "there is no 'Dark Magic' and 'Light Magic', only inappropriate use of those powers we hold. It is quite appropriate, in fact almost enlightened of Hogwarts, that this class refers to 'Dark Arts' and not 'Dark Magic'. It seems that someone, when drawing up the curriculum, knew the distinction between the tool and the user..."

Confronted by the sea of puzzled expressions, Vellum sighed, and explained again, "magic is a tool, and we, as wizards and witches, are the users. This tool, by itself, can do nothing - it is neither Good nor Evil. We, on the other hand, have the power to command this magic to a chosen task; the responsibility for magic's use rests with us, not with the spell itself."

Sandwiched between Ron and Hermione, Harry was aware of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, Ron's face had lit up with comprehension, as he hung on to Vellum's words. On his other side, however, Hermione was scowling. Harry was confused - Vellum's words did make

sense, to a point, but how could the Cruciatus Curse ever be put to 'Good Use'? Avada Kedavra? He could begin to formulate an argument for Imperious in extreme circumstances, but overall Harry thought that the distinction was nowhere near as clear cut as Vellum was pretending.

"So, this year, we will be covering all manner of spells, incantations, curses and hexes, both so you know what kind of things to expect, and also how to harness and apply the powers we have. So, if we could now turn to page 31 of the textbooks, and consider the Crellis Curse..."

The remainder of the lesson passed uneventfully, and it was only as Harry was making his way to the Great Hall for lunch that it struck him; Vellum had referred to Voldemort as 'the Dark Lord.'

Chapter 6:

How many points do Hufflepuff currently have in the House Cup competition at Hogwart's School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?

It had been a rough night - Harry had had a bizarre dream that involved Vellum putting Cho under the Cruciatus curse, all the time saying "see, there is no such thing as Dark Magic, I am the Force of Good." He'd rubbed at his scar purely through reflex before he'd realised that it wasn't hurting at all; not a vision, then, just the disjointed mumblings of a teenage boy's mind.

"Hey Harry, Hedwig's back!" exclaimed Ron, pointing out the snowy owl as she swooped towards the breakfast table and releasing a letter addressed with Hagrid's customary scrawl:

Dear Harry,

Thanks for your letter - it looks like we're nearly finished over here, so I should be back at Hogwart's before Halloween (wouldn't want to miss the feast, would I?). I'm enjoying my stay at Beauxbatons, but I do miss Hogwarts.

Glad you like the eggs - I'll be back before they hatch, which should be good.

Hope you, Ron and Hermione are staying out of trouble - say 'hello' to Fang for me.

See you soon,

Hagrid

"Glad you like the eggs??" scoffed Ron, passing the letter back after having read it "what did you say to him?"

Harry grinned, "I just mentioned them, that's all, but you know Hagrid, he just assumes we all think like he does," he said, passing the letter to Hermione as a diversion from her Arithmancy revision (it was official, thought Harry, that girl was *demented*: Arithmancy for breakfast?).

"He says he'll be back in time for Halloween," noted Hermione, "and he doesn't think the eggs will have hatched by then." An expression of concern flashed across her face, "what do you think we'll be doing in Care of Magical Creatures until they hatch?"

If Harry and Ron shared Hermione's concern at the potential lack of lesson material, they didn't show it. Instead Ron suggested that they take Fang for a walk at lunchtime.

And then Seamus' hair exploded.

There was really no other way to describe it; his blonde hair sizzled briefly before exploding into a bright pink cascade of shocked hair, accompanied by a shimmering curtain of silver sparks. All Gryffindor eyes turned to the Weasley twins.

"Exploding hair," explained Lee (the honorary Weasley Triplet), flicking his dreadlocks back, "possibly Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes finest Wheeze yet," he added, appraisingly. Fred and George beamed at Seamus, who scowled back, good-naturedly. If nothing else, he was a good sport.

"What was it in?" asked Dean, with a mixture of interest and apprehension, taking a sip of pumpkin juice.

Fred waited until Dean had swallowed before replying, "we put the powder into the..." Dean's hair interrupted the explanation, sending a second cascade of sparks showering onto the table, "...juice."

Seamus had borrowed a compact mirror from Lavender, and was staring at his lurid hairdo. "Uh guys," he asked, tentatively, "this wears off, right?"

"Well," said George, uncomfortably, "we're still in the research and development stage with this one, but *normally* your hair's back to it's original state in..."

"Minutes," suggested Fred, eagerly.

"Well, maybe not minutes, but not too long, really," modified George.

"All things considered," added Fred, earnestly.

"You know, this time next week, you'll hardly know it was ever pink," said George, supportively.

Seamus and Dean exchanged pained glances, as shrieks of surprise rose from the one of the other tables.

"We did the Hufflepuff juice, too," explained Lee, with a conspiratorial wink.

"Lee Jordan, Fred Weasley, George Weasley. My office," there was no mistaking Professor McGonagall's detention-serving tone, "*now!*"

"It's your own fault," chided Hermione, as the trio got to their feet, "if you didn't play these silly pranks, you wouldn't get all these detentions."

"Well, one has to suffer for one's art," opined Fred, with theatrical exaggeration.

"Art?" said Seamus, raising one pink eyebrow (Harry really wished he could do that, albeit perhaps not with a pink eyebrow).

"That's right, we're *artistes*," confirmed George, in a voice pained by the lack of recognition their endeavors had secured. The trio trooped off, to murmurs of congratulation from the rest of the table.

"You know," said Hermione, "I do love your brothers, Ron, but one of these days a joke is going to backfire."

Ron wasn't listening, however, "Mum is going to *kill* them for this one," he said, with a most un-brotherly grin spreading across his face.

Herbology with the Hufflepuffs was notable for the emergence of 'Herbology Neville'. The others looked on with a mixture of surprise and Gryffindor pride as Neville not only correctly answered questions on the summer reading, but also helped Professor Sprout with the demonstration of repotting Lumoslens cuttings in Greenhouse 3.

"I know that he was an imposter," explained Neville, as the class set about repotting the brightly glowing cuttings, "but the stuff Mad-Eye..."

"Crouch," corrected Harry, absently, "sorry Neville, go on"

"Crouch said about Herbology being my best subject made me realise that I wasn't hopeless at everything."

"But you're *not* hopeless at everything, Neville," exclaimed Hermione.

Neville looked at her levelly, "well, obviously," he said, "Potions is a close second to this..." they laughed at Neville's winning self-mockery, although Harry was uneasy. Crouch had set Neville up in his bid to ensure that Harry would know about Gillyweed in time for the second task - as it turned out, that hadn't worked, and Crouch had had to trick Dobby into fetching the supply. But part of Harry wondered whether Neville really had been good at Herbology, or whether his confidence in the subject was just an unexpected byproduct of Crouch's exploitation.

"No, you don't need to press down so hard," explained Neville, interrupting Hermione's furious kneading of the soil, "the roots on Lumoslens are quite fragile, and they respond better if they're allowed to extend into loosely compacted soil," he continued, "like this..."

Harry paused to watch Neville take over Hermione's repotting, and realized that he didn't really care whether Crouch had been telling the truth or not. What was important was that, intentional or not, he'd given Neville the self-belief that had been sorely lacking beforehand. He remembered Professor Dumbledore telling him that Neville's parents had been aurors, driven mad through torture under the Cruciatus curse; Neville himself still hadn't said anything about that; Harry thought it was a heavy burden to bear alone.

As agreed that morning, they took Fang for a walk across lunch, taking the opportunity to check on their eggs' progress at the same time. They felt much happier doing this with the knowledge that the eggs weren't expected to hatch for at least another six weeks.

"What do you think is inside them, anyway?" asked Ron.

"It's probably something dangerous," replied Hermione, before adding, "that wasn't really a necessary statement, was it?"

"Well," said Harry, "Filch said that we should look up stuff on dragons, crocodiles and..."

"Eels and snakes," finished Ron, "but it's illegal to breed dragons. Everyone knows that."

"Yeah," agreed Harry, "but those damned Skrewts from last year were crosses, weren't they? I'll bet it's dragon crossed with the other stuff, and that's why it's legal."

"Well, not illegal, probably," corrected Hermione, "as opposed to properly legal..."

They exchanged wary glances. Hagrid wasn't necessarily the most objective person in the world when it came to assessing potential threats from creatures, and they all doubted very much that the Ministry was fully aware of what was, literally, being hatched at Hogwarts.

It fell to Ron to change the subject, "so what's going on with you and Cho, then?" he asked.

"What?" exclaimed Harry, trying to affect his best tone of complete surprise, aware that the rapidly rising flush to his face was spoiling the effect somewhat.

"I couldn't believe it when you sat Quidditch practice out to watch from the stands," he continued, "until I saw who it was you were talking to."

"What??! You passed up a chance to *fly*. To talk to Cho?" asked Hermione, incredulously.

"Nothing's happened. Nothing is happening. Nothing will happen," said Harry, with what he hoped would pass for conviction. "We're just friends."

Hermione and Ron exchanged knowing smiles.

"And what's *that* supposed to mean?" asked Harry, confronting his two friends' accusatory looks.

"Oh, methinks the boy doth protest too much," said Hermione, airily, "it's OK, Harry, we *know* you like her, and she is very pretty..."

"She plays Quidditch, too," Ron had a talent for pointing out the obvious, "not that *not* playing Quidditch is a bad thing," he added quickly, for what Harry strongly suspected was Hermione's benefit. Not that she seemed to have noticed.

Realizing that they weren't going to get any further mileage out of him, Hermione and Ron changed subject to discussing Neville's transformation in Potions. They returned Fang to Hagrid's hut, and made their way towards the library for Runes, Scripts and Lore.

It was just Harry's luck that they passed Cho, with her usual collection of friends, heading in the other direction: "Hi Harry!" she called cheerfully as they passed.

"Hey Cho," responded Harry, before wheeling around to face Ron and Hermione, who were looking back at him wearing exaggerated expressions of wide eyed innocence.

"We didn't say a word," said Hermione, with her now familiar knowing look.

"Welcome to the library," said Madam Pince as she addressed the assembled Gryffindor and Slytherin fifth years. "Now, I know that some of you are familiar with the library," everyone looked at Hermione, "but the purpose of these lessons is to ensure that you all develop the necessary research skills a practitioner of magic requires.

"Knowledge," Madam Pince swept her arms to indicate the serried ranks of book stacks, "is power. The Muggle stereotype of the wizard surrounded by arcane books is not unfounded. In your time here at Hogwarts, your teachers will introduce you to a variety of spells, potions, incantations, but you must understand that they are barely scratching the surface of the vast array of powers available to you.

"This is why Professor Dumbledore asked that I run this class, to show you how to locate information, and how to tease crucial information from seemingly innocuous documents."

Harry had to admit that Madam Pince had grabbed his attention with her introduction. Of course, you couldn't spend the best part of four years in Hermione's company without developing some sort of affinity with books, but he'd never stopped to seriously consider *why* Hogwarts had such a huge library. He glanced at his compatriots - Seamus and Dean were drifting off (not wise, given their extreme visibility, hair-wise). Most of the Slytherins had bored looks on their faces, although Malfoy seemed to be paying attention, as did, surprisingly, Pansy.

"Now, the classic mistake all students fall into is assuming that the answer to everything lies in a book of spells," the Librarian continued, "when in fact a great deal of information can be gleaned from the histories.

"Now I know what you're thinking, history is a lifeless subject," well, be fair, it was taught by a ghost, "but the crucial thing about history is it gives you *context*. History explains the *why* in a manner that no list of potions ingredients can do.

"But our studies will extend back even further than the histories, and into the realms of legend. You need to be able to sift the grains of truth from the tales of legend, because," and here Madam Pince paused to ensure she had their attention, "legends did not become legends because they were nice stories.

"Legends became legends because at the time of their inception, the only history was oral history. What you have to understand is that legends were our oldest ancestors' only way of passing crucial information down to us. Obviously, over time, the art of storytelling has obscured many of the messages, but it hasn't destroyed them.

"And what becomes more evident with each passing age is that our ancestors appear to have been blessed with exceptional foreknowledge as to which nuggets of information we would find particularly helpful, even crucial, as we pass through this life."

As Harry absorbed this, he began to wonder if there might be any clues as to how Voldemort might be defeated in the histories and legends held in Hogwarts' library. Dark wizards had been defeated before, Grindlewald, for example. It was a recurring cycle, he realized - Darkness rises, and is conquered. Sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. The two were always in conflict, but neither was ever completely vanquished. In times of greatest evil, there was always good somewhere, carrying the fight. Similarly, in the most benign of times, the cancer of darkness lurked, biding its time, waiting to strike.

As they sat down to the evening meal in the Great Hall, Harry and Ron fresh from Quidditch training, Professor Vellum stood up, and caught the students' attention by tapping her glass; "excuse me, everyone, but if I might have a moment of your time."

Several hundred pairs of eyes turned to the tall, thin witch with interest. "The headmaster has kindly agreed that I may run a fencing class for the older students," a buzz of excitement greeted this statement, which she cut short, "now I know that one of my predecessors had an ill-fated attempt to start a dueling club, but this is different."

"Should hope so too!" whispered Ron; they all remembered the dismal dueling club Gilderoy Lockheart had established in their second year.

"Now, as most of you will have realized," Vellum continued, "I pursue Muggle fencing as a hobby. Professor Dumbledore has kindly allowed me to start a Muggle fencing club for fifth year students and above. Anyone interested should add their name to the sign up sheet outside the door - the club will meet on Tuesday evenings, at 8 o'clock. Thank you for your attention."

The hall was abuzz with frenzied whispers; Harry had immediately decided he would sign up - he remembered facing Slytherin's basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets armed with Godric Gryffindor's sword, and wanted to be much better prepared should he ever find himself in that situation again. "I'm signing up for that," said Harry, eagerly.

"Me too," confirmed Ron, "what about you, Hermione?"

"Oh, I can't," said Hermione, "it clashes with our weekly Prefects' meeting. And besides, I'm not keen on swords."

"That's a truly pathetic excuse," Fred cut in.

"Yeah, miserable," agreed George, "I mean, *we* can't go 'cos it clashes with our detentions," he added, importantly.

"Only you two, sorry Lee, you *three*, would find it necessary to have detentions, in the plural, already mapped out," said Hermione, shaking her head.

Leaving the Great Hall, Harry and Ron waited to add their names to the sign up sheet, which had already run on to a second parchment. Even so, Harry was somewhat surprised that he was adding his name immediately below Pavarti's. Somehow she'd never struck Harry as the fencing type.

Back in the Gryffindor Common Room, Lavender had brought down Wizard's Triv, a wizarding version of the Muggle game Trivial Pursuit. Most of the Gryffindors had joined in the game, even though the twins seemed solely intent on trying to transfigure their cheeses into mice, dislodging everyone else's counters on the board. Crookshanks glared at them.

"OK, Seamus," said Lavender, "easy one for you: who's the current Minister for Magic?"

Seamus was rolling the dice before he'd even answered: "Cornelius Fudge."

"That's stupid," commented Dean, "'cos as soon as he's out of his job, the card's out of date."

"Not these cards," explained Ginny, who was playing in a team consisting of herself, Ron and Harry, with Hermione on tap for the hard questions, "they're charmed to automatically update. There are some *really* evil questions in there, like *Who is potions master at Beauxbatons Academy?*"

"And how do you know that, Miss Weasley," asked Angelina, eyeing her suspiciously, "I do hope you haven't been sneaking a look at the cards..."

"Um no, of course not," said Ginny, not looking at the seventh year Chaser, "Harry, your turn to ask; Arts and Entertainment, isn't it, Seamus?" Despite the quick change of subject, Ginny discovered that Angelina was still surveying her with a fixed stare.

Although he was hopeless at the game, Harry found it an enjoyable way to spend the evening, as the trivia gave him a glimpse of the wizarding world he'd never known existed during the first eleven years of his life. He found it strangely comforting that there were magical counterparts to the Muggle Janet and John series of reading books.

They played long into the night - the rules weren't very clear on exactly how the game ended, and no-one seemed particularly interested in winning, anyway.

Chapter 7:

Which weatherwitch presented forecasts on the WWN from 1948 to 1985?

"Good morning, class," announced Professor Vellum, "now, if you'd all like to collect your things and follow me, please..." The tall witch led them from the classroom through the corridors to one of the inner quadrangles.

Harry hadn't been to this part of the school before, as far as he could remember. Which, now he came to think about it, seemed a little odd, since he was now in his fifth year. But what with revolving staircases, and numerous out of bounds corridors, floors and towers, maybe it wasn't that much of a surprise.

The quadrangle itself was about the size of a tennis court, surrounded on each side by covered walkways. A cluster of gargoyles leered at the students below, keeping watch. In the centre of the lawn lay a perfectly smooth, perfectly black boulder, and Professor Vellum strode right up to it, the class following. She turned to face them.

"Do any of you know what this piece of rock is?" she queried. In response to the sea of blank faces, she continued, "this is the Hogwarts soakstone. No-one knows where it came from, or how it got here, but that's not our concern. The interesting thing about the soakstone is that it has, to date, proven to be completely indestructible."

"Excuse me, Professor," Mandy Brocklehurst had raised her hand, "but surely something must have made it the shape it is."

"Indeed," agreed the Professor, although her eyes did not betray whether Mandy's question had been astute or woeful. "You might also wonder how it got here," she added, as if it were an afterthought.

"Now, we will be using the soakstone in later lessons as an object to train some of the more destructive spells upon. For this lesson, however, I will award 200 house points to Gryffindor *and* Ravenclaw if *any* one of you manages to either move the soakstone, or change its appearance in any shape or form before the end of the lesson."

As one, the class blinked. 200 house points? It was unheard of. It was almost inconceivable. It was preposterous.

It was a chance to overtake Slytherin in the House Cup.

"Alright then," said Harry, drawing his wand and marching to the front of the group, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Nothing happened.

"Any change in its appearance?" asked Hermione, seeking clarification.

"Yes, that's correct. If you can change *any* aspect of this stone before the end of the lesson, I will award the points." Harry noticed that Vellum didn't seem unduly concerned that such an eventuality would occur.

"*Chromaticus Blanco!*" cried Hermione, flicking her wand at the boulder. Her shoulders drooped when nothing happened.

"What was *that* supposed to be?" asked Ron, perhaps not in the most supportive fashion.

"It was supposed to change the colour to white," said Hermione, thoughtfully.

Terry Boot announced a change of tactic, "OK, it seems clear that basic spells," Hermione and Harry both bristled at the description 'basic', "don't work. Let's think outside the box a bit on this - why don't we try brute force?" Vellum's eyes glowed appraisingly.

Although the stone was large, it wasn't physically possible to provide a handhold for every member of the class. In the end it was left to the boys, minus Harry (who was the slightest), to all find a handhold, as they tried to move the stone. Nothing happened.

"Give up, boys, you'll strain something," interrupted Lisa Turpin. "We need to introduce some mechanics here - remember Archimedes? He said 'Give me a long enough lever, and a place to stand, and I can move the Earth'. We need a lever."

"And, presumably, a place to stand," added Seamus, whose mane of shocking pink hair had been groomed into a ponytail by Lavender. He would have cheerfully killed anyone who dared suggest it, but he was actually getting quite attached to his new look. Dean had asked Parvati to dreadlock his - the effect was quite surreal.

"*Accio tree!*" commanded Harry, stretching out his arm. The last time he had done something similar was when he retrieved his Firebolt for the First Task - this time he was aiming to fetch one of the felled trees that had been nestling by Hagrid's hut, left over from making the cages for their eggs.

"Impressive, Potter," noted Vellum as a 20 foot sapling came spinning through the air, to rest on the ground, upright, in Harry's grasp.

"Showoff," muttered Ron, although it was a goodnatured grumble.

"Hermione, can you put an enlargement charm on this, together with a strengthening charm?"

"I'm not sure if the two will work together," replied Hermione, dubiously.

"OK, well how about transfiguring it into rock?" asked Padma.

"Nah, too brittle," opined Terry, "anyone know how to transfigure wood into metal?"

Hermione turned to Professor Vellum, "can we use the library?"

Vellum's eyes lit up (the class were learning to read her eyes quite well - it was generally the only way you could tell whether you were on the right track or not), "of course," she murmured.

"OK, thanks," said Hermione, "Ron, Harry?" she immediately set off to the library, Ron and Harry in her wake.

Once in the library, the three split up, "and Ron, *try* to stay away from the Quidditch section," Hermione had instructed, mute to his strangled cries of wronged innocence.

Harry had found one reference to soakstones, which hadn't been encouraging, describing them as immovable objects, impervious to any kind of force whatsoever.

Hermione had found a couple of transfiguration references, which she checked out. "Alright, she said, let's get back. Where's Ron?"

"I'll go," volunteered Harry making his way towards the Quidditch section. "Oy Ron, c'mon, we're leaving. Did you find anything?"

Ron had quickly pushed the book he'd been looking at back on the shelf with a start, and judging by the colour of his ears, Harry suspected that the material had been far more related to air-borne team games than arcane quasi-magical objects.

"She'll kill you," Harry teased.

"I *was* looking," asserted Ron, indignantly.

"Uh-huh?"

"Anyway, I'll bet Hermione found something - don't know why she needed us anyway."

"Well come on, she's waiting for us now."

The trio made it back to the quadrangle, where the situation was pretty much as it had been before. The stone was still exactly as it had been left, and Vellum clearly hadn't been required to award 400 house points.

In fact, it distinctly looked as though several people had given up on the project. Seamus, Dean, Lavender, the Patil twins and Mandy were sitting in a circle, catching the weak September sunshine, Lavender absently re-grooming Seamus' ponytail.

"You know, your hair's really silky now," she commented, "I wonder if they put any conditioner in Exploding Hair?"

Hermione rolled her eyes as they overheard this, and went to join Terry and Lisa.

"Best leave it to the egg-heads to come up with the plan," suggested Ron. He was right - Hermione and the two Ravenclaws were now deep in conversation, leafing through the two transfiguration texts attempting to come up with the optimum strategy.

In the end, they decided to transfigure the tree into iron, having initially cut a section off to act as the fulcrum for their lever. "OK everyone," Terry called people to attention, "here's the plan."

"Hermione and Lisa will use a stasis charm on the fulcrum to make sure it doesn't move. I will levitate the bar into position between the rock and the fulcrum. On my mark, the rest of you need to hit the top of the bar, towards the far wall," he indicated the direction with a gesture.

"Harry," Terry turned to him, "can you be ready with a levitation spell in case anything gets out of hand?"

"Sure," nodded Harry. He already knew the plan wasn't going to work, but it was at least an interesting exercise in teamwork. He pitied the Hufflepuffs, who would no doubt get given the same task in their class with the Slytherins.

"OK, Hermione, Lisa.... and hold!" Hermione and Lisa, wands drawn on either side of the tiny fulcrum, sent holding spells, to ensure that it was permanently fixed.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" commanded Terry, directing the transfigured tree into an upright position, and then carefully nestling it between the soakstone and the fulcrum.

"OK," said Terry, satisfied that the elements were in position. "Harry, you ready?"

Harry had his wand drawn, and nodded.

"Alright then, everyone, on my mark, hit this side of the bar," he slapped the side facing the stone, "with as much force as you can muster in *that* direction," he said, pointing to the far wall.

"One... Two... Three... *NOW!!!*"

At first, nothing seemed to be happening, but gradually the bar started angling downwards. Scarcely believing it, Harry looked at the soakstone, but it hadn't moved. He then realised that the fulcrum was slipping - Hermione and Lisa were holding their breath with the effort of keeping the fulcrum in place, and couldn't raise the alert. The fulcrum slipped some more, and Harry suddenly realised that the bar was eventually going to snap to the ground, and squeeze the fulcrum out of its path rather like squeezing a pip from a lemon.

"Stop pushing!" yelled Harry, and immediately started his levitation incantation, "*Wingardium....*"

The group stopped their force on the lever, but it was already falling, and Lisa and Hermione were powerless to prevent the fulcrum from being propelled along the bar's length, picking up speed. Harry's Seeker reflexes saw the fulcrum shoot out as the lever collapsed, heading towards one of the windows in the far wall. He tracked it with his wand, as he finished his incantation, "...*Leviosa!*"

Just in time, Harry flicked the fulcrum up, finally missing the top of quadrangle wall by a fraction. He guided the fulcrum back down to earth, as the rest of the group looked at the trench made by the lever as it had slammed into the grass.

"Good catch, Potter," said Vellum, approvingly. The end of the lesson was drawing near.

"Well, as I'm sure you now realise, there never was any hope of you achieving the task I set you. The soakstones, and as far as we know there are three, have withstood the attentions of

the greatest minds of our time, and still no-one has found their secret. Watch," she instructed, and hurled a series of lightning bolts at the soakstone.

Vellum had hit the boulder with terrific force, yet unlike a normal lightning bolt, where the discharge resulted in a thunderclap, there was almost no sound beyond the small static drizzle as the energy travelled from wand to rock. Dudley's summer homework came unbidden to the front of Harry's mind:

The sum energy before a transfer is equal to the sum energy after a transfer.

Energy cannot be produced out of nothing. Nor can it disappear, it simply changes to another form.

Harry walked over to the rock, inspecting the point where the lightning bolts had hit. There was no indication that anything had ever happened, and as he put his hand to the stone, it wasn't even warm. All the reading he had done over the summer told him this wasn't possible. The energy from Vellum's lightning bolt couldn't have disappeared. And yet it hadn't been transferred to heat, or noise.

The only explanation that Harry could think of, then, was that the stone had somehow stored the energy from the lightning bolts.

And then the implications started to sink in. It had also stored all the energy from all the spells that morning, and, indeed, every single type of attack it had been subjected to since its discovery.

Put simply, it amounted to being a battery of magical energy of stupendous quantity. Fortunately, no-one knew how to tap it.

Chapter 8:

What was the name of Janet and John's pet wyvern?

"Do you think they'd actually miss us?" asked Ginny, who was starting to get a little bored.

Harry looked down at the play beneath - Ron had just successfully defended another shot from Matty, and Angelina was trying to evade a Bludger from Dean as she flew with the Quaffle. "Probably not," he agreed, "I don't even know if Alicia is planning to release the snitch at all. Normally I just float around above the action, staying out of trouble..."

"Flying round and round in circles, getting lower and lower until you go back up to the top and start again," Ginny finished for him.

"Hey, you deciphered my brilliant Seeker's strategy," exclaimed Harry, before switching to teasing mode, "is that all you do at Quidditch matches, watch me?" He flashed her what he hoped was a winning smile.

"Well, as you know, I used to have a passing interest in you," explained Ginny, "but then it struck me that the noble hero look was *so* passe. So there you have it, I've moved on with my life, and I'm over you."

"You're over me?" asked Harry, with a grin, "when were you under me?"

"Don't be crude, Potter," Ginny admonished, with a smile, "Anyway, *as* I was saying, I'm over you, and this year I've set my sights a little higher."

"Oh really?" enquired Harry, "anyone I know? I mean, technically, most of the fifth year and above are taller than me, so they'd all be a little higher, wouldn't they?"

"Y'know, it's pretty easy to spot our Reserve Beaters, with those hair-dos," observed Ginny, apparently changing the subject.

"Fred says that it'll wear off," noted Harry.

"And you'd trust the word of a Weasley Twin?"

"Well," admitted Harry, "he wasn't exactly precise on the timescale..." he suddenly dived towards the ground, cutting straight through a hawkhead attack from the Reserve Chasers, Ginny trailing in his wake. He let out a whoop of pure exhilaration as he pulled out of the dive, inches to spare between the broom and the turf of the Quidditch pitch, ascending into a leisurely circle beneath the play, waiting for Ginny to catch up with him.

"Where'd it go?" asked Ginny, bewildered.

"And *that*, my dear, is what we call a Wronski Feint," explained Harry, beaming at her.

Ginny glared at him for a moment, before responding, "and what a shame, no Cho spying on us to see..."

Now it was Harry's turn to scowl, "tell me, which bit of 'nothing happening' do you lot not understand? We're just friends!"

"I believe you," assured Ginny, with insincerity so thick you could have cut it with a Bludger.

"It's true!" protested Harry.

"Of course it is," agreed Ginny, nodding her head vigorously.

"Just. Friends," growled Harry, through gritted teeth.

"You know, you're *so* right. Just friends. Of course," trilled Ginny, happily, which made Harry even more aggrieved.

"...and she *wasn't* spying," he asserted defiantly.

"No, she was too busy staring dreamily into your eyes for that, I think," agreed Ginny.

Harry saw his chance to even the score, "Oh yes, my eyes; 'as green as pickled toad', wasn't it?" he enquired, merrily.

Ginny scowled, "I can't *believe* you brought that up. *Again*. That was *three years* ago..."

"You know, I have the whole poem memorised," continued Harry, happily, "now let me see..."

Care of Magical Creatures, having flattered to deceive with Filch's first lesson, stuck to the form book for the second. As Hagrid had said in his letter, the eggs weren't due to hatch for some time yet, and Filch had no intention of allowing the class to spend the entire lesson babysitting a batch of inert eggs.

"I can't *believe* that he's got us doing this," complained Ron, "I mean, the Slytherins get to feed the fish, and we get *this*," he wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Well Ron," said Hermione, "we all know that post owls are magical creatures, and it must have been self evident that they didn't just look after themselves." She winked at Harry, out of sight of Ron.

"But cleaning out the owlery," said Ron, despairingly, "this is detention stuff, not a lesson."

"Well, I bow to your family's expertise in *that* department," said Hermione, "and anyway, it means that the house-elves don't have to do it."

"Oh no, not spew again," said Ron gloomily.

"It's S.P.E.W.," corrected Hermione, crossly, "and honestly, I'd have thought this would have given you an insight into just how much you take those poor creatures for granted."

"But it's what they *do*," persisted Ron, "they *like* it. And I, for one, am about to suffer a near fatal guilt overdose from depriving them of the happy task of clearing up...." he looked distastefully at the shovel's contents, "...postal owl *byproducts*."

Harry smiled. It might not be the most pleasant of jobs, and Uncle Vernon would probably have done a little jig of joy if he could see him now, on his hands and knees scrubbing the floor of the owlery, but even Ron and Hermione's bickering had a cosy sort of familiness to it.

Hedwig had flown over to nip Harry's finger as a hello, but once she'd discerned that he didn't need her to deliver any messages, she'd flown back to her perch, where she watched the team of Gryffindors attack the task of cleaning her floor with shovels, scrubbing brushes and a decidedly minimal helping of enthusiasm.

It had been a normal Hogwarts weekend, with a full week's classes having given them enough work to keep them occupied. Dean had tried to get the Gryffindors interested in playing Football, even going so far as to wear his West Ham kit, to hoots of derision from the less Muggle-aware, who'd never seen a football kit before.

The Muggle-aware Gryffindors, on the other hand, collapsed in fits of delirious laughter because the kit, claret-and-blue, clashed woefully with the pink dreadlocks.

Actually, Harry had convinced the Weasleys to join in, but they really couldn't see the attraction of a game which only had one ball, and no magic. Still, Dean had managed to get together a reasonable 5-a-side team, and was going to try and talk Hufflepuff into a match sometime.

But now it was Monday morning, and immediately after break it was down into the dungeons for the unique brand of personal Hell that was Potions with the Slytherins. He'd forgotten that Fleur would be there.

"ello 'arry," she beamed at him, and Harry felt the force of her Veela charm hit him just about at knee height.

"Hi Fleur," he replied weakly, trying to act as though he always collapsed into his seat clutching the desk.

"Ten points from Gryffindor," Snape's sneering tones would have cut concrete - Veela charm stood no chance, "for displaying a lack of respect for teaching staff. You will refer to my assistant as Ms Delacour in these lessons."

Harry gloomily pondered this terrific start to the lesson - the Slytherins weren't even in yet, and Gryffindor were already ten points down. Ron was staring dreamily at Fleur, transfixed, and oblivious to everything about him, until Hermione poked him in the ribs. Hard.

"Ow! What was that for?" he hissed.

Hermione fixed him with an arch glare, "you were *drooling*," she hissed, venomously.

Once the class was full, Snape introduced Fleur formally. "ello everybody," she said, beaming her winsome smile once more. The class split in three at that point. Almost all the boys stared, transfixed at this blonde-haired vision, the girls all tutted an exasperated sigh, and Draco Malfoy disdained both in equal measure.

Hermione waited a respectable time before jabbing Harry and Ron to bring them back to their senses; she could tell it was going to be a long year of Potions. "Somebody pinch Neville," she whispered.

It had worked before, so Harry figured it was worth a try, and raised his hand.

"Yes, Potter?" inquired the spectral History professor.

"I wondered what you could tell us about the Hogwarts soakstone," Harry asked, mildly.

"Potter, I am attempting to explain to you the reasons behind Ulrog the Inept's disastrous leadership in the abortive Goblin Rebellion of 1362. I'm afraid I don't see how your question relates to the topic."

"Well it doesn't," admitted Harry, quickly adding, "*exactly*," to forestall Binns' attempt to continue on with his monologue on Ulrog the Inept. "That's just it," he added, winningly, "we seem to know so little about it that it's hard to see how it relates to anything."

"Good one," congratulated Hermione in a light whisper - if Binns had a weak spot, it was his firmly held belief that a failure to understand the history of events meant that the student might be unaware of the crucial interaction between A and B that resulted in C. And those that didn't understand History were doomed to repeat it, as he was so fond of saying.

Binns paused, clearly fighting some kind of internal battle as to whether to proceed with inflicting death by monologue or allow himself to be diverted by Harry's question. "I'm afraid I can't supply much information myself on the subject," he admitted, and Harry's shoulders dropped. Still, at least he could get some sleep in before Quidditch practice.

"However," Binns continued, and Harry sat back up, "what we *do* know is that the soakstones were somehow revered by the Magi, and Salazar Slytherin succeeded in capturing the stone at Hogwarts."

Harry was stunned. Slytherin? But more pertinent questions had raised themselves.

"Excuse me, Professor, but who are the Magi?" asked Hermione, who had now been sucked into the topic.

"Were, Miss Granger, were. The Magi were a primitive race, subhuman, but with some limited magical ability. Foolishly, they declared war on the wizards, and were ultimately defeated under the leadership of Slytherin."

"Well what happened to them after they were defeated? I've never heard of them before," admitted Hermione, now hooked.

"Well, they were defeated," explained Binns, with a shrug, "there were no survivors."

Hermione's expression turned cold, "*We wiped them out?*" she asked, with barely controlled anger.

"Well, Ms Granger, that is somewhat... emotive language," cautioned Binns, "what you have to remember is that Slytherin and his followers were dealing with a sub-human species, of fundamentally limited intelligence, and a slim grasp of rudimentary magic."

"According to whom?" asked Hermione, acidly.

"I think you'll find that Slytherin's journal of the campaign is taken to be the definitive account of these events. I do believe we have a copy in the library in fact," he continued, "however, we've been sidetracked long enough, and we must return back to the subject at hand..."

Harry looked at Hermione, "Library?" he asked.

"Library," she confirmed, eyes narrowing.

After Quidditch practice, Harry and Ron sought out Hermione in the library. She had three piles of books on the table, and was leafing through a biography of the Founders when she looked up, "Magi, soakstones, Slytherin," she announced briefly, indicating each pile with a vague wave of her hand.

Ron and Harry looked at each other - this was Hermione in 'battle mode', and it was useless trying to get any further discussion out of her until she'd finished whatever task she'd set herself. "I'll take soakstones," volunteered Ron.

"Guess I'm the Magi, then," deduced Harry, and picked the first book off the pile.

"You know, this doesn't make sense," said Harry, a little while later.

"Too right," agreed Ron wholeheartedly, and snapping his book shut, "let's get back to the Common Room." Hermione glared at him.

"No, that's not what I meant," corrected Harry, "it's weird, all this stuff about the Magi, I mean, half of it's contradictory. I've read that they were half-human half-goblin crossbreeds. Then someone else said that they were crossed with slugs, and left trails of slime everywhere they went."

"Yeuch," said Ron, with feeling.

"Well in Slytherin's accounts, he says that he had to conduct identity tests on all his forces to ensure there weren't any Magi masquerading as wizards on his side," added Hermione.

"So?" asked Ron, who really didn't understand what the fuss was all about in the first place.

"So," explained Hermione, "if Slytherin couldn't tell who was Wizard and who was Mage in his own army, they must have been human."

"So why is there all this stuff about them being half-human?" asked Harry, "Binns told us that they were sub-human creatures... It doesn't make sense."

"Yes it does," said Hermione, "don't you see? It's the classic first step of war - dehumanise the enemy. Slytherin set about spreading this anti-Magi propaganda so that the Wizards wouldn't feel guilty about committing genocide."

"Well yeah, obviously," said Ron with heavy sarcasm, "'cos we all know that Slytherin was wracked by guilt complexes his whole life."

Hermione chose to ignore that, "so what about the soakstones?"

"Nothing that we didn't already know," replied Ron, "soakstones: Revered by the Magi, blah blah blah, seemingly indestructible, blah blah blah, no known use, blah..."

"Enlightening report, Ron," noted Harry.

Ron simply shrugged, "I can only work with the material I've got..."

"Well, I don't really know what I was looking for," admitted Harry, "but I don't think I've found it yet. Let's head back."

The trio packed their bags, returned the books to the stacks, and made their way towards the exit.

"I'll catch you up," promised Harry, and about turned.

"Am I intruding?" he asked, gingerly.

Cho looked up, "hey Harry, no, not really. Why?"

"Well, normally you're with all your friends," he pointed out, "so it's kind of unusual to see you in here by yourself."

"Arithmancy waits for no-one," she smiled ruefully, waving a hand at a book full of incomprehensible runes, "and I wanted some time to myself. I never liked being on my own before, you know? But since Cedric, I've needed space from time to time - it helps me keep balance."

"Right, so really you lied, and I *am* intruding," he said, apologetically, "so I really will go this time. Plus Ron and Hermione will be waiting."

"Thanks Harry."

"For what? I'm the one doing the interrupting."

"For listening, I guess, and for not being afraid to talk. Guess Gryffindors really do have the courage thing."

"Well, if you ever need someone to listen, and I'm sure there are millions of people above me in that list, but, you know, if you ever need to talk..."

"I'll hold you to that," she said, meeting his eyes.

Harry made his way out of the library, expecting to meet up with Ron and Hermione in the Common Room. Instead they were waiting to pounce immediately outside the library door.

"Just friends," confirmed Ron, nodding, "I see that now," he added, exuding insincerity and disbelief from every pore.

"Ron," commanded Harry, tersely, "construct a well known phrase or saying from the following words: face. Sodding. Your. Shut."

Chapter 9:

Bodrig the Blunt was the leader of which Goblin Rebellion?

"Right," said Professor Vellum, eyeing the 30 or so students who'd turned up for the new session, "I take it you are all fifth years and above, aren't you?"

Harry looked about the room as they all nodded their confirmation. Professor Flitwick and Madam Hooch had also come along to the session - he knew that Flitwick had been a duelling champion before coming to teach at Hogwarts, but that was duelling with wands. And Madam Hooch was the closest thing Hogwarts had to a PE instructor, he guessed.

Vellum called everyone to the front of the room. "Right, now understand that fencing is a demanding discipline, and as such I demand your *complete* attention during these sessions. I'm sure you'll all be disappointed to learn that we will be practicing with wooden canes to start with," her eyes twinkled in amusement. Of course, Harry thought, she was hardly going to let a room full of teenagers loose with swords. Worse luck.

"Mr Weasley," Harry suspected she'd picked on Ron because he was the tallest student present, and also the hair was a bit of a giveaway, "please could you pass the canes around?"

"Now, *before* you even *think* of taking a swing with the cane, you must put on the face guards," Vellum indicated what looked like a collection of sieves, "although the arm protectors are up to you. For what it's worth, expect to get hit. Lots."

The class fumbled around putting on the face guards, and Harry decided to go for padding protecting his right arm - it was in two sections, for the forearm and upperarm, leaving the elbow free to move. He felt utterly ridiculous, but still, better ridiculous than blind - even though they were only using canes, it would still be relatively easy to lose an eye.

"Excellent. Now, Mr Weasley, if you could join me at the front, please. All we are going to concentrate on tonight is stance, and a basic thrust and parry. Positioning is everything, so pay attention to your feet."

Vellum then proceeded to demonstrate how to face an opponent, and how to lead and block. Harry was astounded at the liquid grace of Vellum's fencing - everything flowed naturally from one move to the next, whereas Ron was clumsy and unco-ordinated by comparison. But then, be fair, thought Harry, Ron hadn't had half a century's practice.

"So, I want you to find a partner of equal height, and take turns to attack and block. Remember, keep your body loose - flow into each move. Be graceful. Don't force the speed - that will come later. Also remember the cardinal rule - no blows above shoulder height, and none below waist level. In fact, the *only* target this lesson is your opponent's sword arm."

Professor Vellum surveyed the assembled students with a steely glare, "if so much as *one* person breaks these rules, the *entire* club is suspended." She left them in no doubt that this was not an idle threat.

Before Harry could start looking for a partner of more or less equal height, Parvati had grabbed him. "Hi Harry, I'll be your partner," she said, cheerfully.

"Er OK," Harry agreed - he'd been expecting to seek out a male partner for the duelling, but, he supposed, she was the same height as he was, and that was the only stipulation they'd been given.

Mimicking Ron and Professor's starting places, they took up position opposite each other.

"Harry, do you remember the Champions' Ball last year?" Parvati asked, dangerously casually.

"Of course I do, we went together."

"Oh, 'went together' as in you we had ONE dance, and then you ignored me for the rest of the night?"

"Er..." said Harry, sensing, belatedly that some defensive work was necessary.

"That sort of 'went together'?" she pressed.

"Um..."

"I'm sure you can imagine how *valued* I felt."

"Ah..." it was turning into a night of rare eloquence on Harry's part.

"Two *hours* getting ready. New dress robes specially made for the occasion..."

"Mmm."

"The whole school watching my date pointedly ignore me for the whole evening..."

"Oh."

Parvati's eyes flashed: "payback time.... *en garde!*"

Harry raised his cane, rather as holding a wand in a wizard's duel, suspecting that Parvati would make the first move. She did.

"Ow", Harry winced from a blow to the upper arm.

"Too slow," beamed Parvati, *way* too cheerfully for Harry's taste, "you want to block the blow before it lands," she added, an entirely superfluous piece of advice in Harry's view. "Ready?"

It didn't take long for Harry to realise that Parvati was *seriously* good at this.

"Just try to relax, Harry", encouraged Parvati, "You're all tensed up, which obstructs your poise..."

"I'm all tensed up because the prettiest girl in the year is destroying me in a fencing contest," replied Harry, finally managing to parry a right side thrust successfully, "maintaining poise isn't top of my list at the moment."

"Do you really think I'm pretty?" asked Parvati, pausing momentarily.

Harry, relieved by the break, continued talking before he'd thought his answer through fully "Of course I do - you and your sister both. How did you get to be this good anyway?" Mention of her sister as competition appeared to have reminded Parvati that she was supposed to be annihilating Harry in this contest, and she picked up the attack again.

"Well, that's a long story."

"I'll buy you a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade next weekend," offered Harry.

"Do you know, no-one's ever asked me out at sword-point before," Parvati paused again, and feigned being mildly flattered.

"Stick point," corrected Harry, who realised that he'd gone a bit further than he meant to, but since Parvati hadn't (yet) turned him down flat, or (worse) burst into hysterical giggling, he decided to press for an answer.

"Was that a yes?" He asked. Parvati, too, gave the impression that this had gone a bit further than she'd anticipated, as she paused a while before giving her response. "Yeah, that's a yes." She launched another flurry of attacks, "but don't think for one *second* that that makes things even..."

"Ow!" replied Harry, by way of confirmation, as Parvati landed another blow, this time to the forearm, causing him to drop the cane. Again. Fortunately, as he looked around at the other melees taking place in the classroom, it didn't seem as though he was being particularly inept.

Madam Hooch was paired with Dean (the hair didn't seem to be fading at all, he noted), but Flitwick was wandering about offering advice as and when - hardly surprising that he didn't have a partner, Harry mused, given that even he was at least a foot taller than the diminutive Charms professor.

Suddenly, Parvati's draw dropped with surprise, "Harry! Madam Trelawney's prediction!"

"*What?*" asked Harry, in his best are-you-completely-deranged voice.

"She said you'd lose a duel to a dark witch! And what am I if not dark?"

Harry frowned. If that was the prediction, it hadn't been spectacularly useful. "I don't know, I don't have much faith in Trelawney's Inner Eye."

"But don't you see, it fits?"

"Well, not really - Trelawney said I'd be vanquished, remember?"

"Don't tempt me...."

"Splendid, splendid," cried Professor Vellum, as she called the session to a close, "the room is booked for the same time next week, for those who want to attend. Now, if you could all hand your canes in, I'll take them back to Professor Sprout in the morning."

"Actually Professor," volunteered Harry, "we have Herbology first thing tomorrow, so I'd be happy to take them for you." Ron rolled his eyes at Harry, clearly affronted by Harry's creeping.

Parvati looked at him quizzically.

"Well," he said, "it's not as if she's going to notice if a couple of the canes are missing, is it? Damn!"

"What's 'damn'?"

"Well," said Harry sheepishly, "I meant to ask if you'd practice with me before I got hold of the canes." He turned on what he hoped was his best, endearing wide-eyed look.

"You go for dominant women, huh?"

"You asked Parvati out?" Ron was stunned.

"Well, yeah, we were fencing and...."

"...and she said 'yes'?" now Ron sounded really stunned.

"Oh thanks for the supportive comments. Anyway, yes. Cool session, though, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, Vellum said that I seemed to have a natural aptitude for swordplay. How did you do?"

"Er... Parvati slaughtered me..."

A disbelieving smile started to spread over Ron's face, "Parvati? No way. NO WAY!"

Hogsmeade weekends were always special, but this was the first time Harry had ever gone to Hogsmeade with a date. One of Hogwarts' limitations was that there were really only two places you could take a significant other - Hogsmeade and, of course, the Astronomy Tower. Given that there were usually only two Hogsmeade weekends a term, the Astronomy Tower could get pretty busy at nights.

Or so he'd heard, anyway.

Thankfully, the drizzle that had persisted for the previous two days had dried up, and whilst not exactly burning with sunshine, it was a pleasant enough day for mid September in Scotland as Harry and Parvati made their way towards Hogsmeade. Parvati had linked her arm through Harry's, and he'd decided this was a thoroughly companionable way to walk.

First stop was the Three Broomsticks, where Madam Rosmerta furnished Harry with a pair of Butterbeers to take back to their table. "So," said Harry, handing Parvati her drink, "long story."

Parvati smiled, "well, maybe not that long. We've got a brother, Sital, two years older than us," Harry noticed that Pavatri always talked about family relative to 'us', meaning her and Padma. He assumed it was a twin thing.

Harry frowned, "Sital Patil? I don't think I know him - which house is he in?"

"He's not at Hogwarts," she explained, "he's, well, he's a squib."

Harry wasn't sure what to say to this - having grown up outside the wizarding world during the first eleven years of his life, he had no idea whether this was a Big Thing or a Huge Thing. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said, hoping that it was more or less the correct response.

"Mmm," said Parvati, absently, before continuing, "oh, don't be sorry, he's fine, and he's happy, and not everyone can be a wizard.

"Anyway," she continued, "the thing is, growing up as a squib in a wizarding family is quite tricky. I mean, because of the near segregation between us and the Muggles, it's almost impossible for Sital to integrate into the Muggle world without leaving us completely. And we didn't want that.

"So he decided to pursue a career that straddled both worlds, the magical and the Muggle. He's a really, really good fencer. But because he had so few opponents to train against, he taught us to fence too."

"Wow. So Padma can fence as well as you?"

"Padma's better than me - more disciplined. You know me, a bit of an airhead at times, although I do confess that Lavender tends to bring out the worst in me. Still, I'm not bad, Padma's good, and Sital's brilliant." Parvati's eyes sparkled at this last sentence, and Harry could feel the pride she had in her family. He could never imagine feeling like that about the Dursleys, and as for his parents...

"You OK?" asked Parvati, "did I say something wrong? I mean, I love Lavender dearly, and she's my best friend in the world right now..."

"No no, I'm fine," replied Harry, "and it wasn't about the Lavender thing, although you are quite different without her. I was just thinking about how proud you were of your family, and, well..."

Parvati twigged, and her eyes widened in shock, "Oh I'm so sorry Harry, I didn't mean to go on about having family."

"Don't be silly - it's fine, you know, it's just that I keep on coming up against things that I've never had to consider before. I live with Muggle relations across the summers, and I hate them. Ron's family, and Hermione, are probably the nearest thing to a family I have. Not in the blood thing, but in the bonding sense. I think."

"I'm not making a lot of sense, am I?" he asked.

Parvati took both her hands in his, and looked him in the eye, "you're making perfect sense," she assured him.

"It's just, you know, this thing," he pointed to the scar on his forehead, "it makes life difficult. I never knew my family, and I'm kind of famous because I survived what they didn't."

"More than kind of," she said gently, squeezing his hands lightly.

"I hate the fame. I hate people thinking that somehow I asked for this. That I enjoy it."

"Rita Skeeter, huh?" asked Parvati sympathetically, "although whatever happened to her? She seemed to stop writing after you won the Triwizard Cup."

"But you know, really, I'm just plain Harry," he continued, ignoring Parvati's question. Not that he wanted to ignore her, but he didn't want to lie about the Skeeter thing. Nor was he sure that he should tell her the truth either.

"Well, just plain Harry, you're pretty special to me," said Parvati, before adding with a grimace "would you like extra cheese with that? It was supposed to sound a lot more.... sincere."

"Does that mean you're not averse to spending the rest of the day with me?" asked Harry, hopefully.

"Uh huh."

"And the fencing practice? You'd do that with me too," he persisted.

"I'd like that," she replied, "you weren't bad, actually, for a beginner - have you ever used a sword before?"

"Just once," confirmed Harry.

"Who was that against, then?"

"It wasn't a person, I fought Slytherin's basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets at the end of the Second Year, remember?"

"Wow. Just plain Harry, but by the way I singlehandedly defeated a basilisk when I was twelve..."

"Well it wasn't singlehanded," elaborated Harry, "Fawkes helped me."

"Who's Fawkes?"

"Oh, Dumbledore's phoenix," explained Harry, which resulted in Parvati's eyes twinkling.

"You beat a basilisk when you were twelve, *and* you're on first name terms with a phoenix?? You're the youngest seeker Hogwarts has seen in a century. And the youngest *ever* triwizard champion! And you seriously think that you're just plain Harry?"

"Well, OK, but apart from my part-time duty as sole defender of the Free World against the fall of the apocalypse, you know, I'm pretty much your average wizard."

"So Harry, any more secrets that you're not telling me?" Parvati asked, smiling.

Harry thought - well, Snape's a former DeathEater, and my godfather's a convicted criminal on the run from life imprisonment on Azkaban, even though he's innocent. I can name seven current members of Death Eaters in Voldemort's inner circle. Rita Skeeter's an unregistered animagus.

I have an invisibility cloak and used to have the Marauder's Map. Filch is a squib. Lupin was a werewolf (but you knew that), and I didn't really win the Triwizard cup because Barty Crouch gave me an easy ride. The password to Dumbledore's office is likely to be some kind of Muggle sweet.

Neville's parents were aurors, driven mad under torture by the Cruciatus Curse. Peter Pettigrew wasn't killed by Sirius black, and he too is an unregistered animagus (there seem to be a lot of those about).

Gilderoy Lockheart used memory charms to usurp other people's victories, and write them up in his dark arts books. Madame Trelawney has only made two successful predictions in her life, according to Dumbledore. I was the one who threw the firework into Goyle's potion that time in Potions when were we doing Swelling Solutions.

I've held the Philosopher's Stone in my hand. Hagrid hatched a dragon egg in his gamekeeper's hut. You can get past Fluffy, Hagrid's three-headed dog, by playing it some music. I've been inside the Slytherin common room, in disguise, and I broke into the prefect's bathroom outside of curfew.

Harry looked at her sadly. "Yes. Lots."

Parvati weighed the gaze of those green eyes. She could see that if he could tell her, he would. And maybe he might, in time. "Right, well can you tell our sole protector against the fall of the apocalypse that he'd better get lost for the rest of the day, because I have a date with just plain Harry, and he's *mine*."

"Right, I need some chocolate frogs, and some Bertie Botts beans," explained Harry, as they stood outside Honeydukes, "and I insist on getting my date something. What would Madam like?"

"Well," considered Parvati, affecting a cliched upperclass tone, "Madam would not say no to a bar of Honeydukes chocolate. Plain. Not milk, and *definitely* not orange!"

"OK, no white chocolate, no fudge," murmured Harry, as they made their way inside.

"What?" asked Parvati, perplexed.

"Oh, sorry," explained Harry, "Muggle thing - film quote... sort of tangentially appropriate, in a kind of roundabout fashion. A bit. I've just wanted an opportunity to repeat that line in the real world, and figured that this was about as good a chance as I was ever going to have."

"I've had a really nice day, you know," said Parvati, linking her arm through his once more as Harry secured a major colony of chocolate frogs to take back to his dorm.

"So have I," replied Harry, warmly, "do you want to do this again?"

"Definitely, but I don't want to wait until December!"

"So are we... then?" it seemed awkward, not to mention a little silly, to spell it out.

Parvati kissed him briefly on the lips, "Yes, just plain Harry, we are."

Chapter 10

Who discovered the 12 uses of dragon's blood?

It was dark - what little light there was came from the wall mounted torches and the open fire, casting flickering shadows on the floor. Nagini was curled up in front of the fire, presumably asleep.

Lucius Malfoy, on his knees and wracked with pain, suddenly fell forward, his hands slapping against the cold stone, "Thank you Master," he spluttered, "you are indeed merciful."

"I reward the faithful," the voice was thin, cold and rasping, yet fuller than it had been in the graveyard in the summer.

"Yes Master," agreed Malfoy, daring to look up from his prostrate position."

"I punish weakness. Weakness is failure. My servants do not fail me."

"No Master."

"Are we any closer?"

At this question, some of the Malfoy poise appeared to reinvigorate the Death Eater, and he pushed himself back up to a kneeling position. "Yes Master," the grovelling tone had completely evaporated, "in fact," he added, "we have found something that may address both objectives; the Boy and the Keys."

Sensing he should continue, Lucius asked, "tell me, Master, have you heard of the Subsumatum Curse?"

"No," the still unseen voice confirmed, intrigued, yet betraying its distaste.

"Allow me to demonstrate," asked Malfoy.

"Very well," the voice agreed.

Malfoy turned to face someone out of sight, "bring the captive here."

"At once," this new voice was familiar.

The shadows continued to flicker as Malfoy, still kneeling, waited before his Master for the captive to be brought in.

A cloaked figure returned, dragging a limp body with him. As he cast the wizard down against the stones, his hand sparkled silver in the half-light.

Malfoy got to his feet, and withdrew his wand, pointing it at the lifeless form, "Enervate!" he hissed.

"Where am I? What happened?" the revived captive reached for his wand, but his pocket was empty.

"Looking for this, Jonas?" asked Malfoy, mildly, holding a second wand in his left hand.

"Malfoy!" he spat, "you won't get away with this...." but his bravado failed as he turned to look at the figure seated in the chair, "...who are you.... but, but that's not possible!" he shrieked.

"He seems alert, Master," advised Malfoy, before turning his wand back on the man he'd called Jonas, "Subsumatum!" he whispered.

The captive screamed in agony, clutching his hands to his face, the nails drawing blood as the gouged tracks down from his eyes.

"Finite Incantum," drawled Malfoy, lazily.

"Was this all you had to report?" the voice asked, a tone of warning evident.

If he was worried, however, Malfoy didn't show it, "No Master, watch," he invited, walking back to Jonas, "Enervate!" he hissed again.

Writhing in pain, Jonas looked in disbelief as Malfoy threw him back his wand, and then turned his back on the prisoner as he walked calmly away. Jonas, sensing Malfoy's overconfidence, raised his wand, "Stupefy!" he commanded.

Malfoy kept walking away, until he'd reached the far side of the room, where he turned to face the prisoner once more.

"Dear me, Jonas," tutted Malfoy, sympathetically, "perhaps that particular incantation was a little advanced for someone in your condition. Why don't you try something simpler," he sneered.

"Petrificus Totalus!" shrieked Jonas, panic rising in his voice.

"Oh dear, it's really not working, is it? Why not just try a simple 'Lumus'?" asked Malfoy with mock pity.

Jonas was now shaking in terror as he stammered out the word, "Lumus!" he commanded, his body betraying the sheer effort he was putting into willing the most elementary of all spells to work.

Malfoy turned to face the chair, "as you see, Master, the magical capabilities of the captive have been completely destroyed. What is less evident, however, is that those powers have been transferred to me." His voice changed pitch to one of pure hatred, "Crucio!"

Jonas body wracked in pain once more, his agonised screams reverberating about the room.

"Excellent, Malfoy, you have served me well. And this will work with the Keys?"

"I believe so, Master, although that process is more ritualised. Nonetheless, I have found the documentation, and I believe it can be done."

"It had better be more than belief, Malfoy," warned the voice, "as...."

"Harry! Harry," Ron was shaking him vigorously - the dorm was still dark, and his scar was burning, "what happened?"

Harry looked up, rubbing his scar - his bed was completely wrecked, and Ron's face was as white as sheet, "nightmare" he mumbled, still rubbing his scar.

Ron turned his head away from the bed, "he's alright," he reported, "I think," he added, uncertainly.

"I woke you all up?" asked Harry, guiltily, to which Ron nodded, half apologetically, "I have to see Dumbledore!" Harry suddenly realised, sitting upright.

"Harry, it's 3.20 in the morning. Even Dumbledore's going to be asleep now. You can see him in the morning, before Charms."

"Oh," said Harry, realising that Ron was correct. Even though he'd made his way to Dumbledore's office at many odd times, the Headmaster had to sleep at some point, didn't he?

"You'll be alright, won't you?" asked Ron, concern fighting a losing battle against fatigue.

"Yeah," lied Harry, "go back to bed, I'll see Dumbledore in the morning. 'night."

"'night," said Ron, stifling another yawn. Harry heard him crawl back into his own bed, and shortly after, he heard the sounds of Ron's rhythmic snoring.

Harry lay awake, wondering who Jonas was. Wondering where Voldemort had been. Wondering why he'd stopped Sirius and Remus killing Wormtail back in the third year.

Wondering why 'just plain Harry' had chosen this precise moment to disappear.

Morning came slowly.

Puffy eyed and leaden footed, Harry made his way down to the breakfast table. "Morning Harry!" Parvati had called, cheerfully, before concern washed over her face, "are you OK?"

The fifth year boys at the table all glanced at each other.

"Bad dream," said Harry, by way of explanation, stabbing at his scrambled egg morosely.

"Pretty bad," confirmed Seamus, sombrely.

"How do you know?" asked Parvati, quizzically.

"We were awake," explained Dean, "sort of like a by-product of the frenzied screaming." Seeing Harry's expression, he quickly added, "we were worried about you, man," and Harry could see the concern was genuine, even if the presentation had been somewhat lacking in tact.

"I thought that your hair was supposed to wear off," said Harry, changing subject.

"Um, yeah," replied Seamus, shiftily.

Parvati leaned into Harry to whisper in his ear, "Seamus and Dean have been drinking Exploding Hair to keep the colour. Lavender told me."

Harry looked at Parvati, turned to Seamus and Dean, back at Parvati, Seamus and Dean again, before returning to his girlfriend, "No way!"

"Way," she confided in his ear, "they *claim* that they're doing it to wind Fred and George up that it won't wear off, but Seamus noticed that Lavender can't keep her hands off him now, and Dean... well Dean's Dean."

"Can't you two get a room, or something?" asked Ginny, rolling her eyes.

Harry approached the gargoyle warily, as though it were a combatant foe, "chocolate frog?" he ventured.

Nothing happened.

"Jelly bean. Jelly *beans*?" Of course, he'd known it wouldn't be easy.

"Cockroach clusters. Sherbert Lemons. Aniseed Balls. Pear Drops. Sherbert Fountain."

The gargoyle moved to the side, and Harry made his way up the staircase to the Headmaster's Office, and knocked gingerly on the door.

"Come in, Harry," called the voice. Harry vaguely wondered how Dumbledore knew it was him, and entered the Headmaster's office.

"Good morning, Harry" the headmaster's eyes suffused the room with a calming warmth that made Harry feel instantly at ease. He suspected the effect was intentional.

"Morning Professor," Harry replied, "hullo Fawkes." Fawkes was looking in a sorry state, presumably it wouldn't be too long before he moulted.

"I had a dream," Harry started, by way of introduction, gesturing to his scar.

"I must confess I was beginning to wonder whether Voldemort's resurrection had severed that particular link. It has been unusually quiet. What did you see?"

Harry attempted to explain what he had seen; Lucius Malfoy, Nagini, Wormtail, the man they'd called Jonas.

"Jonas. Tall, dark, curly hair? Well dressed?"

"I couldn't really see what he was wearing," he admitted, "but his hair was dark. I suppose he could have been tall," Harry felt guilty for not having paid more attention to Malfoy's victim.

"Renguard," said Dumbledore, softly.

"Sorry?" enquired Harry, not quite having caught the Headmaster's words.

"Renguard," he repeated, before clarifying, "Jonas Renguard. Used to be an Auror, but he gave up after Voldemort was presumed defeated. He had a Charms practice off Diagon Alley. Married a Muggle, which would explain why Malfoy went after him - always obsessing about keeping the bloodlines pure. And what happened to Renguard?"

"Malfoy woke him up to put this curse on him, and said that he'd transferred all Renguard's power into himself."

"Are you sure?" asked Dumbledore, displaying surprise for one of the first occasions Harry could remember.

"Well that's how Malfoy explained it; he then gave Renguard back his wand, and let him attack, but he couldn't even cast a Lumos."

"That doesn't necessarily prove anything, Harry" cautioned Dumbledore, "Malfoy might have given Renguard a fake wand, to impress Voldemort. And even if he'd discovered a way to drain someone's magic from them, I have never heard of anyone assimilating a combatant's powers into their own."

Harry was crestfallen, "but don't you believe me?" he asked. The thought of Dumbledore not trusting him was almost unbearable.

"On the contrary, Harry, I believe you have accurately reported the vision you experienced, but we must be cautious in its interpretation. Even though I strongly believe that your visions are direct observations of events, we have to consider that they may simply be dreams..."

"But..." Harry began to interrupt, but was silenced by the Headmaster raising his hand slightly.

"I said that I strongly believe that your visions *are* direct, Harry. But we must be cautious. These are dark times," he frowned. "We must also consider the possibility that Voldemort is aware of your connection to him, and that the whole event could have been stage-managed. Although to what purpose I cannot imagine.

"Finally, we must give consideration to the nature of this link. It seems that you can connect to Voldemort, albeit involuntarily. I wonder if he can connect to you?"

"So what do we do?" asked Harry, before being struck with an idea, "Couldn't we ask Snape if he's heard anything?"

"*Professor* Snape, Harry" the Headmaster chided, gently, "alas no. Severus is engaged upon a path of his own choosing, and neither you nor I can interfere in that. What you must

understand is that Voldemort keeps his followers in line by revealing as little as he can of what his other supporters are doing. Or even who they are.

"Were we to burden Severus with knowledge he should not have, we might be exposing himself to even greater risk than he is at present. And we would lose far more than we gained."

"Well what about the Curse? Subsumatum, I think it was, should we look that up?" asked Harry, feeling uncomfortable about the Headmaster's seeming passivity to the events of his vision.

"That would seem a logical course of action to pursue," agreed the Professor, "although I'm afraid I do not hold out much hope for you. I would strongly urge complete discretion in your studies, however.

"I know, of course, that you will be reporting everything I've said back to Mr Weasley and Miss Granger, but, and Harry, I cannot stress this enough, you must *not* let anybody else know about this new curse. Should word reach Lord Voldemort that we are trying to find the same curse that he has just seen demonstrated, he will know his security has been breached."

Harry nodded his understanding.

Professor Dumbledore wandered over to the bookcase, and retrieved a battered tome, entitled *Summoning and Control*. "This might prove a good starting point," he suggested, "I'll just mark the appropriate page," he added, laying a scrap piece of parchment at the start of a chapter.

As he closed the headmaster's door, and made his way towards Charms, he reflected that as the years went by, the Headmaster's abilities to lessen the burdens he felt appeared to diminish. In fact, he thought morosely, he possibly felt worse now than he had before he went in. He'd been so certain that Dumbledore would have recognised the curse, would have known what it was and how to deflect it.

To find that the Headmaster was as ignorant in the matter as Harry himself was disturbing, as though a central foundation at Hogwarts had suddenly disappeared.

Harry glanced at the book in his hand - he wondered which chapter Dumbledore had been keen that he read, and cracked the book open. It was then that he recognised the bookmark. Dumbledore had returned the Marauder's Map.

"Hey Harry, Parvati, isn't it? Padma's siser?"

"Hi Cho," greeted Harry, suddenly feeling uncomfortable - he and Parvati were headed towards Potions, hand in hand, which had seemed perfectly natural up until now.

Cho whispered something in Parvati's ear, giggling. Parvati whispered something back, and Cho laughed, "see you later," and disappeared down the corridor with her usual group of friends.

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me what that was about?" he queried.

"Oh," replied Parvati, airily, "she just wondered if I'd got my own back on you for the Champions' Ball."

"And you said you had," surmised Harry.

"Oh no, Harry, not remotely."

Harry glanced at her to check whether she was joking. Apparently not.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you look cute when you're nervous?" she teased.

"I'm *not* nervous," lied Harry.

"Whatever. Who are you sitting with?"

"It's my turn with Neville today," explained Harry, apologetically. Parvati had actually been pretty good company through Charms - Lavender had abandoned her to sit with Seamus. It was comforting to sit with someone who wasn't as naturally brilliant as Hermione, nor as stubborn as Ron.

"Do you guys have a rota or something?"

"Not exactly, we've never even spoken about it, and I've only ever thought about it just now, but we just seem to know to rotate with Neville - Seamus and Dean used to be inseparable, and then there was me, Ron and Hermione, and you and Lavender, of course, so it was always Neville left on his own."

"Oh! I'm sorry," apologised Parvati, "we never really thought about it. We don't really know him that well..."

"I don't think anyone does, actually," admitted Harry, "he has a lot on his mind..."

Time and tide wait for no man, and carefully arranged seating plans amount to nothing in the eyes of a Potions Master, "time to split up the Dream Team, I think," Snape announced, glaring at the Gryffindor half of the class. The Slytherins' smugness soon vanished, however, "Potter, Parkinson."

"You're putting me with Pansy?" asked Harry, incredulously.

"I'm sorry, Champion Potter, do we have a hearing difficulty? I do hope that you're not questioning my judgement of an appropriate potions partner..." his voice trailed off, the veiled threat implicit.

"As I was saying," continued Snape, "Zabini, Weasley. Patil, Bulstrode," Harry shot Parvati a commiserating glance, "Granger, Malfoy. Longbottom, Crabbe and Goyle will work together, under Ms Delacour's supervision." Harry suspected that none of that trio would be able to concentrate on the lesson with Fleur so close to hand.

"Well?" asked Snape, once the allocations had been read out, "change desks then."

Harry looked across at Pansy, who stared back, unmoving. Malfoy was reclining at his desk, completely sure that Hermione would be the one to move to him, which, with an exasperated sigh, she did. Harry realised that Pansy wasn't going to move, so he gathered up his things and went to join her desk, which was immediately to the left of Hermione and Draco.

"Right, now if we could all turn to page 172, and consider the Alemnas Draught..."

Pansy turned out to be quite the most uncommunicative potions partner Harry had ever met, and he'd struggled to elicit more than brief 'Yes', 'No' and 'OK' responses from her as they divided the preparation tasks. He wondered whether she'd been put out by his somewhat unflattering response to Snape's decision to pair them.

Harry chanced a glance at Hermione, who was having some kind of argument with Malfoy as to how exactly the Yarrow roots should be chopped.

"No, you're *supposed* to cut them at an angle," she was insisting.

"That's only for physical restoratives," Draco countered, "Flisch and Strum are quite clear on that - the correct orientation for a mental stimulant is laterally.."

"But that's only when they're being combined with Herbwheat..." Hermione stopped, suddenly aware that the entire room had gone quiet, as the class listened in on the two fabled enemies' bickering. Hermione flushed bright red, whilst Harry saw a flicker of embarrassment flicker across his face before the famed Malfoy mask slammed down.

Snape eyed the pair, levelly, before scanning the rest of the class, wordlessly communicating that they were to continue with their preparation.

"That was *your* fault," hissed Hermione.

Draco seemed unrepentant, "you're the one who doesn't know how to prepare Yarrow root."
"Well if you'd actually read Humsen, you'd know...."

Chapter 11

Which country was the first to successfully defend the Quidditch World Cup?

What with classes, Vellum's Fencing Club, Quidditch practice, Fencing practice with Parvati, and half-hearted (on the boys' part) revision with Ron and Hermione, time was passing quickly, and it was a rainy Saturday that saw the Gryffindor team line up to face Ravenclaw in the opening match of the season.

Still without a formal captain, the team no longer had Oliver to provide the team talk. Nobly stepping into the void, Fred and George did their best to substitute, "OK men," started George.

"And women," added Angelina.

"And women," agreed Fred.

"This is it," continued George.

"The big one," clarified Fred.

"The one we've all been waiting for," the team chorused, with the exception of Ron, who hadn't been privy to Oliver's pep talks in the first three years.

Alicia took over, "right, we'll play as we've been practicing - Harry, Ravenclaw's Seeker's got a new broom - a Firebolt, so you'll be on level terms this time."

Harry was caught by surprise - Cho used to use a Comet 260, and she'd been a pretty good flier then. With a Firebolt, things could get interesting.

"Now this is the opening match of the season, and I know that we're in pretty good shape, but this is *no time for complacency*," she continued, tersely. "Ravenclaw are a good side - they've got a good Seeker, and some excellent Chasers. Their Beaters aren't quite in the same league as Fred and George, and they've got a new Keeper, so that's an unknown quantity...."

Eventually she finished the pre-match instructions; "everybody set?". The team nodded. "Right, let's go."

Even in the rain, Quidditch matches drew most of the school as spectators, and the stands were filled as usual. Hermione had renewed the Impervio charm on Harry's glasses to keep the rain off, and so he had a good view of the teams as they lined up for Madam Hooch to start play.

As Seeker, he'd adopted his usual position some way above the main play, and Cho had followed suit.

"I must compliment you on your excellent choice of broom," said Harry.

"Snap!" called Cho. On the pitch below, Madam Hooch was addressing the two Captains (Alicia was termed Captain for the sake of protocol), and turned back to the case to release the Bludgers.

"Harry," Cho said.

"Yes?" he looked across at the Ravenclaw Seeker.

"Good luck. I know it seems a bit stupid to wish my opponent luck..."

"Thanks - and good luck to you too. Not that you need it, mind."

"Indeed - I've a score to settle in this match, haven't I?"

"Loser buys the winner a Butterbeer," declared Harry.

"Done!" agreed Cho, and the two Seekers returned their attention to Madam Hooch, who was preparing to release the Bludgers.

"And welcome to the first Quidditch match of the season," exclaimed Lee, in his customary role of not-quite-impartial commentator. Professor McGonagall was on his right hand side in an attempt to dissuade him from getting too carried away.

"This long awaited match pitches Ravenclaw against an excellent Gryffindor team, who boast a new Keeper, Ron Weasley!" the Gryffindors cheered, and Ron acknowledged them with by raising his arm.

In the stands, Hermione and Parvati had come to an agreement, whereby Parvati was to fret on Harry's behalf, whilst Hermione would be watching out for Ron.

"The Bludgers are released," noted Lee, "and the Quaffle is in play!" he confirmed, as Madam Hooch hurled it into the air, where it was immediately caught by Roger Davies.

"And it's Ravenclaw with the first attack, Captain Davies carrying the Quaffle. He passes to.. Oh, *excellent* interception there by the extremely talented Katie Bell..."

"Jordan..." cautioned Professor McGonagall.

"I just tell it like it is... and Alicia Spinnet takes up the attack Ooh, close shave with a Bludger there, and Ravenclaw are back in possession. As an aside, both Seekers in the match are on Firebolts, so we should be seeing some superb flying from Potter and Chang as the game progresses."

Up above the play, Harry and Cho grimaced at each other.

"And Mandy Brocklehurst shoots for Ravenclaw... *Excellent* save by the debut Keeper! Ron Weasley passes the Quaffle to Angelina Johnson, and it's Gryffindor on the attack once more."

It was one of the most closely fought and exciting Quidditch contests that Hogwarts had seen. It was clear that Roger had drilled his team every bit as harshly as Alicia had Gryffindors, and the play was full of slick passing and quick changes of possession.

The score stood at 60-80 in Gryffindor's favour, but with 150 points resting on catching the snitch, the game was anyone's.

"Hey, you guys are *good*," noted Harry. Cho had taken up the marking position she had adopted in their previous encounter, and the two had been exchanging the occasional sentence as they scanned the skies for any sign of the golden, winged snitch.

"Roger's been driving us *mental* with insane practice schedules," confessed Cho.

"Tell me about it..." and then, because he was already speaking, he vocalised his next thought, "snitch!" the speck of gold was hovering just above ground level, at the foot of the Ravenclaw hoops.

"Harry!" admonished Cho, "you're not supposed to *tell* the opposition!"

They both hovered in mid air, looking at each other for a second, before their eyes narrowed simultaneously and they set off in precipitously steep dives to chase the snitch.

"It's the snitch!" exclaimed Jordan, "and will you look at those Firebolts go!" he continued, approaching the realms of delerium.

Harry whistled straight past Fred, narrowly avoiding getting caught between the beater and an onrushing Bludger. Meanwhile, Cho had destroyed an ongoing Gryffindor move by slicing through the Chasers' attack formation.

The snitch darted towards the opposing hoops, and sped past the two Seekers, who were still dropping altitude to get to its level. Harry flicked the broom into a vertical dive, spinning it on its axis before snapping the nose up to complete the reverse of direction.

"And Potter executes a *stupendous* move," squealed an awestruck Jordan, his voice exploring an entirely new octave for commentary, and for once Professor McGonogall didn't attempt to correct him, "but Chang's matched it! This is *astounding*... meanwhile, Ravenclaw have possession, on the attack."

The snitch peeled off to the left, which was Cho's side, and started to arc upwards, and across the Slytherin stands. The three, Harry, Cho and snitch, whisked over the Slytherin heads, and then dropped out of sight as the snitch headed for ground once more, at the back of the stand. Meanwhile, Ravenclaw had scored.

"Excellent follow through by Terry Boot to score, after Keeper Weasley saved Davies' initial attempt," noted Lee, who had got so caught up in the game that he was finding it hard to remain partial. "And the Seekers re-emerge at the Ravenclaw end, neck and neck..."

Harry and Cho were indeed side by side, and getting closer to the snitch. In a few seconds it would pretty much come down to whether the snitch went left or right. Left and the game was his, right and he'd owe Cho a Butterbeer.

The snitch went right. Harry tracked it, but Cho was a good Seeker, and with a whoop of joy, she grabbed the winged ball in her gloved hand, holding it high aloft.

"And Chang catches the snitch!" shrieked Lee in delight, before remembering that he was a Gryffindor, "and so Ravenclaw seal victory on one of the finest matches I have *ever* seen."

There was tumultuous applause from all around - the Gryffindors applauding an enjoyable game, whilst the Slytherins were just pleased that Ravenclaw had got one over on their arch rivals. And the Hufflepuffs, well, they were Hufflepuffs, and were more than happy to applaud anything that didn't constitute a Slytherin victory.

As soon as Cho had caught the snitch, Harry had eased up, smiling despite himself. It had been an excellent chase, and it really could have gone either way. Now Cho was heading back towards him, arm outstretched. They slapped hands in as close to a high five as it was possible to achieve whilst riding on a broomstick. "One all!" she yelled, delightedly.

"Great catch, Cho," complimented Harry.

"Don't you *dare* tell anyone that you spotted the snitch for me," she whispered conspirationally, before she was mobbed by the approaching Ravenclaw team.

Harry went to join the rest of his team, who were looking remarkably cheerful considering they'd just lost.

"Now *that* was Quidditch," exclaimed Angelina, face flushed from the play.

"Best game we've ever played," confirmed Alicia, "wow! I'm just going to go and congratulate Roger." She flew off to meet the Ravenclaws, but they were headed towards the Gryffindor team anyway.

"Unbelievable," volunteered Fred.

"Intense," seconded George.

As the two teams, still yet to touch down after the game, exchanged heartfelt congratulations to each other, Ron flew up alongside Harry. "That was fantastic," he said, "are all the games like this?"

"No," admitted Harry, "but I wish they were. We have just taken part in something truly special..."

"Awesome," said Ron, dreamily, still on the adrenalin high.

"Oh Harry, never mind," consoled Parvati. They were standing on the pitch, where the team had landed once the airborne end of game celebrations had died down.

"Wasn't that a great game?" exclaimed Harry, eyes wide with delight.

Hermione stared at him, "Harry, we lost! You didn't get the snitch... Ravenclaw won!"

"I know!" exclaimed Harry, delightedly, still buzzing, "wasn't it brilliant?"

Parvati and Hermione took a step back, eyebrows raised. They'd expected to have to offer support to a gaggle of disconsolate Quidditch players, heartbroken from losing their first match, and instead the whole team were leaping about as though they were Cornish pixies.

One hand on the broomstick, Harry gathered Parvati up in the other, and kissed her delightedly. "I don't care whether we won or lost," he nearly shouted, "that was the *greatest* game of Quidditch I have ever seen!"

"Well," said Parvati, still trying to get up to speed on this, "I'll say this for you, Harry, you're a great loser." She might have thought he was completely out of his mind, but she snuggled up to him anyway.

Hermione was congratulating Ron on his debut as Keeper, when Katie came over, Lee in tow, "Roger's invited the team - and partners - to the Ravenclaw post-match party. We're all going, right?" she gushed.

As the team vigorously nodded their assent, Hermione looked on, dumbstruck, "you guys are *so* weird."

The Ravenclaw-Gryffindor match was still the *only* topic of conversation the following Monday. The first lesson had been Charms with the Ravenclaws, and Terry, Harry, Ron and Mandy all received another round of congratulations.

So it was in fairly buoyant mood that Harry made his way to Potions, only to bump into Malfoy.

"Unbelievable," drawled Malfoy, in his most disgusted tone, "you lose the damned match and *still* manage to hog all the limelight."

Harry was determined not to let Malfoy ruin what had so far been an excellent day, "it was a great game. Have you got a problem with that?"

Malfoy appeared to be consider his answer carefully. "Would it really kill you to take the back seat once in a while? Stop reminding us all how brilliant you are? Some of us are completely sick of the Wonderful Harry Potter saving the world before breakfast, barely breaking sweat.

"I mean," Malfoy continued, getting into his stride, "even when you *lose* you're the story. The main attraction. No-one talks about Chang beating you to the snitch..."

"Actually, Malfoy, they do. All the time. It was a great match, and she won, fair and square."

"Will you shut up?" demanded Malfoy, "it's the same in everything - always volunteering to be the test subject in Defence Against the Dark Arts, just bursting to show off your overblown skills. You know, just try and blend in a bit more. Stop hogging the limelight, just stop being so bloody famous all the time."

Harry's resolve to not let Malfoy get to him was fading fast. "I didn't ask for fame," he hissed, "it found me, *entirely* unsought. We took part in a fantastic Quidditch match. People enjoyed it. What's *your* problem, Malfoy? Can't you bear to see the world revolve around someone other than yourself?"

"This isn't about me!" Draco's voice had dropped to a near whisper, but the tone was laden with venom, "this is about *you*. Just stop and take a look at yourself from the outside, and ask yourself if that's who you want to be. Share the limelight, let someone else get the credit for something..."

Malfoy turned away from Harry, and headed towards the dungeons. After a few paces, however, he stopped and turned to face Harry again, "Fools rush in. You think about that, Potter."

Harry was still standing in the corridor, staring into the space where Malfoy had disappeared from sight, when Parvati caught up with him. "Hey Harry, are you OK?"

"Yeah, sure," he murmured absently, as their fingers intertwined, "just Malfoy..."

What had been odd about the exchange was that Malfoy normally played to an audience, but they'd been alone in the corridor when he'd launched his tirade. Harry had the nagging feeling that Malfoy had been trying to tell him something.

And just to rub salt into the wounds, Snape had made them stay with the partners he'd assigned in the second week, so he now had the dubious pleasure of sharing a desk with Pansy for the whole lesson. No doubt the weekend's game would inspire her to new heights of hostility.

Fools rush in... where angels fear to tread. Harry shook his head, bewildered, what was Malfoy on?

Chapter 12

How many lines are there in the Gwyffric Rune for Peace?

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," Harry tapped the parchment with his wand, and watched the lines radiate across the Marauder's Map. It was Monday evening, and Alicia had given the team the evening off Quidditch practice, so Harry was lying on his bed, looking for Malfoy.

Most of the other fifth years were in the Common Room; Ron was playing the combined talents of Dean and Seamus at chess, and winning, naturally. Lavender and Parvati were working on their Divination homework together (taking it *far* too seriously, in Harry's opinion - they hadn't died *once* yet), and Hermione was somewhere with her Arithmancy study group (he suppressed a shudder at the thought).

Fools rush in.

Against his better judgement, he'd decided to track the Slytherin down and ask him what the morning's outburst had been about. The Marauders, Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs had truly created a work of genius with the map, and Harry got sidetracked as he watched the dot marked 'Mrs Norris' patrol the third floor of the East Wing.

But he was looking for Malfoy, he reminded himself. As expected, there were a large number of dots concentrated in the Slytherin common room, but not the one he was looking for. His traced potential routes to the library, the Quidditch pitch and the dungeons (well, he *was* looking for a Slytherin).

Fools rush in.

He didn't even know what he was going to say when he found him.

There! Flitwick's Charms classroom. Harry stared at the map, frozen. It filled his vision. He focused on the four walls of the room, the outlines shimmering on the aged parchment. The small dot labelled 'Malfoy'.

And next to it, another dot, labelled 'Granger'.

On the way from Transfiguration to Defence Against the Dark Arts, half of Harry wanted to conversationally turn to Hermione, and ask 'so, how many of you are there in your Arithmancy study group, then?'

The other half of him feared she might answer 'Oh, a few...' Betrayal upon betrayal.

He'd stayed on his bed for a long time the previous night, staring at the two dots, before he'd finally muttered 'Mischief Managed', and put the damned thing away. All thoughts of tracking Malfoy down had vanished. If the Slytherin really wanted to tell him something, doubtless he'd try again.

As they waited for Vellum to arrive, Harry pondered that he was still somewhat on the fence with regards to his opinion of the tall Professor. There was that time when she'd referred to Voldemort as the Dark Lord - it wasn't a crime, in itself, but it had made him wary.

And then, last week, there had been that whole business with Amaraletta's Serpent - she'd conjured up what looked like a snake of iridescent energy, controlling the way it moved with her wand. They'd brought in some Lumoslens from Greenhouse 3 (evidently they'd been cultivated specifically for the demonstration), and the class had watched, amazed as the flowers had dimmed, wilted, and finally turned to ash as the snake touched them. Fed on them, more like, as it grew bigger, and more luminous, as it mowed the plants down.

As a trick, it was quite neat, but what positive use could you put to such a creation? Vellum had, of course, sidestepped that particular question with her usual assertion that there was no such thing as 'Dark Magic', and that the relative merits of a spell were dependent on the application by the caster.

On the other hand, they were being exposed to some pretty heavy duty hexes and curses, and even if he never cast any himself, it would be nice to know what to expect if they were thrown at him. And, of course, there was the Fencing Club.

"Good Morning," Vellum strode into the room, her face, as always, a mask. The only way to read her was to watch the eyes, and even they took some time to warm up. It was also impossible to know what they were going to cover the next lesson.

Each class she would set reading. Sometimes it would be relevant to the next lesson, sometimes not. Either she was amazingly haphazard, which seemed unlikely, given her analytical nature, or else there was some bigger plan going on that would only be discernible from a distance.

"Now, I understand that your instructor last year," she never referred to Crouch by name - they all assumed it was to avoid the rather lengthy 'Barty-Crouch-masquerading-as-Alastor-Moody' description, "gave you some instruction in fighting the Imperius Curse." She didn't phrase it as a question.

"Today's lesson will continue that work," as the class flinched back at these words, she added, "although, of course, no-one is obliged to submit to the experience."

This was more like it, though, thought Harry. He'd been put under Imperius, and the Cruciatu curse. In fact, he thought, somewhat morbidly, when you counted Avada Kedavra when he was a baby, he had the complete set. The sort of accomplishment that should come with a tee-shirt.

Fools rush in.

"As you know, there are three Unforgiveable Curses," she ticked them off on her fingers, "the Cruciatu Curse, the Imperius Curse, and, of course, the Killing Curse, Avada Kedavra."

Harry's eye's hardened into a frosty glare. Of course, he couldn't escape people talking about the Killing Curse. It was out there. It killed people. They had to know about it, but it accentuated the loss. Those words, that wand flick. They took his parents away. And he could never get them back.

Vellum was still talking, "...and so, I need a volunteer to demonstrate Imperius on. Anybody?" All eyes fell on Harry.

Fools rush in.

He hesitated, aware that Vellum was looking directly at him, expectantly. It was hardly surprising; everyone knew that he'd been able to resist Imperius under Crouch. Malfoy's voice was replaying again and again in his head. He'd specifically warned Harry to let someone else volunteer for Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Why?

"Mr Potter?" asked Vellum. The rest of the class were looking at him expectantly.

"What do I have to do?" he asked, not committing himself yet, until he'd learnt what lay in store.

"Well, stand and face me at the front, here," somewhere along the line, the whole concept of volunteering appeared to have been bypassed. Parvati gave his hand a squeeze as he made his way to the front of the room, wand drawn.

"Right, now rarely will you be hit by a single curse. An assailant is likely to launch a combination of attacks against you, and you have to respond to the threats as they develop."

So this was to be a duel, then. Harry looked about him, to familiarise himself with the surroundings. The front of the classroom was raised by a step, and there was a large, built-in desk in the middle of this dais. So the desk provided his only means of cover, but he had room to move.

Harry was alternating glances from Vellum to the class, waiting for her to make the first move. She was explaining the principles behind blocking spells, and the need to balance energy expenditure between the need to defend against the necessity to retaliate.

He had a pretty good idea that Vellum was going to launch an immediate, unannounced attack as soon as her speech was finished, and, sure enough, as her final words of instruction ended, the tall witch had spun round to face Harry, moving with her fencer's grace.

As soon as he'd seen her pivot on her heel, wand drawn, Harry had cried "*Expelliarmus*", simultaneously hurling himself behind the desk. There was a flash of light as the two spells connected, but Vellum was already tracking him, preparing another attack.

He'd followed up his initial block with a leg-locker curse, which he fully expected Vellum to counter, but at least it would buy him time. He kept moving. His basic plan was not to stay in the same place long enough to get hit. By an amazing coincidence, this also happened to be his advanced strategy too.

They traded blows for a while. Harry was acutely conscious of the fact that whilst he was throwing himself about the room, Vellum was hardly needing to move. Most of his spells were blocks, and the very few offensive spells he knew seemed pitifully limited against his adversary.

"*Imperio!*" cried Vellum, having cornered him against the wall and the blackboard. His arms felt as though they were moving through treacle, but he fought the desire to release his wand, and threw himself into a forward roll, aiming for the cover of the desk. There was an almost elastic feel to the pull of Imperious, and once he'd made the move to free himself from its command, his actions became easier.

Unfortunately, Vellum had used the momentary pause in his reflexes to close the gap between them, "*Corpus Inflamare*" she intoned, levelly, and without feeling. Harry noticed the black eyes were completely devoid of expression - he'd expected them to be sparking with the energy from the duel - before the searing pain came in.

His whole body was engulfed in blue flame, and Harry collapsed on the ground, writhing in agony. His wand fell from his grasp, clattering on the polished wood floor, just missing Vellum's feet as she strode across the room.

"*Finite Incantum*" intoned the Professor, as she stooped down to give Harry a hand to get to his feet. Still reeling from being hit with that last curse, he was surprised to see that she had reached for him with her left hand, whilst simultaneously pointing her wand at him with her right.

He remembered Madam Trelawney's prediction about being beaten in a duel by a Dark Witch. He remembered Malfoy's words, which, with hindsight seemed to have been an explicit warning. Still, he'd survived.

Then, in a voice so low that even he wasn't sure he heard it, Vellum cast a final spell.

"*Subsumatum.*"

It was like Imperius, but moreso. A beguiling compunction to open his mind to the connection, to give everything, because that's what they wanted. He could feel a lightening of the burden he carried. The distant promise that if he released his grasp, the pain would end, and reward would be his.

But then a voice in his head said 'I know this. This is Imperius. And I can fight it.'

It wasn't Imperius. This was something stronger. More compelling, more urgent.

'*Fight!*' screamed the inner voice, "*here*" in his mind, he saw the torrential energy drain as he gave in to the spell. But then he saw another possibility. Another connection. He didn't have much time.

In another world, he heard a whispered, "*Finite Incantum*," frenzied scrapings of chairs, and rush of feet. Shouts. Somewhere, his name. Hands clutching at his body. Tears.

His mind was black, the void spreading through his body. His senses shut down, and he slipped into oblivion.

In that darkness, a tiny flame flickered, serving only to accentuate the void that had become.

Chapter 13

Who sang 'I'd catch a Hippogriff (for you)'?

Hermione was trying not to think about Draco. Not Draco, she corrected herself, *Malfoy*. She was trying not to think about Malfoy. That was better.

It was Tuesday morning, and she was in Transfiguration with the Hufflepuffs. Harry was sitting with Parvati, *again* - he'd hardly said a word at breakfast. Probably a bad dream last night, or something. She'd have to ask him about it at break, or after Defence Against the Dark Arts. That was the thing about Harry, she ruminated, always trying to carry the burden by himself.

Sort of like Draco, then.

Damn.

After the initial shock of the first lesson with new partners in Potions, she had grudgingly admitted that Snape had actually paired people on the basis of ability, and not, as they'd all suspected, purely out of sadistic glee. And despite the bickering, she was, well, not *enjoying* Draco's company, but welcoming the challenge.

Of course, she felt sorry for Harry, who'd been saddled with Pansy. Even Draco agreed that Pansy was a 'caustic psycho bitch', not, she reminded herself, that she was at all interested in *his* opinion. It had been amusing, though, when he'd quipped that the only reason Neville (Draco, of course, had called him 'Longbottom') had been paired with his two sidekicks was that Crabbe and Goyle appeared incapable of independent locomotion.

And then she'd been in the library one evening, whilst Ron and Harry were at their damned Quidditch practice, *again*, and she'd been immersed in Arithmancy, the familiar drawl had advised her that she should consider applying the Hygren Transposition to the problem at hand.

She'd glared at him, and muttered some acerbic comment (she hoped it had been witty, too), and then had been surprised to see a flicker of hurt behind those impassive grey eyes. And then she'd apologised. Why? Four years of taunts, petty jealousies and nasty schemes (she would *never* forgive him for that Dementor trick at the Quidditch match in their third year), and he'd never once said 'sorry'. And *she* had felt obliged to apologise to *him*. And then they'd argued about Arithmancy for the next 30 minutes, until she realised that Harry and Ron would be getting back from practice, and the absolute last thing she needed was Ron to think she was consorting with a Malfoy.

Not, of course, that she was 'consorting'. They simply studied together, because they'd found it helpful to have someone to argue with. She loved Ron and Harry dearly, but, with all the best will in the world, there was no way you could describe either of them as the brains of the trio. Don't get arrogant, Granger, she chided herself.

And so, on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, when Ron and Harry were at Quidditch practice, she and Draco had been meeting to study. They'd quickly abandoned the library, as people

were bound to notice, and instead they'd adopted Flitwick's charms classroom as their study base.

It seemed to work quite well. Sometimes they sat and argued Potions or Transfiguration or Arithmancy. Other times, he'd sit against the window, she'd be at Flitwick's desk, and they'd spend the entire session in total silence, immersed in their respective books.

So last night, she'd been reading Arithmancy, and Draco had been in the window seat at her back, when suddenly he appeared standing at her back, gripping the back of Flitwick's chair with his hands as he idly read over his shoulder. And, by reflex, she'd flinched.

"You really think I'm evil, don't you?" he'd asked. Amused.

She'd not known what to say to that? Draco? Evil? He was a Slytherin. *Quotas Erat Demonstratum*. So instead she'd relaxed, and leant back in her chair, her head leaning against his body, as a signal that, well, she wasn't terrified of him.

Her eyes had needed a break from reading, anyway.

But we're not thinking about Draco. Malfoy.

Professor McGonagall was stalking around the class, assessing how well the transfigurations had gone. Hermione wasn't worried - she and Draco had read well ahead in the Transfiguration syllabus, and were contemplating how to become animagi. The Marauders had done it unaided by their fifth year, and if they could, she was certain she and Draco could.

And so he'd slid his hands down from the back of the chair, onto the arms, to bring his body closer. The back of the chair had still been between them, of course, but, considering their history...

The thing about accustoming yourself to your animal form was that, firstly it was painful, and, secondly, you needed another wizard on hand to snap you out of the transformation the first few times. The texts warned of the risk of sole experimenters being trapped in their animal form, prisoner to instinct. But they had a way to go before they reached that point.

Of course, Draco wouldn't have been her first choice of partner in the project. But he *was* probably the closest student to her in terms of ability in Transfiguration. So it only made logical sense, really.

If you looked at it in a certain way.

Neville had managed to transform his teapot into half a rabbit, but the rear half of the animal remained willow pattern china. Harry had told her that Neville deserved all the support they could give, but wouldn't say why - he'd said it wasn't his secret to tell. He was astoundingly loyal to his friends, and even in the midst of going all gooey-eyed over Parvati he was taking time to explain the transformation again to Neville.

And then there was Ron. She sighed, inwardly. It wasn't that she didn't like Ron, she did. Loved him as a brother, even. But, well, nothing more than that. They'd gone to the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw Quidditch party together - as friends, she'd thought.

But then Katie had done a double-take at the quartet's arrival - Harry and Parvati, Ron and Hermione, and asked, wide eyed, if she and Ron were officially an item now. Ron had looked at Hermione with pleading eyes, but she just couldn't say it. "No, just friends," she'd explained, pulling Ron closer all the same. But it had been impossible to miss the hurt in his eyes.

Ron was avoiding her, too now. Probably embarrassed. Another 'talk' to get done then.

Boys.

So, they'd stayed there like that for a minute or so, in Flitwick's classroom, and then he'd disappeared, "see you in Potions, Granger," leaving her somewhat bewildered.

He was definitely... different this year. Still annoyingly condescending, stuck up, opinionated, overbearing, overprivileged... and, be honest girl, those were the *good* points.

What was she doing?

But he *was* different. The vindictiveness was gone, even if, underneath the more approachable exterior it was still the same old story, kind of. But Old Draco wouldn't have been seen dead breathing the same air as her, whereas New Draco had actually agreed to study with her.

Or had she agreed to study with him?

Enough! No more Draco.

She looked at Neville's desk, where a willow pattern rabbit was hopping to coos from Lavender and Parvati. Honestly, what did Harry see in her? Well, she was pretty, and friendly enough, but, really, she would have thought that Harry would have gone for someone less, well, frivolous. He was the Boy Who Lived - the last thing he needed before going to face the apocalypse was a girlfriend who spent 20 minutes trying to decide exactly which shade of nail polish to apply. She'd shared a dorm with the girl for four years. She *knew*.

You wouldn't catch Draco falling for that kind of fluffiness...

Stop it! Concentrate. Transfiguration. Defence Against the Dark Arts. Need to talk to Ron, need to talk to Harry. Draco can wait until Potions in the afternoon.

Defence Against the Dark Arts. Quite possibly, now that she'd given up Divination Studies, her least favourite instructor. Hermione pondered this. Snape or Vellum? Both had relatively few redeeming qualities, but at least Snape had Dumbledore's confidence. It was far from clear whether Vellum did.

She vaguely wondered what Draco thought of her - they didn't discuss Defence Against the Dark Arts when studying. It was one of those unspoken things between them. Of which there were many.

Not to mention the fact that, of course, she wasn't interested in *his* opinion, anyway.

She looked across at Harry, and reminded herself that she really should talk to him at lunch, and get to the bottom of whatever it was that was bothering him. Considering that Defence Against the Dark Arts was his favourite subject, even with his reservations about Vellum, he looked positively distracted this morning.

Unforgivable Curses. They'd covered these last year. Volunteer? Harry, then. But he was looking somewhat reluctant. Not that Vellum seemed to notice.

She'd watched the duel with interest. Harry was putting up a noble effort, and he was undoubtedly far ahead of any of his classmates in this arena, but Vellum clearly had a strategy in mind, and Hermione could see her repeatedly pinning Harry further and further back until he was trapped in the corner, no way out.

All in all, a reasonable, if vicious demonstration, if you were Harry. She couldn't see what Vellum thought the rest of the class would get out of it, though. She resolved to ask the question once the instructor had brought Harry back to his feet.

Instead, however, Vellum had hit Harry with an evil looking curse, his body consumed by blue fire. From Harry's reaction, it had to be excruciating. This was too much.

Vellum ceased the incantation, and strode over to where the boy lay, pulling him up before he collapsed once more. Parvati had already left her desk, and was rushing to help him, and Hermione, full now of fresh loathing for Vellum, had followed suit.

"Harry!", had she really screamed that? He really looked in a bad way, and Hermione fought to stop the tears from falling. She wheeled around to face the instructor, who was surveying the scene with disinterest, "we have to take him to Madam Pomfrey!"

"Whatever," shrugged Vellum, clearly bored with the whole thing by now.

Hermione stared, openmouthed at the callousness, until the classroom door burst open in a blaze of fury, and an incandescent power swept into room.

Albus Dumbledore was *livid*. It was a terrifying sight.

In the days after the Third Task, Harry had tried to explain to Ron and Hermione what Dumbledore had looked like when he'd burst into Moody's office. He'd said that the benign twinkle, the warmth of those blue eyes, had disappeared. At the time she couldn't believe it. That *was* Dumbledore. You couldn't take those things away from him.

But Voldemort feared him. The reason was made abundantly clear to the assembled Gryffindors and Ravenclaws in the room.

This was no kindly grandfather figure, amusedly tolerating his charges' transgressions. This was a full-blown wizard of unfathomable power, cold fire searing from his eyes, absolute energy radiating from his figure. Every line on his face was etched with fury. His entire carriage spoke of command of unimaginable force.

And still more terrifying than the presence was the absolute control. Through the haze of tears, a tiny part of Hermione took great delight in seeing Vellum *quail*.

"*Stupefy!*" commanded Dumbledore, and Vellum crumpled into a heap. He bent down and removed her wand as Madam Pomfrey arrived. Hermione blinked. To have summoned Madam Pomfrey to Harry meant Dumbledore thought things were bad. Very bad.

"Alright dears," soothed the mediwizard, "you can leave him with me now."

"No!" cried Hermione and Parvati in unison. Hermione looked at Parvati in a new light.

"We're *not* leaving him," declared Parvati, tears streaming down her face.

"There's nothing you can do for him at the moment," explained Madam Pomfrey, patiently, "and you would do well to get some rest for when he does recover."

Professors McGonagall and Snape had now arrived. McGonagall looked shocked, distressed and the hundred other things you would expect the Head of Harry's house to look under the circumstances. The best that Hermione could say for Snape was that at least he had the decency not to smirk.

"...won't we, Hermione?" asked Parvati.

"What?" distracted by the latest arrivals, Hermione hadn't been following the discussion between Madam Pomfrey and Parvati.

"We'll take it in turns to keep watch over him."

"Yes. Absolutely," Hermione faced the mediwizard, "we are *not* leaving him."

Hermione wouldn't dare admit it to anyone, but inwardly she was prepared to concede that Madam Pomfrey had a point; Harry didn't look as though he would be in any state to even recognise he had company for some time yet. But the vigil was as much for Harry's continued protection from attack as it was moral support.

The combined fifth years of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, all of whom had been in the class, had immediately offered to take turns in maintaining the vigil, but Hermione had declared that one of the core three should remain with him at all times. Herself, Ron or Parvati.

He was laid up, once more, in the all-too-familiar surroundings of the hospital wing. Crisp, starched linen scented the air, and even the silence felt antiseptic. Having said that the surroundings were familiar, the particular bed was not. Harry had been allocated a bed in an individual room. It had a small window, overlooking the Quidditch pitch. She wondered whether that had been a conscious decision, or just a lucky coincidence.

There was also a fireplace - she'd been assured it wasn't connected to the Floo network (Dumbledore had been impressed by her cautious reasoning), but it could be used for communication.

Hermione had taken the first stint, skipping Potions. The last person she wanted to see right now was Malfoy. There, much better than referring to him as Draco.

Parvati had taken over at dinner, and then Ron had taken a stint, bringing with him the full might of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. But there's only so long you can stand in a room talking to an unconscious patient, and in the end they'd left, in a distinctly more sombre mood than when they'd arrived.

Hermione had returned at midnight, and begged a blanket off Madam Pomfrey. It had taken the full might of a personal note from Professor McGonagall to allow Hermione to stay, but that was hardly a problem.

Dozing in the armchair, she was awoken by the door swinging open, as a large black dog padded in.

"Snuffles!" shrieked Hermione, in half joy and half despair. She flung her arms around the huge dog's neck, and, just when she thought her tears had run dry, she found herself sobbing uncontrollably once more.

Sirius remained in animagus form during the night's vigil. There were simply too many people popping in and out to risk his human form. But he could listen, and Hermione explained, as well as she could, the day's events.

The room was cold, however, and Hermione found herself drawing the blankets around her in the chair. Pauses in her narration became longer, and longer, and the dog watched over her as she fell asleep.

Chapter 14

Who was the first Warlock of Dyequera?

Crisp, clean linen. He didn't even need to open his eyes to know that it would be white; two starched sheets with a light, pale blue blanket on top. The sheets so neat you'd almost imagine that they'd been ironed into place. He groaned. What was it this time? Quidditch? Troll? Vicious Hex? His recollection of the day before was somewhat hazy. It would come to him.

He opened his eyes, noting that his assumption had been correct, and he was indeed in the blurred hospital wing. He felt for his glasses - on the bedside table. Having been in the hospital wing as often as he had, he knew how Madam Pomfrey dealt with such things.

Now that he could see, he took in his environment in more detail. It was dark outside (hey, he had his own window!), and illumination was provided by two small glass cylinders mounted on the wall.

More than enough light, however, to realise that Hermione was asleep in the armchair next to him, a blanket gathered around her to stave off the night's chill. Remembering his hurt of Monday night, he cursed himself. How could he not have trusted her?

But then his eyes fell on a large black heap of shaggy fur, lying at Hermione's feet.

"Sirius!" he croaked, forgetting for once to use the agreed code name.

The dog shook its head as, in one fluid move, it transformed into Sirius Black, standing at Harry's bedside, looking completely distraught. "Harry! Are you OK? Stupid question..."

"I'm glad you're here, Sirius," Harry didn't directly answer the question, because he didn't yet know the answer himself. "But wasn't it a bit of a risk to come?"

"No. I'm your *Godfather* Harry. I got Dumbledore's owl, and there was no option but to come."

"Dumbledore *owled* you? *Dumbledore*? What did he say?"

Sirius paused - Harry had the distinct impression that he was trying to work out how much of the contents of Dumbledore's letter it was safe to relay. In the end, he sidestepped the question, "Harry, if Dumbledore thought it necessary for me to be here, and he did, then I had to come."

"I don't want you to get caught on my account."

"Harry, you need to get some more rest. I'll go and let Madam Pomfrey know you're awake."

"Er Sirius, won't she kind of freak out when the world's most wanted fugitive pops his head round the door to say that I'm awake."

By way of reply, Sirius transformed back into Snuffles, and headed for the door.

Of course he was glad Sirius was here. But he was worried, too. The entire wizarding world was on the lookout for the supposed murderer, and if he stayed anywhere too long someone would eventually spot him. Sirius knew these risks. And still he'd come.

Which could only mean that he, Harry, was in serious danger. He sighed. No change there then.

Madam Pomfrey came into the room, holding a vial of what Harry suspected would be Dreamless Sleeping Draught. He wasn't wrong.

"You have to get some rest, my dear, so you'll need to drink all of this. Professor Dumbledore will be coming to see you in the morning I don't doubt. Is there anything else you need?"

He'd been about to say no, when he remembered, "yes please. Could you get another blanket for Hermione? She looks cold."

The mediwizard glared at Harry for a second, and he grinned inwardly, knowing full well that the only reason that he was getting away with such an outrageous request was because he was evidently in serious ill health. Still, might as well make the best of the situation.

She gave him the sleeping draught, "drink."

And he did.

Morning came, and Harry squinted as his eyes became adjusted to the light. Hermione's chair was now Ron's, "morning Harry. You look terrible." That was just too cheery a tone of voice for first thing.

"Mgh," replied Harry, as he fished for his glasses. It was so unfair having people watch you wake up. "Hi Ron. Where's Snuffles?"

"Under the bed," on cue the large dog slunk out, to sit at Harry's side, "how did you know he was here?"

"Woke up in the night," explained Harry. It was a little too early for conversations any more elaborate than that. "Hermione was here," he added.

"Yeah, Parvati came and took her to breakfast, but they'll be back to check in before Herbology."

Harry nodded, processing the information. "Ron."

"Yeah?"

"Could you tell Pomfrey I'm awake?"

"Yep, sure thing," he confirmed, and disappeared out of the room. As Ron made his way towards the office, Harry heard him suddenly offer a surprised greeting, "hello Professor! What are you doing here?"

"Same as you," explained a familiar voice, "come to check on Harry."

Harry looked at Snuffles, but the dog was staring patiently at the doorway.

"Morning you two," greeted Remus Lupin, scratching behind Snuffle's ears.

"What are you doing here?" exclaimed Harry.

Lupin sighed, "I'm beginning to wonder if anyone is going to proffer a different greeting to me in this place. It's nice to see you, too, Harry."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." Harry's apologies died as the former Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts chuckled lightly.

"It's quite alright, Harry. I hear you've had a rough time."

"So did Dumbledore owl you, too?" Harry asked, "or have I made the front page of the Daily Prophet again?"

"Yes, Albus owled me, Harry. It seems that he would appreciate my expertise in the area of the Dark Arts."

"So you're coming back to teach!" he assumed, eagerly.

Lupin's face clouded slightly, "No, Harry, I don't expect that particular appointment to be offered to me. Such things lie in the hands of the governors, and I do believe they made their position quite clear the other year."

"Oh," responded Harry, shoulders drooping, and disappointment evident in his tone.

Ron had now returned, with Madam Pomfrey in tow. Harry braved her standard morning scrutiny before being pronounced completely unfit to do anything but stay in bed all day.

"Don't worry mate," consoled Ron, "I'll get your homework for you."

"You will do no such thing, young man," corrected Madam Pomfrey. "Mr Potter is to rest himself *completely*. And I might add that I do *not* consider hosting parties inside his room as rest." She glared pointedly at Ron and Lupin, reserving an extra special look of distaste for Snuffles.

Harry beamed a 'sorry mate, what can I say?' smile back at Ron. It was going to be tough, he knew, but as doctors' orders went, he could think of worse. Ron scowled back, goodnaturedly, by way of reply.

No sooner had Madam Pomfrey left than Hermione and Parvati arrived, with a simultaneous greeting of "Professor Lupin! What are you doing here?"

Lupin rolled his eyes, and Harry smiled.

"What's that dog doing here?" asked Parvati, as she settled down on the bed at Harry's side.

"Oh, Snuffles? He's a..." Harry tried to think of a suitable phrase. His task was not helped by Snuffles directing an inquiring look, as though saying 'go on, try me'.

Hermione attempted to rescue the situation, "he's, he's, well...", her valiant contribution wilted as Snuffles considered her with interest.

"He seems really clever," noted Parvati.

"Oh, not especially so, I wouldn't say," contradicted Lupin, the faintest trace of a smile on his lips. Snuffles glared at him.

"No, I really mean it," she persisted, "it really looks as though he understands what we're saying."

"Don't encourage him," groaned Harry, secretly enjoying this game. Snuffles glare now transferred to him. "Hey, Hermione," he changed the subject, "thanks for staying last night. You know, you really didn't have to do that."

Hermione's answer wasn't the one he'd been expecting, "yes, Harry, we did. I didn't know you were awake, though - you were still asleep when Ron started his shift."

"Shifts? You guys had shifts keeping watch on me? Was it that bad?"

Parvati looked at him, and he suddenly realised that she looked exhausted, physically and emotionally, "Harry, it was awful..." and tears welled up as she buried her face against his shoulder.

"You don't remember?" asked Ron, gingerly. Seeing Harry's blank look, he prompted, "Vellum? Dark Arts? Duel?"

Things started to fall into place, and Harry's face fell. "Oh," he said, remembering the duel. "Yeah."

Subsumatum.

His world fell apart.

Madam Pomfrey had *not* been impressed, and all five of his visitors had been ejected from his room. Sirius and Lupin set up camp immediately outside his door, and would not be moved. The three Gryffindors were sent off to whatever Herbology might bring.

Harry had then been given a bewildering series of potions, a stern lecture about the precise definition of 'complete rest', and, finally, another dreamless sleep.

It was evening when he woke again. His memory came at him backwards this time. The dreamless sleep potion. The other potions. Him having hysterics as his friends tried to calm him down.

Subsumatum.

This time he was too numb for the word to have an effect. He pushed back further.

Parvati. Hermione. Ron. Lupin and Sirius. All here. Hermione staying the night in the room, sleeping on the chair.

The duel against Vellum.

"I see that you are awake."

He didn't really need to look at the speaker. He knew the Headmaster's voice instantly. He also recognised the gravity of the tone. The glasses had, once more, been put on the bedside table.

He looked across weakly at the Headmaster, whose expression did nothing to lighten his mood. Albus Dumbledore looked weary. Concerned. Worried, almost.

"We have been extremely worried about you, Harry," continued the Headmaster, "although I understand from Sirius and Remus that you had deduced that from my need to owl them both."

Harry nodded confirmation.

"I feel partly responsible for this," Harry shook his head, to disagree, but the Headmaster raised his hand lightly, in that signal of his, and continued, "you told me that Voldemort had access to some kind of subsumption curse, but I could not believe such a thing was possible."

"It very much pains me to say that I was in error. Harry, I cannot lie to you. I can try and soften the blow as much as I can, but I'm sure you suspect where I am headed with this conversation."

"The reason I know that I was in error is that the facts, as they lie in this bed before me, are irrefutable. Somehow, Harry, Professor Vellum drained your wizarding ability. I suspect, but cannot yet confirm, that she has indeed transferred those to herself, but that is of only minor importance to me."

Harry wanted to scream at him. 'Minor importance?' That ability was *his*, and he wanted it back. However, the sheer cold weight of the situation had virtually incapacitated him. All he could do was listen to the Headmaster.

"I am certain that the immediate question in your mind is whether you can recover the powers that have been taken from you."

Harry nodded. It wasn't exactly a difficult conclusion to arrive at.

"And again I find myself having to disappoint you. You will know, by now, that I do not promise false hope, Harry. My assessment of the situation is made on the basis of the investigations I have made in the past 24 hours. Circumstances could change, new facts could come to light. These are unknowns."

"I find myself having to be overly forceful on this, Harry, but it is imperative that you understand. You are too valuable to us to waste your time on a wild goose chase to recover the irrecoverable.

"Your wizarding abilities are gone. They cannot be recovered. Yes, I know what you are thinking, 'if the Subsumatum Curse can transfer powers from one wizard to another, why not use that?'. The simple answer to that would be that a wizard has to cast it, and you, Harry, are no longer a wizard."

Despair was welling up inside Harry. How could Dumbledore be so callous, so cruel to him? How could everything he'd loved these past four years be taken away from him in one fell swoop? But the headmaster was still talking.

"But I said you were too valuable to us, Harry. I find myself always asking great things of you - and always, to date, you have shouldered the burden."

Harry elbowed himself up to slightly more of a sitting position, and studied the Headmaster. The blue eyes were not sparkling as they usually did. A cold fire burnt in the headmaster's steely visage.

"You were quite successful at resisting Imperius, weren't you?"

Harry nodded.

"Before I say any more, you should know the following. The door to this room has been locked by myself. The only way that it shall open is either from my command, or upon my death. There is a silencing charm surrounding our conversation. And you were placed in this room because, quite simply, it is the most secure place in the Hospital Wing. This conversation cannot be overheard, and we cannot be interrupted."

This all sounded a bit extreme.

"An interesting curse, Subsumatus," continued Dumbledore, although it was quite clear that the interest was not one he found at all pleasant, "but what concerns us at the moment is that it appears to be built upon an extremely powerful variant of the Imperius Curse to induce the attacker to yield their powers willingly to the assailant."

Harry frowned as he tried to follow this seemingly jumbled conversation.

"You fought the Imperius, Harry. It was vastly stronger than anything you've been subjected to to date, and you were not entirely successful, as your current residence in this room should be testament to."

In Harry's mind, a feeble ray of hope had gleamed briefly, only to be extinguished.

"As I said before, your wizarding ability has been completely drained. We know of no way to restore it, and believe me, Harry, some of the finest minds over time have considered this problem. Normally, of course, because a family member is a squib, but I digress.

"I am most careful with my choice of words, and you may have noticed that I have consistently repeated the fact that your *wizarding* powers have been drained."

The ray of hope gleamed once more, feeding on Harry's supposition that Dumbledore was not going to all this trouble as a prelude to expelling him from Hogwarts for being a squib.

"It seems, Harry, from the tests I have conducted, that in fighting the Subsumption Curse you managed to siphon a tiny amount of your magical ability into a different structure within your mind."

Harry's heart started to beat faster.

"Tell me," Dumbledore enquired, mildly, "what do you know about the Magi?"

"That they were a primitive race of magic users. Probably human, defeated by Slytherin. Wiped out, actually. The soakstone in Hogwarts used to belong to them."

"Not completely wiped out, Harry. I used to know of one, a man named Lucas."

Dumbledore paused, and looked directly into Harry's eyes. "And now," he continued, "I know of two."

Harry stared at the Headmaster, incredulously. "I'm a Mage?" he asked.

"Yes. Albeit an exceptionally weak one, at the present time. Professor Vellum almost succeeded in completely draining all magical ability from you. However, she did not succeed, and you managed to construct some kind of escape mechanism within your mind as an alternative to passing all your powers through the link."

"So I can stay at Hogwarts?" asked Harry, eagerly. "I'm not a squib? I don't have to go back to the Muggle world?"

The Headmaster paused, not breaking eye contact. "Do you know what the sentence is for being a Mage?"

"Sentence?"

"A Mage is automatically sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban. But, to ensure that they cannot pose a threat in the event of an escape, they are blinded first."

Harry's draw dropped. His new lease of life had just transformed into a death warrant. "Azkaban? Blinded?"

"I suspect that you have little enough faith in the values of wizarding justice to be too surprised by this. The laws were never revised, as it was assumed an academic point. Until Lucas was discovered, and then there were too few people ready to stand and fight for his cause."

"So this Lucas, he's in Azkaban?"

"Yes, life imprisonment in Azkaban. He's been there for 25 years, and I'd like you to meet with him."

"In *Azkaban*?"

"There would be no other way. Lucas is the only person who could begin to show you what powers you have, and how they might be used."

"But what would be the point? You said that I have very little ability, and if I were to use it, I'd end up in Azkaban."

"Harry, you are a marked man. I do not know whether it was Professor Vellum's intention to kill you herself, or whether that task would fall to another of Voldemort's minions. Or even Voldemort himself - I can imagine that he feels he has a point to prove in your case."

Harry did not find the Headmaster's words particularly reassuring.

Dumbledore's tone turned urgent, "this is *war*, and war is neither fair, nor honourable, nor glorious, no matter what the history books might tell you. My instincts tell me that you still have a part to play in what is to come, and my knowledge of you tells me that you will wish to rise to that challenge.

"But you must be cautious. You will be entering a new sphere of magic, knowledge of which is both extremely rare and not very forthcoming. Furthermore, should word get out that The-Boy-Who-Lived is actually a Mage, then there would be a very real danger that you would live the remainder of your years in Azkaban.

"There is, of course, an alternative," explained the Headmaster, lightly, "and that would be to return to your life as a Muggle, although I am not convinced that you would be any safer..."

Harry interrupted the Headmaster. "I'm not going back to the Muggle world. I belong *here*," he paused, before adding, "well, not 'here' as in this bed in the hospital wing, but 'here' as in the world of magic. Voldemort will come for me, no matter where I am. I need to be as prepared as I can be to face him."

He'd always known it would come down to this. Well, always since that first encounter with the weakened Voldemort and the Philosopher's Stone. The Boy-Who-Lived, the virtual poster-child of the Forces of Light. He couldn't simply turn tail and flee - he had a responsibility to see out his duty. To face down Voldemort time and again, if need be, until there was a victor. And he would do it.

Professor Dumbledore got up from the armchair, and waved an arm in the direction of the door. Harry assumed that it was some kind of unlocking spell. "I shall bid you good evening, at this point, Harry, and ask you to think on what we have discussed. Tomorrow, I will meet you again. Unfortunately time is of the essence, I fear, and I must ask you for your decision in the morning."

"I know now," protested Harry, "I've made my decision."

Again, that slight raising of the hand, "Harry, this is not something to be taken lightly. You would be living a double life, and the slightest betrayal of your powers as a Mage would very likely see you imprisoned. Accepting the challenge would set you on a path to the front line in this war. You would be placing yourself in grave danger.

"Think carefully, Harry. You have lost so much, and see a chance to rebuild what you once had. This is *not* that chance. This would be taking you in a new direction, on a path few people have travelled, into a world of the unknown."

Harry absorbed these words, as the Headmaster left the room. He knew that he wasn't going to change his mind. He had to face Voldemort. He didn't like the word 'destiny', which just sounded too, well too plain *Trelawney*, but he would shoulder the responsibility that had been placed upon him. Whatever it took.

With absolute power comes great responsibility. Why couldn't the deal work the other way, and bring to those with great responsibility absolute power? Harry felt that a little dose of absolute power would come in really useful at this point.

Chapter 15

Which is heavier, a pound of Knuts, or a pound of Galleons?

Once the Headmaster had left, Lupin and Snuffles returned to the room. With the door safely shut, Sirius transformed back. It may have been a little over two years since he'd escaped from Azkaban, but the haunted expression still hung across his face. Right now, however, the gauntness was emphasised by sheer worry and fatigue.

Lupin's expression was equally grim, and it was the former Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts who spoke first, "So Harry, how are you feeling this evening?"

Harry wondered how, indeed he did feel. Dumbledore had just told him that his entire life as a wizard was lost forever, and that if he wished to stay in the magical world, he would be at risk of capture and permanent imprisonment in Azkaban. In the company of Dementors for the rest of his life.

"Harry?" reminded Lupin gently.

"Oh, uh, sorry, I guess I'm still a little woozy," replied Harry, mind still distracted by the previous conversation. He suddenly wondered if Dumbledore had told Sirius and Lupin about their discussion. Probably not, he thought. At the very least, he'd wait until they broached the subject.

"I'm not surprised," observed Sirius, "by all accounts that was a hell of a curse Vellum threw at you. Hermione says you were covered in fire..."

Harry's godfather trailed off as Lupin gave him a silencing glare. Tact wasn't really one of Sirius' strong points.

This exchange was enough for Harry to deduce that they didn't know, or weren't letting on, about the Subsumatum Curse. Was he supposed to face this alone, he wondered, despairingly, and he could feel tears brimming behind his glasses.

Lupin rested a gentle hand on Harry's shoulder, "Madam Pomfrey was right, Harry, you need to rest. Recuperate, get your strength back..."

Harry laughed, weakly, and bitterly. His strength? Gone. Stolen. Stolen by... "What's happened to Vellum?"

"She's currently in the dungeons," explained Sirius, "Dumbledore contacted the Ministry immediately of, course, and she'll be collected by Ministry agents and taken for trial."

"*She* gets trial and you didn't?" exclaimed Harry, still resentful about the manner of Sirius' incarceration.

"I say scrap the trial, and just give her to me, Remus and a full moon," growled Sirius.

Harry felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Sirius did not appear to be joking. Lupin didn't seem in a huge rush to register his objection to the idea, either.

"So what *are* you doing here, Professor Lupin?" asked Harry, aware that he was repeating the greeting that had been issued so many times already.

"Well, initially I came to make sure you were alright. Also, Albus seemed to think that my knowledge of the Dark Arts might come in useful in trying to establish what happened. So later, *much* later I'll need to talk to you about the duel. But not now."

There was a knock at the door, and Sirius immediately transformed back to his animagus form as Ron, Hermione and Parvati entered the room.

Parvati snuggled up to Harry on the bed, legs tucked underneath her. Hermione had taken the chair, with Ron perched on one of the arms. It was Wednesday, so they related events from the day's lessons, although there had not been much to report, as the whole school seemed to have been subdued by news of Vellum's attack on Harry.

"Well, almost the whole school," corrected Ron, interrupting Hermione's summary of the day, "the Slytherins were still... being Slytherin about it all. Malfoy being a git as usual, and Pansy was almost jumping for joy."

"Yeah, well she hates me in Potions," Harry observed, "probably delighted about the whole thing." Harry had noticed that Hermione scowled briefly at Ron's charitable description of Malfoy, but didn't say anything.

If there *was* something going on between Hermione and the Slytherin, Harry really didn't want to be anywhere near Ron when he found out.

A different continent would do nicely.

The friends chatted amiably, Harry choosing to relax and watch the conversation flow, luxuriating in the warmth of Parvati's body against his. Ron talked Lupin through the previous weekend's Gryffindor/Ravenclaw Quidditch match, primarily for Snuffles' benefit. Lupin explained that he'd been working in Egypt, and had bumped into Ron's brother Bill on a few occasions.

The subsequent discussion of Bill's work as a curse breaker for Gringotts suddenly prompted Hermione to mention Harry's dream about the Subsumatum Curse, and their complete lack of success in finding any reference in the Hogwarts library.

"Yes, the Subsumatum Curse," agreed Lupin, "Albus did mention Harry's vision to me in his owl," he continued. He flashed a look at Harry, however, and in that look Harry realised: Lupin knew.

Eventually Madam Pomfrey threw all the visitors out - despite the trio's vexed protestations, she would not allow any students to remain in the Hospital Wing. Lupin, however, assured them that he and Snuffles would stand watch overnight.

Dreamless sleep engulfed him once more.

Breakfast, and Harry was feeling much better. Hermione and Parvati had brought up some croissants from the Great Hall, still warm and utterly delicious. The first lesson on Thursdays was supposed to be Defence Against the Dark Arts, but those classes had been cancelled for the week as the governors cast about for a suitable stand-in.

Lupin, who had returned from a walk around the lake with Snuffles, suggested that Hermione join him in the library so that they could compare notes on their research. Having ascertained that Harry was fine with the proposal, the two disappeared, already deep in animated discussion.

"Guess it's just you and me, then," noted Parvati, unaware of Snuffles' amused expression over her shoulder as she leant in to kiss Harry.

Flushing, Harry tried to respond to Parvati whilst simultaneously shooing the dog away with his free hand. His godfather, however, was clearly intent on getting his own back for the previous day's comments, and appeared not to understand Harry's sign language.

Parvati drew back, abruptly, confusion on her face, "what's wrong?" she asked, fearfully.

"Nothing's wrong," exclaimed Harry, fervently, "I uh, it's just, well, erm... I think the dog's watching us."

"Oh honestly, Harry, it's just a dog. You're not normally embarrassed about us."

This was, of course, true. But then their audiences to date hadn't included his godfather. Harry tried a change of tack, and shot Snuffles a pleading look. The dog assumed an expression of wide-eyed innocence, before *eventually* taking the hint, and slinking out of the door. Harry relaxed.

"I don't know what it is," muttered Parvati, darkly, "but there is *definitely* something about that dog."

"Mmm," agreed Harry, before he and Parvati returned to making the most of their seclusion.

"Nice girl," commented Sirius, temporarily in his human form, as Parvati and Ron, who'd turned up just before the morning break, had set off for Transfiguration.

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his bed, "Dumbledore said he'd be here this morning." He really didn't want to get in a discussion about girlfriends with Sirius right now.

"Indeed," concurred Sirius, "and you've made a decision?"

"You knew?"

"Yes," Sirius laid a comforting hand on Harry's arm, "Dumbledore thought it best to tell myself and Remus. We'll both be looking out for you, no matter what you decide."

"Thanks," acknowledged Harry, "but there's really no choice, is there? I'm not going to run away."

"We never thought you would, but you had to make that decision yourself. No-one else can choose your path for you."

By the time Dumbledore arrived, Harry was out of bed and dressed.

The Headmaster swept into the room looking rather frazzled, "Good morning Harry, I'm sorry I'm late, but there's been a lot to deal with this morning. Sirius, Remus - if you could give us a moment, please?"

He waited until the two Marauders had left the room before continuing, "so Harry, have you made a decision?"

"I'd made my decision last night. I can't leave all this," he gestured with his arms, "and all my friends. I can't just run away from who I am."

Harry had expected a smile, or, at the very least, the blue eyes to sparkle with warmth. Instead, Dumbledore simply nodded, his expression serious, stern even. "We have asked so very much of you, Harry, and you have given beyond expectation. I see that you are dressed - I'll just have a word with those two," he nodded towards the door, "and then we must be off."

There was a brief discussion outside the door - Harry couldn't follow the words, but Snuffles and Lupin headed out of the Hospital wing as Dumbledore re-entered the room. "We must go now," announced Dumbledore, "as I really am running out of time." He took hold of Harry's arm, and he could feel something hard in the palm of the Headmaster's hand.

"Go where?"

"Azkaban," said Dumbledore, firmly. "Translocate."

It took a moment for Harry to process the response, and by the time he had, he felt the pulling sensation building in his stomach as they were transported away from the school grounds.

Harry did not have any fond memories of his encounters with Dementors. Of course, he was hardly alone in this respect, but, as Lupin had noted in their classes in the third year, Dementors had a particularly powerful effect on him. He'd suggested that Dementors affected Harry more severely than other people because there were horrors in his past that others didn't have.

And now he was travelling (by apparation? portkey?) to Azkaban, an isolated island somewhere in the North Sea that was full of the hooded figures. Wizard prison, where the Dementors sucked all hope out of their charges. To be sentenced to serve time in Azkaban was to live in perpetual despair. Most prisoners went mad, and even those who survived, like Sirius, were scarred for the rest of their life.

As soon as they landed, Harry felt a dull coldness, and a strange resistance to all movement. He was momentarily puzzled - his experience in meeting just a single Dementor had been more intense. The freezing cold, the numbness, and then falling unconscious.

His companion, detecting Harry's confusion, gave him a quick glance, "a small protection charm, which should serve to reduce the effects of the Dementors' attentions during our visit," he explained. "Come," he added, and Dumbledore walked purposefully towards a doorway apparently cut into the rock.

Harry followed, taking care to examine his surroundings as they walked.

To call the place an island seemed a bit of a misnomer. 'Lump of rock' would be better. 'Cold, wet, miserable lump of featureless rock' would be more accurate still. The sky was steely grey, with low clouds roiling overhead - it was raining, although the Headmaster's protection charm appeared to extend to warding off the elements as well. Nonetheless, Harry had to watch where he placed his feet to avoid the puddles that lay on the uneven rock.

Not a tree, not a bush, not a blade of grass. The only land in sight was this featureless black rock, slick with the wetness of the falling rain. The sea about them was choppy, windswept, and mirrored the steely-grey colour of the sky. They probably didn't do postcards. Pity, because he could just imagine sending one to the Dursleys: *Wish you were here.*

They reached the doorway, it was tall and wide, with stone columns marking the sides. As they passed through, into the dark tunnel inside, Harry winced as a cold pain stabbed through him. Dementors stood either side, guarding the entrance, and he realised that, as good as the Protection charm was, it wasn't sufficient to completely negate the Dementors' effect.

It was a painful journey, as they made their way through a labyrinth of corridors, illuminated by torchlight. The ice-cold stabs of pain as they passed guards were bad enough, but there were also the relentless moans and wails of the unseen prisoners, condemned to the torture of relentless despair.

He'd long since lost track of the turns they'd taken when Dumbledore finally stopped by a cell door. The Headmaster had been walking a little way ahead of Harry, and was engaged in remonstrating with a Dementor in the corridor. Harry observed from as close as he dared - as far as he could tell, Dementors themselves made no sound, so the dialogue all appeared to be one-way. He wondered whether Dumbledore felt the coldness, the despair, as he himself did.

The Dementor stalked away, further down the corridor, and Harry joined the Headmaster as he knocked on the cell door before pushing it open.

The cell inside was small. Rough stone walls, ceiling and floor. It was not so much a room as an incidental hole in the rock with a bed in it. There was no window, and the only light inside came from eight glass cylinders, two per wall. One corner of the room appeared to be an open toilet.

The bed itself was a shelf in the rock, with a mattress on top of it, and a small wooden trunk at its foot. A thin, gaunt man lay on top of the mattress. "Albus," the prisoner noted, without moving.

Harry glanced quickly between the headmaster and the prisoner. Dumbledore hadn't announced his presence - then he realised that the protection charm was probably a dead giveaway.

"And is that Potter with you?" still the prisoner hadn't moved. He lay on his back, on top of the bed. Still, it wasn't as though the room was overflowing with seating options.

"This is, indeed, Harry Potter," confirmed Dumbledore, "and I've brought him to see you. I would appreciate your help." It was amazing, Dumbledore's command of language and expression - he could convey tangible gratitude in the simplest of phrases.

Harry realised that you both believed Dumbledore and believed *in* him.

The prisoner appeared to understand the urgency of the implied need in Dumbledore's tones, and swung himself into a sitting position, and Harry could now see him properly. He was black, thin, and quite possibly as old as Dumbledore. His hair, though dreadlocked, had streaks of silvery-grey within, whilst his beard was a frosty white, compared to Dumbledore's sparkling silver. Prison uniform seemed to amount to a utilitarian black robe, that hung too loosely from his meagre frame.

His eyes, however, were completely white - no iris or pupil, and Harry suddenly remembered that, assuming this man was Lucas, he had been blinded upon his arrival at Azkaban.

"Greetings, Mr Potter," announced the prisoner in a Carribean accent that his time in prison had done little to dilute, "my name, as I'm sure Albus has mentioned, is Lucas, and I used to be the Last of the Magi."

"I shall be waiting outside the door, Harry," announced the Headmaster, "as I promised the guard that I would keep watch on these four cells."

Harry wondered whether Dumbledore really needed to exit the cell to monitor the activities of this group of cells, or whether he was simply ensuring that he knew as little as possible of whatever it was that he was here to discuss with Lucas.

As the door shut, Harry turned to face Lucas once more. It was disturbing, he realised, looking at someone with no eyes... it made it almost impossible to discern what the prisoner might be thinking.

"So, Mr Potter, I see you are a Mage."

"Um, you can call me Harry, if that's OK. And how did you know I was a Mage? I don't even know that... well, I've been told, but I don't *know*..."

"Good question. I can," Lucas paused, as he struggled to find the correct word, "sense, I suppose you'd call it, sense," and again another pause, "energy... ah, patterns."

Harry frowned. To be truthful, he found it a bit disturbing trying to hold a conversation with Lucas, face to face, but deprived of eye-contact.

"Do you play chess?"

Harry, taken aback by the startlingly odd question, stammered, "um yes," before adding, "not very well, though. Why?"

"Let's play," suggested Lucas, and fished out a chess board from the trunk Harry had noticed at the foot of the bed. He laid the board at the foot of the bed, and poured the pieces on to the covers. "Sit," he invited, indicating the trunk to Harry with his hand.

"Erm, if it's not too rude a question," began Harry, as he perched himself on the trunk, "how can you play chess if you can't see? Can you memorise the board?"

"An interesting strategy," observed Lucas, with a chuckle, "but far too much like hard work for me. Albus kindly made this set - it looks like a non-magical chess set, but in fact each of the pieces has its own distinct energy signature. As does the board. I can sense the energy, representing the pieces and their respective positions. Observe."

Harry watched, transfixed, as Lucas positioned the pieces on the board. He seemed to need only to lightly wave his hand to position each piece in its correct place. "You can do magic *here*, in prison?" asked Harry incredulously.

"I'm a Mage," Lucas shrugged, "and have no need, cannot use, in fact, a Source such as a wand. A Mage's power comes from within. Now, white or black?"

"Black," suggested Harry, for no other reason than it at least put the onus on Lucas to make the first move.

"OK," drawled Lucas, spinning the board around with a lazy flick of his wrist, "my move then," and again a light gesture and a pawn moved forward two spaces into the centre of the board.

Harry frowned, pondering his next move. These weren't wizard chessmen. He assumed that he'd have to move them by hand...

"Don't touch the pieces," commanded Lucas, "instead look at the board, and concentrate on the positions of the pieces."

Harry did as instructed, withdrawing his arm back. They were ordinary pieces, black and white, not especially delicate, not crude either. Unremarkable.

"Close your eyes, can you still see the pieces in your mind?"

Harry nodded, before realising that Lucas couldn't possibly see this, "um yeah."

"Right, hold that thought. Now let your mind empty itself of all other thoughts, and concern yourself only with this room. Expand your vision of the chessboard until you're touching the walls on each side..."

Harry tried to visualise opening his mind, tried to imagine that he was somehow looking down upon himself, sitting on the trunk at the end of the bed, in the cell. And then, suddenly, something snapped into place.

Inside the rectangular space, he could see eight points glowing like dim stars on the walls. The lights, he realised. He could see the chessboard, chequered in alternating patches of luminous energy, and the pieces themselves. Tiny points of light, harder to differentiate piece from piece, although the two sides were distinctly different. He could see himself - swirls of green and blue. Brighter than the chesspieces, but not as bright as the lights.

And Lucas, at the other end of the bed, was a blaze of orange and purple.

Lucas picked up on Harry's intake of breath, "you see it?"

"I think so, I can see the lights on the walls, the chessmen and us. Different colours, and some are dim and some are bright. It's like I'm looking down from the ceiling...."

"Excellent," complimented Lucas, "now can you see *beyond* the room. Where's Albus?"

The four walls stood out starkly in Harry's mind, and he tried pushing his perception beyond them. Beyond the walls, right on the edge of his vision was a beacon of red, shimmering brightly, and moving away from the cell."

"He's walking away from us, in the corridor?" asked Harry, unsure whether his interpretation would be correct.

"Very, very good, Mr Potter, can you see further than that?"

"No," he replied, ruefully, "Dumbledore's gone now."

"Hmm," Lucas acknowledged the information with a slight nod of his head.

A question struck Harry, "so how far can you see?"

"I can see every living thing on this rock, and beyond it, into the sea," his reply was tinged with sadness, which was quickly suppressed. "Now, concentrate on the piece you wish to move."

Harry concentrated on the chessboard in his mind, with its different energy signatures beaming at him.

"Oh, don't worry, we're not playing to win. Not even playing rules, in fact," assured Lucas, "now, select your piece, and," again the prisoner paused, "*will* it to move forward."

Harry frowned, and willed one of the glimmering dots in his mind to move. Nothing changed. He screwed up his face and intensified his concentration, and still the pieces remain fixed.

"You may find it helpful to use your hands," advised Lucas, "you feel a bit self-conscious at first, but it soon becomes natural," he added, reassuringly.

Harry pushed his hand away from his body, at the same time as willing the piece to move in his mind. And it did.

The piece shot through the air, and Lucas caught it deftly in his left hand, placing it back in its original square.

"Sorry," murmured Harry, "I didn't realise I'd hit it quite so hard."

"It takes a while to get used to it. This is physical magic. A Mage senses and manipulates energy, and you will find it very tiring to begin with. You, Mr Potter, are the Source for your magic, as opposed to the wizard's wand."

"But I've got so little energy in me," exclaimed Harry, despairingly, recalling his mental map of the various energy sources in the cell. Even the wall lights had shone more brightly.

"Indeed you have, and that is how all Magi start out. But don't think of it as being a supply that you carry around inside you all day. The mind of the Magi works slightly differently - what happens is that your power is limited by the extents of your experience. In other words, you are as powerful as the most powerful act you have formed."

"Um, I'm not sure I follow that..."

"Let's say that one day you conjure a lightning bolt..."

"I can do that? Cool!" exclaimed Harry. Things were *definitely* starting to look up. Lightning bolts! Oh yes....

"You must first learn to walk before you run," admonished Lucas, before continuing, "then once you have conjured that lightning bolt, you will always be able to conjure it. A Magi's energy, once stretched to a new level, doesn't return to the old state. Instead your capacity is permanently increased to the new point."

"Um, OK, but if I'm weak now, how do I ever conjure up something stronger than I currently am?" it seemed to be a paradox. Almost like one of those Catch-22 things, although he'd never read the book.

"That, Mr Potter, is why the Magi had the Keys."

"The Keys?"

"Oh, I forgot, you probably know them by the wizard's name of Soakstones."

Harry's eyes widened with the realisation, "are you saying I can tap the power that's stored in the Soakstone at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, Mr Potter, I am," confirmed Lucas, although he didn't seem to be as delighted at the prospect as Harry certainly was.

Harry's head was drooping by the afternoon - his mind was numb from the effort of moving the chess pieces, of 'sensing' his surroundings. Lucas had shown him how to conjure a spark, the tiny speck of light shooting from his fingertip and earthing itself in the wall.

He'd conjured up a tiny, flickering flame, dancing in the palm of his hand. It burnt feebly in the dimness of the cell, and as soon as Harry stopped willing it to be, it had died.

The final skill had been hardest to grasp - he could manipulate energy in its rawest state. He could conjure up a thin curtain of force, that shimmered as he concentrated, and served in similar fashion to a blocking charm. Alternatively, he could fashion the same energy into a needle-like lance. Or any stage in between.

"And so, Mr Potter," (Harry had given up trying to get Lucas to call him by his first name) "those are the powers of the Magi - you can sense energy, you can move objects, you can conjure electricity, you can create a fire, and you can will energy to your bidding. These are the building blocks through which you exert your power."

Harry nodded, slowly, and then remembered to give an acknowledging "um,".

"The list of what you *cannot* do, is, I am sorry to say, far greater," continued Lucas, "for example, you cannot charm objects, as wizards do. You cannot transform one type of object into another. You cannot heal injuries, as a wizard can. A Mage's influence on the energy flow is maintained only as long as the Mage concentrates. A wizard could transfigure a stone into a tortoise, and that tortoise would live until it was transformed back. A Mage's fire will die as soon as he releases his mind's hold upon it.

"You will discover that most magical objects are as useless in your hands now as they would be in the hands of the non-Magical," Lucas did not seem to use the term 'Muggle', "and so you must be cautious. You will need to avoid placing yourself in any situation where your Magi deficiencies will bring attention to yourself."

"But I'm at school," protested Harry, "I can't transfigure things, I can't charm things. People will notice."

By way of answer, Lucas replied, "people have a way of seeing only what they want to see. The powers you have, if applied, ah, *creatively*, should allow you to maintain an adequate illusion of ability."

"But I don't seem to have much of them," commented Harry, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"Ah yes, the Keys. Watch," Lucas conjured up a ball of energy, about the size of a Quaffle, the orange and purple colours Harry now associated with Lucas swirling in cloud like formations across its surface. "Now, reach out with your mind, and touch this energy. Consider it. Assess it. Weigh it with your mind."

Harry was slicing his fingers slowly through the air as he followed Lucas' instructions. He could sense the energy separating around his hands, and then reforming once they'd passed, tendrils of orange and purple dripping from his fingers.

"Open your mind, and will this energy inward, feel it soak into your body. Coax the power into your bones, into your soul," urged Lucas, as Harry tried to do as instructed.

It was a strange sensation. He could feel a warmth invigorating his body, could sense energy being transferred. He was almost swimming in energy, as he felt a tidal wave of power engulf his senses. His analysis was interrupted by Lucas' voice, "breathe!"

With a start, Harry snapped back into the cell, blinking, and realised that he had indeed been holding his breath. The ball of energy had reduced in size, and was now barely larger than a golf ball. His heart was hammering, and his breath ragged. His mind was exhausted from the effort of assimilating the power, and he listened, listlessly, as Lucas warned him of the dangers inherent in the process.

"As you have just experienced, there is a danger that you can drown in the energy transfer. So remember, you cannot drink the ocean in one go. The soakstones carry more power than you could possibly imagine, so drink little, but often, to build up your energy levels."

"Are you saying that I can use that same method to tap the Key?"

"Yes," sighed Lucas, "only you will need to use a great deal of caution in doing so, particularly as you would be attempting the transfer unsupervised. You're tired, and you need to rest - I shall call Albus back," and Lucas got to his feet to walk to the door.

"Lucas?" a question had struck Harry.

"Yes?"

"Why are you helping Professor Dumbledore like this? I mean, the wizards put you in here just for being a Mage. I can't see why you feel that you owe them any favours."

Lucas paused, hand on the door, and turned to face Harry. The blank eyes were trained directly upon him, and Harry was relieved that the man couldn't see his shiver. "Albus was a friend to me at a time when I had none. I owe him this. As for my sentence, it is true, I am a Mage, and that alone carries a sentence, but that is not the sentence I serve here."

"What do you mean?"

"Harry," Lucas used his first name to emphasise his next words, "revenge is a terrible thing. It is never truly satisfied, and each act only increases its thirst.

"As a Mage, we command terrible powers. I ask only this of you, think carefully before you take something you cannot return," and with these words, Lucas turned back to the door to call Dumbledore.

Chapter 16

Who was the victor in the inaugural Triwizard Contest?

They returned to Hogwarts, landing at the top of the Astronomy Tower, still lit by the early evening sunshine.

"I thought you couldn't apparate into the school or its grounds?" Harry directed the question at Dumbledore, who had paused to survey the buildings from the high vantage point, an unreadable expression on his face.

"That is correct, Harry," confirmed the Headmaster, removing a small stone from his pocket. "I used this portkey," and he held it out for inspection. It seemed to be a small, greenish stone, about the size of a domino, with a thin leather cord passing through a hole at its top. "There are several kinds of portkey - those that are programmed to transport the user at a specific time, for example, and those that are triggered by the user.

"This portkey is two-way, and switches destination from Azkaban to Hogwarts alternately. To operate it, you need to press your thumb against the back of the stone, and say 'translocate'."

Harry wondered why Dumbledore was bothering with such an involved explanation. He soon found out.

"This portkey can only be triggered by two people - yourself and I. And, since I am able to apparate to Azkaban independently, I made this for you to wear," and so saying, Dumbledore looped the cord around Harry's neck before he could protest. There was an audible snap as the cord fused together at the back of his neck, before Dumbledore let the pendant drop onto Harry's robes.

"But why would I go to Azkaban by myself?" asked Harry, "the Dementors were bad enough even with your protection charm. I don't think I'd survive on my own."

"It may be that we have to meet on Azkaban, arriving independently," said Dumbledore, which struck Harry as a particularly unlikely scenario. "And don't worry - the pendant won't fall off - only I can break the cord that holds it to you, and only you or I can actually issue the command to make it operational."

Harry was too exhausted to ask any further questions, but self-consciously tucked the pendant inside his robes as they made their way down from the tower to the hospital wing, Dumbledore behind, having taken one last look around him at the school's grounds.

Madam Pomfrey had given him a once-over, handing him two vials of potions before declaring him fit to return to Gryffindor tower. The days' last lessons were just about to finish as Harry and Crookshanks settled themselves into one of the armchairs by the fireplace, waiting for the fifth years to return from Herbology.

As he waited, he attempted to sense his surroundings, reaching out with his mind to explore the corridors about him. He was surprised to discover that he could sense a great deal further

in Hogwarts than he had been able to in Azkaban. Also, everything was sharper - more defined. Perhaps he was just learning to focus better.

The school was teeming with energy. Bright clusters of distinct dots had to be classes. There were luminous points on the walls, and Harry wondered whether these were lights or paintings. He drew back from his searching, and considered the Gryffindor common room, rearranging a few cushions on the opposite armchair with some vague arm gestures.

He began to think Lucas may have been right. This could work.

"Harry!" exclaimed Ron, as he burst through the portrait hole, "they let you out!".

"Yeah, still a bit weary, but it's good to be back," he affirmed, "did I miss much today?"

"Nope, not really - no Defence Against the Dark Arts, because..." Ron suddenly stopped, realising what he'd been about to say, "well, y'know, and so it was only Transfiguration and Herbology."

Harry nodded. Transfiguration. What was he going to do about that?

"Harry, you're back!" this time it was Parvati, who'd come in with Lavender, Seamus in tow. Parvati perched herself on the arm of Harry's chair, before he shooed Crookshanks off his lap with a gentle shove, and steered Parvati there instead.

"It's good to be back," he repeated, closing his eyes as he relaxed in the company of his friends.

"You look shattered," she noted.

"Yeah, I am, but at least I'm out of the hospital wing. So what'd I miss?"

"Not much," said Seamus, his hair once more being regroomed by Lavender, "we're still on teapots to rabbits with McGonagall - I mean, when are we ever going to actually need to transform a teapot into a rabbit? Or vice versa. Doesn't strike me as something with a great deal of practical application, if you ask me."

"True, but I'll bet it's in the O.W.Ls," put in Lavender.

"You sound just like Hermione," observed Ron.

"Hey, where is Hermione, anyway?" asked Harry, opening his eyes once more.

"Oh, she stayed with Neville in Herbology - Sprout has virtually given him his own plot to look after now, you know, so he was tending to that, and you know Hermione, anything to do some more work," explained Ron.

"Oh yeah," remembered Harry, "Parvati and I used to see him quite often when we used the Greenhouses for fencing practice."

"Well," commented Lavender, knowingly, "I've never heard it call *that* before."

"It's true!" protested Harry, fervently hoping that he wasn't actually turning as red as he felt he was. "Well, mostly..."

Dreamless sleep ebbed away as Harry woke up, back in his Gryffindor bed on Friday morning. Actually, it was a pretty good day to get back to lessons. Astronomy, a free (but don't tell Hermione), Care of Magical Creatures and then Divination. It was entirely feasible, then, to get through all of Friday without drawing a wand.

Which was *exactly* what he needed if he was going to pretend that he hadn't lost his powers in the duel with Vellum. He'd been thinking things through, and had come to the conclusion that it was Charms and Transfiguration that were going to be the trickiest.

Of course, he'd never been very good at Transfiguration, and he wondered whether he could swap the subject for Ancient Runes, say. Except that Transfiguration was pretty essential to any wizard, so it wasn't optional. Plus, he reasoned, at least he'd know the theory if he encountered it in battle.

As for Charms, well, they'd moved on to such intricate stuff now that it was probably easy enough to bluff failure. But maybe Dumbledore could have a word with McGonagall and Flitwick respectively - suggest that they not expect too much from him after his duel with Vellum. Harry figured that probably would be the best thing to do, and decided to speak to Dumbledore about it after the weekend, once he'd had a chance to recuperate a little more, and become more familiar with his powers as a Mage.

He idly sensed his surroundings, analysing the energy patterns that represented Ron, Dean, Seamus and Neville. It wasn't surprising, he thought, that Seamus and Dean seemed quite similar - obviously distinct, but a great deal of similarity between the two. Ron was primarily red, with some hints of green and blue, and Neville was almost entirely lime green. Lucas had said that, in time, Harry would be able to recognise people as easily by sensing as by sight.

But with the added bonus of being able to do so through walls, round corners, underneath disguises (would it work on polyjuice, he wondered?), even underneath invisibility cloaks. He wondered whether Sirius looked different as Snuffles. It seemed that sensing would be a valuable weapon in his fight against the Dark side.

He extended his vision over to the girls' side of the tower - it wasn't spying, exactly, since all he could determine was relative positions of energy sources. Crookshanks was curled up near the blob that was Hermione. Lavender was moving, on her way to the showers, and Harry drew his senses back in, guiltily.

OK then, so maybe it was a *little* like spying.

"Slytherin vs Hufflepuff tomorrow, then," announced Ron, helping himself to more toast as they ate breakfast in the Great Hall.

"They ought to ban blood-sports," commented Dean, wryly. No-one expected any result other than the Slytherins to conduct a wholesale massacre.

Harry was actually concentrating on the Slytherin table as they spoke - looking for Malfoy. He recalled that Lucius Malfoy had discovered the Subsumatum Curse for Voldemort, and wondered if Draco Malfoy had received some kind of advance warning of Vellum's intentions.

But then, even if he had, why would Malfoy care what happened to him? Harry glanced at Hermione - surely not? His train of thought was interrupted by the arrival of the boy himself, walking with his customary poise, Crabbe and Goyle in attendance.

Almost as soon as Malfoy had sat down, Harry noticed that Pansy got up, a few collected Slytherins following suit. He wondered, idly, what domestic drama in the Slytherin soap opera had caused those tensions.

"Sprout's asked for a minute's silence at the start of the match in honour of Cedric," reported Hermione, raising her eyes briefly from Arithmancy. The Herbology professor was Head of Hufflepuff, and Cedric had been their Quidditch captain. Seeker, too - he'd beaten Harry to the snitch, two years ago, when the Dementors had mounted their own pitch invasion.

Cedric. *Kill the spare.*

Instinctively, Harry's turned round to look at the Ravenclaw table, searching out Cho. He hadn't spoken to her for a while.

"Who're you looking for?" asked Parvati, to his left.

"Just looking to see if Cho's here," responded Harry.

"Oh," replied Parvati, frostily, "fine."

Harry turned to face his girlfriend, almost feeling as though he'd been slapped, but Parvati was looking fixedly to the front. "Parvati?" he prompted, trying to ignore Lavender's accusatory glare burning at him from across the table.

"I said 'fine'," repeated Parvati, icily, before abruptly standing up and leaving. Lavender shot Harry another spiteful look before getting up to follow her friend.

"What'd I do?" asked Harry, bewildered.

"A word to the wise," suggested Seamus, "it's not a good idea to tell your girlfriend you're looking for other women."

"But I was just looking to see if Cho..."

"*Particularly*, I might add," interrupted Seamus, "if said woman was responsible for you ignoring your girlfriend for the entirety of the Champions' Ball."

"But it's just that Hermione mentioned Cedric, and that made me think of the Third Task, and Cho..." Harry tried to explain, trailing off.

"It's not really me who needs telling," said Seamus, patiently.

"Cho's just come in," observed Ron, cheerily.

"Ron, I beg you not to help me," returned Seamus, before facing Harry, "Harry, do not talk to Cho, do not collect 200 dollars, go directly to Parvati, and explain."

"But she just stormed off out of here, without a word," Harry pointed out. In the corner of his eye he could see Ron trying to work out where the 200 dollars entered this particular equation.

"Precisely!" exclaimed Seamus, triumphantly, "so she wants to talk."

"Then why didn't she stay here and talk to me, then?" asked Harry, bewildered.

Seamus looked at him, pityingly, "you're new to this stuff, aren't you?"

Harry left the Great Hall, with Seamus, Ron, Hermione and Ginny still involved in a medium sized argument at the table as to the rationale behind feminine behaviour. Right, find Parvati. Where did she go?

Harry slapped a hand to his forehead as he remembered, and then let his sense sweep outwards, looking for her pattern. And probably Lavender's too, he noted, sourly. Still, he guessed, she was only trying to look out for her best friend.

Two dots, moving along the corridor towards the portrait hall. Well, at least it wouldn't be hard to explain how he'd tracked them down.

"Revision is important," he said, half-heartedly to the Fat Lady, who allowed him past. He and Ron had tried having a word with Hermione about her passwords, but she wouldn't be swayed.

"Parvati?" he asked, gingerly knocking on the door to the girls' dormitory.

The door opened sharply, just enough to admit Lavender's face, "she doesn't want to talk to you."

For a second Harry wondered why, exactly, he'd let himself be talked into this course of action by someone who, by choice, wore his hair in an electric pink pony tail. Because it was important. "Parvati," he called, ignoring Lavender completely, "please, I need to talk to you."

"Go and talk to Chang," snarled Parvati's voice, although it sounded half-hearted, "because that's who you want, isn't it?"

"Actually, no," replied Harry, shifting from foot to foot, distinctly uncomfortable at being forced to carry this conversation on whilst being faced by Lavender's icy stare. He decided truth would be a good card to play at this point, "although I *do* want to talk to her, but not before I've spoken to you."

"So that's it then?" Parvati asked in dull tones.

"What?" asked, Harry, surprised.

"You're breaking up with me," the same, lifeless tones.

Harry blinked. Where had that come from? "Er no, Parvati. I'd kind of hoped quite the opposite, actually. Are you OK?"

To his relief, Lavender had actually been puzzled enough at this exchange to forget to maintain her murderous stare. He turned his attention to the face at the door, "Lavender, please..."

"What, then?" interrupted Parvati, her face now appearing next to Lavender's.

Well, he thought, at least he'd got her to the door. "I need to talk to you. C'mon, let's take a walk around the lake - there's easily enough time before Astronomy."

Parvati looked doubtful.

"Please?" Harry was aware that he seemed to have won the battle with Lavender (why did they have to gang up?), since she wasn't attempting to interrupt. So now he just had to get through to Parvati. And get rid of Lavender.

There was a pause. Harry's eyes flicked between Parvati and Lavender. Lavender shrugged, and left the two of them to it, going back into the room. Which left Harry and Parvati facing each other. "OK," she agreed.

They set off round the lake, arms linked as they had been on the trip to Hogsmeade. Parvati felt like a wound spring next to him.

Part of him felt like he shouldn't really have to apologise, but, on the other hand, he didn't know how else to start off. "Look, Parvati, I'm sorry about this morning."

"Hmm."

"Really sorry, it's just, you know, Ron mentioning the Quidditch match, and then Hermione saying about the minute's silence. Cedric. I mean, you know, the Third Task."

She wasn't making this easy for him. "And, you know, Cho and Cedric. So, I wanted to talk to her, make sure she was OK. OK about tomorrow."

Parvati stopped, and looked at him, puzzled, "what are you going on about?"

"Kill the spare."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That's what Voldemort said when we arrived in the graveyard."

She flinched, "do you *have* to say his name? What graveyard? Why?"

"Yes, it's *Voldemort*. If *anyone* has reason to be frightened of a name, it's me, and I'm not!" despite himself, Harry's anger was starting to build. Why wouldn't she understand? And then he remembered that she genuinely didn't know. "You remember the Third Task, last year, don't you?"

They'd stopped walking by a rock, and were looking across the lake at the school, the Forbidden Forest some way behind them.

"Of course I do," she replied, "they'd made this maze on the Quidditch pitch. You won, of course," and the warmth was back in her voice with that gentle tease, before vanishing again, "and Cedric was dead. Dumbledore told us all not to talk to you about it."

"Yeah, I know he did. And I was glad. But, you know, people didn't *know*, still don't, what happened. After Cedric and I grabbed the cup. Well, Dumbledore knows. And I told Ron and Hermione, obviously. And I told Cho, because I thought she should know. Know how it ended."

Tears were starting to well up in his eyes, now, as the memories replayed. *Kill the spare*. And before that, Cedric, not knowing what had happened, *Wands out?*.

"I spent the summer thinking that most people assumed that I'd killed Cedric."

"No-one thought that! *Ever!*" exclaimed Parvati, "Dumbledore told us it was You-Know-Who."

"And, in a way," continued Harry, "I did." A tear ran down his cheek, as he started to lose himself in those memories. He slumped down against the rock, and fixed Parvati with green eyes filled with pain, grief and guilt. "It was at the end of the Third Task, and Cedric and I had made it to the centre..."

In the end they missed Astronomy, Harry, drained, staring listlessly across the lake at the school, Parvati absently toying with the fingers of his right hand as she tried to take in all that he'd said. All that he'd been through. And all that he expected still to face.

"I'm really sorry, Harry." Astronomy had long since finished when Parvati eventually broke the silence. "I just didn't know. So are you going to go and talk to Cho?"

"I'm sorry too, and I know you didn't ask for any of this. Yes, I still need to talk to Cho. She's a friend."

"I'm sorry, Harry," she was still replaying his account of the Third Task to her.

"I, um, I need to speak to Cho alone," Harry persisted, wincing slightly, "is that OK?"

"Yes, yes, of course," she replied. But as she said these words, Harry thought he saw a flash of doubt cross her eyes. It was gone almost instantly, and, in the end, he decided he must have imagined it.

Chapter 17

Who was the first Minister for Magic to be assassinated in office?

Since Care of Magical Creatures resulted in them cleaning out the owlery floor *again*, Harry's disguise as a wizard wasn't unduly tested during the course of the morning. Parvati had a word with Lavender, and everything seemed to be back to normal.

Which, in Care of Magical Creatures, meant the collective might of the fifth year Gryffindors willing Hagrid back as quickly as possible. As a sign of their desperation, they were almost beginning to look back on the Skrewts with something akin to, well, not active dislike.

Almost.

"S'been ages since we've heard from Hagrid, you know," commented Ron, face still scrunched up in disgust as he attacked the corners with a shovel.

"He did say the he hoped to be back for Halloween," added Hermione, "maybe you should write again, Harry. After all, Halloween's next week..."

"Yeah, I should, I s'pose," agreed Harry, though his mind was on other matters. Such as how to find Cho, and exactly what he was going to say to her.

Snuffles and Lupin were waiting for them outside the owlery, Lupin stoically braving the cries of "Professor Lupin, what're *you* doing here?" from Dean, Seamus, Lavender and Neville.

"Harry, could I have a word?" asked Lupin, looking pointedly at the rest of the group.

Hermione, as usual, was quickest to pick up on this, "we'll see you at lunch, Harry, OK?" she asked, tugging Ron and Parvati with her.

"Yeah, catch up with you," confirmed Harry.

Once his fellow fifth years had vanished, Lupin, Snuffles and Harry headed out to the lake once more. Harry was getting to know the path around it quite well.

"Snuffles is heading back, Harry," explained Lupin, "if Voldemort did oversee your attack, and we believe he did, then Wormtail would've told him that Sirius would most likely come to your aid. We must assume that there are Ministry officials sympathetic to the Dark Side, and it really is too much of a risk for Sirius to remain here."

"I told you that you shouldn't have come," said Harry, accusingly, but Snuffles simply gave him a 'like I'm going to listen to *you*' look.

"I, on the other hand, will be around for some time," continued Lupin, "I've got a room at the Three Broomsticks, and there's not a full moon for another fortnight."

"What do you hope to achieve by staying?" asked Harry. The lack of a clear plan, or even a decent target, was starting to bother him.

"Well, first and foremost, we need to find out as much as we can about Subsumatum. Unfortunately our endeavours are restricted by the need for discretion, but if the Death Eaters are going to subsume opponents' powers, then Voldemort will soon have a formidable army at his command.

"It could also provide Voldemort with a fast track means to regaining his previous levels of power. Of course, he'd need to drain the powers of many wizards to reach that point, but it's clear how Subsumatum would appeal to him."

But Harry had stopped, frozen in his tracks. In his vision, Lucius had said that the curse was a possible solution to both 'the Boy' *and* the Keys. Of course, at the time, he hadn't realised the significance of the second element. But Lucas, having explained that the Magi referred to the soakstones as Keys, had solved that puzzle for him yesterday.

Lupin and Snuffles had turned to look at Harry, realising that he was no longer walking.

"The soakstones!" exclaimed Harry, "Voldemort is going to drain them to absorb the powers himself!"

"Ron!" exclaimed Harry, sliding into the space opposite, between Lavender and Parvati, "where are the three soakstones located?"

"Mmpf?"

"The soakstones - we know there are three, and that one's here at Hogwarts, but where are the others? The books you read must have told you, right?"

Hermione had looked up from Ancient Runes at the start of this conversation, her interest piqued, "well, it won't take long - I'll bet they'll be listed in *Stones' Almanac of Magical Artefacts*."

Ron had, by now, swallowed his food, "no, that's just it, nothing I read told me where the soakstones *were*, just what was known about them."

"You three are completely deranged," observed Parvati, "what were you reading up on soakstones for?"

"Um, remember when Vellum was trying to get us to move the soakstone? Hermione, Ron and I went to the library to look for clues." Harry was impressed with himself, what he'd said was perfectly true, but to elaborate any further at this point would take too long, and would necessitate dragging Parvati further into the lair of secrets he'd built.

It wasn't that he didn't trust Parvati, he did. Instinctively, however, he felt it was important to only divulge the absolute minimum of information - it was too risky to make all they knew to date public knowledge.

"But why do you want to know *now*?" persisted Parvati, who looked as though she was on the verge of detecting something odd going on.

"Well Lupin was asking," Harry directed his reply at Hermione, pointedly, "so, y'know, I thought it might save him some time, but not to matter..."

Hermione, however, had dropped her Ancient Runes text, and her eyes were wide with a sudden thought. Harry grinned, inwardly, trust Hermione to link Lupin's interest in the Subsumatum curse, and his apparent interest in the soakstones' locations. And so quickly.

"Just remembered," said Hermione, almost leaping to her feet, "I have to..."

"...go to the library!" Harry and Ron finished her sentence off for her in unison, beaming.

"Prefects' meeting tonight," explained Hermione, after she'd finished scowling at her two so-called-friends, "catch up later." And with that she was off, virtually sprinting to the library, her half-eaten lunch completely forgotten.

"Hermione can be a bit... manic, at times, can't she?" observed Parvati, carefully.

By way of response, Harry and Ron shrugged.

Well, he'd made it. A full day of lessons (well, OK, he missed Astronomy, and calling Divination Studies a lesson was kind of abusing sarcasm, and the less said about Care of Magical Creatures, the better), and he'd not blown his cover. Nobody appeared to suspect that his powers had in any way been disturbed following his duel with Vellum. Monday would be harder, starting as it did with Charms, but on Friday evening, sitting in the Common Room, he felt reasonably satisfied with the day.

He looked about him. Lee, Fred and George were in a scheming huddle. Lavender was tying Seamus' hair back in a French plait, which took the term surreal to a new dimension. Ginny and Dean were playing Ron at chess. And *still* Ron was wiping the board with them.

Parvati, currently on his lap (hey, was it his fault that the Common Room furniture was predominantly armchairs? He thought not), had done a splendid job earlier scaring off the Creevey brothers. And they'd agreed to slip off for some fencing practice a little later.

Hermione came through the portrait hole, dragging Neville with her. She looked positively vexed, "I can't believe it," she wailed, "not *one* source could tell me the locations of the soakstones. It's just fluke that we know there's one at Hogwarts - it's not even mentioned in *Hogwarts: A History*!"

"Hmph," replied Harry, "back to square one, then. Did you see Lupin?"

"Yes, and he's asking around. It's weird, I mean, probably most of the staff didn't know about the Hogwarts soakstone. I wonder how Vellum did?"

At that moment, Lee, Fred and George wandered over.

"Harry," began Fred.

"Friend," affirmed George.

If the pranksters were daunted by the simultaneous narrowing of Harry, Hermione and Parvati's eyes, they didn't show it.

"We were wondering," continued Fred.

"As one does," interjected Lee.

"If, dear, dear friend," that was George, maintaining his theme.

"We might consult with Mssrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs?" asked Fred.

"Oh!" said Harry, "of course." Fred and George had given him the map in his third year - he could hardly refuse to let them borrow it. "Be right back," he said, kissing Parvati lightly on the neck before rushing up to his dorm.

Deciding he might as well prime it for them, he took out his wand, and, tapping the ancient parchment, declared "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

And nothing happened.

Harry swallowed. What had Lucas said? That most magical objects were as useless in his hands now as they would be in the possession of Muggles.

Realising that the trio would be waiting for him, he returned back to the Common Room, and handed the parchment over, "what do you need it for, anyway?" he asked.

Lee flashed a brilliant smile, "Oh, just trying to level the playing field somewhat."

Harry spent part of Saturday morning trying to track Cho down, leaving Parvati and Lavender to their Divination Studies, Seamus their prisoner ("are you *sure* that certain doom awaits me at the hands of a monster fish? I didn't even know fish *had* hands...").

He'd tried the usual haunts - the Great Hall, the Library, even the Astronomy Tower. He was, in fact, hugely grateful she hadn't been there - he wasn't entirely sure that he could have counted on a stable response from Parvati had they been 'spotted'. He couldn't sense for Cho, since he didn't know her pattern (a fact that he would of course be rectifying immediately).

In the end, instinct took him out to the Ravenclaw stands at the Quidditch pitch, where sure enough, he saw a lone figure, looking at the pitch.

"Hey you," she smiled, weakly.

"Hi, been looking for you," said Harry gently.

They sat there, silently for a while, each lost in their thoughts.

"Cho, you know there's going to be a minute's silence before the match today, don't you?"

"Yeah... I'm not looking forward to it," she admitted, "I know that it's well meant, and everything, but it's still going to... hurt."

"I know," agreed Harry, before asking the question that had been on his mind, "you don't mind me being at the game, do you?"

Cho looked at him, eyes wide, "what?! Why wouldn't I?"

"Well, erm, y'know, the rumours... that, well, erm..."

"That you killed Cedric because he was going out with me?"

"You've heard them then?"

"Well, only the once. I slapped them so hard no one dared suggest it again..." she smiled again, weakly.

"I'm really sorry about Cedric, you know..."

"Harry, I *know* that. And do *not* feel guilty. He knew the risks when he entered..."

"Er, not *that* risk..."

"Well no-one did. You can't feel guilty for something no-one foresaw."

"I kind of live with that risk every day, Cho. I never meant Cedric to be sucked into this whole thing."

"Harry, Cedric wouldn't have wanted you to face You-Know-Who alone, if he'd been given the choice. I know that. He was like that."

"I didn't face him alone - Cedric *was* there, like I said before. He helped."

The two Seekers sat staring at the Quidditch pitch for a while.

"If you don't turn up today, Harry, then people will think that you're ashamed of what happened. They'll assume guilt. And besides," she added, a smile creeping across her face once more, "if I have to go through that alone, I *will* kill you."

"I'll be there, Cho," he replied, softly, and made his way down from the seating, leaving the Ravenclaw Seeker alone with her thoughts and the empty stadium.

"And so, fellow students," Fred's amplified voice rang around the pitch.

"Welcome to the second match of the year," continued George, "Slytherin versus..."

"Hufflepuff!"

The boos that had greeted 'Slytherin' were replaced by an enthusiastic cheer for the Hufflepuffs. The Slytherins, were of course, cheering and booing the other way round, but with the vocal weight of three houses ranged against them, they were bound to be drowned out.

"So why isn't Lee doing the commentary?" Harry asked Ron.

"Didn't you hear? Lee's got detention with Filch. *All day*. Nine till nine."

"Wow," said Harry, seriously impressed, and choosing to ignore Hermione's dismissive sniff.

"And fifty house points, too!" Ron's voice had an unmistakable tinge of awe.

"What did he do?" exclaimed Harry, in wonder.

"He broke into the Slytherin dungeon at three this morning, and set off a cluster of Filibusters..."

"Cool!" Harry now realised why the Slytherin team looked so grumpy. On the other hand, maybe the prank would have the same effect as poking a Norwegian Ridgeback with a toasting fork - the team in green and silver looked as though they had a score to settle.

"And it couldn't have happened to a nicer set of people," observed Ron, with a completely straight face, finally drawing a giggle from Hermione.

"And now," Fred's voice boomed out across the pitch.

"Before the match starts..."

"Professor Dumbledore will make a short speech..."

"In memory of Cedric Diggory, Hogwarts's Champion." Even though Fred and George were still doing the alternate speaking thing, they'd managed to sound sombre and respectful at the same time.

Harry felt his throat tighten, as the Headmaster walked into the centre of the pitch. He tried to spot Cho in the Ravenclaw stands, but there were so many people it was hard to distinguish an individual. He knew which stand she was in, of course. He'd sensed her as soon as they'd got to the pitch. That would have to do.

Parvati gave his hand a squeeze, one of six people present who had the full story of what happened that fateful day in June. Himself. Dumbledore. Hermione and Ron. Cho. Parvati.

"I have been asked," intoned the Headmaster, sombrely, "to say a few words in memory of Cedric Diggory, Hogwarts Champion, who was killed at the end of the Triwizard tournament last year.

"As many of you will know, Cedric loved Quidditch, and was both Seeker and team Captain. He was a prefect, and a Hogwarts champion. Truly, Cedric Diggory was an accomplished student of this school, and his loss affected us all."

The two teams were hovering over the centre of the pitch in a circle formation during the speech, which, Harry realised meant that, for once, Malfoy was at least having to show some proper respect for Cedric - the memory of the Slytherin's smirks during the end of year feast rose, unbidden in his mind.

"Cedric was a hard worker, and he valued fair play. He was a true and loyal friend to those that knew him, and I ask everyone here now to take a minute to silently reflect upon his loss."

It was a strange thing, the quiet. So many faces, all sombre, all silent had an almost overwhelming power. Maybe that's why people chose to remember people this way. To show that the memory of a person was valued enough to deserve total focus for these sixty seconds.

The seconds ticked by, and Harry could feel Parvati tightening her grip on his hand. His eyes were moistening, as he remembered, again, words that would haunt him for the rest of his life. *Kill the spare*. So callous. So matter of fact. They'd landed in the graveyard, perplexed. Cedric had been the one to suggest, nervously, *Wands out, d'ya reckon?*. And then the voice, *Kill the spare*.

And then he was remembering returning to Hogwarts - one hand on the portkey, the other on Cedric. Tears streaming down his face now, it was taking all of Harry's control not to scream in anguish. In pain. In rage.

He would face down Voldemort. No matter what it took. He'd be there, he'd face him.

A loud cheer resounded around the stadium, as the allotted time expired. But Harry was oblivious to it all, a rage burning inside him.

The match had ended, Harry had no idea who'd won, or how long they'd been playing. He stayed in the stand as the rest of Gryffindor made their way back to the tower.

Dusk fell on the Quidditch stadium, deserted except for two figures. One in the Gryffindor stands, and the other almost opposite, in Ravenclaw. Both lost in their own thoughts, oblivious to the world.

Chapter 18

Name a common substitute for Yarrow Root typically used in physical restoratives

The anger had burnt out, and Harry realised that dusk had fallen. He shivered slightly, it was the end of October, after all, and sensed across the pitch. Cho's shimmering blue was still seated in the stands. It was a particularly nice colour, he thought, absently. Sweeping beyond, towards the school itself, he sensed a red presence, hints of green and blue swirling on the surface. Ron, walking towards them.

Ron went to the Ravenclaw stand first, to Harry's surprise, and then the two of them made their way to the Gryffindor section. Harry felt slightly jealous of the time Ron had alone with Cho as they walked across the pitch. After all, Ron hardly knew her.

Cho waited at the bottom as Ron bounded up the steps, two at a time. "Hey Harry, you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine. Just thinking."

"C'mon, it's getting dark, and it'll soon be time to eat... You're OK, aren't you?"

Harry sighed, trying to let go of the tension he still felt to the core of his bones. He met Ron's eyes in the halflight as he wordlessly got to his feet, seeing sympathy, and perhaps a little confusion too. Ron stood to the side, to let Harry descend from the stands first. The tall red-head scanned the pitch, seemingly trying to identify what it was that had kept Harry transfixed since the start of the game.

The three walked silently to the school, the gargoyles' attentions serving to hasten their steps as they reached the entrance. Harry had never really considered how warming firelight was, but as the trio split up in the main entrance, Cho wordlessly seeking the Ravenclaw dorm, he felt the flickering warmth of the flames invigorate him.

Ron seemed instinctively to know to keep silent until they reached the Fat Lady. "You sure you're OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Heavy day - bad memories..."

"In we go, then."

The warmth of the Common Room enveloped him, and Harry unclenched his teeth, the tension finally sliding off him.

"Harry! Catch!" that was Dean's voice, and something small came whizzing through the air.

His Seeker reflexes automatically cut in, and Harry caught the chocolate frog in his right hand almost before he'd had a chance to register it. "Cheers Dean!"

"Hi," he greeted Pavarti, taking her outstretched hand and giving it a squeeze, before sitting on the floor at her feet, leaning against the armchair, staring at the fire. Pavarti ruffled his hair as he unwrapped the chocolate frog. Merlin. Typical, thought Harry, he had seven of him already.

Fred and George were almost bouncing off the walls as the Gryffindors made their way down to the Great Hall.

"What are you two planning?" asked Angelina, in her I-can-see-right-through-you tone, eyes narrowing.

"Not planning, my love," replied Fred (at least, Harry assumed that it was Fred).

"The deed is done," confirmed George, seemingly fighting a Herculean battle to stop himself from dissolving in a fit of giggles.

"It's a pity Lee's still with Filch," lamented Fred.

"True," concurred George, "this could be..."

"...the most daring..."

"...the most outrageous..."

"...the most, dare we say, legendary?"

"...prank yet."

"I hope that you've not done anything stupid," interrupted Hermione, warningly.

"Dearest Hermione..."

"Sweetheart," right, thought Harry, that *had* to be George, since otherwise Angelina would probably have thumped him.

"Tonight is the culmination of six and a half years of work..."

"Endless nights of blood, sweat and tears...."

"Research, development, planning...."

"...and not a little guile..."

"...all distilled into this one event..."

"...the achievement that will, finally..."

"...undoubtedly, and indubitably..."

"...set the seal on the legend of the Weasley Twins."

"An event so momentous..."

"...so totally sponditious..."

"That's *not* a real word," corrected Hermione.

"As we were saying..."

"An event so outrageous..."

"...you shall all fall down to proclaim us..."

"...as truly, the most brilliant pranksters these hallowed halls have ever seen."

Now in his fifth year at Hogwarts, it hadn't taken long for Harry to realise that the Twins weren't exactly lacking in confidence. But they really seemed to have outdone themselves this time. "OK, I'll bite," he volunteered, "what, *exactly*, have you done this time?"

They'd reached the massive doorway to the Great Hall as Fred revealed, in hushed tones, "we've spiked Dumbledore's drink with Exploding Hair!".

Hermione was shocked, "that's *outrageous!* You can't do that to Dumbledore. He's... he's the *headmaster.*"

"And therein, m'lady, lies the proof of our skil.... mgfh!" George's response was cut short as he'd walked straight into the back of his twin, "Oi Fred, get a mov....."

Harry stared. The Twins had suddenly turned as white as sheet, eyes wide in horror, staring at the Head Table.

He followed their gaze, sweeping from the left as he noted those present. No Hagrid, of course, but there was Madam Hooch, Professor Snape, Professor Sinistra, Professor McGonagall...

He had barely time to register how unhappy they all looked, as he'd now arrived at the figure sitting at the centre of the Head Table. And it wasn't Albus Dumbledore.

Harry was aware that his jaw had dropped, and closed it, slowly. "C'mon," he whispered, nudging the transfixed Twins towards the Gryffindor table, "let's sit down."

Fred and George were almost quaking in terror as they made their way to the long table, and for his part, Harry couldn't take his eyes off the central figure at the Head Table.

What, he asked himself, was Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, doing in Dumbledore's seat?

It would have been amusing, if the situation had not been so serious, to note that Fred and George could maintain the alternate speaking thing in times of crisis: "this is bad.."

"...terrible...."

"...dire..."

Hermione was not being hugely supportive, "it's your own stupid fault," she hissed.

"We know, Hermione," admitted George, morosely.

"Just please don't say 'I told you so'," begged Fred.

"Well," continued Hermione, in full Prefect mode, "if you two actually maintained some semblance of respect for the teaching staff..."

"Dumbledore had a sense of humour," opined Fred, "he'd have seen the joke."

No-one dared to imagine, even for one second, that Fudge's reaction was likely to be anything even remotely similar.

Harry was thinking ahead, "Lavender," he hissed, "tell Seamus and Dean to keep their heads down!"

Lavender had missed out on the conversation, but relayed the message. Seamus and Dean, sitting opposite each other with their vibrant pink hair, shot Harry a questioning look.

"Down!" he repeated, in a harsh whisper, slamming his hand down towards the table for effect. The two friends slunk deeper into the chairs, still puzzled, but convinced by the urgency on Harry's face that he had his reasons.

Hermione was still scolding the Twins for their recklessness, ignoring Ron's rather pointed instructions that she should keep her nose out.

"But you don't understand," hissed George, cutting off Hermione's tirade.

"We're not worried about what'll happen to us," began Fred.

"But Fudge is Dad's boss!" explained George.

Hermione's eyes widened in comprehension, but before she could speak, Fudge had stood up, tapping his glass to gain the hall's attention. The frenzied whispering that had been present since Dumbledore's absence had been spotted died immediately.

Although most of the eyes in the Great Hall were fixed on Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, resplendent in his customary pinstripe robes, had anyone cared to look, they would have seen that the eyes of the fifth and seventh year Gryffindors were firmly fixed on the glass that remained in his right hand.

"Thank you," Fudge's ministerial voice rang out across the Hall, "I expect many of you will be wondering why I am here this evening," he continued.

Harry chanced a glance at the Slytherin table. For once, Malfoy wasn't smirking, or exchanging knowledgeable whispers with Crabbe and Goyle - his steely gaze was firmly fixed on Fudge. Pansy, at almost the opposite end of the table, however, looked distinctly bored.

"It is my duty, as Minister for Magic, and, I might add, Chairman of the Board of Governors, to report that Albus Dumbledore has been relieved of the post of Headmaster with immediate effect...."

What? The stunned intake of breath echoed across the Hall.

"As you may be aware, the former Headmaster took it upon himself to suspend a member of teaching staff, *without reference to either his Governing Body nor the Ministry*. Quite clearly, such a breach of procedure could not be tolerated, and his position became untenable.

"Following the dismissal of Mr Dumbledore," clearly, now that he was no longer a member of staff, the title of Professor was no longer allowed, "the Governing Body have reconsidered the events leading up to the suspension of the aforementioned member of staff, and presented their recommendation to myself for approval.

"I am therefore pleased to inform you that no charges will be lodged against Professor Vellum, and that classes in Defence Against the Dark Arts will resume with immediate effect."

Harry's ears were ringing. He was genuinely stunned by Fudge's proclamation. An almost palpable physical shock, that left him dazed. Dumbledore had been sacked, and Vellum was being reinstated. His fellow Gryffindors all had their mouths agape.

"Traditionally the Ministry has taken a relaxed view of the manner in which Hogwarts' administration has been executed. However, recent events have brought home the need for much closer scrutiny of the day to day operation of this establishment, and, to this end, I have asked my staff to conduct a *thorough* review of the school.

"I realise that you will all be feeling betrayed by your former Headmaster at this point," continued Fudge, seemingly oblivious to the dagger-like looks being hurled his way from almost all corners of the room, "but can only ascribe Mr Dumbledore's errors down to a deep-seated, yet misguided, belief on his part that he was acting in your best interests.

"I, as Minister for Magic, will take full responsibility for ensuring that we close this particularly sorry chapter in this great institution's History, and I know, that with your full support, we shall be making amends from henceforth."

Harry was livid, shaking with anger. He was absolutely certain he wasn't alone. Hermione's face had become set in an expression similar to that when she'd crossed swords with Rita Skeeter, except it had been raised to the power 10. Even in his anger, he felt a small amount of pride in his friend; he knew that Fudge would rue the day when he crossed Hermione Granger.

Hagrid's cold, measured threat to Uncle Vernon echoed through Harry's mind, *Never, ever insult Albus Dumbledore in front o' me.*

If Fudge had any idea of the magnitude of deep seated hatred that was being emanated in his direction, he didn't show it.

And then the Gryffindor table watched in sheer terror as the Minister took a sip of water to freshen his throat before continuing.

A stunned silence had greeted Fudge's speech. But now, the very air seemed to hang solid, as staff and student's alike registered stupefaction at the sight in front of them.

Fudge's hair had exploded, and in a sparkling flash, torrents of multi-coloured hair cascaded from his scalp, reaching below his waist. A curtain of shimmering sparks fizzled and cracked their way down the vibrant coiffure, the sounds echoing seemingly forever in the completely shocked silence.

Somewhere, a tiny voice in the back of his mind noted that it had been a truly stupendous prank; where was Colin's camera when you *really* needed it?. But the vast majority of his brain was registering complete and utter terror. Harry glanced at Seamus and Dean, whose eyes were now beneath the level of the tabletop as they attempted to sink still further into their seats.

On either side of Fudge, the Hogwart's staff looked utterly stunned. Professor McGonagall had a hand clutched to her chest, mouth opening and closing in horror at the transformation. Flitwick was aghast, the normally serene Vector's mouth was agape, and even Snape's pallid face appeared to have turned several shades whiter.

No one made a sound.

Fudge didn't even attempt to preserve his composure, "Who! Did! *This?!!*" he shrieked, eyes bulging, and a vein throbbing in his forehead. His eyes scanned the room in pure fury, seeking the culprit.

Dean and Seamus had both disappeared completely from sight, cowering under the table.

Fred, George and Ron were sitting absolutely rigidly, faces completely neutral.

"*Who?*" screamed Fudge, the shriek echoing through the silence.

Hermione timidly got to her feet.

Fudge seemed to have more or less regained control of his voice, "and who might you be?"

"Hermione Granger," she replied, voice quavering, "Gryffindor Prefect."

Fudge nodded his approval, "I see that at least someone in the room understands the responsibilities of office. Do you know who did this?"

"Yes, sir," the voice quavering still further.

Harry kept his eyes on the Weasley boys. Ron was looking at Hermione with an expression of sheer hatred, which Harry strongly suspected was extremely misplaced. Fred and George remained fixedly staring into each other's eyes, not moving a muscle.

"Yes," prompted the minister, "and who was it?"

In his mind, Harry was a first year again. It was Halloween, and a troll was lying unconscious on the floor.

"It was me," admitted Hermione.

Ron's expression melted so fast, it looked like he might burst into tears. Next to him, Harry felt George move. He kicked him, "do *not* move!" hissed Harry, through gritted teeth. George froze.

"Miss Granger..." began Professor McGonagall, struggling to keep her composure.

"Silence!" screamed Fudge, eyes boring into Hermione with pure hatred. "How *dare* you abuse the position of Prefect?"

Hermione flinched.

"Where is your respect for the teaching staff of this school?" continued Fudge, vocal cords strained to the limit.

"You are clearly unworthy of being a Prefect - your position is revoked!" he continued, and Hermione again flinched.

"Detention!" screamed Fudge, "Nightly!" he added for good measure, seemingly ignorant of the tears forming in Hermione's eyes as the punishments were hurled at her.

"And 250 points from Gryffindor!" he concluded in a demented rage, as Hermione was unpinning her Prefects badge.

Harry had had enough, and stood up sharply, the scraping of his chair amplified out of all proportion in the stunned silence. Hermione was walking towards the Head Table, preparing to hand in her silver Prefect's badge.

"And what do you think you are doing, Mr Potter?" shrieked the Minister.

Harry turned to face the politician, and said, in very clear, and deliberate tones, "I'm not hungry." He turned to leave the hall, as he did so, Fred, George and Ron stood up simultaneously to join him.

This seemed to trigger the rest of Gryffindor into action, as they all stood up and turned to leave. Alicia was making her way towards the Head Table, unpinning her Head Girl badge as

she did, fury in her eyes. Hermione was now walking to the exit herself, tears blinding her steps.

Ravenclaw followed, Lisa Turpin standing, and unpinning her own Prefect badge as she made her way to the Head Table. Roger Davies, Head Boy, was right behind her.

The Hufflepuffs were next, simply because although Justin had stood up at the same time as Lisa, he had further to walk from their table to lay his badge in front of Fudge.

All eyes fell to Slytherin, where Draco Malfoy had got to his feet. From the doorway, Harry watched as Malfoy, *Malfoy* of all people, wordlessly added his Prefect badge to the collection in front of Fudge, before returning to the head of the Slytherin table. He motioned with his arms that the rest should rise.

What happened next took Harry by surprise. He'd always assumed that Draco was the prime force in Slytherin - even given the fact that he was only a fifth year. He was a Malfoy, that's what they did. But the Slytherins looked uncertainly at Pansy.

Harry watched, perplexed, as Pansy's blue eyes met Malfoy's steely gaze. The challenge hung in the air for maybe a second before she, too, got to her feet, and her house followed suit.

Outside the hall, George was carrying the sobbing Hermione in his arms, Ron and Fred as escort as they returned to Gryffindor tower.

Once in the Common Room, Alicia addressed her house, "everyone to their dorms, except the Weasleys, Hermione and Harry. Know this: within these walls, *everyone* is to continue to treat Hermione as Prefect. Move." It was pretty clear that everyone was also going to continue to treat Alicia as Head Girl, but this went unsaid.

The students headed for their dorms as instructed, the shock of Fudge's initial announcement had all but been forgotten by Fudge's public castigation of Hermione. And no-one had an appetite any more.

George had settled into one of the armchairs by the fire, Hermione still cradled in his arms, "anything, Hermione, absolutely anything. Say it, and it's yours..."

Hermione's sobbing had subsided somewhat, "Don't leave me," she pleaded, in a tiny, broken voice.

"Hermione," Fred was whispering, crouched by the side of the chair, "you have absolutely *no* idea..."

The six of them, Hermione, the twins, Ron, Ginny and Harry stayed in the empty Common Room, murmuring their support, until Hermione finally fell asleep, exhausted. Fred carried her up the stairs to her dorm, and handed her over to Lavender and Pavarti.

"McGonagall in the morning," stated Fred.

"Yep," agreed George, "Mum and Dad too."

The twins exchanged a meaningful glance. At times, Harry was convinced they were telepathic. "We can't make this up to her, you know."

"True, but we're going to do our damndest to try..."

Chapter 19

Who wrote Advanced Principles of Cross-Species Transfiguration?

Breakfast on Sunday was a sombre affair. Ginny, Ron and Harry formed the Weasley Guard of Honour for Hermione's protection (to all intents and purposes, Harry and Hermione were both considered honorary Weasleys in all but name and hair colour), but the Twins were nowhere to be seen.

"Fred and George must've got up really early," Ron suggested to Harry, "and no-one's seen them all morning."

"Well, they did say they were going to see McGonagall, and I've lent them Hedwig so they can owl your Mum," reminded Harry.

"Yeah, but I didn't think it would have taken them *this* long..."

As it turned out, Hermione didn't seem to be in much need of protection. Most students were avoiding her gaze completely. The few that did murmured a few words of support before drifting off again.

Now that the initial spectacle of the Exploding Hair Event had subsided, most people were assimilating Fudge's announcement that he'd sacked Dumbledore. And reappointed Vellum.

Lisa, who, having been a Ravenclaw Prefect until the previous evening, was in Harry's year, and had therefore been present at Defence Against the Dark Arts on Tuesday, came over to the Gryffindor table. "Hi Hermione, we're completely with you."

For her part, Hermione smiled weakly, her eyes still puffy from the night's emotion.

"Harry," Lisa had turned to him, now, "what are we doing about Defence Against the Dark Arts?"

"Mmpf?" asked Harry, eloquently, inviting further elaboration.

"Well, we've been talking," continued Lisa, with a nod of her head towards the Ravenclaw table, "and if you want to boycott Vellum's classes, we're right with you."

Harry was somewhat taken aback. *Ravenclaws* suggesting that they skip classes? Clearly, Hermione's supposed prank of the previous evening had unearthed a militant streak amongst the students. "Well, I hadn't really thought about it," he confessed.

"I mean, how can they hold a review of Vellum's dismissal without consulting *any* of the witnesses to what she did to you?"

He realised that Lisa had a point. On the other hand, he wasn't going to let Vellum know that she'd won her battle.

"I dunno, Lisa," returned Harry, "I mean, we're just one class..."

"No Harry, I meant *Ravenclaw* is behind you if we go for a boycott. All seven years."

Harry was momentarily taken aback, "Wow," he murmured, trying to suppress a smile when he realised that that would include Cho, now a sixth year. He frowned, "but, y'know, I don't think we should let Vellum know she got to me."

"Harry!" spluttered Ron, incredulously, "you were laid up in bed for two days! She nearly killed you!"

"Just a flesh wound," dismissed Dean, as he came to take the seat next to Ginny, wry smile on his face.

Lisa, Ron and Ginny looked taken aback at his seemingly heartless comment, but, Harry realised, they'd probably never heard of Monty Python. "Yeah," he agreed, "what are you going to do?"

"Bleed on me?" chorused Dean, Seamus and Harry. Realising that this must be some Muggle cultural reference, Ginny beamed at Dean.

"So no boycott, then?" pressed Lisa, before Harry could analyze the look passing between the two Gryffindors.

"I don't think so; it seems clear that she's got Fudge's backing anyway, so I doubt that *he's* going to care about our opinion," commented Harry, bitterly. "But don't expect me to take part in any more demonstrations in class."

"*No-one* is going to take part in demonstrations with Vellum, Harry," assured Lisa. Noting Harry's glance towards the Slytherin table, she added, "well, not counting Slytherin, but they don't count, do they?"

Harry nodded absently to Lisa's assertion, but, remembering that Malfoy, too, had voluntarily handed in his Prefect's badge the previous night, he wasn't so certain of that statement anymore. What was going on with Malfoy?

They returned to the Gryffindor Common Room, where Hermione set about changing the password (the Fat Lady, clearly, hadn't yet been told that Hermione had been relieved of her duties).

Ron had challenged Neville to a game of chess (he was working his way through the entire house - no one had beaten him yet), and Lavender and Pavarti were engrossed in comparing nail-polish. Dean was cajoling people to join in some footy practice (Ginny had agreed immediately), and Harry had decided that he'd get back on his Firebolt, since they had Quidditch practice on Monday.

Hermione came back from the portrait hall, beaming. "OK everyone, new password," she announced.

"Don't tell me," said Ron, closing his eyes and pretending to connect to his Inner Eye (fortunately, he couldn't see the scowls sent his way from Lavender and Pavarti), "*I can't wait till exams.*"

"Nope..."

"How about *There simply aren't enough Arithmancy lectures in the day?*" suggested Seamus, complete with Hermione impression, dodging a hurled cushion.

"Pathetic... the answer is... *Keep your hair on*" she grinned a most un-Hermione like smile, as Ron sprayed the chessboard with tea. The pieces jabbered back at him, angrily.

"Nice one, Hermione!" complimented Harry.

Hermione certainly seemed to have cheered up, "well boys, the moral of the story is: appreciate what you've got, because basically I'm fantastic."

"Hermione!" exclaimed a clearly impressed Dean, "Howdy-doodly-do!"

"I didn't know you spoke Dean, Hermione," observed a surprised Seamus.

"Howdy-doodly-*what?*" asked a puzzled, and slightly worried Ron.

"Oh, I'm not fluent, or anything," Hermione explained to Seamus, dismissively, "I just know the odd phrase or two".

"Toaster," was the sum total of Dean's explanation to Ron's question.

"Red Dwarf, mate," elaborated Seamus, surmising that Ron was still some way behind the Muggle-aware in the conversation.

"Waffle?" offered Harry, innocently, as he, Hermione, Seamus and Dean dissolved into laughter. Like Hermione, he couldn't speak fluent Dean, no-one could (well, Justin in Hufflepuff was almost as good), but he'd seen enough Muggle TV and the occasional film to be able to place the obvious quotes.

"Barking," murmured Ron, shaking his head, "completely mental. Your move, Nev."

So it was in considerably lightened spirits that Harry marched down to the Quidditch pitch, Firebolt in hand, determined to make the most of the late October sunshine.

Although it had been a fantastic match, the fact remained that they lost to Ravenclaw in the opening game, and, as expected, Slytherin had brutally slaughtered Hufflepuff 420 points to nil.

The next match was against Hufflepuff, after the Christmas break, and Harry realised that he should have paid more attention to yesterday's game. Not, he reminded himself, that anyone had needed to remind Ron to pay attention to the upcoming opposition. All you needed to do is say the words 'Hufflepuff' and 'Chaser' for Ron's face to turn a fetching shade of pink.

According to Hermione, Ron had spent the entire game watching Samantha Bones, a fourth year Chaser, passing toe-curlingly outrageous (and, according to Hermione, completely unwarranted) compliments on her ability at every opportunity. Apparently he hadn't even noticed Hermione stamping on his foot. Repeatedly.

Ron, of course, had vehemently denied all this. But the fact that his face had turned virtually the same colour as his hair had told its own story.

Harry wasn't sure which was more amusing. The fact that Ron's emotions were so transparent, or that his obvious attraction to the Hufflepuff clearly seemed to have irked Hermione.

Mind still on his best friends, Harry mounted the Firebolt and pushed off from the ground with both feet.

And fell over.

"No," he gasped, getting back to his knees, "not this too. Not this...."

He slumped to his haunches, defeated, Firebolt forgotten. Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, the youngest seeker in a Century, and the Seeker who had won all but two Quidditch matches he'd played in, couldn't fly.

Harry walked disconsolately back to Gryffindor Tower, having deposited his Firebolt in the broomshed, mind a whirl. How was he going to explain this? What was he going to do about Quidditch practice the following evening? How were Gryffindor going to win the Quidditch Cup?

For yes, even in the midst of despair, Harry wanted to make sure that Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup again. And failing that, he wanted to make sure that Slytherin did not reclaim the trophy. Which meant ensuring that Ravenclaw won their remaining matches.

It was a pity, in some ways, he thought, that Cho already had a Firebolt, as otherwise he could have loaned her his for the remaining games.

But how was he going to explain this to Alicia? Anyway, looking on the bright side, at least he couldn't be made captain, which should mean that Ron would get the position he'd wanted since they'd been in the first year, looking into the Mirror of Erised.

"Hey Harry, what's up?" it was Pavarti, still fluttering fingernails at a cooing Lavender, who greeted him first.

"Hmm," replied Harry, frowning, and ignoring Pavarti's squeals of protest as he gave the outstretched hand a gentle squeeze in greeting (the latest shade hadn't dried yet), "got some problems with my broom... Have you seen Alicia anywhere?"

"Um no, haven't seen her all day... what problems?"

Harry considered the question. He could just tell the truth (well, not the *whole* truth, but then hey, whoever had time for *that?*), and say that he couldn't fly anymore. But he didn't really

want to go public with that news just yet. Malfoy would be able to taunt him for weeks, he thought bitterly.

Still, unless he presented a pretty final reason for not being able to fly, he'd just be bombarded by suggestions, questions and such. All well-meaning, of course, since Gryffindor wouldn't want to lose their star Seeker, but all, ultimately, futile.

So he made his decision. He'd tell the team, and his friends, but everyone else would be sworn to secrecy. "Fancy a little fencing?" he asked, making the double meaning clear.

Pavarti blushed slightly, and Lavender giggled as only she could, before agreeing, and the two made their way to Greenhouse 2, which they'd adopted as the base for their sessions.

There were five Greenhouses, of differing sizes and climates, containing all manner of magical plants, herbs, shrubs. Greenhouse 2 was the largest, almost a cathedral of glass, housing lush, tropical vegetation and towering trees.

Sensing was almost impossible, Harry realised, as all the vegetation carried its own pattern. That would presumably apply to the Forbidden Forest as well, he thought. Of course, movement stood out. But if someone were remaining still, it would be extremely difficult to detect them. Not good.

They faced each other, canes at the ready as usual, and started trading parries and thrusts, moving about the space as they did so.

"You know," observed Pavarti after a while, "you're getting pretty good at this. Maybe we ought to invite Padma along to whip you some time?"

"Two twins at once?" laughed Harry, with a dreamy expression on his face, "you do realise that that is quite possibly the ultimate male fantasy, don't you?"

"Oh really?" she inquired, archly, launching a more spirited attack against him, "and that would be a fantasy of yours too, hmm?"

"No, of course not!" he denied, willing every sense in his body *not* to think about the combination. The two prettiest girls in the year? Twins? At the same time? Of course he wasn't going to think about it...

"Honestly," he deadpanned, "the thought never crossed my mind..."

The two traded teases for some time before eventually Pavarti prompted him, "broomstick?"

Harry's shoulders slumped, and he rested the tip of the cane on the floor. Pavarti raised her eyebrows in surprise, and she, too, dropped her guard.

"I can't fly," he admitted, quietly.

"What? I can't hear you", explained Pavarti softly, drawing closer, puzzled.

"I can't fly," he said, finally looking up from whatever it had been that was of tremendous interest on the floor to meet her eyes.

"What are you talking about? You're the best flier at Hogwarts! Everyone says so."

"I used to be good," conceded Harry (he wasn't quite big-headed enough to claim that he was the best - after all, Cho had beaten him to the snitch, hadn't she?), "but since Vellum, I can't fly."

"Harry, that's just *not* possible."

"Believe me, it's possible. I. Cannot. Fly."

"But how? And for how long?"

"I don't know, and, I think... I think it's permanent."

"You're joking," disbelief was written clearly across Pavarti's face, but it was evident in Harry's expression that this was anything but a joke.

"Nope. I'm going to have to quit the team, of course. But I'm really going to miss it... y'know, I used to love flying. And it's gone..."

"Harry," she exclaimed softly.

"Anyway, this is top secret, OK? No telling *anyone*. At all. Not Padma, not Lavender, not Seamus... Obviously people will be surprised when Ginny plays Seeker against Hufflepuff, but it's vital that nobody else knows."

"Vital?" repeated Pavarti, dubiously.

"Vital," confirmed Harry, resolutely, "you would not believe how much could be at stake here."

"You're scaring me."

"Yeah, and I'm scared," he admitted. The thought of Subsumatum being used in the coming war (or was it the ongoing one?) was terrifying. He'd been able to retain some magical ability, but he had no doubt that others would not be so lucky. They'd know, eventually that he was no longer a wizard, of course, but the longer he could put off that final confirmation, the better.

On their way back to Gryffindor Tower, some time later, a thought struck Harry. Cho had missed several matches because of injury... all he needed to do was pretend he'd picked up something similar, and that would dismiss most of the difficulty in maintaining the charade.

Of course, his first thought had been to fake a broken arm, but Madam Pomfrey could cure that in about 30 seconds flat. This would need a little thought.

"Whoa Harry! What did you do?" asked Ron, incredulously, staring at the sling supporting his left arm.

"I tore some ligaments in my wrist," he explained, with a shrug, "misjudged a Feint on the Firebolt and went sprawling."

Ron was always going to be the sorest test of this, "*you* misjudged a Wronski Feint? *You?* Seriously?"

Harry and Pavarti nodded vigorous confirmation, and Pavarti took over the narrative, "so we went to Madam Pomfrey, but you can't heal muscle as quickly as bone. So Harry's banned from flying for at least six weeks..."

"...and," continued Harry, "I've got to keep this thing on for the next fortnight."

Murmurs of sympathy swept around the Common Room, until they reached Alicia, whereupon she hurled herself across the room, "what do you *mean*, no flying? Six weeks? You can't! *We* can't!"

Harry smiled - Alicia, despite only holding on to the Quidditch captaincy temporarily, was becoming more and more like Oliver every week. She was still going on, "of course, Slytherin won at the weekend, so they're in the lead, and even Ravenclaw are ahead of us..."

Personally Harry thought it a bit harsh to say '*even* Ravenclaw', but kept his mouth shut.

Eventually, having explained how it would be the end of civilisation as they knew it should Gryffindor *lose* against Hufflepuff, Alicia remembered to ask Harry if he was alright otherwise.

"Oh fine, really, I guess," Harry assured both Alicia and the attendant audience, "although it's going to be a bit of a pain having to wear this," he waved his left arm, "for the next fortnight. I guess I must still be a bit zonked from the Vellum thing," he concluded, apologetically.

"But Harry, you're our Seeker!" exclaimed Angelina, somewhat unnecessarily, "You *will* be alright in time for Hufflepuff won't you?"

"Well," hedged Harry, "erm, I *should* be, but apparently these things can take time, you know. Anyway, you've got Ginny," he said, pointing at the flame-haired fourth year, noticing that she was, once more, with Dean. Hmmm.

"Well, yes, but..."

"But I can't fly," stressed Harry, "so I'll lend Ginny the Firebolt until I'm back in circulation again. Is that OK with you Ginny?"

Ginny snapped her jaw shut, nodding wide-eyed. Greeeeeat, thought Harry, gloomily, just when she was getting past the crush thing, but was then relieved when she turned back to her conversation with Dean. Someone ought to tell them that red and neon pink didn't go together, he thought.

Harry had been resigned to the Invisibility Cloak also not working, but *still*, he thought, it would have been *nice* to have been surprised by one out of the three. Marauders' Map, Firebolt, Invisibility Cloak. All useless.

He'd flung the cloak over himself as soon as he'd got into the dorm after breaking the news about his arm, and, of course, he'd not been able to see a thing. Because he'd just stuck a sodding great blanket over his head.

So, without the protection of being invisible, and, unless he got someone else to prime it for him, without the guidance of the Marauders' Map, getting to the Magi's Key was going to be tricky. He'd have to rely on his sensing abilities and his natural guile. Neither of them were sufficiently developed for him to find the prospect encouraging.

Harry spent the hour or so before dinner wandering the corridors, attempting to find as many staff as possible, so that he could map their patterns. Obviously, he also needed to find Filch and Mrs Norris. Peeves wouldn't hurt, either, he thought.

But it just seemed to be typical of his recent luck that he couldn't locate either Filch or Mrs Norris. And Peeves had seemingly disappeared. Still, he'd managed to get Flitwick, McGonagall and Sinistra. He'd have to get the remaining teachers at dinner. Particularly, he reminded himself, Snape, since the Potions Master would appear to find no greater pleasure than discovering Harry roaming the school past curfew.

Fred, George and Lee returned to the Gryffindor Common Room just after Harry had got back in himself, but were extremely evasive about what they'd been up to - detention with Filch, but they wouldn't say what, or where, or when or even why. Whatever it was that they'd been doing, however, it seemed to have worn them out completely.

Harry guessed that he shouldn't have been surprised to find out that his bad luck continued to mine the rich vein of form it had discovered: Snape was nowhere to be seen at Dinner, nor could he find Filch or his evil cat.

This complicated things somewhat. Harry had been planning to start tapping the Key's energy that evening, but that had been before he'd known he'd be visible, and wouldn't have the Marauders' Map.

In the end, he decided discretion was the better part of valour, and stayed in Gryffindor Tower all evening. He didn't dare venture out into the school post curfew until he could rely on sensing all possible opponents at some distance. The consequences should he be caught were too great.

Lavender had once again dug out Wizards' Triv, but this time Harry sat on the fringe of the game, watching the delighted expressions on his friends' faces as they answered question after question about a world that Harry had only lived in for four years.

He *knew* that it was only trivia, and was an essentially pointless exercise, but Harry saw the trivia as the glue holding together the wizarding world's culture. Each question carried with it

the assumption of so much knowledge (he hadn't even known that the WWN broadcast soaps until that first game) that he kept being forcibly reminded of his ignorance throughout the game.

This was a world that he could now never be part of, and it was with a fairly heavy heart that Harry Potter, Last of the Magi, ascended the staircase and went to bed.

Chapter 20

Which lives longer - A Centaur or a Wyvern?

Breakfast on Monday morning, and some of the usual hubbub had returned to meals in the Great Hall. Hermione had seemingly recovered from the weekend, and, if anything, looked in even better spirits than before apparently destroying the Minister for Magic's professional image in front of several hundred students.

"...and Professor McGonagall's in charge of my detention," she was explaining, eagerly, "and you'll never guess what it is..."

"I don't know - polishing the Gryffindor Quidditch trophy collection?" hazarded Ron.

"Nope!" Hermione was positively beaming, "I've been asked to catalogue the Restricted Section of the library!"

"Hermione," said Ron, "you need help."

"But don't you *see*? It means that I have unrestricted access to all the books."

"Yeah, but you still can't borrow them, can you? They still stay in the library," Harry pointed out.

"Well, actually," continued Hermione, with a butter-wouldn't-melt expression "Professor McGonagall convinced Madam Pince that I might need, on occasion, to borrow books so that I could cross reference elements to make sure the catalogue was thorough."

"You *really* need help," maintained Ron.

Harry, however, was seeing things a little differently, "so what you're saying, Hermione, is that you've got unlimited borrowing rights on books from the Restricted Section?" he asked, incredulously.

"Uh-huh," beamed Hermione.

Further discussion was interrupted by the arrival of the post. Harry was distracted by the sight of Hedwig, the snowy owl standing out partly because of her plumage, but also because she was carrying a rather large parcel.

"Hey Harry, what's Hedwig got for you?" asked Ron.

"I don't know," replied Harry, bewildered, and then, as Hedwig flew straight past him without so much as a sideways glance, "and, evidently, I'm not supposed to, either," he sighed, as his traitorous owl landed next to the Twins.

However, a tiny black owl, rather like Pig, but much more dignified in manner, had landed next to Harry's pumpkin juice, with a tiny parchment attached to its leg.

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione, who both shrugged in return. "Maybe it's from Pavarti," teased Ron, as he'd noticed earlier she wasn't at breakfast.

"What, all the way from Ravenclaw?" asked Hermione, pointing out the Patil twins, deep in conversation. Suspiciously deep conversation, it seemed, as far as Harry was concerned.

Harry had now opened the parchment, and the tiny owl had disappeared, refusing even a sip of the pumpkin juice it had been offered. The message was brief:

Meet me at 1PM.

A.D.

"So who's it from?" asked Ron, "Is it from Snuffles? That'd explain the owl."

"Nope. It's, erm, private," Harry replied, somewhat embarrassed. *Meet me at 1PM*, but where? *A.D.* - had to be Albus Dumbledore. But where was he supposed to meet... Oh, he realised, as the cold stone about his throat suddenly seemed to weigh about as much as a medium sized hippogriff.

Azkaban.

"Secret admirer?" needled Ron, determined to get an answer.

"Hey," noted Harry, suddenly, looking past Ron's head, "isn't that Samantha?"

"Where?!" asked Ron, spinning round in his seat to scan the Hufflepuff table.

"I can't see her..." he was saying, oblivious to Hermione's giggles, and Harry was halfway towards the door before Ron had turned back.

The first lesson was Charms, with Ravenclaw, and to his great surprise, Harry found himself sandwiched between the two Patils for the lesson. "Morning Sweetheart," beamed Pavarti, to his right, a flash of revenge sparkling in her eyes.

"Hello Harry," added Padma, huskily from his left.

"Um, morning," muttered Harry, warily, his mind going back the previous day's fencing conversation with Pavarti. He should have known he'd have to pay for that.

"Well," continued Pavarti, "we thought Charms would be an ideal place to fulfil your ultimate fantasy, *darling*," patting his thigh under the desk for emphasis.

Harry swallowed, aware that he was going scarlet.

"Oh," exclaimed Padma, in mock sympathy, "is he always this shy, sis?" rubbing his back for good measure.

Harry let his head fall on to the desk, quite convinced that the wood would probably start smouldering from the heat.

"It is kind of sweet, isn't it?" agreed Pavarti.

Harry muttered something that sounded like 'wibble' into the desk, as the two sisters continued to exchange innuendo. The soundtrack of giggles from the desks behind, containing, amongst others, Lavender, Seamus and Mandy, only served to deepen his embarrassment.

Why was it that the ground never opened up and swallowed you whole when you needed it to?

On the plus side, however, Pavarti and Padma were so intent on humiliating Harry they didn't notice he didn't take any turns in the exercises.

Harry fell in step with Dean as they headed towards Potions after break.

"Potions, Snape," lamented Dean, "a Jedi craves not these things..."

"Indeed," agreed Harry, resignedly, "but *you* don't have to share a desk with Pansy, do you?"

Except, he noticed, that Pansy actually seemed quite cheery this morning. She actually smiled at him. A predatory smile that sent shivers up the spine, but it was a smile, nonetheless.

"Oh 'er-mahn-eee," cried Fleur, throwing her arms around Hermione and kissing both cheeks, "you were so brave on Sat-*eur*-day," she added.

Hermione, scarlet with embarrassment, mumbled something about it being nothing, whilst most of the boys looked on with slack-jawed envy.

"Oh, eet wass *not* neurthing," contradicted Fleur, shaking her Veela hair vehemently, "you made uz all so proud..."

Snape, clearly, had had enough, "Miss Granger," he snapped, icily, "if you've quite finished reliving your reprehensible actions of the weekend, perhaps you might allow me to start my lesson?"

"Bu..." protested Hermione, as Fleur finally released her, flouncing across the dungeon to join Neville, Crabbe and Goyle.

"That is, if you've *quite* finished," persisted Snape, before concluding, in time honoured fashion, "10 points from Gryffindor."

This exchange really seemed to have made Pansy's day, and she was beaming as Harry slunk in to the seat next to her, "morning Pansy," he ventured.

Pansy turned directly to Harry, eyes sparkling, clearly delighted with the world, "Hello squib," she replied.

Harry blinked, "*what?*" he asked, aiming for a semi-incredulous, semi-shocked tone of voice.

"You heard," hissed Pansy, still beaming, before returning her attention to Snape, who was outlining the days lesson, where they would be preparing Velocitas Syrup, a mental/physical stimulant.

Harry had indeed heard. Of course, he wasn't actually a squib, he was a Mage, so he had genuinely been able to manage a tone of disbelief. On the other hand, Pansy had clearly shown her hand now. She knew about Subsumatum. She knew about Vellum.

Harry was strongly convinced, as had been Dumbledore, even without direct evidence, that Vellum had been acting on orders from Voldemort. So, he reasoned, Pansy must have some connection to Voldemort also.

His train of thought was interrupted by Pansy's elbow, "light the cauldron, then," she commanded.

Harry pondered this, "well you're the one with their wand out," he countered, aware that Malfoy was also considering him with interest.

"Is there a problem, Miss Parkinson?" Snape's snapped tone caused everyone in the room to look at Harry and Pansy's desk. He had a particularly vindictive gleam in his eye.

"Not really, Professor," simpered Pansy, "Harry was just about to light the cauldron for us."

"Well get on with it then, *Champion* Potter," sneered Snape, "or is a little *Incendium* Charm beneath your undisputed prowess?"

All eyes in the room swivelled to Harry, as he reluctantly fished his wand out from his robes. So Snape knew, too, then, he thought. He lazily murmured "*Incendio*," whilst simultaneously willing a bright blue flame at the base of the cauldron.

He was rewarded for his efforts by Snape's expression of incredulous surprise, and Pansy's flinch. Malfoy merely gave him an appraising look with those steely eyes before returning back to his own desk and berating Hermione (although he of course called her 'Granger') for having diced the Mandrake leaves with an orthogonal pattern, rather than the isometric one as instructed.

Harry tuned out Hermione and Malfoy's bickering - it had become second nature, used as he was to ignoring Ron and Hermione's arguments, and flashed a concerned expression at Pansy, "are you OK? You look a bit... upset."

"Don't talk to me," she snarled in return, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He was having to concentrate to maintain the flame, and he wasn't sure he could do too many other things simultaneously. Still, he'd got one over on Pansy. And Snape.

For the time being, he reminded himself.

Harry rushed lunch in the Great Hall, Pavarti still teasing him remorselessly about Charms that morning, much to their audience's delight. He had to meet Dumbledore at 1, and so he kicked Ron, sitting opposite, saying "c'mon then, Ron."

Ron managed to suppress his expression of complete surprise and puzzlement quickly enough for it not to have been spotted.

"What was that for?" Ron asked.

"Um, I can't say just yet, but I need a favour from you."

"What?" asked Ron, warily, as they headed towards the library.

"I need you to stay in the library for the rest of the lunch, and avoid being seen by anyone. You were with me all lunch, OK?"

Ron's eyebrows raised in suspicion, inviting further elaboration.

"I'm meeting someone, but I can't say who," and then, at the knowing look on Ron's face he snapped, "and no, it's *not* Cho!"

"Who then?" persisted Ron, not about to be fobbed off for the second time in one day.

"You and Hermione, this evening. I'll explain everything," he promised, before, having checked that there was no-one else in the particular bookstack they were occupying (Divination, of course), grabbed his pendant, and commanded, "translocate."

He was vaguely aware of Ron's impressed 'whoa!' as he felt the by now familiar pulling sensation at the pit of his stomach, and the library's surroundings dissolved.

"Good afternoon, Harry," Albus Dumbledore looked different, he thought. And yet still the same. Slightly more serious - the frown more intense, but he still suffused the air around him with a tangible warmth. Before Harry could even respond, however, the former Headmaster had gripped his arm, and commanded 'Apparate!' as the outside world once again dissolved from view.

"So yer back, then," noted a familiar voice, "and what did y'bring *him* with y'for? Can he be trusted?"

Harry was trying to take in the surroundings. It was a circular room, about thirty feet in diameter. There were no windows, in fact, he realised, there wasn't even a door. The light came in through the ceiling, which was an enormous dome of frosted leaded glass, veined with gold in some kind of intricate pattern.

The absolute centre of the room carried a circular pool of water, at least ten feet across itself, around which was a stone table, again circular. Seated at *this* were a number of people, some of whom he recognised.

"Yes, Alastor," sighed Dumbledore, "Harry can be trusted. And yes, I am completely certain that this *is* Harry and not an imposter under Polyjuice..."

"Well I'm sure yer c'n appreciate m' concern," snarled Moody, who clearly had emerged from his 9 months imprisonment in a piece of luggage the previous year with his celebrated paranoia now elevated to legendary levels.

They'd now reached the stone table, and Harry was guided to a seat between Dumbledore and... "Sirius! What are *you* doing here?"

"You know, I was beginning to think it was only me you people greeted like that," observed Lupin, who was sitting two places to the left of Dumbledore.

"Hi Harry, what happened to your arm?" Sirius returned the greeting, but Dumbledore called the meeting to order before any further pleasantries could be exchanged.

"We do not have much time, I'm afraid, since Harry must be back at school before afternoon lessons begin, so, Harry, I'll just run through the membership for you, and then we'll ask you a few questions if that's OK?"

Harry nodded, feeling hugely out of place. The pool in the middle of the room, he now saw, carried a small collection of huge fish, mottled colours, gliding idly through the water.

"Well, starting from my left, we have Remus Lupin, Mundungus Fletcher, Arabella..."

"Mrs Figg!" exclaimed Harry in surprise, "you... you, all this time..."

"Yes Harry," agreed Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling with amusement, "Arabella Figg, Kolchan Vesh, Monica Tiller, Sirius Black, yourself and I. One of our number is missing, but it's probably best if we..."

"Sorry I'm late, Albus," apologised *another* familiar voice, and Harry span round, openmouthed to greet the latest arrival.

"*Bill*? What are you doing here?"

The dashing Weasley flashed Harry a warm smile in greeting, still the same fang hanging from his ear, and his flaming red hair pulled back into a ponytail, "came to listen to you, actually."

"Me?" asked Harry, in a slightly smaller voice than he'd intended.

"We must press on, I'm afraid. Harry has little time, and I'm sure you will have questions that need answering. Harry, if you please, could you recount the dream you told me about, near the start of term?"

And so it started. Harry explained his dream, trying to ignore Moody's derisive snorts and obvious distrust; it was typical, he thought, that the real life Moody should be so much more unpleasant than one played by a Death Eater. There were a few questions, mainly relating to how he knew that the vision was real - he didn't, but the best he could say was that it felt real, and his visions always seemed to fit events as they unfolded.

He then moved on to his duel with Vellum, weathering yet more abuse from Moody for deliberately having placed himself in jeopardy in the first place.

They *then* moved on to Azkaban, where Harry recounted briefly his discussion with Lucas, and demonstrated some of his feeble powers.

He didn't know why - maybe Moody's constant sniping at Harry's lack of vigilance, maybe he wasn't certain he could trust everyone in the room, maybe he was just being petty, but Harry carefully throttled in his abilities, to provide the most meagre of demonstrations for his audience.

Harry concluded his speech with his supposition that Voldemort was going to attempt to use a variant of Subsumatum to use the soakstones to build up his power.

"Excellent, Harry," thanked Dumbledore, before adding, "well we wouldn't want to keep you now, so you'd better get back to school before someone misses you."

Harry's mouth opened and closed at this rather harsh dismissal. It seemed clear to him that no-one else was being asked to leave, and he felt rather hurt that he'd been the one to provide them with all the information, but then was being shoved out of the door (well, except there wasn't actually a door) just when the discussion was about to get interesting.

"So," persisted Dumbledore, "just use the Portkey - I assure you that its range is more than adequate. And, naturally, this meeting never happened."

"OK," relented Harry, "bye then," he murmured half-heartedly, before activating the Portkey, and materialising at the top of the Astronomy Tower. He had five minutes before History of Magic, and immediately set off for the library to rescue Ron.

Harry, Ron and Hermione were in the Charms classroom. It was late, and curfew would be approaching in half an hour. "Hermione, can you cast a silencing charm, please?"

"Sure," she agreed, hopping to her feet, and walking about the room as she set the perimeter.

"Oooh," commented Ron, "we jump to your every whim, oh great exalted one. Why didn't you do it yourself?"

Hermione had now returned to join them, the security charm in place, "because I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't," scoffed Ron, "Standard Book of Spells Volume 3. Even I know that one!"

Harry exhaled, and explained patiently, "yes, I *know* the charm, I just can't cast it, anymore."

"What are you talking about?" pressed Ron, eyeing him suspiciously.

"I'm not a wizard, anymore."

"Not a wizard?! Of course you're a bloody wizard! Where do you think you've been going to school these past four and a half years? Who won the sodding Triwizard cup last year??" something told Harry that Ron was just the teensiest bit sceptical.

"What do you mean, 'not a wizard'?" asked Hermione, seeking clarification, with just a touch of the impatience she normally reserved for re-explaining Transfiguration homework.

"Vellum. She hit me with Subsumatum," elaborated Harry, and watched the expressions of puzzlement, realisation, shock, disbelief and outrage flicker across his friends' faces.

"But it didn't work, did it!" cried Ron, triumphantly, "'cos you conjured *Incendio* in...Hey, do you think that's why Snape was so insistent that *you* conjure it and not Pansy? 'cos he thought that your powers had been drained?"

"Yes, it did work," confirmed Harry, "and yes, Snape did know. As did Pansy, and, " he paused, briefly to glance at Hermione, "as did Malfoy."

"But you can still cast spells," persisted Hermione, "so it can't have worked." Sensing that her explanation hadn't swayed Harry at all, she added, "well how else could you have lit the cauldron?"

By way of answer, Harry wordlessly summoned a ring of bright blue flames on the desktop in front of them, "like this," he said, before extinguishing the dancing fire with a close of his fist.

Hermione looked at Harry suspiciously, "what *was* that?" she asked, slowly.

"*That*," explained Harry, "was physical magic." He looked each friend in the eye to make sure he had their complete attention, "I'm a Mage."

"You're a *what*?" spluttered Ron, indignantly.

Hermione was, as usual, several steps ahead of him, however, "but how can that be so, 'cos Slytherin wiped them out when Hogwarts was founded, didn't he?"

"You were right, Hermione," confirmed Harry, "the Magi were human, just like us. It's a different kind of magical structure in the mind, or something. When Vellum drained my powers as a wizard, somehow I managed to divert some energy to the Mage-part of my brain, where it did just enough to awaken my Magi powers."

Seeing the uncomprehending looks facing him, Harry added, "well I don't understand it fully myself, but that's basically the gist of it."

"So what's the difference between a wizard and a mage then," asked Ron, an unreadable expression on his face.

"There are lots, mainly of the form 'I can't do this anymore'; I can't use most magical objects - so I can't wear the invisibility cloak anymore, and I can't prime the Marauders' Map..."

"...and you can't fly your broom!" exclaimed Hermione, having joined the dots.

"You're quite possibly the most unbelievably clever person I've ever met," said Harry, by way of reply.

"So you didn't misjudge a Wronski Feint," exclaimed Ron, in dawning realisation, "I *knew* you were lying... and your arm..."

"My arm is just fine," confirmed Harry, "and I hope that Alicia doesn't take it upon herself to harass Madam Pomfrey for her medical orders, because Pomfrey doesn't know anything about it."

"So you've told Pavarti, then," noted Hermione.

"Told her what?"

"About being a Mage,"

"Actually, no. I told Pavarti that I couldn't fly, and she helped come up with a plausible excuse - I said it was some psychosomatic thing following on from the duel with Vellum, and she bought it. You two are the only people in Hogwarts who know I'm a Mage, and I'm asking for your help in making sure it stays that way."

"Well why?" asked Ron, perplexed, "it sounds pretty cool if you ask me."

"Yeah," replied Harry, sarcastically, "especially the bit about Mages being automatically sentenced to life in Azkaban, blinded, if they're discovered. Really looking forward to that one..."

"They can't!" exclaimed Hermione, outraged. "You can't be sentenced just for being something... it's not right!"

"That's wizard justice for you," shrugged Harry, "so you see, *nobody* must know. I'm going to try and pass myself off as a wizard, using physical magic wherever I can, but some things, like Transfiguration and Charms are going to be impossible."

"Right..." said Ron, slowly, "but you can't maintain that illusion for ever, can you?"

"Just long enough to drain the soakstone," confirmed Harry, "and then I'll probably disappear, join Sirius or something... I don't know, I haven't really thought that far ahead yet."

"So this lunchtime, was that all connected to this stuff?" asked Ron.

"Yup - I met Dumbledore - he was the person who sent the owl - and from there we went to this secret chamber thingy, and there was some kind of council that never happened."

"Where did you meet Dumbledore?" asked Hermione.

"Azkaban," responded Harry, secretly enjoying the horrified looks on their faces, before launching into a brief resume of the past week.

"Whoa!" breathed Ron, in amazement, once the discussion had concluded, "so what can we do?"

"Right now, I need you to help me to get to the Key. The soakstone. Tonight," answered Harry.

"But the curfew," protested Hermione, before being cut off by Harry.

"Which is why," he said, "I brought along these," and he pulled out the Marauders' Map and the invisibility cloak from his bag. "Ron," he said, giving the parchment to his best friend, "I want you to have this, because I can't use it anymore."

"Harry! Are you sure?" exclaimed Ron, with huge gratitude.

"Yup. I can't use it, I've told you that. And the Hufflepuff dorms are just off the East Wing," he noted, pleased to see Ron's face turn bright pink once more. "Hermione, I want you to look after the cloak for me, because, again, I can't use it."

"OK, thanks Harry - and just say the word if you want it back, ever."

"Thanks you two, but right now I need to get to the soakstone..."

Since he was in the company of Ron and Hermione, their combined influence on the cloak meant that it made Harry invisible too. Ron had primed the map, and they made their way through the corridors to the soakstone's quadrangle. It was almost pitch black this deep into the castle, and the moonlight was obscured by a thick layer of cloud.

None of this mattered to Harry, however, since his sense picked up the soakstone as an incandescent source of brilliant, shimmering white. The scale of the energy in the stone's pattern was beyond anything, or anyone, he'd sensed to date. It was phenomenal.

"OK then," explained Harry, "I've never done this before, so keep an eye on me, and pull me back if anything.... weird happens."

"Harry, are you absolutely sure about this," trust Hermione to have misgivings.

"There's no other way, Hermione, at the moment I'm a really weak Mage. But also, if I can drain the Key, then Voldemort can't!"

"Well I don't like it," snapped Hermione, "you could get hurt or something. You know what Lucas said."

"And what I'm saying is that I don't have a choice. Just look out for me, OK?"

Harry got out from under the cloak, and sat, cross-legged, on the grass in front of the stone. He reached out with his sense...

...and was lost in a blaze of brilliant white, seemingly without end, without width, without depth. It was *everything*. This was pure energy, absolute power. Colossal. Vast.

His.

As in the cell with Lucas, Harry allowed his mind to soak the energy, tendrils of white streaming from his fingertips. When he'd soaked up Lucas' energy, it had been like a tidal wave of power, warming his soul.

This wasn't a tidal wave. This was an ocean, dropping on him from great height, and his entire body was aflame with energy. It was painful, but not excruciatingly so... to start with, but as he went deeper, the pain built up, and the burning sensation was becoming more inten...

"Harry!" he was knocked to the ground, momentarily stunned, before he looked up to see Ron, his hands pressing Harry's shoulders into the ground, terror on his face, "are you OK?"

"Yeah, I'm fine... that was a bit intense... what made you stop me?"

"Harry, you were burning up!" exclaimed Ron.

"You were glowing, Harry," continued Hermione. It was like this white fire was burning from your skin. Everywhere. And it was getting brighter and brighter. Didn't you feel it?"

"Well, a bit, I suppose," confessed Harry, but he was trying to downplay the fear he'd felt, because, now that he'd taste what the Key could give him, he wanted more. Lots more.

"Well OK," said Ron, uncomfortably, "look, I think we'd better go. 'cos you said it was tiring, and we've still got to get back to the dorm and everything."

It was true, he *was* tired. Actually, the more he thought about it, the more weary he became. "Look, just one more transfer, OK?"

"Harry, Ron's right, I really don't think you should overdo..."

But Harry didn't hear the rest of Hermione's misgivings, as he'd taken a deep breath and leapt into the Key's energy once more. He was aiming for just a fraction past the previous attempt's pain threshold, and could feel his muscles tensing, his whole body shaking as he assimilated the Key's power into his mind.

This time, however, and for the first time in any transfer, he willingly disengaged from the connection. He snapped his head back, and then turned to look at Ron, who's misgivings were evident, even in the darkness, "OK, I think that's enough for tonight... let's get back."

Ron hadn't moved, "Harry, that was... scary. You took more in that time, didn't you?"

"Yeah - how did you know?"

"You were glowing white. Your whole body," explained Hermione, once more, "and you were shaking... we were about to pull you out."

Harry shook his head, "No, I was alright that time, I think I've got it now." The fatigue was building up on him now, and every muscle burned with complaint. In his sense, the previously dull pattern that had represented himself now glowed more brightly, and was a different colour, a dull gold, with flecks of orange and clouds of burning white.

And as Harry swept his sense beyond the quadrangle, through the castle, and out towards Hogsmeade, he knew for certain that he'd be back, and would continue to drain the Key until it crumbled to dust.

Chapter 21

Name three types of were-creature.

Salazar Slytherin obviously had a wonderful sense of irony. Why else would he have chosen to locate the dormitories for his own house in the dungeons?

Draco Malfoy did not particularly appreciate the humour. Of course, you wouldn't know that they were in a dungeon - the common room with its overstuffed leather armchairs, panelled walls and grand fireplace. The windows all being located near the ceiling, casting light from 12 feet up, were a subtle pointer, but you soon got acclimatised.

It wasn't damp, it wasn't cold, and there wasn't a pair of rusty manacles in sight.

But it was still underground, with one entrance, and ever since the summer, the walls had been closing in.

Control. The single, over-riding quality expected of all Malfoys. Not, as people thought, ambition, although that was strong too, but control. Control of emotion. Control of power. Control of mind.

Malfoys were not rash. They were not impulsive. They carefully considered the options, weighed the risks, thought through the consequences, and then played the move that absolutely, totally and utterly gave them the best payoff.

And ever since the summer, Draco Malfoy had been considering his position, and becoming decidedly more uncomfortable each day.

Not many people knew that he'd come face to face with the Dark Lord in his first year at Hogwarts. And, frankly, he'd been terrified. But, he reminded himself, at least he'd had the presence of mind to run. Potter, who'd been with him that night in the Forbidden Forest, had either been completely paralysed by fear, or just simply too wound up in his own legend to appreciate the danger he was in.

Potter had been lucky that time. Potter had been astoundingly lucky to date, but, contrary to public opinion, Draco didn't envy Potter his luck. Luck always ran out, but the Gryffindor was too wrapped up in his own legend to realise.

Mother, on the other hand, had been left in no illusion that her luck on marrying into the Malfoys had been *very* short lived.

Lucius, his father, the Death Eater. Potter had been right about that - luck, again, had allowed him to escape the Dark Lord's clutches that day in June, but you can't be lucky forever.

Lucius. Slave to ambition. Slave to power. He'd sacrificed the Malfoy control in an attempt to wield power and influence in the Dark Lord's circle. Draco had seen this happen, had seen the change in the man that had been his father, from the cold, calculating and ruthless wizard into a pathetic lap dog for his master.

Draco, watching dispassionately from afar, had initially pitied his father's fall, but now he felt it was somewhat deserving. Chasing the Dark Lord's favour was clearly a blind alley - the Dark Lord was set on becoming immortal, so options on power sharing would be thin on the ground. What kind of position was that for a Malfoy?

On the other hand, throwing one's weight into the opposition against the Dark Lord was both foolish and naive. Trusting one's life to the Muggle loving fool, and their Gryffindor boy wonder; they could never win. They didn't understand the ruthlessness, the callous nature, and the sheer disregard for life the Dark Lord had.

But, in time, they would.

For Draco was under no illusion. The Dark Lord had risen that June, and the time was near when the Muggle lovers and Mudbloods would be cast out of the world they'd infiltrated, and wizarding would once more become the realm of those to whom it had been intended.

Granger. It was pretty obvious to Draco, now, that Granger was, well, an exception to the general rule. It wouldn't surprise him if it turned out that quite recent ancestors had been pureblood. Perhaps her grandparents, maybe.

Indeed, he'd come to realise that there was no way a witch of her talents appeared out of nowhere. She had blood in her history, old, pure blood; it was just a matter of time before locating it.

Of course, although he was prepared to acknowledge that he'd managed to overlook the inevitability of this over the last four years at Hogwarts, it would be a waste of breath trying to convince others that he was right. Hence the need for discretion.

Which, for her part, she seemed to understand. Probably afraid of what Weasley might say. Potter, too, but it was Weasley he was prone to the tantrums - but who wouldn't be, forced to spend their entire life in the shadow of their best friend, a best friend who seemed to go out of the way to demonstrate how brilliant he was.

Potter's extrovert nature would prove his undoing. Of that Draco was sure. It wasn't as if he left his opponents in any doubt as to his capabilities. Oh look, a Dementor; excuse me whilst I faint. But don't try to outfly me on a broomstick.

Nobody knew the full extent of Draco's own abilities. Keep something in reserve, for when you really need to pull the rabbit out of the hat (and what an ironic metaphor). Even in Quidditch, Malfoy refused to abandon himself completely the way Potter did. Control. Never let your guard down. Your enemies are everywhere.

And they're watching you to find your weaknesses.

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose. It was late evening, and most students had now wandered off to their dorms. The fire was dying down, and he too would soon retreat to the fifth year dorms.

Pansy was seated near the staircase. She was watching him, he knew, and, no doubt, biding her time. Draco might be ambitious, might be a little unpleasant, from time to time, and, occasionally, a little vindictive.

Pansy, on the other hand. Well, she was evil.

But stupid.

Potions, this morning, for example - he'd seen her shock that Potter had survived Vellum's curse. Merlin knew how, Potter's luck again. It would run out, though. Talk about openly declaring your allegiance - Potter knew now to watch his back whilst she was around. So that was one advantage lost.

Actually, Potions was alright this year - despite the obvious reservations about Snape. Granger was a good partner - asked the right questions, got things done. A bit argumentative, from time to time, but anything was better than Goyle and Crabbe, those two lumps of gristle who were barely able to walk without instructions; left, right, left, right.

But Pansy. Trouble. And the whole of Slytherin house knew it. Malfoy wasn't too concerned at the erosion of his own power base - it had been embarrassing having to stare her down at Fudge's meal (Granger had really shocked him, there; completely out of character, impressive, in a way, and you had to admire her nerve), but he'd won.

The other three houses had done their solidarity bit - what choice did Slytherin have but to follow suit? Draco had considered the options, evaluated the outcomes, and decided that throwing the weight of Slytherin behind the other three houses gained more than remaining to eat in a hall three quarters empty.

Besides, Fudge had gone completely over the top on the whole thing. But he would, deluded fool that he was. Ironically, it meant that he was fairly safe in his post as Minister for Magic - no sane servant of the Dark Lord would attempt to remove an official so spectacularly oblivious to the danger around him. One of the summer's highlights had been reading the various refutations of Potter's story, eventually twisting it around beyond all belief.

Draco smiled. Maybe Potter's luck had run out, now; most of the wizarding public had read between the lines in the Prophet, and come to the conclusion that Potter had indeed killed Cedric in a fit of jealousy over that Chang girl.

And the best bit was that Potter had ruined his credibility for the sake of a Chinese witch, who shouldn't even be at Hogwarts in the first place. The Boy-Who-Lived brought low by a worthless immigrant. You had to appreciate the irony.

No doubting the low point of the summer, though.

Lucius, hell bent (a rather apt phrase) on impressing the Dark Lord, had spent his days burrowing through tome after tome of curses, hexes, spells, incantations. Dark magic. As black as it gets.

And he'd found it. The Subsumption Curse. *Subsumatum*.

But Lucius wasn't a fool. He needed to make sure that it worked before he presented his prize to the Dark Lord. Couldn't afford to present a broken gift. So he'd needed a test subject.

He'd needed someone to drain of magical power, but still remain alive so that he could verify the results. And the Dark Lord had strictly forbidden the Death Eaters to get carried away across the summer; needed to keep the populace in doubt, discredit Potter's outlandish tales of resurrection. So Lucius had needed someone who wouldn't be missed.

The Dark Lord had chosen the right course of action.

And Lucius had chosen his wife.

Well Mother, you said for better or worse; did you have any idea at the time what 'worse' meant?

And so Draco watched from the sidelines, as the powers positioned their pieces. The Dark Lord was building power, slowly, ready to strike. The days of legend, nightmare strikes of random terror, they were coming back. And no-one was ready to counter them.

The self-styled forces of good, the agents of erosion of all that was precious to wizard culture, they didn't stand a chance. Too timid. Too weak to grasp the full nature of their power. Too trusting, a fault that ran right to Dumbledore, who gave everyone and everything a second chance.

Draco knew that, this year, sometime, he'd receive the summons to the Dark Lord's service. But he wasn't yet sure what he was going to do. He was a Malfoy. They considered their options. They looked at the problem from all angles. They weighed the relative merits of all possible outcomes.

But even the densest fool could see that nobody, and nothing, was worth dying for.

Worth dying for. Potter genuinely seemed to believe that rubbish. An effect looking for a noble cause. That was Gryffindors for you.

Give a Gryffindor a box to open, and they'd most likely ask 'how will this help you?'. A Slytherin, of course, would ask 'what's in it for me?'. Hufflepuffs would probably want to know who the box was for. The Ravenclaws, they'd get someone else to open the box for them - not ones for taking risks, the Ravenclaws. But their thirst for knowledge would mean that they'd still want to know what was inside.

It occurred to Draco that Granger could have ended up in any of the four houses. She had the brains for Ravenclaw, no question. She was loyal to Potter and, ridiculously, Weasley (Potter he could understand, but what did she see in the red-headed clumbersome pauper?), and, of course, anything that called itself a member of staff, but, really, her talent would have been wasted on the Hufflepuffs.

There was Gryffindor courage, even he had to admit that, with that whole business in their first year with the Philosopher's Stone. She'd even had the nerve to slap him, of all people, over that bloody Hippogriff. Girls - could get a bit irrational at times.

But, Draco thought, Granger would have made a good Slytherin. Ambition. No question that Granger was trying to prove that she was the sharpest witch in the year. Possibly in the school. Whether she was or not was another matter. Bit naive of her to play her hand so obviously, so maybe that was Gryffindor coming through again. Brave as you like, but hopeless at recognising danger.

Granger as a Slytherin would have been an attractive proposition. Of course, school robes weren't the most flattering of cuts, but she'd definitely improved over the summer, with curves in all the right places now. And the bushy hair was gone, to be left with tight curls - she liked to chew the end of a particular strand as she pondered Arithmancy, he recalled.

Yes, he thought, Granger was alright. Not like the rest of them.

Chapter 22

What was the duration of the shortest ever Quidditch World Cup final?

Tuesday morning, and Harry woke, muscles stiff from the previous night's trip to the Key. This time he'd gone on his own, leaving Ron and Hermione in the midst of another of their legendary quarrels.

With each trip his sense was becoming sharper, and more detailed. It was still all patterns and boundaries, but he could start to distinguish sub-patterns. For example, he could now detect which rooms had been locked and which hadn't, just by sense.

Locked rooms. Now *there* was an unexpected hurdle. Ever since Hermione had unlocked Fluffy's door with *Alohamora* in the First Year, a locked room had never posed a problem. Now, however, reduced to relying on his powers as a Mage, a door with a locking charm might just as well be a wall of granite.

And so it went, discovering that those things he'd taken for granted - shaving with his wand, for example, were lost to him forever. Ron was helping him out with the stubble problem (Parvati had complained that she didn't like kissing sandpaper), although it was probably only a matter of time before Seamus or Dean walked in on their morning shaving and jumped to immediately the wrong conclusion.

Harry was finding himself astoundingly grateful that they had a squib as a caretaker. Alright, Filch might not be the most pleasant, well, thing, on the planet, but at least he was a squib. Which meant that all the everyday doors, corridors, passwords and so forth had to be squib aware.

He'd taken three drinks from the Key on Monday night. He thought the term 'drinking' was the most appropriate - the energy in the stone seemed almost liquid in nature. Three drinks, each more powerful than the last, and he'd barely dimmed the Key's glow in his sense. But his own powers were increasing rapidly.

When Lucas had been explaining a Mage's powers to him, Harry had been most excited by the glamour of casting lightning bolts and fireballs. *That* was the sort of weaponry he wanted at his disposal when he faced down Voldemort.

But instead, he'd found that the most useful power was the sense. He was starting to keep the sense operative all day now, a small radius that allowed him to keep track of who was around him at any time. He'd already mapped the patterns of his friends, and extended that to include most of the staff, and virtually all his year (he still needed to finish the Hufflepuffs).

The castle was simply too busy with life during the day for sense to work at too great a radius, but, at night, lying in Gryffindor tower, he could sweep the grounds, and see who was with whom, and where.

It really wasn't spying. He was training. Really.

The fifth years seemed more of a unit this year - probably because, Harry supposed, the two couples (he and Parvati, Seamus and Lavender) were forming a glue between the previous years' three groupings. It was ironic, he thought, that he was just starting to get to know his classmates better (and, in a certain case, much, *much* better, he reminded himself), just at the point when his only real connection to them had been severed.

Still, no point on dwelling on things.

"Oy Harry," exclaimed Dean, "there's Hedwig. What's she got this time?"

Hedwig had, once again, arrived with the morning's postal owls, and was flying towards the fifth-years with a conical package. At least this time she wasn't landing next to the Twins, thought Harry, gratefully. He *knew* he'd said that they could borrow her, but he hadn't meant they should feel free to monopolise the bird.

Not, he reminded himself, that he'd sent many owls. Best write to Hagrid soon, check how things are.

Hedwig released her package, but on top of Hermione's Arithmancy. All eyes turned to the former Prefect, "Oh Harry, what's this?"

"Don't look at me," replied Harry, "I've said the Twins can borrow her when they need to..."

Hermione had unwrapped the package now, and had turned virtually crimson by the time the others could see the contents, "It's from the Weasleys!" she exclaimed, then, realising that the statement covered a rather broad section of the wizarding community, she clarified with "Molly and Arthur."

"Oh they're beautiful, Hermione!" exclaimed Lavender, taking the bouquet from her. "Are these for Saturday?"

"Mmm, yes," she replied, absently, as she scanned the accompanying letter. "Oh Ron! Your parents are so sweet!" she exclaimed, before pecking him on the cheek.

The rest of the fifth years exchanged 'looks', as Ron blushed the same colour as his hair, but Hermione seemed oblivious, as she got up to join the three Twins at the other end of the Hall.

Only at Hogwarts could you have a group of three called the Twins, reflected Harry with a smile.

Transfiguration. Harry was *not* looking forward to this. As a basic plan, he, Hermione and Ron had agreed to sit together, Harry in the middle, so that they could take turns discreetly transfiguring his subject for him.

Unfortunately, Parvati had been a bit miffed that he didn't want to sit with her, so she'd gone to join Seamus and Lavender. He would love to be able to explain the situation to his girlfriend, but he couldn't bring himself to.

And what was slightly worse, he realised, was that the longer he put off explaining the problem, the more affronted she was going to be that he hadn't trusted her from the outset. He wasn't looking forward to that day.

Professor McGonagall had finally moved on from willow pattern rabbits, and today they were supposed to be transfiguring partners' hair colour. Dean had Seamus had both objected to the prospect 'on principle', but had been cut short by their Head of House in no uncertain manner.

"We're doing this because it's one of the first principles of the Animagus transformation," explained Hermione in a hushed whisper.

"Oh, right," acknowledged Harry, heart sinking. His dad had been an animage, taking the form of a stag. Sirius could transform into a huge dog. Somewhere in his mind, Harry had envisioned becoming an animage too. He didn't know what form, partly, because he'd assumed, like wands, that the form chose the wizard, and not vice versa.

Ron, however, was not convinced, "have you forgotten, Hermione, that the whole *point* of being an animagus is that you transform *yourself* and not your mate?"

Ron suddenly found himself the recipient of the patented Hermione-death-stare, and shut up. "For your information, Ronald Weasley..."

Harry cringed; when Hermione was really riled with Ron, she called him by his full name. It was almost *never* a good sign, and he began to wonder about the wisdom of volunteering to be the buffer zone between the two.

Lavender and Parvati were in their element, repeatedly transfiguring each others' hair into newer, and more lurid shades. Seamus and Dean had also chosen to use the two girls as their test subjects, to ensure that their own hair remained the vibrant pink to which they'd become so attached.

Harry and Hermione had synchronised wands when transfiguring Ron's hair, Hermione keeping her hands below the desk. He wondered whether McGonagall had really been fooled, but then he reminded himself that wizards probably didn't know what a blue-rinse looked like.

"Right, excellent work, all of you. Neville, you may wish to practice a little further before the next lesson, where you will be attempting to transform your own hair," Neville squirmed in embarrassment - he'd only managed to turn half of Ernie's hair orange, and then, when he'd tried to finish the other half, Ernie's whole head had been engulfed in flame.

Ernie, being Ernie, had taken it all in good spirit, but Neville had been mortified, and hadn't dare raise his wand for the rest of the lesson.

"Now, the reason *why* we cover this is because changing hair colour is the most rudimentary aspect of the animagus transformation..."

"See?" hissed Hermione at Ron. Unfortunately, Ron seemed to have gone temporarily deaf, and missed this. At least, that's what it looked like.

"Hair, you see, is already dead. Transfiguring living cells is, of course, much more involved, much more dangerous and..." Professor McGonagall surveyed the room with her tight-lipped expression, "... more painful."

Harry tuned out of the rest of the lecture. He wasn't going to be an animagus. It would have been another thing he could have had in common with his dad, but not any more. An unknowing wizard amongst Muggles had now become a hidden Mage amongst wizards.

Somewhere, surely, there would be people who would recognise him as one of their own, wouldn't there?

Tuesday.

One week on.

Defence Against the Dark Arts.

Harry had chosen to sit in the corner of the classroom - Parvati was next, then Hermione, then Ron. The whole class, Ravenclaws and Gryffindors, had organised themselves into a kind of defensive wall between Harry and the front of the room, as though by some unspoken agreement.

Vellum walked in, the expressionless face a mask, "Good morning," she announced, into the silence.

No-one replied.

Vellum merely raised her eyebrows slightly, and then commenced with the lesson, "Well, this morning we will be considering applications of summoning as they relate to... yes? Miss Granger?"

"Aren't you going to apologise?"

"I beg your pardon?" Vellum was not amused by the impertinence of the question.

"Are you going to apologise? To Harry," persisted Hermione, her tone icy, "for *hospitalising him* last week?"

"My dear girl," responded Vellum, with a pitying tone that set everyone's teeth on edge, "as I'm sure the Minister made very clear at the weekend, I have nothing to apologise for. Indeed, I might add, I still await a formal apology from Mr Dumbledore for his treatment of *me*."

Harry leaned over to Parvati, whispering, "pinch me when we return to Earth, OK?"

Vellum had now returned to the lecture, seemingly oblivious to the glares she was receiving from the rest of the class. None of the students said a word all lesson, and Harry was doing his best not to think of doing as his godfather had suggested, leaving her to Sirius, Lupin and the full moon.

Was Snape bitter, twisted and spiteful because his classroom was in the dungeons, wondered Harry, or were the dungeons depressing because that's where Snape lived?

"Well, well, well, *Champion* Potter, and what manner of misfortune befell you this time, might I ask?"

Harry's arm was still in the fake sling as all eyes in the class turned awaiting his response, "I, er, had an accident, flying..." explained Harry, in no doubt what the Potion Master's response would be.

"20 points from Gryffindor!" announced Snape, triumphantly, "clearly, since others appear unwilling to do so, it falls to me to drum some sense of responsibility into that thick skull of yours, Potter! Your first duty at this school is to keep yourself fit and healthy so that you may benefit from my instruction.

"It will of course be obvious that attempting ridiculous antics on that overpowered broom of yours amounts to recklessness in the extreme, and it is a constant source of wonder to me that your irresponsibility has not, to date, had the misfortune to injure anyone else."

"But that's not fair..." protested Harry, before he was cut off.

"Oh, *Champion* Potter," assured Snape in his silky smooth tone, "I assure you it is fair. I know it seems hard, but you will, eventually, learn that the world does not revolve around you. Potions is a demanding subject, and requires the full attention of disciplined mind *and* body..."

One of these days, Snape was going to surprise him, thought Harry. But probably not any time soon. He recalled Malfoy wandering around for three months in the third year after Buckybeak had allegedly 'savaged' the Slytherin. Snape certainly hadn't been keen on taking away House Points then, he thought, bitterly.

He chanced a glance at the Potions Master, who was still glaring. Probably best not to mention it, though, he reflected.

Pansy was once more ignoring him. This brightened Harry's day tremendously.

"Hey Harry, what did you do to your *arm*?" Cho's voice, softened in the library, was welcomingly concerned.

Harry looked up from his History of Magic project, Slytherin's campaign against the Magi, "Hi Cho, I, erm, well, I kind of misjudged a feint on my broom, and went sprawling..." he made a barrelling motion with his good arm for effect, "and tore some ligaments.

"So," he continued, with a shrug, "I've got to keep the arm in a sling for the next fortnight or so, and I can't fly for another six."

Cho settled into the seat on the opposite side of his table, and fixed his eyes. She had nice, warm eyes, thought Harry.

"What did you *really* do?" she asked, levelly.

Harry paused, before remembering that he really had to stick to his story, "I fell off my broom..."

"Harry..." the disbelief was palpable.

"Really... don't look at me like that... really..."

"No you didn't. Harry, I've flown against you. I've got a Firebolt too, now. No *way* did you crash. So what did you do?"

OK, so he thought Ron would have been hard to persuade. He'd forgotten that Cho would be equally difficult to convince. It was kind of nice that she was concerned, though.

This was Cho. Lying to Cho was particularly difficult, since if she discovered he'd been economical with the truth here, she might begin to doubt his account of the Third Task. And they had a connection, now, that he didn't want to jeopardise. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Is it good?" she asked, with a mischievous smile.

"Not really," replied Harry, glumly, "if I tell you this, it cannot go any further, OK?"

The smile vanished, to be replaced by concern, "Well, if you don't want to tell me, perhaps you shouldn't..." it wasn't a hurt comment, Cho was genuinely trying to respect Harry's request.

"That's just it, Cho, I'd really like to tell you, because, well, I think you'd kind of understand," Seeker to Seeker, she'd surely know what the loss meant. "Can you promise not to tell anyone? Please?"

"Of course I won't tell, Harry. But if it's that secret, maybe you shouldn't tell me..."

"I can't fly," he whispered, "anymore."

Cho smiled the half-smile of someone who hasn't quite grasped the punchline, and then, seeing that Harry wasn't elaborating any further, the expression turned to one of doubt.

"My arm's fine, I just needed... a, plausible excuse for not playing for the time being."

"But you'll be back soon, won't you?" asked Cho, reaching out a hand to squeeze his quill hand (the left was, of course, in the sling). He'd been right, she could see the loss.

Not daring to speak, Harry shook his head slowly. He was not going to cry in front of Cho over something like this. She'd lost Cedric, he reminded himself, and all he'd lost was flying in a game.

A game. Just a game. Except that it wasn't; flying had been an extension of his wizard self - he didn't think about how to fly, it was just something he *did*, instinctively. Carefree. And, he knew, he'd been good. There were moments when he'd pulled off stupendous feats of aerobatics in pursuit of the snitch.

And now he was landlocked. A spectator once more.

"Harry," exclaimed Cho, still soft, "if I can ever help... you know that, don't you?" She suddenly withdrew her hand sharply from his.

"Parvati," Harry sensed her arrival, Lavender too.

"How did you know? Your back's to the door!"

"One day, OK?" promised Harry, as Cho stood up to leave.

"Hi Parvati, I was just commiserating with Harry about his arm," she explained, with a rueful smile, "still, at least he should be better in time for Hufflepuff."

"Hmm," said Parvati, a little too coldly for Harry's liking. What was *her* problem? Cho was only being friendly.

"Well, see you later," and with that the Ravenclaw Seeker left the library, and Parvati settled into her place.

"What was *she* doing here?" she asked.

"She saw the sling, and asked how it happened," said Harry with a shrug and, he hoped, a completely guilt-free expression. "You know, she's a Seeker too, and she's had her own injuries...."

"Well, far be it for me to intrude on my boyfriend's conversation with his soulmate," she snarled.

"She was only being friendly...."

"Oh yes, and what did she mean, 'see you later'?"

"It's just an expression, Parvati, really. *Really*. Y'know, instead of 'bye', or 'adieu', or 'until we meet again'."

Parvati shook her head, as though to rid herself of the previous argument, and changed subject, "Harry, you and I need to distract Hermione all day Saturday."

"Really? Says who?"

"The Twins. We've got to keep her here until 6 on Saturday, because they're organising a party for her. But it's a surprise, of course. So will you help?"

"Of course I will. Erm, the Twins are organising it? It's going to be a *nice* surprise, right?" Harry thought it prudent to make absolutely certain

Chapter 23

Who is the longest running character in the WWN soap 'Dragonchasers'?

"Right," commanded Professor Spout, marshalling the Herbology class, "if you could all collect a vial, and join me in Greenhouse 3. Don't forget your dragonhide gloves..."

Harry groaned. This could mean only one thing...

"I love the smell of Bubotuber pus in the morning!" exclaimed Dean, as they crossed the threshold into the Greenhouse.

"Yeah," agreed Justin, getting into character, "smells like...."

"Victory!" chorused Dean, Seamus and Justin. Harry had to admit, it *was* funny seeing the completely baffled faces of the purebloods when the Muggleborns started speaking Dean.

Neville's scandalised expression was cut short by Professor Sprout, "Neville, you did lock up everything last night, didn't you?"

"Um, yes, Professor," confirmed Neville, "I was working in Greenhouse 4 on the Grelfig saplings. Everything was fine when I left..."

Professor Sprout seemed distracted, "and there was no-one else about at the same time?"

Neville looked questioningly at Harry and Parvati, who both shook their heads - they hadn't managed to squeeze in fencing practice the previous night. "Nope, no-one. Why?"

Harry watched the collection of the Bubotuber pus with immense distaste, noting a fairly animated conversation between the Herbology professor and Neville going on in the background.

Neville was a completely different person in Herbology. If any of the other teachers had challenged Neville the way Sprout had, he would have dissolved into a gibbering heap. But Sprout had asked him the question almost as an equal, it seemed, and Neville had responded likewise.

All the same, it seemed a bit weird that Sprout was so obsessed about whether or not the Greenhouse had been locked.

The remainder of the week passed without much incident. In Charms Harry discovered he could use his Mage force to make his box supposedly open and close on demand. He made sure that it didn't work quite as it should, so as to keep Flitwick's expectations appropriately low.

Defence Against the Dark Arts was about as enjoyable as having teeth pulled, although without the warm fluffy feeling. None of the students said a word, and Vellum didn't seem inclined to prompt conversation. Harry did notice that she had started rubbing her arm

towards the end of the session. He was willing to bet his Firebolt that a Dark Mark lay underneath the teaching gown.

Fudge taking over the school was not an entirely bad thing - Filch had been sent back to his caretaking duties, and Professor Grubbly-Plank was back for Care of Magical Creatures.

She was evidently alarmed by the eggs Hagrid had procured for the fifth years - they were starting to rattle now, and it seemed likely that the creatures, whatever they might be, would be hatching very, very soon. No-one found the prospect welcoming.

Saturday arrived, and Fred had instructed Harry and Ron to keep Hermione occupied, and inside, all day. George and Lee had already disappeared, and when he stopped to think about it, Harry realised he hadn't seen Angelina, Katie or Alicia about either.

So it was that Parvati, Harry, Ron and Hermione were all in the library in the early evening, piles of books spread across the table they'd commandeered for the day.

Hermione suddenly sniffed, "hey, can you smell... someone's made a *bonfire!*"

"Hmmm?" asked Harry, before he too recognised the unmistakable tang of woodsmoke. "Yeah, you're right. Wow that's weird..."

"Why would anyone have a bonfire at Hogwarts?" asked Hermione, "Magical fires are so much safer, and more convenient..." her eyes went dreamy, "but do you remember going to Bonfire Nights, Harry?"

"Actually, no," admitted Harry, "the Dursleys used to go to these big ticketed displays, but they used to leave me either in my room, well, cupboard, actually, or they left me with Mrs Figg." Oh happy days, he thought, sourly.

"What's Bonfire Night?" asked Ron.

"Muggle thing," explained Harry, "guy named Guy Fawkes tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament, but he was caught. So every year on 5 November, the Muggles build bonfires and let off fireworks. Muggle fireworks."

"But woodsmoke is just so.. evocative of childhood," continued Hermione, who had now sat back in her chair, mind distracted from the book she'd been immersed in.

By now Parvati had stood up, and had picked up her Gryffindor scarf, standing behind Hermione. She raised her eyebrows questioningly at Ron.

"Now!" confirmed Ron, standing up as Parvati slipped the scarf over Hermione's eyes, tying it into a crude blindfold.

"Hey!" protested Hermione, trying to untie the scarf as she was brought to her feet.

"Nuh-uh," said Harry, pinning her arms to her side.

"You know," lied Ron gleefully, "we're really, *really* sorry about this." He was clearly finding it hard not to laugh.

Hermione couldn't see the funny side of the situation, however. Probably because she couldn't see at all. "Ronald Weasley," she commanded, "take this scarf off my eyes *now!*", stamping her foot for good measure.

"All in good time, Hermione," assured Parvati, trying not to giggle.

"Where are you taking me?"

"You'll see," advised Harry, as they frogmarched Hermione out of the library, and towards the main entrance. Hermione eventually stopped struggling, after all, it was three versus one.

She didn't stop threatening, however, "when this scarf comes off, you three, you'd better run before I hex you to pieces..."

"Good point," realised Harry, and he fished her wand out of her pocket. Just for safekeeping. He remembered Neville's attempt to prevent the three of them going to face Fluffy in their first year - Hermione could be a bit scary when pushed.

At the entrance hall, they wordlessly met up with Fred and George, who opened the doors for them as they marched Hermione down the steps and towards the lake.

"What are we doing outside? And where's my wand? Take this blindfold off me *now!*" Hermione's voice was getting shriller and shriller, which had the unfortunate effect of making her captors giggle more insistently. Yes, it was fairly safe to say that Hermione Granger was *not* amused.

Finally they stopped at their destination.

"OK, Hermione," said George, soothingly, "just stay still..."

"Where did you come from?" asked Hermione, suspiciously, but by now she was disorientated enough to comply, as Fred and George untied the scarf and removed it from her eyes.

"Hermione..." said Fred.

"Welcome," continued George.

"...to your party," finished Fred.

The whole of Gryffindor gave a huge cheer to punctuate the sentence. Hermione was lost for words.

They were standing by the edge of the lake, illuminated by six huge, and very real, bonfires. Lee Jordan had connected a WWN receiver to some speakers, and there were four tables groaning under the weight of food and drink.

A pink bubble extended around the bonfires, and partly into the lake, "protection charm," explained Fred, seeing Hermione's puzzled expression, "Flitwick did it for us, to keep the... well, to erm..."

Harry decided he probably didn't want to know what the charm was protecting them from. Dumbledore had said the lake was out of bounds at the welcoming feast.

Hermione was still rooted to the spot where her blindfold had been removed, her eyes sparkling.

"Wand," explained Harry, returning it to Hermione, who absently returned it to her coat pocket, seemingly in another world.

"And now," George had extended his hand to Hermione, "may I ask the good lady for a dance?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Hermione, allowing herself to be led into the middle of the Protection bubble's area, where there was a clear space dedicated for exactly this purpose.

As parties went, this had to top all of Harry's previous experiences at Hogwarts, and for that evening, he completely forgot all about Voldemort, being a Mage and everything else. He was surrounded by his friends, his house-mates, and, to all intents and purposes, his family, as he watched Hermione being hugged, kissed and invited to dance by just about everybody.

Hermione was absolutely stunned by such a huge display of friendship and love, and, having got over the initial shock, and the inevitable floods of tears (girls, Harry thought, were very definitely weird when it came to the crying thing; she was *supposed* to be happy!), she was bouncing around as though she was on Cloud Nine.

They presented her with the latest edition of *Hogwarts: A History*, signed by all of Gryffindor (including Professor McGonagall), because, as George had put it, 'someone said you liked books.'

The real fires were still burning healthily. The Twins had explained that they'd got permission from Filch to get firewood from the Forbidden Forest. When asked *why* they'd bothered, they'd said that it was to prove to Hermione that she was special enough to warrant the work.

"You didn't have to do that..." she'd protested.

"Which is *exactly* why we did," explained Lee.

"And remember," added Fred, "no house-elves were harmed in the construction of this party." He beamed cheerfully at her, and it was a sign of the blissful state that Hermione was in that she didn't rise to the bait.

Real fires had a mesmerising quality that magical flames didn't possess. Harry had never noticed it before, but as the flames licked the crumbling wood within, he found it very hard to draw his eyes away. He, Parvati, Seamus, Lavender, Ron and Ginny were all sitting together, watching the dancing, when Dean appeared.

"Tell me, Ginny," he asked, extending his hand, "have you ever danced with the Devil in the pale moonlight?"

"No!" Ginny practically squeaked with delight as she grabbed Dean's hand and was led off to join the other dancers.

"Mmmm," murmured Lavender, dreamily, "Dean's so.... poetic, isn't he?"

"Yes," sighed Parvati in agreement.

Ron just scowled.

Seamus and Harry rolled their eyes behind their girlfriends' backs. Still, they weren't going to hold recycling film quotes against Dean; he didn't do it to be cheap, it's just what he did.

The next song started up, and Parvati pulled Harry up to dance. "You know," she whispered, as they swayed gently in time to the music, "all this activity has worn me out... would you be a gentleman and walk me to my room?"

Harry was pretty certain that the sparks in Parvati's eyes were down to more than simply the reflected firelight, as he managed to croak his reply, "of course."

Ron was still scowling when they explained that they were heading back to the Tower, "I thought they were just going to have one dance," he muttered, glaring at Dean and Ginny.

"Well," observed Harry, "he must have asked her for another dance, then."

"They make a lovely couple, don't they?" asked Parvati, stirring it a bit, and pretending not to notice Ron's murderous expression.

"Ron!" squealed Hermione, "you are dancing with me *now!*" she commanded, pulling him to his feet and leading him into the crowd. Harry was fairly certain that she hadn't led Ron to almost exactly the opposite side of the dance floor to Dean and Ginny by accident.

Harry and Parvati made their way back to Gryffindor Tower, which was completely deserted, "Back so soon dears?" asked the Fat Lady.

"C'mon," said Parvati, dragging Harry up the girls' staircase.

"Um, Parvati, this is the *girls'* dorm..."

She flashed him a wicked smile, "and we've got it all to ourselves..."

Harry allowed himself to be dragged into the girls' dorm. Well, not exactly dragged, he admitted.

Not remotely, in fact.

They collapsed onto Parvati's bed, as she drew the curtains about them.

"Right, we've got about an hour or so before the rest get back, I reckon," estimated Parvati, unbuttoning Harry's robe. "Now, can we think of *anything* that might keep us occupied until then?"

It was probably his imagination, but Harry thought he could hear his heartbeat echoing off the walls as the two of them divested themselves of their robes.

"Yes, my master, it is done..." he couldn't see the speaker's face, partly because they were prostrate on the ground, and partly because they were probably wearing their mask anyway.

"Some of the survivors, mostly students, have fled, along with Dumbledore's pet giant. I feel sure that they will not get far..."

The courtyard was illuminated by moonlight and firelight. One side had a low wall, beyond which the moon's reflection flickered in gentle ripples on the black water of the lake.

Gravel crunched underfoot, as a witch, struggling, was brought into view, screaming something in French, he thought.

"My Lord," one of the witch's captors spoke, "we may begin the transfer now, if you are ready."

"You dare to suggest I might not be fully prepared for this, Malfoy?" that familiar metallic rasp. Cold, lifeless, callous.

"No my Lord, of course not. I merely wished..."

"Your nerves betray you, my servant. You are... confident of your research, are you not?" the tone made it very clear that only one answer was permissible to this question.

"Of course, my Lord."

"Then you may proceed..."

At these words, the witch was brought to a large, black stone in the centre of the courtyard. It had to be a soakstone. A knife appeared from somewhere, and the witch's arm was sliced open, and Malfoy started murmuring an incantation as the blood poured onto the black stone.

The incantation seemingly complete, Malfoy pushed the witch, weak from blood loss, onto the stone, and then, with another command, touched his wand to the arm. The body seemed to glow, white fire licking across the skin, getting brighter and brighter.

The anguished screams of the witch went unheeded by the Death Eaters, as Malfoy instructed his Lord to ready his wand. The witch's body was now completely incandescent, and skin was peeling, falling to the floor in smouldering ribbons.

"Master," intoned Malfoy levelly, "I suspect that we may be nearing the saturation level, so you may cast when ready."

The cold voice rasped "Subsumatum," and the witch's tortured spasms increased as the power was drained. The screaming was getting louder and loud....

Harry woke up, and found himself lying on the floor between his bed and Ron's, the dying echo in the room indicating that it had not only been the witch who had been screaming. His scar was burning with an intensity he'd never experienced before his life, and his forehead was slick with sweat.

Ron's curtain's were torn apart, as Hermione's horrified face appeared....

Hermione?

"Harry!" that was Parvati's voice, her own face a picture of absolute terror...

Wait a minute, thought Harry. Hermione. Parvati. He was still in the girls' dorm. On the floor. Naked.

Bugger.

Harry looked up at three terrified faces, illuminated by the light from Hermione's wand.

"Harry!" stuttered Hermione, "Y-y-y-your scar... it's... it's *bleeding!*"

Harry wiped his brow, and looked at his palm, thick with blood that looked almost black in the halflight.

For a few seconds no-one moved, and then Hermione's expression changed from one of terrified concern to indignation, "and what the *hell* were you doing in Parvati's bed?"

"Um," was all Harry managed by way of reply, before darkness claimed him.

"Now, the girls tell me that they found you like this in the Common Room..." explained Madam Pomfrey.

Harry heaved a sigh of relief, and silently gave thanks for their quick thinking. That had been close!

The mediwizard fixed him with a steely glare, "do I look like I was born yesterday?"

Wisely deducing that the witch, who wasn't exactly in the first flushes of her youth, didn't seriously expect an answer to that question, Harry kept his mouth shut.

"Now," she continued, "I'm not going to lecture you, but..." and for the next 20 minutes, she did exactly that, as Harry, prisoner in the ward's bed, squirmed in embarrassment.

As if hearing her talk with astonishing frankness about, well, things, wasn't bad enough, she kept on peppering her lecture with heart-stoppingly direct questions of squirm inducing intimacy. And demanded answers, clearly unfamiliar with the concept of personal privacy.

Disembowelling horned toads in detention for Snape had nothing on this.

"Right then, I'm glad we've had this chat, Mr Potter. And I've spoken to the girls, too, of course...."

Harry's heart stopped. Again. "What, all of them?" he asked, somewhat dismayed by the note of despair he detected in his voice.

The mediwizard looked at him with surprise, "of course."

That was it, thought Harry, glumly. Hermione was going to kill him.

If Parvati didn't first.

And they hadn't even done anything. Well, OK, he thought, perking up a bit, they'd done quite a bit.

But not *that*, he reminded himself, hastily.

"Good morning, Mr Potter," although Professor McGonagall's tone of voice indicated she thought it was anything but, as she entered the hospital wing in full-on severe mode.

Harry groaned inwardly.

"I must say that I'm extremely disappointed in you," his head of house continued, "and would have expected that you would not have been so foolish as to, well..." she trailed off, seemingly lost for words, before returning to safer waters, "thirty points, Mr Potter."

"B..." Harry was about to protest at the injustice, when firstly, he realised that he wasn't exactly standing on firm ground, and secondly, Professor McGonagall had cut him off anyway.

"Thirty points, Mr Potter," the stern witch confirmed, before adding, "unless, of course, you would prefer to argue your case during breakfast in the Great Hall..."

Harry had a sudden vision of Malfoy transported into delirious fits of laughter as his previous night's indiscretion was broadcast for public consumption. "Thirty points," he agreed, dejectedly.

It wasn't, he reflected, that he wilfully set out to break school rules. It was just that he seemed to have the most appallingly bad luck whenever he did transgress.

Like that time in the second year, for example, when he and Ron had stolen the illegally charmed Ford Anglia to get to school, and they'd crashed it into the Whomping Willow. Could have happened to anyone. But the *one* time he and Ron had done it, they'd been caught.

That was the sort of luck he seemed to have. Clearly, Murphy had been an optimist...

Harry suddenly remembered his vision, "I have to see Professor Dumbledore!" he exclaimed, sitting bolt upright in the bed.

"I'm very sorry, Mr Potter," replied a somewhat taken aback Professor McGonagall, "but as you are very well aware, Minister Fudge... saw fit to relieve Professor Dumbledore of his post as Headmaster. I have been appointed as Acting Headmistress in his stead. Is there anything I can be of help with?"

"I have these dreams," started Harry, pointing to his scar, which still burned like acid. "Visions," he continued, perturbed by his Head of House's blank expression, "they connect me to Voldemort."

It was odd, you didn't expect someone like McGonagall to flinch.

"Beauxbatons," explained Harry, "it's been captured by Voldemort!"

Chapter 24

Which hair type is stronger - Veela or Unicorn?

Harry made his way down to breakfast directly from the Hospital Wing - the girls had evidently gathered up his clothes from Parvati's bed when they'd taken him there (the alternative would have been unthinkable - making his way back to Gryffindor Tower in just a hospital gown). Parvati, Lavender and Hermione were all deep in conversation, but he decided to brave their wrath and get it over with, "morning all."

It was probably just his imagination, but he was certain that the heating had been turned all the way up in the Great Hall that morning.

Parvati gave his hand a gentle squeeze as he settled into the chair next to her, "morning, are you OK?"

"Um, yeah. Bad dream..."

"Yes darling, we *did* notice."

OK, thought Harry, clearly no-one was pretending it hadn't happened.

"I'm really sorry about that - I don't have any control over when I connect, you see..."

Hermione looked up from her animated conversation with Lavender. "Did Madam Pomfrey talk to you?" she enquired.

"Er, about what?" asked Harry, cautiously.

"About sex, Harry," Hermione replied, crisply. Quite how she'd managed to time this clarification to coincide *exactly* with a momentary lull in all other conversations within the Great Hall was a mystery. But time it she had.

He'd never before noticed just quite how far Hermione's voice could carry.

"Um yeah," he mumbled by way of reply, involuntarily squirming at the recollection.

"She's really good, isn't she?" commented Lavender, "and Hermione's spoken to McGonagall about getting Pomfrey to speak to all the fourth years and above, by house," she added, enthusiastically.

"Wibble?" ventured Harry, weakly. Surely they weren't going to inflict a repeat performance upon him. With an audience.

"Yes, Professor McGonagall was really impressed with the idea. If it goes well, they might make it a permanent fixture in the curriculum!" Hermione sounded ecstatic.

Terrific, thought Harry, his legacy to future generations would be Madam Pomfrey terrifying them with... well it just didn't bear thinking about. He shuddered at the prospect.

At this point the Twins arrived, whooping with joy at the site of Harry, "Harry!" cried Lee, "I hear you pulled a 30 pointer!"

"Good on you, mate!" added Fred, slapping Harry's back heartily for good measure.

"What's a 30-pointer?" asked Hermione, puzzled.

"Oh," elaborated George, "30 points is the standard fine for, well, you know, being caught in, well..." the knowing look that supplemented this explanation contained all the detail anyone could possibly need to deduce exactly which transgression resulted in a fine of 30 house points. "Right Harry?"

Harry wondered just how quickly he was going to be able to extricate himself from Breakfast from Hell. Because, no doubt about it, this was turning into the genuine article. At least it couldn't get any worse.

And it really was hot in the Great Hall. He wondered if someone would think of opening a window or something.

"Hey Harry," greeted Neville, as he slid in to the vacant spot next to Hermione, "did you stay out all last night or something? 'cos the curtains on your bed were pulled back all night..."

To make the time pass more quickly, Harry decided to lightly bang his forehead on the table, repeatedly. The muffled groans were purely for artistic effect. Parvati ruffled his hair sympathetically.

Harry hadn't been surprised to receive another curt message from Dumbledore, using the same miniature black owl. This time he was to meet the former headmaster at 11. Since it was a Sunday, and there were obviously no lessons, Harry was hoping to learn a bit more, rather than being shoved out as soon as he'd said his bit.

It was the same room that they apparated into, once Dumbledore had collected Harry from the portkey point at Azkaban. Sweeping outwards with his sense, there didn't seem to be any other buildings around, and certainly no other people. The fish still floated idly across the pool in the middle, which was about 12 feet in depth, he calculated, as he plunged his sense through the water.

Which made the room very odd. There was absolutely no mundane entrance or exit. You *had* to apparate here.

Moody was already there. This didn't surprise Harry in the least - in fact, he wouldn't have been surprised if Moody had decided to live there; at least there was only a slim chance of someone breaking in.

"I see y'brought Potter back, then," the ex-Auror noted, his magic eye scanning Harry whilst his real eye looked at Dumbledore.

"Yes, Alastor," confirmed Dumbledore, although given that he was still holding Harry by the arm, such confirmation seemed redundant, "and I would not be in the least surprised to learn that Harry has some vital information for us this dark day."

"We've all heard of curse scars serving as alarm bells before, Albus," cautioned a distinctly sceptical Moody.

Fortunately, further discussion was interrupted by the arrival of Sirius and Lupin. Both were looking pretty grim.

"Morning Harry - so tell me about the arm then," Sirius hadn't had an opportunity to follow up their greeting from the first meeting Harry had attended.

"Oh, this," exclaimed Harry, waving his arm in its fake sling, "it's nothing." Then, at Sirius' disbelieving expression, "I mean, *really* nothing. It's fake." Realising that there was no point pretending to be an invalid, Harry discarded the sling.

Moody gave Harry an approving look.

"OK," said Sirius, slowly, "and the point is...?"

"Since I became a Mage, there are certain things I can't do," explained Harry, "one of which is fly a broomstick... You know I'm Seeker for Gryffindor, right?"

"And a damned good one, too," confirmed Sirius.

"Well I needed a plausible excuse to present to Alicia - she's captain - for not being able to fly at the moment. So I made up an accident, and they bought it. Well, most of them, anyway. See, only Ron and Hermione know that I'm a Mage..."

Moody snorted in disgust, "can't that boy hold his tongue?" he asked of no-one in particular.

"Hermione and Ron are like family to me!" asserted Harry, strongly, riled by Moody's implication that either of his best friends might present a security threat. Besides, it was his neck on the line.

"Yes," sighed Moody, wearily, "and look where family ties get you in this business."

Crouch. Harry clenched his jaws to prevent him getting sucked into a deeper argument, and also because the mention of Barty Crouch inevitably led to the Triwizard Cup. The Third Task. Cedric.

Cho.

Sirius spoke up, "I can vouch for Harry's friends, Alastor," he said, mildly, "they're good. But Harry," and his godfather turned to face him, "be careful..."

"I know, I know," said Harry, resignedly. He didn't mind conceding the point to Sirius, but he was damned if he was going to let Moody get one over him.

"...and as far as I can tell," Bill was explaining, "the Subsumatum curse was developed some time around the late sixteenth century, during the rise of Predergast."

"Of course!" exclaimed Lupin, his academic's curiosity piqued, "and that explains so much! The Predergasts prior to Morgana had never been a notable family. Not much power, modest ambition, and then, suddenly, Morgana rose to become one of the most feared witches of the time... And this must be how she got her power."

Kolchan Vesh, a young (by the others' standards) blonde witch was nodding her head. Harry guessed she must be in her mid-30s, and quite attractive. "So the Predergasts developed this curse as a tool to sweep to power. Then why was it forgotten?"

"Well," continued Bill, "it seems that it can be a double-edged sword, Subsumatum. The journal entries I have for Frederick Gryffsen, who was the last of the Predergast line before they were overthrown, shows him suffering from advanced schizophrenia in his later days. I'm guessing that absorbing too many personalities into the one probably created some kind of conflict within... but that's just a guess."

Moody gave an exaggerated sigh, but Harry resisted the urge to turn and glare at him. It was hardly as if Moody had contributed anything constructive to the meeting himself so far.

"So we can see why Vellum used it on Harry," noted Sirius, "since they wanted to weaken him before he faced Voldemort again..."

It was one thing to be spoken of in the third person, as though you weren't there. It was quite another to have your godfather calmly conjecturing a further showdown between yourself and Voldemort as though it was a dentist's appointment.

Sirius was still speaking, "...but Harry's vision," again there was a derisive snort from Moody, "mentioned that they wanted it for the Keys. How would that work?"

"Well," began Harry, before stopping again, self-consciously. Moody was scowling at him once more, which, ironically enough, made Harry even more resolved to explain what he'd witnessed the previous night.

"Do go on, Harry, we're here to listen to you," encouraged Dumbledore, seemingly oblivious to Moody's exaggerated slump in his chair.

"Last night, I had a vision that Beauxbatons had been taken by Voldemort..."

"And indeed it was," confirmed Dumbledore gravely, "but what can you tell us about the role of the Key in all this?"

So Harry explained about the blood sacrifice performed on the witch, and Voldemort casting the Subsumatum curse on her as her body dissolved.

"So how did yer know it was Beauxbatons?" snarled Moody.

"Deduction, mainly," admitted Harry, "the bit about 'Dumbledore's pet giant' had to mean Hagrid, and I knew he was staying at Beauxbatons. Plus the witch was screaming in a language that sounded like French..."

"Sounded like?" persisted Moody.

"I think so..." confirmed Harry, cautiously, remembering being completely baffled by Dudley's homework in this regard

"BUT YOU DON'T KNOW, DO YOU LADDIE?" Moody, for some inexplicable reason, seemed furious. He turned on Dumbledore, "What, Albus, is the point of listening to the boy's daydreams if he can't even observe properly? It could all be conjecture..."

"But for the fact, Alastor," interrupted Dumbledore, his whole demeanour exuding patience, "that everything Harry has said tallies with our own intelligence of the situation in France."

"Blood magic," said Kolchan, softly, nodding her head once more, "yes, that would make sense." She looked at Bill, "they're using captives as Strem vessels, to avoid Voldemort being harmed by the power in the Key, aren't they?"

Bill looked at Kolchan in amazement, "of course! Why didn't I think of this?"

Mundungus Fletcher, a thin, wiry wizard who constantly moved in sudden, sharp bursts, sought clarification, "Strem?"

Kolchan explained, "Josef Strem was a late nineteenth century wizard who came up with the idea of using a third person as an energy reservoir when performing complicated transference incantations. The idea," she noted sourly, "was that if anything went wrong in the process, they'd die, rather than you."

Harry wondered, optimistically, if Snape had ever considered pursuing a career as a Strem vessel. He'd be willing to write a glowing reference for the Potions Master if he ever needed one.

"So how is Beauxbatons now?" asked Harry.

"No-one knows," replied Dumbledore, "all communication has been severed, so the only word we've had was a brief message from Olympe. I would expect, if Hagrid has managed to escape, that the survivors will take one of two options - they will either attempt to seek sanctuary with the giants," at this suggestion, Mundungus flinched backwards in his chair in shock, "or they will make their way to Hogwarts."

"They'd be mad to throw their lot in with the giants," opined Mundungus, seemingly having recovered from his shock at the concept.

"I'm not sure I agree," countered Lupin, "but I would imagine that most of the survivors *would* take that view. I recommend that we advise Hogwarts to stand ready to receive whatever survivors there may be."

"So how long before this goes public?" asked Monica Tiller, a thin, frail witch who seemed almost as old as Dumbledore, but without the sparkling vitality.

Fletcher scowled, "With Fudge as minister, I doubt it will even make the Prophet. You know the routine; first off," he tapped a finger to make the point, "he'll deny it point blank. Next," the animated man tapped a second finger, "he'll write it off as a hoax, a sick joke in poor taste."

"Then," the third finger was tapped, "he'll explain that since Voldemort is busy waging war in mainland Europe we have nothing to worry about..."

The others nodded their heads silently.

"So what's his plan?" asked Sirius.

It was Bill who replied, "World domination. Fast."

Despite the gravity of the situation, everyone smiled at the quip.

Dumbledore took over once more, "Obviously, he's setting out to rebuild his power base, and impose his... extreme view of wizarding society upon the rest of us. Only the pureblood shall survive would be his motto, I suspect."

"So what's his next move?" persisted Sirius.

"I'm guessing that he's going to want to consolidate his base in Beauxbatons, assimilate as much power as he can from the Key, whilst the Death Eaters raise havoc," suggested Arabella Figg, with a weary sigh.

"He picked a good base," noted Lupin, "a nice chateau in the Loire Valley. Good wine, reasonable scenery..." then, seeing the disapproving looks from his colleagues faces, he added, "what? Just because he's evil doesn't mean he's completely without a sense for the aesthetic...."

"Whatever..." sighed Sirius, dismissively.

"It'll probably take a while before he's managed to drain the Key," noted Harry.

"And why is that?" asked Monica. Her tone was not sharp, nor lazy. She was almost devoid of any spark of life whatsoever, and Harry wondered, somewhat morbidly, how long she had left.

"The Key. Its power is vast," explained Harry, shaking his head as he tried to come up with a way to get its scale across. "I mean, I've sensed the one at Hogwarts, and I'd guess the Beauxbatons Key would be similar. Huge...."

"And he's going to need a steady supply of sacrificial victims to complete the transfer, isn't he?" observed Bill, shrewdly.

"Which means," deduced Mundungus, "that we still have time..."

Dumbledore sighed, "I'm not sure it means anything of the kind, I'm afraid, Mundungus. I expect this to be a war fought on many fronts, and even though Voldemort may be preoccupied by his obsession with personal power, his Death Eaters will be given fresh confidence by so bold a hand as played last night. We may find we have our work cut out simply trying to maintain the status quo." The venerable wizard looked impossibly tired.

The assembly paused in silent contemplation of these words, until Moody suddenly turned on Harry, "So Laddie, no-one else knows you had a vision last night, right?"

"Well... I kind of have these screaming fits when it happens," started Harry, apologetically, "so I woke up the people in the dorm..." He fervently hoped that no-one present would pick up on the careful use of the phrase 'the dorm'.

"Ah yes, that would be, let me see, Mr Weasley, Mr Longbottom, Mr Thomas and... Mr Finnegan," surmised Dumbledore, helpfully, "all most trustworthy, I can assure you Alastor."

Harry knew he looked guilty. Which was unfortunate, since he was at that moment the subject of intense scrutiny by the best Auror the Ministry had ever had. "Anyone else?" asked Moody, the barest hint of a threat evident in his tone.

"hulgalhuieisjksk," mumbled Harry, hoping that the matter would drop.

"What was that?" persisted Moody, "Who *else* knew that you had this vision?"

"Hermione, Parvati, Lavender," listed Harry, quietly, face burning.

"But what were the girls doing in your dorm?" asked Lupin, incredulously, before turning mildly pink himself with a delicate "Ah..."

"They weren't actually in the boys' dorm..." continued Harry, morosely.

Sirius was puzzled, "Then how come you woke them up.... Oh!" he exclaimed, eyes widened in realisation, before his face split into a wicked grin.

"Thirty points, Mr Potter?" asked Dumbledore mildly, amusement sparkling in his blue eyes.

"Yes, thirty points," admitted Harry, face burning, staring fixedly at the *fascinating* goldfish.

"Well, Harry!" complimented Sirius, "Unfortunate timing, though..."

Tell me about it, thought Harry, before pleading "Couldn't we just drop it?"

"Oh no you don't, boy!" snarled Moody. Harry cheerfully hated him now.

"We have to make sure," the bitter ex-Auror persisted, "that these girls are trustworthy. We have to maintain whatever advantage we might have over Voldemort, and the last thing we need is for a group of gossiping schoolgirls telling the world about your visions..."

"They're not gossiping sch..." started Harry, before he noticed Lupin looking at him with raised eyebrows. Lupin had of course taught them all in their third year. "Well, OK," he decided to defend them from a fresh stance, "they might, perhaps, be thought of as the gossiping type," Lupin's eyebrows looked as though they might be attempting to march across his scalp to the back of his neck, "but I haven't told them anything about what I saw..."

"Excellent," surmised Moody.

"...yet." finished Harry, locking stares with Moody.

"And you're not going to," confirmed Sirius, fixing Harry with an intense stare of his own. "Are you?"

Once again, Harry was willing to defer to Sirius where he wouldn't to Moody, "No, I won't," he agreed, although he didn't say that he only meant he wouldn't tell Lavender and Parvati. Lupin *was* right about those two.

It struck him that perhaps Sirius realised how much Moody was antagonising him, and was deliberately offering him face-saving climb-downs. Sirius as placating negotiator - Snape would have a heart attack.

As Harry recounted the day's events to Ron and Hermione that evening, he suddenly slapped his hand to his forehead, "Guys! If the First Key was here at Hogwarts, and Voldemort found the Second at Beauxbatons...."

Hermione's eyes had widened in realisation, "Then the Third Key is at..."

"Durmstrang!" Harry and Hermione chorused.

Ron blinked, "How do you know for sure?"

"Well I don't," admitted Harry, "but, it just feels... right, somehow. Actually, I wonder if Lucas knows..."

"Maybe you should talk to him about it," suggested Hermione.

"Don't be daft!" exclaimed Ron, bravely ignoring Hermione's death-stare, "Harry can't pop over to Azkaban for a cup of tea with Lucas... He's sort of allergic to Dementors, in case you'd forgotten." He turned to Harry, "no offence, mate."

"Actually, it's not a bad idea," Harry observed, carefully, "well, apart from the Dementors bit. It would be good to see Lucas, and I get the impression he doesn't get too many visitors."

"Anyway," asserted Hermione, taking back control of the situation, "the important thing is this; we've got to get Harry to the Third Key before Voldemort gets there."

"Easier said than done," noted Harry.

"Especially if it's at Durmstrang," Ron pointed out, "the place practically breeds Death Eaters - Vicky will probably gift wrap it for him," he added sourly.

"His name's *Viktor*," corrected Hermione, icily, before returning a volley of her own with, "and, *if I remember correctly*, it wasn't me who asked for his autograph, was it?"

Chapter 25

Who was the first Minister for Magic to take office jointly with his familiar?

Harry reached breakfast in a daze. Having drunk from the soakstone late on Sunday evening, he'd retired to the confines of his Gryffindor four-poster bed, only for recurring visions similar to Saturday's subsumatum connection with Voldemort.

His frenzied screaming had, of course, waken up the others, but he'd managed to persuade them that it was 'only' a nightmare, and, eventually, his four compatriots had returned to their slumbers. Harry, of course, hadn't been able to embrace sleep, knowing full well the horrors that awaited him there. So he'd lain on his back, willing time to march onward to morning.

So, on top of his exhaustion from the soakstone, he was now suffering from extreme sleep deprivation, and was pondering whether he should ask Madam Pomfrey for some Dreamless Sleeping Draught. He *had* to sleep - his scar, having burnt with ferocious intensity through the night, was now merely sore. Maybe he would skip Charms (after all, it wasn't as though he was going to learn much), and try to catch up on sleep before Potions.

Skip Charms... skip Charms.... the exhaustion in Harry's mind almost made it impossible to process thoughts any more complex than that.

Not having had to properly wake up, Harry was one of the first students at breakfast that morning. A clutch of Slytherins were chattering animatedly at one end of their table, whilst a few Hufflepuffs appeared to be exchanging shocked conversations.

Slowly, the Great Hall filled up, but instead of the usual cheery banter, the tone seemed subdued, and yet, at the same time, urgent. Everyone seemed to be talking in whispers, furtive glances being cast about to see who was listening.

"Beauxbatons..."

"...the Dark Mark... said they *saw* it..."

"...survivors..."

As Harry tuned into the whispers circulating about the Great Hall, he suddenly realised that the scrambled egg in front of him had to be stone cold. When he'd last looked about, there had been barely 20 people in the Great Hall, and now it was practically full...

"Harry!"

He blinked, and looked into Dean's face, opposite.

"Harry, are you even awake, man?" Dean seemed mildly exasperated, "I've been trying to ask if you're OK for like the last three *hours*!"

"Don't exaggerate!" rebuked Ginny, playfully digging her elbow into Dean. Harry watched the interplay between the two of them.

"...sleep? Harry!!" Dean seemed more concerned, now, than exasperated.

Harry blinked once more at Dean, "Wha?", and tried to shake his head to remove the fog of exhaustion. Dean was trying to say something to him. "What?"

But the person sitting opposite had vanished. Harry was momentarily puzzled before he felt Seamus and Dean pulling him to his feet and carrying him out of the hall.

When he woke up, Harry found himself once more back in bed in Gryffindor. Light was streaming in, the curtains casting a red glow upon him. It was almost 3pm, which meant that he'd missed Charms, missed Potions and was now halfway through History of Magic.

His scar still twinged, but at least he'd got some sleep. He wondered whether this meant that Voldemort was most active during the night. It seemed... fitting.

Having had a shower to properly waken up, Harry made his way to the still life fruit bowl, where he tickled the pear to gain access to Hogwarts' kitchens.

"Mister Harry Potter sir!" cried Dobby, virtually hurling himself at Harry in giddy abandon, "Dobby is so pleased to see you! But you's is wounded!" the House-Elf's astonished gaze was taking in the fake sling.

"Um, hello Dobby," replied Harry, cautiously, "I've been... ill, and missed breakfast and lunch... have you got anything to ea..."

Before he could finish his request, however, Harry found himself being frogmarched to one of the great tables mirroring those in the Great Hall directly above. To his surprise, he found himself sitting at the Ravenclaw one.

Well, at least it wasn't Slytherin.

"Mister Harry Potter sir!" exclaimed Dobby, as a quintet of House-Elfs seemingly fell over themselves to ply him with sustenance, "you must eats. Especially in these times..."

Harry looked at Dobby sharply; the creature seemed to be trying to suppress a shudder, and his co-workers were eyeing him warily. "*What* times, Dobby?" asked Harry slowly, around a mouthful of bacon and eggs.

"These is Dark Times, Mr Harry Potter sir," replied Dobby reluctantly. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named walks again. Mr Harry Potter is in great danger! Mr Harry Potter must eats properly to keep his strength."

"What do you mean, 'walks again', Dobby?" asked Harry, fervently hoping that the House-Elf was not about to take upon the role of personal protector again. The last time Dobby had taken it into his head that Harry was in peril, the House-Elf had nearly killed Harry in his efforts to protect him.

Unfortunately, House-Elfs didn't appear to have a concept of irony.

"He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has arisen!" exclaimed Dobby, oblivious to the shocked expressions of his fellow workers, "The Dark Mark... Dobby's friends has seen it over Beauxbatons..."

"Dobby's *friends*?"

The rest of the House-Elfs had now retreated as far from the Ravenclaw table as they could, casting worried glances at their eccentric colleague.

"Miss Winky, Mr Harry Potter sir," explained Dobby, "you does remember Miss Winky, doesn't you?"

"Of course I remember Winky - she was Crouch's House-Elf before she came to work... hey, where is she?"

Dobby's luminous green eyes became sad, "Miss Winky left in the summer. Miss Winky says she not like work at Hogwarts. Miss Winky says would be better life at Beauxbatons..."

Dobby's eyes were brimming with tears now, and Harry was desperately hoping that the House-Elf would regain his composure before making a scene. There had to be a first time.

"...and Dobby he says that he wants to stay at Hogwarts," sniffed Dobby, morosely, continuing his narrative, "and Miss Winky says she never wants to see Mr Dobby again, and..." Dobby now broke down in uncontrollable sobs.

Harry was vaguely aware that the proper thing to do at this point would be to give Dobby a reassuring hug. But, he decided, Dobby probably wasn't the tactile type.

"...now He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is at Beauxbatons," Dobby had regained his composure, "and the Dark Marks is seen in the skies..."

"I'm sure Winky will be OK," said Harry, attempting to reassure Dobby. After all, he reasoned, Winky had survived many years in the Crouch household caring for... Realisation hit Harry sharply, "Dobby! Was Winky *invited* to Beauxbatons? Or did she just choose to go there by herself?"

"Miss Winky was invited," beamed Dobby proudly, "the Beauxbatons Champion, she is very kind to Winky over the summer, and she suggests that Winky goes to France..."

"*Fleur*?" asked Harry incredulously. "Did she... did she invite any of the *other* House-Elfs to go with her?"

"No, Mr Harry Potter Sir, she just asks Winky. She says their castle doesn't have rooms for many House-Elfs, but she says Winky is special..."

"Thanks Dobby! I'll, I'll...I'll get you some new socks!" said Harry, trying to cheer Dobby up whilst simultaneously wondering why Fleur would go through all the trouble of adopting her own personal House-Elf, only to leave Winky back at Beauxbatons when she got herself the job at Hogwarts.

"Oh Mr Harry Potter sir is too kind to poor Dobby sir, indeed!" squealed Dobby in delight, as Harry ate the rest of his food thoughtfully.

Fleur. And she was assistant to Snape, who, despite Dumbledore's faith, didn't seem to be missing any opportunity to make Harry's life miserable.

Harry spent the remainder of the afternoon in the library, once more investigating Slytherin's campaign against the Magi. Part of him wanted to take it personally, but, try as he might, he couldn't will any sense of connection between himself, Harry Potter, and Slytherin's adversaries who went by names such as Jegrilla, Hyke, Creetipicia and so on.

Slytherin had been brutal, and, Harry suspected, these were the sanitised version of events. It was ironic that Slytherin appeared to favour the use of *Avada Kedavra* in the battles. He'd wiped out his magical equals with the same curse that Voldemort had used to eliminate his blood relatives.

The library was almost deserted - clearly, Ravenclaw sixth years had a free; Cho was sitting with a group of friends at one of the larger tables by Potions. Madam Pince was immersed in her index, whereas Harry had cornered the most secluded table he could find by the History stacks.

He paused from writing; the research wasn't really for Binns' assignment - Harry knew that he probably wouldn't be able to stay at Hogwarts long enough to take his O.W.Ls. It really was only a matter of time before something broke the illusion that he was still a wizard, and at that point he would be a fugitive.

It was not a welcoming thought. This was Hogwarts, and for the previous four years it had been his home. He'd found a family here - Ron, Hermione, all the other assorted Weasleys. And now he knew he didn't belong here. He could almost feel the very walls of the castle hissing their distaste at his presence.

Yes, as soon as the Key was drained he'd need to move on, he thought, staring sadly at Cho, who had her back to him.

With a sigh, and finally tearing his eyes from the Ravenclaw Seeker, he went back to Slytherin's campaign journal, and almost let out an audible exclamation of triumph. The three Magi sects - Hoag Ward, Box Bat and... Strang!

That was it, he realised. The similarities between the names couldn't be a coincidence.

They'd been right: the Third Key *was* at Durmstrang.

"Well Charms was pretty cool," explained Ron over dinner, "'cos we've now got the boxes to talk back. They can only say 'Hello' and the person's name, but it's pretty neat. 'course, I wanted to get mine to say 'Malfoy's a slimy git', but Flitwick must've suspected something..."

"Now *that*, my friend, is a noble cause," observed Dean, not in the least fazed by the scowl flung at him when Ron realised that Ginny was once again sitting with the pink dreadlocked boy.

Talking boxes? Harry dejectedly wondered how he was going to fake that. The only real proposition was to fake being appallingly inept in lessons... but some part of Harry's pride refused to consider that. He was *good* at Charms. Well, he corrected himself, he *had* been.

"What about Potions?" prompted Harry.

"Oh, you lost 20 points," informed Seamus.

"20 points?" exclaimed Harry, incredulously. "But I wasn't even there! I was... I was *ill!*"

"Yeah, we tried to explain that," admitted Seamus, "but he said something like," and at this point Seamus attempted a Snape impression, "Mr Potter will have to learn that his, ah *extra-curricular* activities are not sufficient a cause to excuse him from attending lessons. Perhaps he should concentrate on using beds for sleeping..."

Harry groaned. He'd hoped that the 30 points business would have died a quiet death. No chance. Particularly not if Snape had heard.

"So how many points have you actually lost us this year, Harry?" asked Ginny.

"No idea," said Harry, gloomily, "I sort of gave up keeping track once I got past 100..." And they hadn't even got through the first term yet.

"You know," observed Dean, thoughtfully, "there's got to be a record somewhere..."

"Anyway," interrupted Hermione, "most of the school's been talking about Beauxbatons all day; there's nothing concrete, but it seems like most people have heard somehow that You-Know-Who has attacked."

Hermione, of course, having been privy to the content of Harry's vision on Saturday night, already knew this, but for the sake of the audience, they were all treating it as new news.

"Nothing concrete?" prompted Harry.

"It's just rumours at the moment," explained Ron, "but apparently there've been sightings of the Dark Mark over their castle."

"Whoa," breathed Seamus, "so there must've been deaths..."

"Yeah," agreed Ron, "anyway, Hermione still gets the Prophet, so we should get the official version tomorrow..."

"Fudge'll deny everything," said Harry, bitterly, recalling Mundungus Fletcher's words at Sunday's meeting of Dumbledore's secret council.

"We'll see about that!" exclaimed Dean. "Here he is now!"

Minister Fudge had indeed arrived - presumably he'd apparated to Hogsmeade, and then walked the last part to the school - and was making his way towards the head table. Conversations were drying up as students spotted him, so once he'd reached the normally vacant Headmaster's chair, there wasn't really much call for him to tap the glass to gain his students' attention.

But Fudge was nothing if not attached to procedure and ceremony.

The chimes of the glass echoed through the Great Hall, causing everyone to stop to look at the Minister for Magic, stood in front of the Head Table.

"If I might have your attention for a few moments, thank you. As I am sure you are aware, a number of malicious rumours have been circulating in the past few hours pertaining to the apparent resurrection of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named..."

"See?" hissed Harry, triumphantly.

"So I am standing before you as Minister for Magic to offer my personal assurance that, to date, no basis of truth has been found to substantiate these rumours at the present time. The Ministry strongly suspects that the rumours have been started as a particularly unpleasant practical joke, executed in extremely poor taste, and we will be pursuing vigorously all leads to track down and suitably punish those responsible."

Harry was not surprised. This was vintage Fudge.

"And that, really, is all I have to say on the matter; I trust my presence here this evening will have allayed any fears any of you might have that there is any grain of truth behind these wild stories, and bid you good night."

And with that, Fudge left, a thousand unanswered questions hanging on the lips of the students seated at the four huge tables.

"Oh yes, well now I'm *completely* reassured," confirmed Ron. "'cos if Fudge says it's all lies, then it can't *possibly* be true, can it?"

Hermione smiled ruefully, "I wonder how long before he's forced to rethink his position?"

"Probably when the first survivors start showing up, I guess," suggested Harry. He was trying to decide whether Fudge was in denial, or just plain thick. In the end he decided to be charitable, and assume that Fudge was just an extremely thick person *in* denial.

Harry decided not to try and visit the Key that night, and instead he went to see Madam Pomfrey to try and get some Dreamless Sleeping Draught. He couldn't bear the thought of another night like the previous one, plagued by the sight of blood sacrifices over the Beauxbatons Key.

As he made his way towards Madam Pomfrey's office, Pansy swept past him on her way out.

"Madam Pomfrey?"

"Yes... Mr Potter?" the mediwizard gave an exaggerated sigh, "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to find *you* here again. Although it is something of a shock to find that you get here unaided. What can I do for you?"

"Um, I was wondering if you could give me some Dreamless Sleep for tonight. I get these terrible nightmares..."

Madam Pomfrey considered Harry carefully. "Dreamless Sleep is *not* to be trifled with, young man. It is an extremely powerful sedative that is really only to be used in cases of severe trauma..."

Harry hadn't considered that he might *not* be able to get hold of some. A hint of desperation entered his voice, "I *have* to have some. I can't sleep! I missed all today's lessons because I was catching up on sleep from last night..."

"These dreams - they're blood sacrifices. I see... horrible things. Ask Ron! Ask Dean and Seamus! They'll all tell you that I wake up in screaming fits... I wake them up too. Please. I really need to sleep at the correct time... I don't want to miss more lessons."

Well OK, he conceded to himself, the last bit wasn't quite true, but he hoped it would bolster his argument.

"Mr Potter, this is a restricted potion. People can get addicted to it, and we really must be careful about its dispensation... I'm afraid the answer must be 'No' in the first instance..." the mediwizard looked stern, but sympathetic.

"Well isn't there anything else you could give me? Just to tone down the dreams a bit? All I want to do is to be able to have a normal night's sleep - that's all..."

Madam Pomfrey gazed levelly at him for what seemed like an eternity before worldlessly reaching for a vial of red liquid on a shelf behind her. "Solveig's Potion," she explained, handing the vial to Harry, "three drops last thing at night. Come by in the morning and tell me if it helped."

"Thanks," said Harry, taking the offered potion with relief. "I'll check in before breakfast tomorrow to let you know if it worked."

Solveig's Potion didn't entirely kill the visions, but at least he perceived them now as though through a shroud. They were still disturbing, and more than a little scary, but he didn't wake up, screaming himself hoarse.

The following morning, he made his way into the Hospital Wing at what seemed to be the end of a clearly livid outburst from Madam Pomfrey, "...how did they know? My professional judgement is being questioned! They've twisted the entire situation beyond recognition! Minerva, you have to demand a retraction!"

Harry knocked on the door to the office, which was ajar, as Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey turned to face him. Professor McGonagall hurriedly pressed her morning

paper to her chest before greeting Harry, "Good Morning, Mr Potter; Poppy tells me that you've been experiencing trouble sleeping."

"Um yes, and I was just dropping by to say that the potion she gave to me last night seemed to have helped. I mean, it didn't cut out the dreams completely," he elaborated, "but I was more or less able to sleep OK..."

"Well that's a relief," sighed McGonagall, "and did you tell any of your friends that you were going to ask Poppy for some Dreamless Sleeping Draught?"

"No..." started Harry, "oh, well I told Ron," he shrugged.

The two witches frowned at each other, seemingly disappointed.

"I mean that was OK, wasn't it?" asked Harry, puzzled by the atmosphere in the office.

"Yes, well," started McGonagall, "if that's all, shall we make our way to breakfast?"

Harry followed McGonagall down to the Great Hall, leaving Madam Pomfrey to her duties, still clearly vexed about something.

"Hey Hermione, can I see the Prophet?" Harry asked, as he slid into the seat between Parvati and Seamus.

The fifth years looked warily at each other, "There's nothing in there about Beauxbatons," said Hermione, a little too hurriedly, pulling the paper closer to her.

Harry was suddenly aware that an awful lot of people were giving him a... look.

"Well what's the main story then?" he asked, starting to get a sinking feeling.

"Oh, nothing much," commented Seamus, "y'know, the usual rubbish..."

"More toast, Harry?" asked Parvati, nervously.

"Hermione," commanded Harry, eyes narrowing as he extended his hand across the table, "please give me the paper..."

"I really don't think you want to see this..." started Hermione, apologetically.

"Hermione, whatever's in there, I'm going to find out sooner or later, am I not?"

Sighing, Hermione handed over the Daily Prophet, folded over so that only the back page was showing. His fellow fifth years watched him carefully as he opened it up to read the front page.

"Bloody hell," sighed Harry, morosely, looking at a large photograph of himself, looking equally gloomy, on the front page. As if life wasn't bad enough...

Exclusive! Boy-Who-Lived 'addicted to sedatives'

The Daily Prophet can exclusively reveal that Harry Potter (15), the Boy-Who-Lived, is unable to sleep without taking Dreamless Sleeping Draught, writes Irene Stark.

The Prophet has learned that Potter, who attends Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, frequently harasses medical staff at the school to sate his addiction. Potter claims to suffer from delusional nightmares when starved of the drug, a symptom experts ascribe to guilt transfer following his somewhat shadowy triumph in the Triwizard Cup held earlier this year.

Readers will of course recall that Potter, who entered the tournament illegally, was the last person to see Cedric Diggory, the officially selected Hogwarts Champion, alive, and his account of events surrounding Mr Diggory's death remain unverified.

It is surely in the public interest to ask whether Potter's addiction has arisen directly from his attempts to suppress his true role in Diggory's death, and, indeed, questions should be asked as to whether it is prudent to allow such a clearly unbalanced, and probably dangerous individual to remain at school.

Experts specialising in combatting addiction at St Mungos suggest that Potter may become unbalanced after prolonged exposure to the Draught, and strongly question the wisdom of Hogwarts staff in dispensing the potion as though it were Pumpkin Juice.

The Minister for Magic issued a statement explaining that, in the light of the dismissal of former Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, a number of irregularities of administration were coming to light, and this latest scandal merely vindicated the Minister's decision to remove Dumbledore before standards at the school slipped still further.

Having finished the article, Harry looked back at his friends, "they make it sound like I killed Cedric!" he exclaimed. "And what do they mean 'frequently' - I only asked once, and that was last night..."

"Someone's got it in for you, that's for sure," observed Dean, somewhat needlessly.

"But who else would know?" asked Hermione.

"Well, I mentioned it to Ron," replied Harry, before adding, "and don't even *think* that I'd believe for one second you'd do this to me," as he caught sight of a protestation on his best friend's lips.

"And the only other person there was Madam Pomfrey, and she's livid too," he recalled, realising now what McGonagall and Pomfrey had been discussing before his arrival.

And then he remembered who he'd seen on her way out of the Medical Wing the previous night. "Pansy!"

Chapter 26

Arithmancy: what is the next number in the following Haj Series: 1, 14, 15, 29....?

Parvati and Lavender had left the table to return to Gryffindor Tower when Cho came over to briefly express joint outrage at the article in the Prophet, "...and Harry, none of the stuff they wrote about Cedric is true. You know that, don't you?" Cho squeezed his shoulder lightly as she said this, to emphasise her concern.

"Thanks Cho," Harry replied, morosely. To his way of thinking, it didn't really matter whether it was true or not. It was what people were thinking. As Cho left the Great Hall, she passed by the Ravenclaw table, which is when Harry noticed that Padma was glaring daggers at him.

As promised, Transfiguration had the students attempting to change their own hair colour, without a wand. To his relief, Harry noticed that only Dean and Hermione were having any luck with this at all. Dean had grasped the principle almost immediately, in fact, and had then gone on to lengthen and shorten his hair at will.

A tight lipped Professor McGonagall had then instructed Dean to see her after the lesson. Which was a little bewildering - why take it out on the guy just because he was doing *well*?

Defence Against the Dark Arts continued in its recent form, rivalling even History of Magic for lack of audience participation. Vellum was not one to be intimidated by the silent treatment, however, and the lesson dragged on and on.

Potions plumbed new depths in the afternoon, however, with Snape in particularly merciless form, "...if I can get through that drug filled haze of yours, Potter..." and so on. By the end of the lesson Harry had lost a further 40 points, which was a new record for a single lesson. The Slytherins had all been avidly reading the Prophet beforehand, taking care to ensure that Harry saw *exactly* which article it was that had them so engrossed.

Needless to say, Snape didn't seem to mind the fact that half his class were thus distracted.

He sighed. Eventually they'd get bored of it - it wasn't as if they had a mine of information to run with, anyway. Unless they got hold of the 30 points story. Or the fact that he was a Mage. Or someone spotted him whilst he was at Azkaban. He also realised, with a start, that someone might take it upon themselves to question Pomfrey about his arm injury.

Harry wondered, idly, if everyone's life would look as twisted as his did at that moment. He didn't deliberately wander into this mess. These things just seemed to happen. And they always seemed to happen to him.

As they arrived in the Great Hall for the evening meal that night, a new sight greeted them. The room was still illuminated by the light of thousands of candles, floating beneath the roof enchanted to reflect the night sky above.

The head table still ran across the far end of the Hall, with the Headmaster's chair in the middle, the teaching staff arranged either side.

What was different was that there were now five tables instead of four. Professor McGonagall was standing at the head of the middle table, indicating with her arm, "Slytherin, Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Beauxbatons."

"Beauxbatons?" exclaimed Ron, in surprise.

"They must be the survivors," whispered Hermione, softly, "weren't some of them at the Champions' Ball last year?"

"Yes," confirmed Parvati, "that's Olivier at the far end - he must be a sixth year now..."

Harry didn't recognise anyone at the Beauxbatons table, but then, he had been rather preoccupied that night, he reminded himself.

"Now then, alright 'arry?" asked a gruff voice behind them, "Ron? 'ermione?"

"Hagrid!" exclaimed Harry, "It's really great to see you! Have you come straight from Beau... straight from France?"

"Aye, that we 'ave," confirmed the half giant, with a sigh. "Dark times, 'arry, dark times. Still, best be getting on... pop down and see us when you've got a moment, will ya?"

"Of course," confirmed Harry, glad to see his friend had returned safely. Hagrid really had been the first friend Harry had ever made in his life, and the half-giant's presence back at Hogwarts was more comforting to Harry than he could reasonably explain.

Hermione counted just over 60 Beauxbatons students, making the contingent about equal to one of Hogwarts' own houses. "I wonder where they're going to put them all?" she asked, "Do you think we'll have another sorting?"

"Nah, don't think so," opined Ron, "'cos otherwise they wouldn't have made the fifth table, would they? They'll probably keep them all in a new house together."

Harry looked at the new table - the students there had fled from France that Saturday night, which meant that they'd been travelling for three days, more or less. No wonder they looked tired, and not a little lost.

"If I could have your attention for a moment?" asked Professor McGonagall, immediately followed by Madame Maxine making what Harry presumed was the same request in French. The two witches were standing at the head of the Gryffindor table, situated as it was in the middle of the Great Hall.

"As you will all have noticed, we have been joined by a delegation of students from Beauxbatons, who were forced to flee the school at the weekend under extremely distressing circumstances." Professor McGonagall paused to allow Madame Maxine to translate before continuing, "I expect each and every one of you to extend a warm welcome to our new students, who will be staying, and studying, here, at Hogwarts, until the end of the year."

A few teachers had also travelled with the French students, but they would, nonetheless be joining the Hogwarts students for some lessons. "Won't that be exciting?" whispered Hermione, "we'll be able to see how they do things in France!"

Ron looked at Hermione, seemingly lost for words. Seamus stepped bravely in, "Tell me, is there anything more tempting to you than the prospect of extra work?"

About the only negative thing to arise from the new contingent's arrival was discovered when the Gryffindors made their way back to the tower, where they found a surprisingly apologetic looking Professor McGonagall waiting for them, "Now I'm very sorry about this..."

"Halt!" cried Sir Cadogan from his painting, "Who goes there?"

"...but the Fat Lady was the only portrait that spoke French, so I'm afraid we've had to lend her to the Beauxbatons to guard their dorm. Sir Cadogan," and Professor McGonagall almost winced at the name, "has therefore volunteered to protect Gryffindor..."

"Stand up and fight, you mangy curs!" cried Sir Cadogan, brandishing his sword in a challenging fashion.

Everybody groaned.

Reassured that he would once again be able to sleep properly, Harry reverted back to his nightly visits to the Key, draining as much power as he could. The sense was indispensable during these exploits, as he was able to dodge Filch, Mrs Norris and assorted staff with ease.

Even Peeves had a pattern.

He also discovered that the Beauxbatons students had ended up being accommodated in the third floor corridor that had previously housed Fluffy. Hagrid never did say where Fluffy had gone to after the Philosopher's Stone had been destroyed; Harry fervently hoped it was somewhere very, very distant.

The down side to his increasing power was that it was becoming increasingly difficult to control the physical magic he could create. His ability to move objects with force was increasing - he could move the beds in Gryffindor tower, for example - but at the cost of losing accuracy in moving smaller objects.

Trying to rein in his power to move, say, a book from the floor to the table was proving almost impossible. He just had to will the book up fractionally and it would slam into the ceiling. The less said about conjuring fires the better.

It seemed obvious that he needed to have greater control, but how was he supposed to achieve this? Harry resolved to write to Dumbledore to ask if he could meet with Lucas again to talk through some of the problems.

Now that Hagrid was back, the mysterious eggs seemed to know it was safe to hatch. A breathless Colin Creevey had informed the Gryffindor fifth years at lunchtime that they *had* to get to Hagrid's hut *that second* to see the beasts.

And, against their better judgement, they all trooped down to inspect the creatures in the pens they'd constructed.

A light drizzle was falling as Harry warily peered into his creature's pen. The remains of the broken egg lay dull and lifeless in the dirt. The previously iridescent colours had faded completely, but there was no sign of what had emerged.

Harry swept the pen with his sense, and discovered that the creature was in the water, so, with as gentle a force as he could manage, he tried to tap it up onto land so that they could see.

Unfortunately, he was still having problems with the control thing, so his creature ended up rolling spectacularly out of the penned section of the water onto the rough ground, balled up in self defence.

As soon as it detected that it was free to respond, the beast uncoiled, and Harry could see it more clearly. It resembled a crocodile, and was about a foot long, with shimmering scales of red, blue and black, electric sparks shimmering about its body.

Obviously still sensing that an aggressor remained unseen in the water, the beast bared its not inconsiderable fangs, emitting a chilling scream before a small jet of fire shot out. "*Mine!*"

It spoke Parseltongue.

"What's yours?" asked Harry, strangely relieved that at least this was one ability that Subsumatum had not drained him of.

"*Land. Water. Mine*" the creature had turned now to face Harry, its amber eyes locking on his face.

"Alright then?" asked Hagrid, cheerily, "See yer come to find out how yer Threshers are doin' then, right?" The Gryffindors all looked at Hagrid warily. Memories of classes spent chasing Skrewts came flooding back to them all too quickly.

It was official: hindsight *lied*.

"Threshers?" asked Hermione, nervously, "I've not heard of them before..."

"Ah," said Hagrid, proudly, "I bred 'em m'self, see. They got a bit o' dragon in 'em, an' some electric eel too. Obviously they've some crocodile, an' I found a bit o' snake to round it off."

Hagrid was so pleased with 'his babies' that it was almost heartbreaking.

"Er Hagrid," Hermione was still speaking, "was it a *posionous* snake, by any chance?"

"Course it were!" exclaimed Hagrid, evidently affronted that anyone would consider anything but the most lethal, toxic and vicious ingredients for his new beast. "They're right special these 'n all. Ain't no-one bred anything like 'em before, I'll tell yer that now!"

"Gosh, really?" exclaimed Ron, laying on the sarcasm. They'd come to realise that Hagrid never, *ever* picked up on his classes' misgivings about the creatures they studied.

"So what are they for, then?" asked Harry, trying to make conversation.

"They're *guards*," explained Hagrid, importantly. "See, they're only babies at the moment, but once they're grown up a bit, we'll let 'em loose in the lake, 'case anyone tries to attack from the water..." Hagrid had about him the air of someone who's just foiled what an opponent had thought was guaranteed checkmate in four moves.

"Hagrid," that was Hermione in stern, but trying-to-be-sympathetic mode, "aren't these a little bit dangerous to put into the lake?"

"Nonsense!" dismissed Hagrid, before adding the infamous lie, "They won't harm nuffink unless someone annoys 'em first."

"OK," said Seamus, who'd been following the conversation with Lavender hanging on to him as though for grim death, "what sort of thing annoys them, then?"

"Ah, well," admitted Hagrid, "I don't rightly know jus' now," before adding with unnecessary cheer, "but I'm sure we'll pick it up as we go along..."

"Oh, great!" exclaimed Seamus with hugely false enthusiasm. Which Hagrid mistook completely.

"*Hungry!*" complained Harry's thresher, anger sparking along its glistening skin.

"Hagrid, the Threshers are hungry," Harry dutifully relayed the request, "what sort of thing do they eat?"

Hagrid stroked his beard as he considered this, "Well," he shrugged, "pretty much anything I'd guess... best not give 'em live prey just yet, though..."

The Daily Prophet, unable to toe the Ministry line any longer, ran with the story that Beauxbatons had fallen to Voldemort on the Thursday. The Dark Mark had returned to Europe's skies, and the French magical community was living in fear of further attacks.

Fudge's response, issued through Percy, had been that although He-Who-Must-Be-Named did *appear* to have returned, he seemed to be based in France, and, therefore, the wizarding community in the United Kingdom should not be unduly concerned.

Ron was deeply ashamed that Percy had been party to such obviously deluded reasoning, and no-one found the Ministry's response in the least bit helpful. Voldemort had returned. The Dark Mark had been seen. It was only a matter of time before they struck again.

People were uncertain. They started to jump at shadows. No-one, it seemed, was safe, and suspicion grew. A collective paranoia was sweeping the country.

So it was the end of a fairly tense Friday when Harry stumbled into the Gryffindor Common Room just after 1am, having drained some further power from the Key, to find Parvati waiting for him.

"And where the *hell* have you been?" she snapped, anger flashing in her dark eyes.

"Ah," exclaimed Harry, warily, "I, er, went out... for... a walk..."

"A walk?" asked Parvati, with forced calm.

"Yeah... quick amble round the castle, y'know...."

"*No*, I do *not* know! It's past curfew. Merlin knows you've lost Gryffindor enough points this year already - what are you doing wandering the castle at night?"

"I was just out for a walk... you know, clear my head sort of thing."

"And who did you meet?"

"Meet?"

"Yes, meet. Who, *exactly*, are you meeting up with on your cosy little night-time strolls?"

"Er, I'm not sure I follow you."

"Harry, I *know*. I just want to hear it from you. You owe me that, at least."

"Er, know what, *exactly*?" Harry sensed that the conversation was entering dangerous waters.

"You've been slipping out every night this week."

"Er, well..."

"*Every* night. Not a word to me. No-one knows where you are. You don't mention anything about these night time strolls... so who are you meeting?"

"I'm not meeting anyone!"

"*Do you think I'm stupid?*" shrieked Parvati, before adding, warningly, "Or had you forgotten that Padma's a Ravenclaw too?"

"Padma?" asked Harry, remembering the evil look she'd given him after the Daily Prophet article. He knew there was *something* obvious here that he was missing, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"Yes Padma, my twin sister. You've met her on occasion, I'm sure."

"Er yes, but I've not been meeting up with Padma..." his mind was tired from draining the Key, and Harry was struggling to follow Parvati's train of thought.

"Don't play games with me! Sisters talk, Harry. You didn't think about that, did you?"

"Er, Parvati, I don't have the fog..."

"So Padma *happened* to notice that a certain Miss Cho Chang has taken to slipping out from Ravenclaw post curfew every night this week..."

"She did?" asked Harry, weakly, suddenly realising what it was that he'd been missing.

"And you're going to tell me it's pure coincidence, aren't you?" asked Parvati, eyes flashing dangerously.

"Er, well, actually, yes," Harry winced as he said these words, knowing that he wasn't sounding hugely convincing. There was, obviously, the guilt about the secret trips to the Key that he couldn't mention anyway. And, also, he was wondering where Cho was going on her night time strolls.

"All those cosy Seeker-to-Seeker chats in the library. You avoiding me in Charms and Transfiguration. Surreptitious night-time excursions - which, by an *amazing* coincidence, you completely innocently synchronise with Chang..."

Harry had to admit that, when you looked at it that way, it did seem kind of incriminating.

"Cho and I are just friends!" he protested, "ask her..."

"Oh yes, brilliant idea, Harry - Hello Cho, you're not stealing my boyfriend are you?, well I'm sure she's going to admit to it, isn't she?"

"Cho wouldn't steal someone's boyfriend," asserted Harry, defiantly, "she's not like that!"

"Well of course you'd defend her, wouldn't you? Not that it really matters, because as of *now* I don't have a boyfriend."

"You're breaking up with me?"

"Which part of *I found out that you're a two-timing-lying-cheating-scumbag* did you not follow?"

"Parvati, wait! It's really not like that!" protested Harry.

"Yes, Harry, it's *exactly* like that," snapped Parvati, before storming up the stairs to the girls' dorm.

Harry collapsed into the armchair by the fireplace, "Brilliant," he muttered dully. And then he started to wonder where Cho was going on *her* night time strolls.

Word soon got around Gryffindor that Harry and Parvati had split up. Lavender was back to giving Harry her icy glares, and Parvati wouldn't even look at him, let alone talk.

So breakfast on the Saturday morning was a rather sombre affair - the normal grouping of the fifth years all together, as they had been since the Hogsmeade, had been split in two, with Harry, Ron and Hermione at one end of the table, and the rest at the other.

"I feel bad about this," admitted Harry.

"Oh, I'm sorry," commiserated Hermione, "but I s'pose it was too much to ask that you could slip away every night unnoticed..."

"I feel bad for Cho, as much as anything," explained Harry, "because right now everyone's assuming that she would do that, and she didn't... and also I kind of miss the eight of us all being together, you know? I thought we had a good group going this term, and I feel bad that I've broken that up...."

Hermione frowned, "Don't you feel bad that you've split up with Parvati, too?"

Harry blinked, "Well yes... I think... um..."

Hermione's raised her eyebrows as Harry tried to work out exactly what he did feel.

"But, you know, she could have trusted me..." protested Harry.

"You didn't really give her a lot to trust in, did you?"

"Well that's hardly my fault, is it? My life's full of secrets, not even you two know everything, but at least you understand enough not to press... Look, could you two do me a favour?"

"That depends," said Ron, "on what exactly you want us to do..."

"Well, I'd kind of like to be on my own right now," explained Harry, "so could you go and join the others, explain that there's no hard feelings and all that?"

"Harry," said Hermione, levelly, "I don't think Parvati's going to listen to us explaining how wonderful you are right now..."

"I'm not asking you to do that! I just, y'know, I don't want our group to split up because of this - we were all getting to know each other so much better, and I don't want us to lose that. So could you?"

Hermione and Ron exchanged dubious glances.

"C'mon, I mean, Ginny's up there with them too," Harry pointed out, "y'know, just to show that they're just as important to you. We're going to need our friends. All of them - you see that, don't you?"

"Alright," said Ron, getting to his feet, "but if they scream us out, I'm not trying again..."

"Thanks Ron, Hermione," said Harry, as his two friends got up to walk to the other end of the table. He was about to leave the Great Hall when a huge commotion of wings interrupted everything.

The Hawks of Tempus had arrived.

More than four years had passed since Harry had first been taken aback by the arrival of the morning post over breakfast, carried as it was by hundreds of postal owls. The owls themselves were of all different shapes and sizes, ranging from birds like Dumbledore's tiny black owl to Hedwig, with her distinct snowy plumage.

The owls had a graceful kind of flight, as they swept down the tables, releasing letters and small parcels to the intended recipients. Over the years, he'd grown so accustomed to the process that he hardly gave it a second thought.

But the arrival of the Hawks of Tempus was terrifying.

A flurry of brilliant white wings had stormed into the Great Hall, immediately attracting everybody's attention. For one thing, the post had already been delivered that morning. For another, these weren't owls.

They were hawks, with a plumage so brilliant white it was almost hard to look at them. Each hawk carried a letter in its talons, and rather than releasing this to the recipient from way above the students' heads, the hawks dived at their target with incredible speed, before releasing their message just as their talons touched the wood of the table.

Then, Harry having caught just the briefest flash of a brilliant blue eye, the hawk returned to the air, and swept out of the Great Hall in a huge flock of its identical colleagues.

For a second, no-one so much as breathed.

On the table in front of him was a brilliant white envelope. Burning blue script, lettering so vividly blue it seemed alive, addressed the message to 'Harry James Potter - Gryffindor'. Underneath this was a symbol consisting of the letter 'T' inside a circle.

Looking about him, Harry saw that not everyone had received a letter. All the fifth, sixth and seventh years had, along with the staff, it seemed. Some of the fourth years had also received a hawk, but the younger students hadn't.

Harry broke the seal, and opened up the letter inside. It had been written with the same burning blue ink as had been used for the address:

Dear Mr Potter,

Dark times are upon us, and the world does not afford us the luxury to sit upon the fence. The time has come when all those of age must make a stance, and either join the Order of Tempus in overthrowing Lord Voldemort, or face defeat.

This letter is a binding magical contract. Upon signing, you will be branded with the Sign of Tempus, and will forever be a member of the Order unless you choose to break your commitment.

In the fight against Voldemort, the Order makes this clear, you are either with us, or you are against us. All those who do not carry the Sign of Tempus are our enemies, and will be defeated. These are dark days, and neutrality is a luxury the world can ill afford.

As a member of the Order, you will be required to carry the fight against the Order's enemies. Refusal to follow these directions will result in expulsion from the Order.

You have one calendar month from receipt of this invitation to make your decision. We urge you to make your stand with the force against Voldemort, so that his presence can be forever removed from these lands.

The Order of Tempus

Chapter 27

In what year were the Holyhead Harpies founded?

Harry stared at the parchment, mystified. Who, or what, was the Order of Tempus? Around him, it looked like all the other recipients of the hawks' letters were pondering the same question.

Clearly, the Order of Tempus were against Voldemort, and that had to be a good thing, right? But, at the same time, it was a little disquieting the way they appeared to be saying that anyone who wasn't with them was, by definition, their enemy.

"My enemy's enemy is my...?" mumbled Harry to himself, trying to decide. It would have been more helpful if the Order of Tempus could have given a bit more information about themselves. Harry wasn't keen on signing up to a blank cheque in this instance.

Professor McGonagall's glass chimed across the Great Hall, cutting short the puzzled whispering that had greeted the opening of the summons. "If I could have your attention, for a moment," requested the Assistant Headmistress, "now it would seem that a number of you have received these messages from a body claiming itself to be the Order of Tempus.

"I must say that this has taken us quite by surprise," admitted Professor McGonagall, "and I am sorry to say that we are not able to offer any advice to the letters' recipients at this moment in time. My colleagues and I will be discussing the contents of your letters immediately, and we would *strongly* urge you all not to respond to the summons until the situation has been clarified."

Professor McGonagall paused to conduct a hurried whispered conversation with Snape, Flitwick and Sprout before concluding, "your Head of House will offer further advice as to the appropriate course of action in due course."

Harry considered the staff table, where Professor McGonagall had returned to her seat, immediately being engaged in frenzied conversation with Professors Flitwick and Sinistra. All the staff seemed unsettled by this development, although, Harry noticed, Snape had disengaged himself from the conversation, and was considering the students present with his typically beady gaze.

Harry felt the Potion Master's eyes lock onto his, as though in silent challenge, and Harry turned away first, trying to puzzle what this all meant.

Where was Dumbledore's owl?

As it turned out, the tiny black owl did not arrive that day, so Harry found himself in the library with Hermione, trying to find out anything relating to the Order of Tempus. It turned out that they weren't alone; Roger Davies and Alicia Spinnet, the former Head Boy and Girl respectively, were also attempting to fathom the Order's history.

"Well Hermione," asked Alicia, "any luck so far?"

"None whatsoever," admitted Hermione, dejectedly. "It just doesn't make sense! How can this group appear out of nowhere - for starters, they had to get all those birds together to deliver the summons, and get all our names... it all seems too organised to be new, but I can't find anything related to Tempus anywhere..."

"Still," suggested Roger, "if they're against You-Know-Who..."

"Voldemort," corrected Harry, by reflex.

Roger flinched, scowled briefly at Harry, and continued, "*if* they're against You-Know-Who, then, well, they can't be bad, can they?"

"Y'know, Roger's right," conceded Alicia, "it looks as though someone somewhere has decided to mobilise people against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and maybe this is our chance for a consolidated retaliation..."

"Well," started Hermione, "if only we knew a bit more about Tempus, we'd know for sure, wouldn't we? I mean, why all the secrecy?"

"Because," explained Roger, in the voice of someone trying to argue with a three-year old, "they don't want sensitive information to fall into the wrong hands. The Death Eaters."

"I'm not convinced," stated Harry, "I mean, what's all this business about people who don't carry the mark all being declared their enemy? I mean, that could almost certainly include innocent people..."

"Well, if they're not Death Eaters, what have they got to lose by joining Tempus?" asked Roger, mildly.

Harry opened his mouth to argue, but was cut short by Alicia, "well, I don't think we're really going to solve anything today - I suggest that we hold a meeting for all students in receipt of a summons to discuss our response. How about next Saturday?"

Roger nodded, "I can go along with that. Plus it'll give us time to dig a bit further into the background of Tempus, get advice from the Ministry, speak to the Professors..."

"OK then," confirmed Hermione, "we'll arrange a meeting for 10am next Saturday, for all those receiving a summons. No-one's already signed yet, have they?"

"Not that I know of," replied Alicia, "everyone's got a month, after all, so let's see what we can find out in the next week."

Alicia and Roger left, Roger still talking, "but you know, this could really be the thing that swings events in our favour..."

Harry and Hermione exchanged doubtful looks, "I don't like this," confessed Hermione, nervously, "I don't like this at all."

Dumbledore's summons to the next meeting arrived at breakfast on the Monday, asking Harry to meet him at 1.30pm. Good, thought Harry, that meant missing History of Magic was unavoidable, and, therefore, he probably wouldn't be shoved out just when the discussion was about to get interesting.

Breakfast itself had an air of forced normality - the Gryffindor fifth years were once more sitting all together, although Harry and Parvati were at the extreme ends of the grouping. The Daily Prophet's main story was the summons from the Order of Tempus, apparently issued to every witch and wizard over the age of 15 in the country.

The Ministry had yet to offer definitive guidance on the matter, although Percy was quoted as saying that the Ministry welcomed the initiative to establish a consolidated resistance to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and would be offering further advice as to the correct response to the summons later in the week.

It seemed clear to Harry that Fudge appeared to already have made up his mind to join the Order of Tempus, and he wondered why the Ministry hadn't openly declared its allegiance immediately.

"I mean, it's got to be a good thing, hasn't it?" that was Ron, chatting to Seamus, "'cos, well, they're against You-Know-Who, and that definitely makes them good in *my* book..."

Harry tuned out of the conversation, which was probably being duplicated all over the Great Hall. Tempus had openly declared its opposition to Voldemort. Harry had, equally, declared his opposition to Voldemort.

Did that mean he and Tempus were natural allies?

Harry had resigned himself to acting as though he were completely inept at Charms and Transfiguration. Which, he reminded himself, he now was.

It was humiliating, though, being forced to continually admit to Flitwick that he was having trouble with the vocalised response charms, when he'd previously been something of a star pupil, ever since that business with summoning his Firebolt for the First Task.

Indeed, Flitwick had been concerned enough with Harry's dismal performance to hold him back after the class for a 'friendly word', to check there wasn't anything on Harry's mind.

Not for the first time, Harry rued the gulf that existed between his perceived life and the path he'd been forced to lead. He actually felt guilty for betraying the Charms Professor, who was genuinely trying to help what he thought was a troubled student.

But what choice did he have?

After lunch Harry met with Dumbledore at Azkaban - for once it wasn't raining, and from there they went to the council chamber, which, Dumbledore explained, was the headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix.

Harry knew it was petty, but he couldn't help feeling that they could have chosen a better name...

It became apparent that the Order of the Phoenix was just as much in the dark as to the nature of the Order of Tempus as the rest of the world seemed to be. However, Dumbledore was clear that, for the time being, he would not be joining Tempus until more was known about the organisation.

Bill had explained that the summons appeared to be loyalty charms, activated once the named recipient had signed as requested. It was known that once signed, a burning tattoo was emblazoned into the recipient's upper right arm, a capital 'T' inside a circle, the mark being in the same flame-blue script as the writing in the letter itself.

As far as could be told, the mark, known as the Sign of Tempus, remained for as long as the person obeyed the rule of the Order. What was not clear was how such rules were conveyed, nor who was doing the instruction.

It went without saying, of course, that membership of the Order was shrouded in the utmost secrecy.

"Well this is pretty hopeless," conceded Sirius, "we don't know who Tempus are, or what. We don't even know where. They've just appeared out of nowhere, with this incredible organisation, almost as though they were expecting to mobilise."

"Expecting to mobilise..." pondered Arabella Figg, "you don't think that they knew Voldemort was planning an attack, do you? Or, perhaps, that they are in some way connected to Voldemort and the whole affair is an elaborate bluff?"

"I don't think any of us know what to think," observed Lupin. "It seems clear that we need better intelligence from the ground - we know that the hawks appeared to come in from Eastern Europe - Sirius and I could try snooping around over there to see what we can find."

"Are you sure that's wise?" asked Mundungus Fletcher, "for one, Sirius remains, regrettably, a wanted man. And secondly, your own, ah, *status* would mean a protracted investigation could cause ...certain difficulties."

Lupin managed a wry chuckle, "thank you for the delicacy, Mundungus. Yes, we're aware that we'd need to get any mission completed before the next full moon, but someone has got to get some background on this, and soon. We," and he nodded to Sirius, "are used to working together, and, should the worst come to the worst, Sirius in animagus form can keep the wolf in check."

Dumbledore appeared to consider the idea for a moment, "the best lead we have is that the hawks originate from Eastern Europe. It seems that the summons are now being issued daily to people on their fifteenth birthday, so, it would not seem unreasonable to expect that the hawk traffic could be traced in that fashion.

"You do, of course, realise the inherent danger in the mission, do you not?" Dumbledore peered over his half moon spectacles, first at Sirius and then at Lupin.

"I think," opined Sirius, "that the danger of ignorance outweighs the danger of capture at this point. We have to know either what we're up against, or who our friends really are."

"Very well," agreed Dumbledore, "but I ask that you return before the next full moon, with news of any progress. This will still be before the deadline for response to the initial conscription letters, which means that your research may help inform peoples' responses to the summons..."

"If," cut in Kolchan Vesh, bitterly, "you can stop the Ministry from signing the nation up to Tempus carte blanche."

Dumbledore raised an apologetic hand, "alas, my dear, I find that Cornelius is more hostile to my advice than at any time previous. I have tried to intercede in this issue once, and fear my sole contribution has been to strengthen the Minister's resolve that joining Tempus serves our interest."

There was a brief, reflective silence, and Harry studied the goldfish, gliding silently across the central pool. He wondered what possessed someone to put the fish there in the first place; who fed them? Who chose them? Did they die?

Bill's voice interrupted his increasingly morbid chain of thought, "you guys do realise, don't you, that the Goblins have also been called?"

Everyone's attention immediately snapped to the dashing curse-breaker. It was Monica Tiller who asked for clarification, "what do you mean?"

"Well," shrugged Bill, "I work at Gringotts, as you know, and when the Hawks arrived, the also carried summons to the Goblins..."

It was Lupin who carried the train of thought forward, "and if they asked the Goblins, then they've also approached the Giants, the Centaurs..." he trailed off.

"If Tempus pull this off," observed Sirius, "Voldemort isn't going to stand a chance..."

"And neither," cautioned Dumbledore, "will anything that isn't part of Tempus. I wonder whether a new evil is simply trying to sweep to power on the back of collective paranoia. The Agents of Tempus could find that they are building their own gallows..."

Harry decided it was worth mentioning how things stood at Hogwarts, "Alicia and Roger, they used to be Head Boy and Girl, well they've convened a general meeting for students who received a summons next Saturday. Just talk, I think, help people outline the options in their mind before they make their decision.

"I'm inclined to not sign," he continued, "but I know that a lot of people seem to think that if Tempus are against Voldemort, then they must be good."

"Well Harry," observed Dumbledore, "your fellow students will have to make their own minds up as to what path to follow in this life. The best service you can do for them is to outline clearly the misgivings you have, so that they might make such a decision having fully considered the pertinent issues."

"All well and good," said Fletcher, somewhat bitterly, "except that the Ministry will probably be recommending that everyone sign up by Friday."

The chamber fell back to a gloomy, reflective silence.

"Now then, 'arry, Ron, 'ermione," beamed Hagrid, as the light from his hut spilled out of the door, "c'mon in, I'll make us some tea... got some cakes 'n all."

The three Gryffindors exchanged wary glances behind Hagrid's back as they made their way into the gamekeeper's wooden hut. Cuisine a la Hagrid was not to be taken lightly.

"We're really glad you're back, Hagrid," announced Harry, once the half-giant had served tea, "but it must have been bad in France..."

Hagrid swallowed the prompt willingly, "dark times, right enough, 'arry. Dark times.

"'course, I shouldn' be tellin' you any o' this, but you probably guessed as much anyways, so I don' think it'll make right lot o' difference... We was jus' gettin' ready to come back to 'ogwarts anyway..."

"Did you meet with the Giants?" interrupted Hermione, eagerly, scowling at Ron's barely suppressed shudder.

"Aye, 'ermione, that we did, Olympe 'n me. Got some of 'em on our side, too. At the time..." Hagrid paused, staring into the fire.

"What do you mean 'at the time'," pressed Harry.

"Well, 'n you'll know about this you'selves, right enough, but the Order o' Tempus, well they gone and wrote to all the Giants 'n all, an' I don' doubt that most of 'em who were with us will 'ave signed up wi' Tempus now." Hagrid frowned, "jus' don' like the sound of it m'self... somethin' not quite right abou' tha' letter," he pointed to the now familiar brilliant white parchment with its burning blue script, lying on the mantelpiece.

"You said 'some of the Giants'," noted Ron, warily, "well, er, what about the rest of them. Did they just want to stay out of it altogether? I mean, they didn't say they *wanted* to join... join You-Know-Who, did they?" Ron's nerves appeared to increase as he made his way towards the end of the question.

"Tell the truth, Ron, Olympe an' I didn't get to meet with too many of the Giants. Keep the'selves to the'selves, the Giants. Not good memories o' their treatment las' time 'round. The only ones we met, well they were on our side already..."

"Were there a lot of them?" asked Hermione, perpetually optimistic.

"'bout seven or eight," admitted Hagrid, uncomfortably.

Ron had turned virtually white, "and all the rest...?" he couldn't finish the question.

Hagrid sighed deeply, "'n the rest, well, they don' think too highly o' non-Giant folk o' any description. But I don' doubt that You-Know-Who will talk em in." Hagrid's tone had become bitter, "Dumbledore, shouldn'a sent me... should o' sent someone better..."

"Nonsense!" cried Hermione, seeking to lift Hagrid's spirits, "Dumbledore sent you because you were the best person for the job! If you couldn't talk them round, then no-one could," she declared, confidently.

Hagrid beamed at her, "Than's 'ermione - d'ya wan' another cake?"

"No thanks," answered Hermione, hurriedly. The trio all lifted their partially gnawed cakes as evidence that they had no need for further sustenance to be plied upon them.

The following Saturday, at 10am, saw a large proportion of the fifth, sixth and seventh year students all crammed into Professor Flitwick's Charms classrooms to discuss the Tempus summons they'd all received.

Although Hogwarts was without any of its student officials, the former Head Boy, Head Girl and Prefects had maintained their notional duties ever since the Hair Incident, so it was unsurprising that Roger and Alicia jointly opened the meeting.

"Right, if I could have your attention," announced Alicia, calling the meeting to order, "as you all know, we're here to discuss the summons each of us has received from the Order of Tempus."

"Now we want to make it clear," continued Roger, "that we are not seeking to impose any decision on the student body. The idea of this meeting is to discuss concerns we might have, share knowledge and such, so that we can all make our own decision as to how to respond."

"I take it," Alicia had taken over the narrative, "that you've all seen the Ministry's guidance? It was in the Prophet on Thursday."

"Yes," sighed Fred, who was sitting with the remainder of the seventh year Gryffindors, "Percy made the statement on Fudge's behalf; *the Ministry welcomes the Order of Tempus, and its initiative in building a coalition to combat the increasing threat posed by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.*"

George continued the recital, "*the Ministry therefore recommends that those in receipt of a summons from the Order strongly consider lending their support to the campaign.* Which is a bit mild for Fudge - I was expecting him to say yes on behalf of the nation."

"Thank you... Twins," responded Roger, clearly deciding not to get embroiled in the identification problem, "but it seems clear to me that the Ministry have given this some thought. Fudge isn't going to make a public statement without having carefully thought the issues through in advance, is he?"

Harry snorted, but was immediately elbowed by Hermione to keep him quiet.

"Well," noted Estelle Lucid, a seventh year Ravenclaw, "the way I see it is this. The Order of Tempus have declared themselves to be opposed to You-Know-Who, which can only be a good thing," the room was full of nodding heads in agreement to this assessment, "so I can't see how joining the Order would be detrimental. I mean, we none of us want a return to the times our parents lived through, do we?"

It was true, of course, that even the eldest present had only been toddlers when Voldemort had been at the height of his powers in his previous incarnation. All they had were their parents' stories of what those times had been like, but even those tales, relayed second hand, had been enough to chill a generation.

Sensing the meeting was running away towards an all out vote of support for Tempus, Harry decided to voice his misgivings, "er well, I kind of have some reservations about the whole thing," he ventured. All eyes in the room turned to the Boy Who Lived.

"You see, we just don't know anything about the Order of Tempus at all. Nothing. Hermione and I have searched everywhere in the library. The Daily Prophet couldn't find a scrap of information on them. Merlin, even the Ministry don't know who they are! Doesn't that strike you all as a bit odd?"

"Remember, this outfit has sprung out of nowhere, and somehow managed to write to every witch or wizard over 15 years of age *across Europe*, and seemingly without any kind of build up."

"So they're organised," observed Roger, laconically, "so what? Actually, pretty encouraging, if you ask me..."

Harry shook his head, Roger had missed the point he was trying to make, "no, I mean, we really don't know who they are. For all we know, it could be another Dark Lord trying to ride to power on the back of collective paranoia..." Harry was vaguely aware that he couldn't quite carry that phrase with the same conviction as Dumbledore.

He tried a different tack, "I mean, my enemy's enemy... what are they, friend or foe?"

The room seemed to ponder Harry's words, until an all too familiar drawl cut across the room, "what's the matter, Potter, afraid someone else might steal your glory? Don't want anyone else to muscle in on the acclaim you get when you single-handedly topple the Dark Lord?"

"Malfoy..." started Harry, reluctantly. He'd vowed before entering the room not to let the Slytherin's taunts get to him.

Help came from a somewhat unexpected source, "I'm with Harry..." started Cho.

"Yes, well, we were all aware of *that*," snapped Padma, cutting the Ravenclaw Seeker's words off, and fixing her with an icy glare.

Cho returned a look of her own that would have cut concrete, and Harry looked on, dumbstruck, fervently wishing he was somewhere else. It was Cho who broke eye contact first, face flushing slightly.

Harry had little time to ponder this, however, as Roger had cleared his throat, "if we could return to the matter at hand," he suggested, making it clear that he considered the previous exchange to have been on a completely different topic.

It all went downhill from there.

Chapter 28

How many forms are there of the Leviosa charm?

Harry found that his dreams were becoming clearer, even with Madam Pomfrey's Solveig's Potion. Fortunately, the images and sensations were still some way short of being able to wake him from sleep, but they certainly were not conducive to peaceful nights.

The dreams normally took the same form - a captive would be brought to the Beauxbatons Key, their blood would be poured onto the stone, and then one of the Death Eaters (Harry suspected it was Lucius Malfoy on each occasion) would start some incantation. This would result in the victim's body being burnt up by the power within the Key, and then, at a certain point, Voldemort would cast Subsumatum.

Even though dulled by Solveig's potion, Harry's scar would always burn with ferocious intensity at this point. It didn't seem to bleed any more, however, so Harry supposed that was at least one thing to be grateful for.

This night's dream, however, had succeeded in waking Harry. He sat upright within the confines of his four-poster bed, arms wrapped around his knees, shivering slightly, even though he was soaked with sweat.

As always, he listened carefully to see if any of his dorm-mates had woken. Fortunately they all seemed to have remained asleep, so Harry was left alone to ponder the images in his personal darkness.

It must, he thought, have been Voldemort's anger that gave the connection sufficient power to cut through his sleep. The curtain of mist that had protected his sleep from the night's visions had been swept aside, summoning Harry into the courtyard at Beauxbatons...

The moon was now on the wane, so the Key was not as well lit as that first night. A body lay slumped against the Key, struggling weakly as the pool of blackness grew about it, soaking the gravel in the courtyard.

He knew from previous nights that the body would be left there for the time being. It would be gone by the following night, but Harry had no doubt that he was seeing the last moments of yet another person's life, their blood flowing from them as the Death Eaters looked on with disinterest. To them this person was just another object, to be discarded once it had outlived its usefulness.

"It is done, Master," Lucius Malfoy's voice.

"Indeed?" in a single word, Voldemort managed to instill a sense of doubt in his servants.

"Master?" enquired Malfoy, fear detectable in the quavering pitch of his voice. Clearly, this was not how matters normally proceeded.

"Was there, perhaps," asked Voldemort, "something you wished to share with me, Malfoy?"

"My Lord, I'm... not certain what it is you ask..." Even in his dream state, Harry had known that Malfoy was lying.

Clearly, Voldemort knew this too, "Crucio!" he'd exclaimed, and then watched as Malfoy collapsed, sprawling to the ground, his body wracked with convulsions. In his dream-state, Harry was aware that his own body was probably mimicking Malfoy's, but he knew he was experiencing only a fraction of the pain.

Voldemort ceased the torture, and watched as his servant struggled to his hands and knees, body clearly weakened by the pain.

"Thank you, M... M... Master," stammered Malfoy, saliva drooling from his mouth, "you are indeed m.. m.. merciful," he finished, the broken voice barely audible.

"I don't think so," noted Voldemort, with what might have passed for a tone of amusement, "Crucio!"

The torture was more prolonged this time, and Malfoy's shrieks echoed off the courtyard's three walls, projecting out across the lake. Once the spell had again been lifted, Malfoy remained sprawled face down on the gravel, not even daring to lift his eyes to look at his Master.

"You pathetic, treacherous imbecile," snarled Voldemort, "do you think you can outwit me? Do you think your power could ever rival mine, when it is I who has given you everything you have?"

Malfoy seemed unable to respond, his body remaining prone in the courtyard, shivering uncontrollably.

*"Did you think I wouldn't notice that you'd attempted to drain some of the stone's power for yourself? You ignorant, deluded fool. Your lack of loyalty shall cost you dearly - I have no place for traitors amongst my servants." Voldemort had paused to allow these words to sink in, before once more placing Malfoy under the Cruciatu*s Curse.

"I think," observed Voldemort, "that you would have appreciated the irony of your demise. Sadly, however, it would seem that you are in no fit state to witness your final minutes on this Earth... Subsumatum!"

Whether Malfoy noticed that the latest curse carried with it a different kind of pain was impossible to tell. Clearly, however, the man had snapped, and once Voldemort had finished draining Malfoy's powers, the silver-haired wizard was lying flat on his back in the courtyard, twitching uncontrollably.

"You see, fool?" enquired Voldemort of the body that lay at his feet, "your pitiful powers were no match for the Dark Lord. You would have been wise to understand that before embarking upon a path of deceit. Still, it remains to your family to meet the debt that remains... Snape."

"Yes, my Lord?" there was no doubting the owner of that voice. It had taunted Harry through Potions lessons for each of the four and a half years he'd been at Hogwarts.

"See to it that Malfoy's son understands the reward for treachery."

"Yes, my Lord," if there was any sign of nervousness on Snape's part, he didn't show it.

Voldemort turned his attention back to the broken corpse of Lucius Malfoy, "let us hope, for your son's sake, that he has a better understanding of loyalty. Avada Kedavra!"

Having replayed the dream in his head, Harry realised it was probably the flash of green that heralded the Killing Curse that had woken him up. It was, he thought, singularly ironic that he and Malfoy, Draco Malfoy, should end up with the unlikely connection that both their fathers had been killed by Voldemort.

This didn't herald a change in attitude on Harry's part, however. Draco Malfoy would certainly not be appearing on Harry's Christmas list any time in the near future.

Snape had been there, he remembered. After the events of the Third Task in the summer, Harry had assumed that Snape was acting as a double agent, secretly spying for Dumbledore. It was, he supposed, possible, that Snape was undercover for Dumbledore. But did he really have to continue to be so vindictive towards Harry simply for the sake of appearances?

And what was all that business about the Malfoy family being in debt to Voldemort? Harry knew enough about the legendary Malfoy wealth to know that any such debt was unlikely to be monetary. Which led him to suppose that there was either a debt of honour, or some kind of repayment for extremely dark magic lurking in the Malfoy family history.

So, reasoned Harry, Lucius Malfoy had been greedy, and tried to augment his powers by using the Key; probably he'd have had to use a sacrificial victim as the insulator against the Key's power. Voldemort had, somehow, discovered Malfoy's treachery, and executed him.

Snape had then been charged with the task of ensuring that Draco Malfoy understood the consequences of betrayal.

Which, to Harry's mind, suggested that, if he wasn't one already, Draco Malfoy was right at the top of the list of upcoming Death Eater initiates. No surprise there, then.

Except that, on reflection, it didn't seem to sit too well with Draco Malfoy's performance in the students' meeting on Saturday morning, where he'd appeared to be a staunch advocate for joining the Order of Tempus.

Clearly, there was more going on here than met the eye.

Harry took advantage of History of Magic the following afternoon to compose a letter to Dumbledore, relaying the outcome of the students' meeting (basically that most students didn't see a problem with signing up, particularly since the lack of the Sign of Tempus appeared to make you a legitimate target in the Order's eyes), and then detailing what he'd seen in his vision.

As far as he could tell, Draco Malfoy had no idea that anything might be amiss. Furthermore, Snape had been pretty much his usual self in Potions - perhaps he had looked tired. Or maybe Harry was just looking for evidence to correlate the events in his vision.

Everything had seemed so normal, in fact, that Harry began to wonder whether it really had been a vision, or just a somewhat macabre nightmare.

Still, he'd made up his mind to relay the information to Dumbledore. The great wizard would know what to make of it.

As a postscript, he'd also asked if he could see Lucas again. He knew he really should have suggested this much sooner, but at least he'd asked now.

Harry looked up from his parchment; Binns was droning on about yet *another* Goblin rebellion, seemingly oblivious to the fact that most of the class were 'thinking with their eyes shut'. Ron, on Harry's left, was one of the few students left awake, and he was frantically scribbling copious notes.

Harry knew what that was all about - Alicia had finally given in at the weekend, and proclaimed that Ron would hold the Quidditch Captaincy at least until Harry resumed his flying duties, at which point the situation would be reconsidered. Harry had had to nudge Ron to complain at the deal; Ron, of course, knew full well that Harry would not be returning to his flying days, but no-one else knew that, and if they were to look convincing, the team had to believe that Ron felt slighted by Alicia's implication that he might not be up to the job.

Looking at the sheaf of parchments that Ron was amassing, Harry was quietly relieved that his participation in the evening's Quidditch practice would be as an observer only.

To Harry's dismay, there was no owl from Dumbledore the following morning. Clearly, then, he wouldn't be seeing Lucas that day; his powers were increasing rapidly now, and the difficulty in maintaining control was becoming more and more pronounced. He doubted that Lucas would have an instant solution, but, at the very least, he felt sure that the Caribbean Mage would be able to indicate the right path for Harry to follow.

Further ruminations along these lines were cut short, however, by a rumour that swept across the Great Hall like a tidal wave. It seemed to have started at the Beauxbatons table, and picked up force as the shocked news was relayed to anyone who would listen.

And, that morning, *everyone* was listening.

Mont St Michel had fallen to the Death Eaters.

Harry mentally scolded himself for having been so complacent. Since he'd been watching Voldemort conduct the nightly subsumption rituals at the Beauxbatons Key, he'd assumed that there would be no other Dark activity until the Key had been drained.

He'd been wrong. It seemed that Death Eaters had stormed the Mount, a traditional stronghold of the French wizarding community, and they had stormed it ruthlessly.

The Dark Mark had been projected into the night sky, and by morning the full extent of the catastrophe was becoming clear. The Death Eaters hadn't distinguished between Muggles and magical folk. They hadn't distinguished between adults and children.

They'd slaughtered the community's entire population in a single night.

Harry was beside himself. Why hadn't he known? Why hadn't he foreseen this? Why hadn't he stopped it? Why had he let himself be used in Voldemort's resurrection ritual?

Somewhere, a tiny voice in the back of his mind was patiently trying to explain that he wasn't being rational about this. But, as Harry struggled to come to terms with his apparent helplessness in the situation, rationality was not a prime concern.

His mind went back to his resolution at the Quidditch pitch, after the Slytherin versus Hufflepuff. He would face down Voldemort, no matter what it took. He'd be there, and Voldemort would be called to account. He, Harry James Potter, Last of the Magi, was going to make absolutely certain of that.

As breakfast progressed, Harry saw flashes of the brilliant white parchment of the Tempus Summons, as students, enraged by the previous night's atrocity, decided to make a stand. Harry, too, had re-read his own summons after breakfast; *We urge you to make your stand with the force against Voldemort, so that his presence can be forever removed from these lands.*

He'd had to forcibly remind himself, standing in the Gryffindor Common Room, of all his previous concerns *not* to sign the parchment there and then. Actually, he discovered that once he'd halted the initial compunction to sign the summons, the reservations came thick and fast, until he was shaking his head at how close he'd come to signing the parchment.

He reflected idly on the complete lack of intelligence shown by Voldemort's troops. They must have been aware of the summons from the Order of Tempus; if there was one thing that was bound to have people rushing to sign up to the new Order, it would be hard to think of something more effective than...

Harry's blood suddenly chilled.

Voldemort *wasn't* that stupid. He *wouldn't* have ordered such a monumental strike at a critical time; he would have foreseen that people's immediate reaction would have been to run to the Order of Tempus.

Voldemort had shown, over the course of the quiet summer, that he could be patient when required. Why strike at Mont St Michel *before* the Order of Tempus' self-imposed one-month thinking period had elapsed? He would have known that such an outrageous act would only serve to increase the public's revulsion of him.

And if Tempus really was the sworn enemy of Voldemort, the last thing Voldemort would have wanted would be to willingly shepherd new disciples to his enemy's army.

But the alternative was equally abhorrent. That the Order of Tempus had staged the massacre to 'encourage' doubters that there was a need to make a stand.

"Nobody sign *anything!*" commanded Harry, urgently. All eyes fell to the Boy-Who-Lived, as he attempted to elaborate, "this isn't right! It doesn't make sense!"

"Well, Mont St Michel certainly meets my definition of 'senseless'," observed Katie Bell, acidly, "why shouldn't we join forces to defeat You-Know-Who?"

"Harry, mate," that was Fred, judging by his proximity to Angelina, "are you sure you're not taking this a bit, well, personally? Not that I'm saying Malfoy's right, but, you know, they're against Voldemort! What more do you need?"

Harry scanned the eyes of the various fifth, sixth and seventh year Gryffindors facing him, "I think what you're saying is that 'anyone's better than Voldemort', am I right?"

And still they all flinched at the name. Harry wondered whether they'd learn to flinch at 'Tempus'.

"Well," started Alicia, "basically yes. I mean, we know you have reserv..."

Harry cut her off, "you're really saying that anything is better than Voldemort?" he asked, levelly, "*anything?* Absolutely anything at all?"

Seeing that he'd finally got their attention, Harry decided to tail his comments off before dashing through the portrait hole, "the Order of Tempus gave us all a month to consider their summons. All I'm saying is... don't rush into this." Harry paused, briefly, to make sure they'd all got the message before racing back down to the Great Hall.

There were times when being the Boy-Who-Lived carried certain privileges, and, he thought, being able to stop conversation in the Great Hall dead upon arrival had to be one of them, "**EVERYBODY!**" he yelled, sliding to a stop on the polished floorboards, at the opposite end of the Halls to the staff table.

Harry winced as Professor McGonagall fixed him with an icy stare, clearly about to say something, but a flash of brilliant white at the Hufflepuff table reminded him of the urgency of his mission. "*Nobody sign anything!*" he ordered, as loud and as clearly as he could.

Behind him, he heard what he knew from his sense to be Hermione and Ron rushing to join him. It was fortunate, Harry reflected, that breakfast was by far the least formal meal at Hogwarts. Students tended to drift in and out right up until the first lessons started. Of course, he'd have missed some students, but a good bulk of the student body were still in the Hall, and he had their attention.

"Now I know that we're all outraged at what happened in France last night, but, please, don't rush into signing to join Tempus just yet. We don't know what they are. Really, we know nothing about them, and we've still got almost three weeks before we really have to decide."

At least, thought Harry, they were listening to him.

"You see," he continued, "Tempus could be *anything*. Anything. At. All. Just because they've declared war on Voldemort," Harry sighed inwardly at the almost perfectly synchronised flinch that swept the Hall, "does *not* make them an ally.

"My enemy's enemy is just that - my enemy's enemy. *Please*, people, don't leap into the unknown on this. You've got another three weeks to reach your decision, and there's no need, *no need* to sign up any quicker."

Realising he might sound a little too pro-Voldemort, Harry decided he'd better establish his own credentials, "Now you all know who I am. Nobody, I'm willing to bet, nobody wants Voldemort defeated more than I, and I am willing to fight that battle. Alone if I have to, but I'll be there, or I'll die trying. That I know."

The blood had risen to his face, and his heart was hammering in his ribcage. He *had* to make them see. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that the whole of Mont St Michel had been an elaborate bluff by Tempus, to entice people to join.

"So when you make that decision, in three weeks' time, just make sure you know what it is that you're signing up to. Please..."

Harry had run out of words, and stood at the head of the Great Hall, feeling the gaze of a hundred pairs of eyes fixed on him. He wondered what they thought of that - had the Boy-Who-Lived finally lost it? Well, he thought, tomorrow's Prophet would probably let him know in no uncertain terms.

Harry looked back at the staff table, where Professor McGonagall had resumed her habitual tight-lipped expression. No sign of displeasure at Harry's outburst, nor, however, was there one of approval. Sweeping his gaze across the head table, Harry saw that all the staff present appeared to have adopted an equally blank expression.

It seemed clear that everyone was still waiting for him to make the next move, so Harry exhaled slowly, and about turned, ready to leave the Great Hall once more. As he did so, Cho caught his eye. She held his gaze for about a second, before he turned to Ron and Hermione, and the trio left the hall, heading for the lake.

"Well," observed Ron, conversationally, "that was a talking point. Look Harry, I know you've got, well, your own agenda with You-Know-Who, but aren't you being a bit, well," Ron flinched in anticipation of the response his next word would get, "defensive of him at the moment."

"Voldemort didn't attack Mont St Michel last night," said Harry flatly, "Tempus did."

"Harry," replied Ron, warily, "you've gone mental."

Hermione was keeping very quiet.

"No Ron, *think* about it. Voldemort's currently holed up in Beauxbatons, building up his powers from the Key. He's got most of his senior Death Eaters with him, probably. The rituals are being conducted at night - who's he got to spare to launch an attack on Mont St Michel?"

"Well, we don't know how many bloody Death Eaters he's got, but Harry, there were witnesses. The Dark Mark was in the sky!"

"Voldemort is not stupid. He's psychotic, evil, repugnant - all those things. But one thing he most definitely isn't is stupid. Now tell me, what was your first response when you heard about Mont St Michel?"

"Revenge," said Ron simply, "and it suddenly seemed that joining the Order of Tempus would be worth it to get rid of You-Know-Who..."

"Right," confirmed Harry, "and don't you think that Voldemort would have realised that?"

"Well..." started Ron, "but..."

Harry watched his best friend process the chain of thoughts, "you see? It looks like it was stage-managed to deliberately provoke people to join Tempus."

"Possibly," said Hermione, "but it still could have been You-Know-Who, you know, trying to prove that Tempus didn't frighten him."

"Voldemort showed this summer that he can be patient. He would have foreseen that a strike of that kind against Mont St Michel would have resulted in international condemnation and outrage..."

"Not, mind you, that the man needs a publicist," noted Ron.

"Condemnation and outrage," persisted Harry, "and so why strike when people still have three weeks to respond to the summons from Tempus? He'd have been better off, if he really did mount the attack, to wait until *after* the Tempus deadline had passed. That way he wouldn't have forced people to join his enemy's army."

"But that's totally barbaric," exclaimed Hermione, horrified, "they're treating the people of Mont St Michel as though they're just pawns in a glorified game of chess!"

"Well the problem is that we don't know for sure, yet. All I know is that Mont St Michel doesn't feel right for a Death Eater attack. It's just too stupid. Even for them. What it does do, though, is raise more doubts in my mind as to what Tempus is, and what they stand for. Snuffles and Lupin are trying to find out more at the moment."

"Y'know, Harry, if you're right about this, we've got a war on two fronts on our hands..."

It was, thought Harry, to be expected that most students would be fairly stand-offish with him the rest of the day. The Gryffindor fifth years stood by him, however. Some, perhaps, a little closer than others, but he was hardly going to hold *that* against Parvati.

Of course, he missed her companionship, but at the same time it was something of a relief not having to continually think about all the various secrets she hadn't been party too. Nonetheless he still had to make peace with Cho over the whole fiasco; he assumed it went without saying that Cho had heard the supposed reason for his split with Parvati, that he and Cho had been seeing each other behind her back.

So Cho would need a pretty good explanation as to why he hadn't been able to adequately refute the allegation. Damn. More lies coming up, he thought, glumly.

Potions.

"We are departing from our usual syllabus this lesson," announced Snape, "as a rare opportunity to acquire some boar-hearts presented itself. *Pay attention, Thomas*, 10 points from Gryffindor...

"As I was saying, I have acquired some boar-hearts, and this afternoon we will be attempting to brew a simulation of Greenjuice Syrup. I say simulation as the real recipe requires the fresh heart of a relative, so you need not worry, Longbottom, this is a rare example of a potion where I expect you all to fail."

What was curious about the last barb was that, even though it had been clearly directed at Neville, Snape's eyes hadn't strayed from Malfoy. Malfoy, for his part, had met Snape's glare with what seemed to be a decidedly uncertain look.

"The reason for using the boar-heart," continued Snape, "is that they are virtually indistinguishable from a human heart. Indistinguishable. So, today's lesson constitutes an opportunity to practice a potion without having to use an ingredient that can, at best, be somewhat difficult to locate."

Harry was aware that Pansy was grinning throughout the introduction. She knew something.

"Now, if you could select a heart from the tray as I walk about the class, *no Weasley, that one's Malfoy's*, and then collect the remaining ingredients as detailed on page 322 of the text..."

Snape meandered about the classroom dishing out the boar hearts until only one was left. He approached Hermione and Malfoy's desk, locking eyes with Malfoy. "Malfoy's heart," intoned the Potions master, levelly, not taking his eyes from Malfoys for even a split second as he levitated the organ on to the desk.

Malfoy looked down at the reddish mass on the desk, before looking back at Snape in horror. Snape's mouth twisted into a thin, cruel smile as Malfoy pushed himself away from the desk, and left the classroom hurriedly.

His mission seemingly complete, Snape turned to head back to his desk. Hermione started to move to follow Malfoy, before she caught Harry's eye.

"Go," whispered Harry, unsure really as to why he was giving her that particular answer to the unasked question in her eyes.

Hermione paused, doubtfully.

"I don't understand. I don't understand at all," said Harry, "but I trust you. Go."

And Hermione did, fleeing the classroom after Malfoy.

"Please advise Ms Granger that I shall expect her in detention tomorrow evening from 7," announced Snape to no-one in particular, "and 20 points from Gryffindor for insubordination."

Pansy turned to Harry, "guess that Mudblood bitch of yours just has a soft spot for orphans."

Harry turned to glare at her, not in the least daunted by the smile he was greeted with. She might be triumphalist, he thought, but she was also completely thick; again she'd declared her hand unforced. She knew about Lucius Malfoy.

Belatedly, Harry realised that Ron might not have taken the near simultaneous departure of Hermione and Malfoy too well. He glanced across at the desk Ron shared with Blaise, but Ron's eyes were fixed firmly on the pestle and mortar, where he was grinding something into oblivion, jaw clenched. It didn't bode well.

Finally, Harry's gaze turned to the now vacant desk next to him. The heart, oozing blood near black in colour, lay on the wooden surface. And it was still beating.

Chapter 29

Who is currently Minister for Magic in the French Ministry?

Malfoy's heart. That's what Snape had said, and Draco Malfoy didn't doubt for one second that the double meaning in the statement had been intentional as he staggered away from the dungeons.

It had still been beating. He'd seen the blood, near black in colour, seep out from the quivering mass, oozing across the desk. And he knew, knew for certain that he was looking at the heart of his father, Lucius Malfoy.

"See what happens when you try and cross the Devil, Lucius?" muttered Draco bitterly.

It didn't make sense. He hated his father. The man was contemptible, throwing his entire life into slavish worship of the Dark Lord. Driven blind not even by ambition, but by greed. Greed for power, influence.

He hated his father, so why did news of his death hurt him? Maybe they were right, and hate is just another form of love. Perhaps if he'd had no emotional reaction to his father at all, he'd have remained completely unmoved by Snape's theatrics.

Draco had long expected this day. You didn't idly throw your lot in with Dark Power; everyone knew the risks, and the consequences. It was a historical truism that powerful Dark wizards could get a little... fanatical at times. The fanaticism usually developed into a paranoia, and the greater a threat a wizard's disciples posed, the more chance there was that such threat would be neutralised.

Permanently.

So he'd long known that, eventually, his father would die. Not of old age, in his armchair by the fire. No, Lucius was always going to die screaming. And Draco had thought he'd mentally prepared himself for that day. Clinical detachment was how he was supposed to respond.

He wasn't supposed to have been shocked. He wasn't supposed to have let his guard drop.

He wondered, again, what this all meant. Was it his father's death that shocked him, or the simplicity of the own threat to himself. 'Join us,' it said, 'or join your father.'

And then there was Snape. Did this mean that the Dark Lord now trusted him? It didn't seem likely. Maybe the whole thing was an elaborate reminder to Snape that he, too, should toe the line.

Quick footsteps were echoing behind him; he wouldn't have thought it in Snape's style to call him back to the lesson, and chose to ignore them, continuing towards his destination, which, at that moment in time, was whatever place was as far from the dungeons as was physically possible.

"Draco!"

Malfoy spun on his heel - that was Granger's voice. He watched as the Gryffindor slowed down on approach, doubt evident in her eyes.

And bloody right you should be nervous, Granger, you've got no idea what you're facing.

"What do you want?" he asked, in a half-hearted drawl. He *hated* his father, so why was he... perturbed by the affair?

Control. Get a grip. Breathe.

"Draco," repeated Granger, now that she had closed the distance between them to a conversational gap, "are you... was that really... I mean... are you OK?"

Draco noted Granger's hesitancy, and nervousness. "Come to drag me back to the dungeon, have you?"

"No," she admitted, "I came to see if you were alright... I was... worr.. I was... *concerned*." Damn, she almost sounded defensive!

"Come to gloat, then, I take it?" he shook his head condescendingly, "you don't have any idea what just happened in there. Be thankful for that..."

"That really was a Malfoy heart, wasn't it?"

Draco blinked. So she hadn't thought he was simply squeamish then. "Father's."

"I'm sorry..."

"No you're not."

She looked as though she was about to argue that point, and then backed down. "OK, I don't feel sorry for *him*, but that was an evil thing for Snape to do. To you. In front of everyone...."

"So why are you here?"

"We're... more than just Potions partners, aren't we? The study evenings..."

Draco returned a studiously blank look. He didn't need friends now. He needed space. He needed to focus, understand exactly what had happened in Potions, and how he should respond.

What he most certainly did *not* need was to be saddled with a chattering busybody seemingly intent on poking her nose into other people's affairs. "This is of no concern to you. Leave me alone."

"As a human being, Draco, I'm not going to leave you; you're not... stable."

Never, ever doubt the Malfoy control. Not *stable*? She really did not know what she'd got herself into, did she?

The initial shock of the incident had dissipated, and a smouldering anger was starting to build in its place.

Draco was not so foolish as to immediately lash out at Snape, or the Dark Lord himself. On the other hand, a new project had just presented itself to him - a nice diversionary challenge, which, once complete, would carry some small satisfaction of its own.

Hermione Granger was about to be played.

Composing his thoughts, and marshalling his emotions, Draco went for a confused, distressed persona, with just a hint of neediness about it, "I just... I can't believe... I don't understand how that happened," he stammered, trying to look bewildered.

Granger moved closer to him, to rest a sympathetic hand on his arm.

Oh foolish girl. Didn't anyone ever tell her not to play with fire?

Draco Malfoy was going to enjoy this.

Hermione looked at the Slytherin, hurt and betrayed. Was he really saying that the mutual study evenings in the Charms classrooms meant nothing?

Well, she conceded, she'd hardly class him as a friend like Ron or Harry, but there was something different about him this year, and, well, she just felt that he deserved to be given the chance. "As a human being, Draco, I'm not going to leave you; you're not... stable."

She winced, inwardly at the poor choice of words. Bravo, Hermione, she chided herself, sarcastically, if anything is going to send him over the edge, questioning his grip on reality should do nicely.

She watched, hesitantly, as Draco seemed to struggle with whatever inner demons he was trying to fight, "I just... I can't believe... I don't understand how that happened."

It was so alien to see Draco Malfoy vulnerable, of all things. Instinctively Hermione rested a comforting hand on his arm, to let him know that she was there, and was trying to help.

He blinked, seemingly distracted, and looked about the pair, standing as they were in one of the corridors coming up from the dungeon. "I, I need to get out of here," he said, almost apologetic in tone. "Away from the dungeons," he clarified, not that there was any need for that under the circumstances.

"Well where were you headed?" she enquired, "do you want to walk around the lake?" Hermione cursed herself inwardly. The absolute last thing she wanted was to be seen walking around Hogwarts lake on the well-known couples' circuit. That really would be... unwise.

Fortunately, Draco had a different destination in mind, "I was thinking..." he started, hesitantly, "of going to the Astronomy Tower...."

Hermione took her previous thought back. Better the lake than be caught illicitly sneaking into the Astronomy Tower with Malfoy. All the protestations in the world wouldn't sway opinion on *that* one.

"You know... it's high up. Get a sense of perspective. Clear air. Collect my thoughts."

Well, she thought, when he put it like that, it *did* make sense. Plus everyone was in lessons, so no-one would see them.

Except Harry would know, with that damned sense of his. But Harry had said that she could go. Would he tell Ron?

"Um, do you want me to come with you?" she asked, doubtfully, before quickly adding "to listen," for clarification.

Draco didn't answer, instead he locked eyes with her, and she found herself peering into those gray, emotionless eyes. It was impossible to see what he was thinking, but the sheer blankness of the gaze spoke to her of a void. A loss.

As Hermione was trying to work out what that look actually meant, Malfoy set off towards the Astronomy Tower, letting Hermione's hand slide off his arm.

She wrestled with the decision. Leave him or follow? Go back to Potions, that heart was probably still on the desk, she remembered, or follow Draco to the Astronomy Tower? Potions? Tower?

Potions.

But if he *really* had wanted to be alone up there, he'd have said so, wouldn't he? He was still Malfoy - far too proud to admit that he wanted company...

Tower, then. "Draco, wait!"

For a brief moment, he actually wondered whether he'd overdone the aloofness. But it soon passed as she asked him to wait, and scurried to catch up with him. The Astronomy Tower it was then.

If he'd dared to smirk at that point, he would have done. The sheer comic delight of the situation was almost killing him. He and Hermione Granger, best friend to Glorious Potter and his Weasel sidekick. He and Hermione Granger, skipping Potions together, in the Astronomy Tower. The rumours were going to kill her.

And oh yes, there would be rumours. He was going to make damned sure of that.

The view from the Astronomy Tower was actually quite special, Hermione reflected, looking down from the commanding height at Hogwarts' grounds. Draco had been right, there was a

kind of calming influence to the place, maybe as a function of its remoteness, its physical distance from the commotion of the rest of the school.

Draco had been leaning against one of the windows, staring into space for some time now. She wondered whether she should prompt him into conversation.

She crossed the room to stand next to him, staring out across the lake towards the Forbidden Forest, "how did you know?" she asked gently.

Draco took a deep breath to compose himself. "Lucius - my father - was a Death Eater. Potter was right about that."

No surprise there, then.

"Anyway," he continued, still staring fixedly off into space, "he was into dark magic. The Dark Arts. It's kind of a family tradition..."

Hermione was surprised by the unguarded comment - he'd virtually admitted he'd studied the Dark Arts himself.

"I don't know how it happened, but Snape... oh, yeah, Snape's a Death Eater too, well he's also in the Dark Lord's inner circle, I guess." He shrugged.

Hermione frowned. As explanations went, that hadn't amounted to much. Maybe he needed a bit of prompting, "but I don't understand. How do you know that it was your father's heart in Potions? It might just have been Snape winding you up..."

"Snape's not the type," assured Malfoy, levelly, his voice tinged with bitterness. "Death Eaters are all obsessed with their internal politics. Jockeying for position to gain the Dark Lord's favour."

Hermione nodded, it made sense. Hence Pettigrew's eagerness to betray Harry's parents all those years ago.

"So, I'm guessing that my father got too greedy, and was punished... Snape was then told to relay news of this to me, and *that* was what this afternoon was all about."

"But why?" asked Hermione, perplexed, resting her hand once more on his arm. Not that he seemed to notice.

"It was probably as much a message for his other Death Eaters as it was for me," he said, almost absently, as though it were a matter of a few lines scribbled on an owl post, rather than the still-beating heart of his father.

"But... but human sacrifice!" exclaimed Hermione, "that's... that's evil!"

Draco turned to face her. Since she still had hold of his arm, this ended up pushing her arm outward, opening her body to him. Not that she really noticed this at the time, but as she replayed the events back in her mind later, she saw how they'd ended up in that position.

By way of reply, he'd simply said, "I have seen evil you cannot even imagine."

And she'd looked into those gray eyes of his, and seen the pain behind them. Seen the knowledge he had, and had taken a further step towards him, to close the gap, as though physical proximity might ease the torment.

There was an art to it, this dance. He was incrementally steering Granger closer and closer to his body - she'd initiated the physical contact, it wasn't as though he was forcing her to do anything against her will.

The sharpest ones always thought they were too clever to be tricked. Always assumed that they could see through the facade to the real person.

It was almost a source of disappointment that Granger appeared to be no different. Show a little vulnerability, pretend to grasp at the empathy, and she was sold. The challenge now was to maintain the momentum, and lead this on to its natural conclusion.

But he had plenty of time, no need to rush, since that would only increase her suspicions. First off, draw her in. Make her believe in this connection.

Next he'd have to draw back, see how far she'd follow. Then draw close once more. Confuse her, keep her guessing, make her uncertain of his feelings. The uncertainty should then exaggerate her emotions, and, eventually she'd be his.

Briefly.

It wasn't exactly revenge against Snape or the Dark Lord, but as a game in itself it would be reasonably satisfying. With the added bonus of driving a wedge between the immortal Gryffindor trio. He might well have just been served his father's still beating heart on a plate, but, all things considered, things were looking up.

She had no idea what it must be like to lose a father. Especially when you were informed in such melodramatic fashion; still, it suited You-Know-Who's sense of style.

"But why would You-Know-Who tell Snape to deliver the heart to you. Why not to your mother?"

Draco almost flinched, she thought, at the mention of his mother.

"My mother..." Draco started, but then tailed off, and returned to staring out of the window. In so doing, he'd somehow steered her, so that she was now half standing in front of him. She marvelled at the naturalness of the situation - she'd started off on the other side of the room, and now here she was, practically being hugged by Draco Malfoy.

A Slytherin.

"My mother," he started again, a reflective tone to his voice, "there's this curse. Lucius found it over the summer. It's called Subsumatum."

Hermione's heart fluttered. Subsumatum! Draco knew. She kept quiet, and waited for him to elaborate - she knew if she professed interest in the curse, he might suspect something of her own research.

"Subsumatum... it's an evil thing, very, very painful. Worse than Crucio."

Hermione feared what she might hear next - she could *tell* this was hard for him. In all their study sessions, he'd never once mentioned his parents. She inched backwards into his body, trying to provide reassurance through the physical connection, hoping that he'd continue the narrative.

He didn't seem to notice the increased contact, but he did keep on talking, "Father intended to present it to the Dark Lord as a gift. A cheap bribe for more power and influence."

It was strange, she thought, but Draco didn't seem to be enthusiastically embracing the concept of becoming a Death Eater himself. Maybe there was hope for him yet.

"But he had to test it first. So he used the first test subject that presented itself. Narcissa."

Draco's voice was now dulled and leaden. Hermione couldn't begin to imagine what horrors he must have witnessed. That curse had incapacitated Harry, and, not to join the Creevey's fan club or anything, but Harry was *special* when it came to resisting Dark curses.

Hermione hardly dared ask the question, "what did it do to her?"

His face was resting against her hair (when had *that* happened?), and she felt his breath ruffle her curls as he answered, lifelessly, "she broke. It destroyed her. She's virtually a squib."

She could feel his body tense at the memory. Had he seen it cast? Or did he just see the consequences? Neither were pleasant. "Draco," she half murmured, "I'm so, so sorry..."

But he didn't know what it really did, did he? He seemed to think that Narcissa Malfoy had lost her magical ability because of the intensity of the pain she'd experienced. Not because Subsumatum had drained her of it, transferring that power to her husband.

Draco was reasonably pleased with the day's progress. Of course, the fact that his family life appeared to be a virtual soap opera, and a bad one at that, played into his hands whilst casting for the sympathy vote.

Still, Granger seemed to have bought the whole charade, and here he was, practically nuzzling her hair, their bodies pressed against each other. OK, so they weren't facing each other, that would have been too much for the first attempt, but for now they'd just stand there, and enjoy the view.

If he was really, really lucky, someone would walk in and find the two in this somewhat compromising position. Explain yourself out of *that* one, if you can, Granger.

Eventually she stirred, as though shaking herself out of some private reverie, saying "classes will be ending soon. I have to get back to Gryffindor."

He'd sighed, briefly, in an attempt to portray mild disappointment. It seemed to work.

"You'll be OK, won't you?" she asked, turning her head to catch his eyes. Their lips had been barely inches apart, but he knew better than to kiss her today. Let her wonder what might have been. Make her doubt.

"I'll be fine," he assured her, levelly, not moving.

She wasn't moving either, "I really must go. I don't want the others to miss me..."

He made no attempt to move - she was going to have to release herself from this. And he took immense delight from noting her apparent reluctance to do so.

Eventually, however, she twisted herself out of the embrace, and laid a hand back on his arm, "Draco, if you ever need to talk... OK?"

He didn't thank her. Didn't watch her leave the room. He just stared out of the window, not seeing the view, and it was only when the door had closed behind her that a smile played across his face.

Chapter 30

How many talons are there on a Norwegian Ridgeback's rear claw?

At the end of Potions, Ron had immediately swept past Harry and through the door in tight lipped silence, leaving him to collect Hermione's books together to take back to Gryffindor. Thankfully he could sense that Hermione had left the Astronomy Tower, so at least she'd be in the Common Room when they got back.

Unless, of course, Ron had managed to say something... inopportune to her before Harry arrived. He quickened his step in pursuit of his best friend, who appeared to be storming through the corridors on some kind of mission.

"Ron!" called Harry, struggling under the weight of Hermione's bag, laden as it was with seemingly half the library ('you should never waste an opportunity to catch up on your reading'), "wait up!"

Ron, however, didn't seem to be able to hear, and had by now disappeared around the corner, leaving a crowd of mildly startled, and slightly nervous onlookers facing Harry. "He's a bit upset about something," he apologised, "I think..." Excellent powers of deduction, there, Harry, he thought. Eight out of three for observation.

When he got to Gryffindor tower, it was to find a group of his housemates looking uncomfortable as they hung around by Sir Cadogan. "What's the matter?" called Harry, trying to catch his breath. Ron could really shift when he wanted to. "The password's..."

"Um, it's not the password that's the problem," explained Angelina, delicately, as Harry moved within hearing range.

The sounds of high pitched voices yelling at each other had clearly put his fellow Gryffindors off attempting to enter the Common Room at that moment.

Well, so much for Gryffindor bravery, thought Harry.

"Alright," he said, resignedly, "I'll go in." He was a little bit hurt that no-one tried to dissuade him.

"...Doing with that slimy, rat faced, Slytherin git?" screamed Ron, his face almost purple.

"He was upset!" countered Hermione, with a dangerous level of control.

The two were standing opposite each other, in front of the fireplace. Hermione had her hands on her hips, and a look in her eyes that would have sent lesser men scurrying for cover. Or wiser ones.

Ron was remonstrating with his arms, hair mussled up, presumably from that thing of his where he ran his hand through his hair when trying to make an important point.

"Hi guys," greeted Harry lightly, flicking his eyes from one to the other. Not that it made a difference, since his two friends were both staring fixedly at each other like gunslingers waiting for someone to shout 'draw!'.

"He's a Malfoy," stated Ron, vehemently.

Harry, although not keen to take sides in this, had to concede that it was hard to argue with Ron on that particular point.

"He's still a human being," returned Hermione, clearly in charitable mode.

"So that's it, then? You're all best friends with that slimy git now, running off to 'comfort' him because you think he's upset..."

"Ron..." Harry tried to cut in and stop his friend before he said...

"...so was it a snog and grope in the dungeons, or did you have a quick shag in the Astronomy Tower?"

...something like that, Harry thought, wincing.

"*For your information*, Ronald Weasley," snapped Hermione, "my personal affairs are *exactly* that. Mine!"

"But haven't you forgotten what he did to Harry? To me? What about Buckbeak in the third year? How can you be so *stupid* as to run straight into his arms? HE'S A SLYTHERIN."

It was amazing, thought Harry. Ron and Hermione had been bickering for pretty much four years straight now, and he still hadn't learnt the cardinal rule - never, ever, *ever* accuse Hermione of deficiency in the thinking department.

"I am *perfectly* aware of his history, thank you very much. But what I do with my life is my business, and is no concern of yours. You don't own me, I'm not your property, and the sooner you just *grow up*, the quicker you'll realise that," and with those icy words, Hermione snatched the bag proffered by Harry, and swept up into the girls' dorm.

"Oh, um, Hermione," called Harry to her retreating back. She paused on the stairs, but didn't turn round, "ah, Snape's given you, er detention. Tomorrow evening. Um. Seven." He thought it best not to mention the House Points as she resumed her course to the dorm, and theatrically slammed the door behind her. Harry whirled on Ron, "Oh well done, Weasley."

"What'd I do?" asked Ron, genuinely bewildered.

Harry didn't dignify the question with a response, and instead returned to the portrait hole, "'s OK guys, you can come in now."

Ron at least had the grace to look sheepish as the Gryffindors gingerly entered the Common Room, all carefully avoiding eye contact.

Harry meanwhile, had dumped his bag, and grabbed Ron's arm, "c'mon, we're going for a walk," he commanded.

"You knew, didn't you?" accused Ron as they braved the bitter wind on their way to the Quidditch pitch. It was, of course, mid November, so there were relatively few people foolish enough to be outside at this time. It was the sort of weather that would only appear inviting to mad dogs and Quidditch captains.

"Knew what?" asked Harry, innocently, anxious not to become the new focus of the famed Weasley temper.

"About her and Malfoy."

"Not *exactly*," he hedged.

"So how long's it been going on?"

"Ron, we don't know that anything is going on. Hermione thought Malfoy was upset, and, you know how she is... fellow student suffering."

"Wouldn't have thought Malfoy was the squeamish type," mused Ron, "I mean, I know those hearts were a bit gruesome, but I'd have thought, what with him being Death Eater spawn, he'd be used to that..."

"Malfoy was given a different heart to the rest of the class, Ron." Harry hadn't mentioned the nightmare to anyone other than Dumbledore. Clearly, Hermione had deduced what the message had been immediately, but Ron tended to be a little slower on the uptake. "Do you remember Snape saying *Malfoy's heart*?"

"Yeah, Snape and his bloody Slytherin favouritism. Probably wanted Malfoy to have the best specimen."

"Er, no. That really was Malfoy's heart, Ron. The heart of a Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy."

An expression of delight slowly crossed Ron's face, and Harry was fervently glad Hermione hadn't been there to see it. Not, of course, that he suspected she'd have been too distressed at the news either. But Ron's response was, well, bordering on gloating.

"Lucius Malfoy?" the tone of someone who was daring not to hope.

"Yup," confirmed Harry, trying to remind himself that this was supposed to be a serious conversation. The corners of his mouth twitched a bit.

"Lucius *Death-Eater* Malfoy?" persisted Ron, incredulously, eyes lighting up.

"The same," agreed Harry, seeing no reason to hide a smile.

"Lucius Malfoy who gave Ginny that enchanted diary that nearly killed her? Who got Hagrid sent to Azkaban? Lucius Malfoy who got in a fight with my dad, *my bloody dad*, in Flourish and Blotts? He's dead?"

"He's dead."

"You promise? You're not just winding me up?" Ron was almost overcome with glee.

"He's dead."

"Well how do *you* know?"

Harry pointed at his scar.

"Oh. Was it horrible?" asked Ron, trying not to sound too optimistic.

Harry shuddered at the recollection, "worse than he deserved."

"That's just too bad," sympathised Ron, with no evidence of empathy whatsoever.

The two friends walked onwards towards the Quidditch pitch in the half-light.

"You're going to have to apologise to Hermione, though."

"Harry! She's virtually shagging Malfoy.... MALFOY!"

"No she's not," attested Harry, wearily.

"So what is she doing with him, then?"

"I don't know."

"Hah!" crowed Ron, triumphantly, "so she could be... and with bloody *Malfoy!*"

"Ron, I trust Hermione, and so should you. You do, don't you?"

"Well I did, but.. Malfoy!"

"We have to assume she knows what she's doing, Ron. And really, she wouldn't do that. They seem to get on OK in Potions, this year, and, being fair, Malfoy's not been nearly as..."

"Malfoyish?"

"...Unpleasant this year, so far, has he?"

"Well no. Not yet. But give him time... You know Malfoy - he's probably just got some kind of grand scheme running, and is going to stab everyone in the back as soon as he can. He's Malfoy!"

Harry was impressed with Ron's grasp of the situation, and tried to recall whether he'd managed a sentence yet without saying the name 'Malfoy'. "Look Ron, we both know

Hermione's the brainiest thing at Hogwarts. No way is she going to fall for anything Malfoy can concoct. Just... look, I mean, can you keep at least *try* and keep your temper in check? It was probably just a one-off today, y'know. Potions was pretty gruesome, really."

Ron thought for a moment, "but if it was a one-off, then how come you already knew?"

"Ah," Harry had to admit, Ron had got him there, "well, um, the thing is, they seem to study together. From time to time. Occasionally..."

"So how come no one told me?" demanded Ron, anger resurfacing.

"Ah, well don't take this the wrong way, Ron, but, probably because we were a bit worried about how you might react..." explained Harry delicately.

"And how, *exactly*, did you think I might 'react'?" wondered Ron, grinding out the words as his face grew more furious.

"Well, actually, pretty much kind of like this," admitted Harry.

Harry's glasses steamed up when they returned to the relative warmth of the school buildings. He'd have to ask Hermione to renew the *Impervio* charm on them, now that he couldn't do it, he reminded himself, as he steered Ron back to Gryffindor Tower.

The Common Room was its usual self, with the exception that Hermione was nowhere to be seen. Harry swept the dorms, confirming that she was, as suspected, on her bed. "C'mon," he instructed, dragging an increasingly reluctant Ron towards the girls' staircase, and trying not to dwell on the repercussions of the last time he'd entered the girls' dorm.

"Hermione?" called Harry, gently, knocking at the door.

There was a brief pause before the door opened, revealing Hermione, clearly still somewhat upset by the evening's earlier argument, "Harry," she nodded, "but what does *he* want?" she asked, glaring at Ron.

Had they not been standing on the girls' staircase, in full view of the entire Common Room, Harry would have taken some time to enjoy the fact that Hermione, a full head shorter, could make Ron squirm with a single glance. It had not escaped his attention, however, that everyone in the room below was acutely *not* listening to the Trio's conversation.

"Ron," announced Harry, "came to apologise." When Ron failed to speak, Harry pushed his friend forward, adding, "didn't you?" for good measure.

The rest of the Gryffindors, lounging as they were in the Common Room before dinner, were now *not* listening to the conversation really, *really* hard.

"I'm sorry, Hermione," mumbled Ron.

Hermione didn't look impressed.

"No, I think Ron was going to *actually* give you a very full, sincere and touching apology," prompted Harry, somewhat impatiently.

Hermione was still standing in the doorway, arms crossed defensively, and obviously had no immediate intention of making Ron's life any easier at this point.

Deciding that a little more intervention was required, Harry shoved his friend forward, so that Ron was forced to grab hold of Hermione to stop her falling. "Deal with it," Harry commanded, before walking back down the stairs. He glared at his fellow Gryffindors, who suddenly remembered that they all really had been engaged in engrossing conversations, and the ambient noise in the room slowly returned to conversation level.

Tendrils of white energy dripped from his fingers as he drained further power from the Key that night. As always, he'd had to dodge various wards and guards on his way to the quadrangle, but he'd taken to assuming that the gargoyles, though animate, and clearly watching his every move, weren't able to communicate his misdemeanours to anyone.

His muscles burning from the night's first drink, Harry squatted back on his haunches to recover his breath, simultaneously sweeping the castle with his sense to make sure that no-one had moved into a threatening position whilst he was under.

A shimmering blue pattern was stationary, just outside the entrance to the Ravenclaw dorm. Cho. Harry watched her for a second - she didn't seem to be moving at all, but, he figured, she was right outside her dorm, and there weren't any staff on that side of the school at the moment, so she'd be alright.

He returned his attention back to the Key. As his power grew, he was able to absorb greater amounts of energy, although this did mean that the actual power transfer took more time. Harry was careful to make sure that he never went under long enough for someone to move into a position where they might spot him.

He revelled in the near liquid feel to the energy, feeling almost as though he were immersed in its source. The sensation of pain had dulled to an almost welcome discomfort these days - and was, in any event, more than compensated by the amount of power he was able to absorb.

Harry snapped back from the energy, and again swept the area with his sense. Cho still hadn't moved. It was worth checking she was OK.

The staff tended not to patrol the corridors directly leading to the dorms. There wasn't really a lot of point, since most students would easily be able to slip through their guardian portrait (or, in Ravenclaw's case, tapestry) before they could be apprehended.

Nonetheless, to actually get from the Key's quadrangle up to Ravenclaw would prove to be a somewhat elaborate journey that night. Peeves seemed to be holding court in the Armour Room, a large chamber with about a dozen knights standing guard, split across the two walls.

Harry didn't doubt that the din Peeves would make would be cacophonous were he to take that route. Which would bring Filch, or Mrs Norris running. There was absolutely no sense in actively *looking* for trouble. It was one in the morning, he was well past curfew (and so, therefore, was Cho), and getting caught was *instant* detention, with options on expulsion.

Having ruled out the Armour Room, he was left with two choices. Either he could take the dungeons, past Slytherin and the Potions classroom, before heading back up the West tower, and finally to Ravenclaw, or he could try going past Hufflepuff on the East side. That was slightly longer, but, regrettably, would require going through the main entrance hall.

Whereas the dungeon route simply had the disadvantage of forcing him past Snape's personal office. Snape wasn't there, but this actually made Harry more nervous about that route, since it was *conceivable* that he might bump into Snape on the way to his office.

No one seriously imagined for even a second that Snape actually *slept*.

Cho was still outside the Ravenclaw dorm. Harry could tell that Padma was actually inside what he took to be their Common Room, along with a few other Ravenclaws. Those intellectual types certainly liked to stay up late.

McGonagall was *still* in her office in the North Wing. Which meant that, potentially, she could emerge at any moment also.

He took the Hufflepuff route. It was longer, but the only real risk of detection would come as he crossed the main entrance, and he was confident enough in his sensing ability now to ensure that he could avoid detection at that point. Harry slipped back out of the quadrangle, and jogged lightly through the dark corridors, his worn squash shoes making almost no sound on the flagstones.

The whole trek was something of a stop-start affair, with Harry sweeping his sense anxiously looking for the staff, and also the ghosts. The ghosts had the distinctly unfair advantage of being able to pass straight through the stone walls, meaning that he was at risk of detection anywhere near them.

And it was official, ghosts really didn't sleep.

So he'd jog a corridor's length, trying where possible to stick to the shadowed sides, and avoiding the flickering light of the torches. He was relieved that he had his sense to help him - at least he knew for certain that there weren't any sinister beasts waiting to trap him in the darkness.

Another benefit of the sense, and its ability to detect the presence of energy patterns was the fact that all the trick steps, and missing flagstones in the corridors showed up too, so he was able to flit down the unfamiliar corridors without worrying that he might find himself trapped. Unlike that night with the Golden Egg, when Snape had nearly caught him.

And in all this time, Cho still hadn't moved. Harry was starting to worry about her.

Finally he emerged from the spiral staircase onto the Ravenclaw corridor. There were no other patterns in the area, so, to avoid unduly startling her (as if a Gryffindor appearing in the Ravenclaw corridor three hours after curfew was perfectly ordinary), Harry lightly jogged down the middle.

Cho was crouched against the wall by the Ravenclaw tapestry, arms wrapped around her knees, eyes sparkling in the flickering torchlight.

"Cho," he whispered, softly, not wanting to startle her. The last thing he needed was her to scream the castle awake at this point.

She sniffed, and looked towards him, "*Harry?*" she asked, incredulously, "what are you doing here?" Her voice was quavering, and as he got closer, he could see tear stains on her cheek. She made no move to stand, however, so Harry crouched down beside her.

"Cho, are you OK? It's late, and, you know, if you get caught out past curfew..."

"I can't get back in. They must've changed the password. I went out for a walk, to be alone, and when I got back I couldn't get in. I tried hammering on the tapestry," Cho indicated the carpet with a nod of her head, "but everyone must've gone to bed..."

Harry swept his sense beyond the wall. Padma's pattern was still there, as were five others - one was Lisa Turpin, but the other four he couldn't place. Mrs Norris had entered the Ravenclaw side of the castle, and was ambling down the ground floor corridor. The Ravenclaw dorm was on the third floor, and there were three staircases that Harry knew of, so he wasn't panicking yet, but he'd have to make a move soon.

"Are you sure they're all in bed?" asked Harry.

"They must be," sniffed Cho, "I was shouting for about 10 minutes, but then I was worried that Filch might hear. Anyway, what are *you* doing here?"

"Well I was out for a walk, you know, couldn't sleep, and I ended up over on this side of the castle."

"Harry, you are hopeless at lying," Cho flashed a weak smile, that seemed to illuminate the entire corridor.

Mrs Norris had reached the stairs, and was headed towards the second floor.

"OK, I admit it, I was worried about you, and I wanted to make sure you were OK. And, well, you're not OK, are you?"

"No... it's cold, I'm tired, and I can't get back into my dorm. But how did you know I was here?"

"Lucky guess?" Harry tried the wide-eyed innocent look, and was rewarded with a half-hearted chuckle. "Look, Cho, I hate to rush you, but Mrs Norris is patrolling this wing now, and I think she's on her way up here."

"Oh Merlin, it's past curfew! And it's past one, too, isn't it?"

Harry looked at his watch, "it's 1.20, why?"

"Instant suspension, and possible expulsion," explained Cho.

Mrs Norris was now walking the length of the corridor below them. The staircase up to the third floor was at the far end. "Cho," Harry whispered, unsure as to exactly how sensitive a cat's hearing was, "we've got to get out of here, Mrs Norris is going to be here any second."

"But there's nowhere to go!" she hissed.

"You could come back to Gryffindor with me," he suggested, "as a friend."

"What?"

"You could, um, I mean, well, I could get you into Gryffindor for the night, and, um, we could get you back to Ravenclaw in the, um, morning before anyone noticed you were, er, gone..."

Mrs Norris had reached the staircase.

"Harry..."

The pattern was starting up the stone steps. In his mind's eye, Harry could see the beast silently padding up the spiral staircase, alert for any noise.

"Come on," Harry hissed, pulling Cho to her feet, "we've got to get out of here," and he set off at a light jog towards the far end of the corridor. It wasn't until they reached the safety of the stairwell, with Mrs Norris still climbing the other stairway at the opposite end of the corridor, that he realised they were still holding hands.

"No sex," hissed Cho, firmly, her face partially hidden in the shadows of the stairwell.

"No, no, no, no! I mean, of course not!" whispered Harry, frantically, "just friends, right? Trust me..."

Cho stifled a giggle, "and you were doing so well, right up until you said 'trust me'."

"Shhh!" cautioned Harry, flicking his sense out across the castle. Mrs Norris had paused by the tapestry. Peeves was still in the armour room. McGonagall, on the other hand, had left her office, and was headed towards Dumbledore's corridor.

Filch was in the Hufflepuff wing, and there was no sign of Snape. And he still hadn't let go of Cho's hand.

It took ten minutes of nervous stop-start running through the shadowy corridors, and, after the first couple of times, Cho had given up asking why they kept on pausing, and seemingly taking random diversions.

They finally reached Gryffindor's tower, and Harry noted with relief that the Common Room was empty. The worst case scenario of stumbling through the portrait hole, Cho in tow only to face Parvati had been avoided.

"Halt! Who goes there?" cried Sir Cadogan, as Harry cringed at the volume.

"Who is *this*?" asked Cho, incredulously. Clearly the Ravenclaw tapestry acted with a little more decorum.

"Pancakes!" hissed Harry.

"A damsel in distress!" cried Sir Cadogan with glee, "a noble quest good Knight. You may enter..."

Harry rolled his eyes at Cho, to indicate that the Gryffindors enjoyed Sir Cadogan's surveillance exactly as much as she would imagine, "c'mon, you'd better get into our dorm before someone sees you... I'll sleep down here, OK?"

"Harry," hissed Cho, "you are *not* leaving me on my own in a dorm full of fifth year boys!"

"Ah... good point," he noted. Unfortunately, he could hardly put her in with the fifth year girls - Cho would likely end up with a wide and varied collection of cutlery decorating her ribcage in the morning.

"We can share your bed, OK? But no funny ideas..."

Harry didn't trust his voice, and decided to nod fervently instead. They tiptoed into the circular dorm, and to Harry's bed. Harry dug out a t-shirt for Cho to change into whilst he hovered outside the bed, making sure no-one woke.

"I can't *believe* this," whispered Cho, when Harry joined her.

"Um, what?" asked Harry, secretly agreeing.

"The Chudleigh Cannons! You can't. Not *really*."

It was the first t-shirt he'd come across, "what's wrong with the Cannons?" he protested in a defensive whisper.

"You *cannot* be serious! Now, the Holyhead Harpies - they're a *real* team... Harry?"

"Yes?"

"You don't have to stay on the edge of the bed, you know..."

"Um, alright," agreed Harry, nervously, moving about two inches in from the edge of the mattress.

"Honestly, I don't bite!" Cho had her back to him, and reached over to grab his arm, which she pulled around her body. "C'mon, you can move a bit closer than that... but *no* ideas, OK?"

"I wouldn't!" protested Harry.

"Night Harry, let's go to sleep."

"That's easy enough for *you* to say," he muttered.

Cho giggled, and snuggled closer still.

"Oi Harry, wake up! It's Quidditch practice in 15 minutes..."

"grehlfimpf?" replied Harry, momentarily startled to discover he still had his arms around what was, quite possibly, the most beautiful witch on the planet, "um, well since I can't fly anyway, ..." He had never before been so amazingly thankful that the Gryffindor four-poster beds all had their own curtains.

"Wha... ?" murmured Cho, lazily.

"Huh?" asked Ron, helpfully.

"Nothing!" replied Harry, a little too quickly.

"Have you... got... someone... in there?" asked Ron, cautiously, with just a hint of incredulity thrown in for good measure.

Cho shook her head.

"No."

"Yes you have."

"No I haven't."

"Go on..."

"No I haven't."

"...Tell me."

"Sod off."

"We'll see about that," said Ron, and there was a brief pause as he started to dig through the trunk at the bottom of his bed.

Harry's eye's widened in realisation as he heard the rustling of parchment, and Ron declaring "I solemnly decl..."

"Ron!"

"What?"

"Don't."

"So you have, then?"

"What time is it, anyway?"

"6.15. Stop changing the subject."

"Who's changing the subject?"

"You are. Anyway, who.."

"I didn't change the subject. You said it was Quidditch practice, and I was just checking the time."

"You only did that to..."

"Shut up, I'm trying to sleep..." mumbled Seamus from across the room.

"And how come Seamus and Dean aren't going?" persisted Harry.

"Because it's first team only, this one."

"Agh!" squealed Neville, evidently woken by the exchange.

"Ron," hissed Harry, "please..."

"Go back to sleep Neville, Seamus. Harry and I were just going to Quidditch practice."

"But I thought Harry couldn't fly..."

"Thanks Seamus, that's what I've been trying to tell him, and I'm not *on* the first team any more."

"Stop trying to distract me,"

Cho was shaking with silent laughter.

"It's *not* funny," asserted Harry in a forceful whisper.

"Who's honey?" asked Ron, clearly having misheard, which only resulted in Cho creasing up even more.

Harry swept the Common Room with his sense. Mercy of mercies, the gods were with him.

"Ron, I'll tell you who's here IF you go and get my dad's cloak from Hermione."

Cho shot Harry a questioning look.

"But she's in bed..."

"No she's not, she's in the common room by the fireplace."

"You're freaky."

"Please?"

"This had better be good," warned Ron, heading for the door.

Oh yes, thought Harry, this is good.

Cho rolled on to her back to glare at Harry, "and I thought you were going to protect my honour!"

"He was about to find out anyway!" protested Harry.

"Mmm," Cho kissed him lightly on the cheek, "you're cute when you're nervous. Did you know that?"

Harry was rendered completely speechless, still trying to process exactly what was going on here. Still, Cho was making no moves to disentangle limbs, so that definitely counted as a positive. Very positive. Quite delicious, in fact, now he thought about it.

If a little scary.

"So, tell me, Mr Potter, exactly why would Hermione Granger have your cloak in her possession? And why did you agree to tell one of the Weasley mafia who you've got cuddled up here with you? And how the hell did you know that Miss Granger was in the Common Room? And why..."

The inquisition was curtailed by the return of Ron, which was fortunate, since Harry had lost track after 'cuddled up'.

"Cloak," announced Ron, thrusting the silvery fabric through the join in the curtains.

Before Harry could acknowledge thanks, however, Cho had flung herself across him to lift the curtain up and beam at Ron, "thanks Ron!"

There was an astonished gasp as Ron collapsed into his bed, and then a barely audible "Bloody *Hell*."

"Cho!" squeaked Harry, equally astonished.

"You won't tell on us, will you, Ron," asserted Cho, endearingly. It wasn't phrased as a question.

By way of reply, Ron opened and closed his mouth several times, wordlessly.

"Bye Ron," prompted Harry.

"Mmm, don't let us keep you," hinted Cho.

Ron made his way to the door, a second 'bloody hell' just audible as he reached the stairs.

Cho collapsed back onto the bed, stifling giggles, "well, he took that well, didn't he?"

"You're wicked."

"Did you see the look on his face?"

"Priceless," agreed Harry.

Another peck on the cheek (Harry was definitely keeping a tally on this), and then Cho's tone became businesslike, "so, Mr Potter, we need to talk," she jabbed a finger to his chest for emphasis.

6.15 in the morning. "No, Miss Chang," corrected Harry, "we need to get *you* back to Ravenclaw without anyone seeing." Somehow, he didn't think he'd be able to get away with the finger prodding thing.

Cho's eyes widened in realisation.

"It's OK," assured Harry, "wear this and you'll be fine." He gestured to the silvery cloak. At Cho's puzzled look, he added, "it's an invisibility cloak."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. It used to belong to my dad - it was given to me in the first year."

"Wow," murmured Cho, taking this in, "but Harry, explain this. How do you manage to lose so many house points when you've got one of these?"

"What can I say?" shrugged Harry, "I like to live on the edge.... c'mon, we've got to get going."

Cho wriggled closer into his arms. "It's 6.15 in the morning, Harry. Five more minutes, OK?"

No power on Earth would have prevented Harry from agreeing to that suggestion.

Chapter 31

What is the fifth use for dragon's blood in Albus Dumbledore's definitive list?

Sipping pumpkin juice in an almost empty Great Hall, Harry was, essentially, confused. He'd spent the night with Cho. This was a good thing; and the way that she'd willingly joined in teasing Ron, suggested that she'd thought it was a good thing too.

He hoped she'd be able to make it back to Ravenclaw in the cloak without having been missed. It had been early enough that most people weren't fully awake, but there were always some early birds from each House who would have made their way to the Great Hall by that time, and the plan was that Cho would slip through the Ravenclaw tapestry when her housemates went to breakfast.

So things were pretty good. Except that he wasn't completely sure what had actually happened. What did it mean? Or did it mean nothing? They hadn't actually done anything, as such - she'd kissed him twice (twice!) on the cheek, and there'd been a brief hug goodbye, but were they now friends, or more than that?

And what about Cedric? And, after Parvati, he wasn't sure if he could do the whole living a dual life thing again. Did he want this? What was it anyway? And what did Cho want?

And then, saying goodbye at the portrait hole. She'd been in the cloak, so he couldn't see her face, but he was sure he felt her suddenly tense as they hugged. He hoped she'd been OK by the time she got back to her own dorm, and that her absence hadn't been detected.

They'd agreed to go for a walk around the lake at one, Cho in the invisibility cloak (which seemed prudent, under the circumstances, given how recently he and Parvati had split), for the 'talk' that they'd postponed from bed.

At that moment, Dumbledore's microscopic owl landed next to his pumpkin juice, the familiar tiny scrap of parchment attached. Harry unfurled the note, and groaned: Murphy really had been an optimist.

Meet me at 1pm

A.D.

He'd considered, briefly, still meeting with Cho by the lake, explaining that he had to go somewhere else, and then meeting Dumbledore. But what if Cho was late? How long would Dumbledore remain at Azkaban waiting for Harry to arrive? What if Dumbledore left just before Harry portkeyed there, leaving him alone on that rock, unprotected from the Dementors?

And he couldn't let Dumbledore down.

So he had to contact Cho. She hadn't come down to breakfast yet - still in Ravenclaw, he confirmed by sense. The only way to get the message to her, then, was to owl her. Fine, he could do that.

He set off to the owlery, to find Hedwig.

Dear Cho, I'm really, really, really sorry about this, but something has come up, and I can't meet you at 1pm today. I'm not sure how long it'll take, either... That wasn't quite right. And, even though he knew he was being stupid, he felt uncomfortable with the 'Dear'.

Maybe she'd expect something more intimate than 'Dear', considering last night. Or maybe she'd read too much into 'Dear' and think he'd misunderstood the nature of last night.

Or maybe he was being paranoid.

But better safe than sorry.

Cho, I can't make it at lunchtime. Something important... no, wait, she was important, something vital has come up. I really wouldn't do this to you unless I absolutely had no other choice. I hope you understand. I'll be in the library this evening. Harry.

He cringed inwardly at 'vital' - it was too self-important. As if she probably didn't already think his head was several sizes too big. Although, he reminded himself, she'd never indicated that she'd even read Rita Skeeter's articles last year.

But no, he thought, crumpling up the second piece of parchment. Third time lucky.

Cho - I'm really sorry, but I can't make it at lunch today. I really want to... see? Talk? See? Talk? ...see you, though. I'll be in the library after dinner. Could we meet then? Harry.

He frowned at the latest version of his masterpiece, trying to work out what response it was likely to generate. Anyone but Dumbledore, anyone at all and he'd have postponed *them* in favour of Cho. But he had to see Dumbledore and, hopefully, Lucas.

Satisfied, he looked for a messenger. Hedwig fluttered down from her perch, ready to carry the note. Harry suddenly realised that Hedwig, fantastic bird that she was, was hardly an inconspicuous messenger. Everyone within a 50 foot radius would know that Cho's message was from him.

And right now that didn't strike him as being the best idea in the world.

"Sorry Hedwig, but this is only going to a friend at Hogwarts, so I'm going to use a school owl," he explained, apologetically. He had thought of borrowing Pig, except that Ron's owl had all the stealth of a demented bludger, and would, if anything, have been more conspicuous than Hedwig.

Hedwig hooted indignantly, and ruffled her feathers.

"Oh don't be like that," he protested, stroking the white bird's feathers, "you know I'd use you if I could, but I have to be, um, discreet, with this message. It's to a... special friend. And, you

know, you'd hardly need to stretch your wings and you'd be there. It's really not much of a mission for you..."

Hedwig didn't seem impressed, and haughtily returned to her perch, her back to Harry, pointedly ignoring the owl treat he'd proffered by way of apology.

Harry made his way back to breakfast - since Cho and he had got up reasonably early (insane Quidditch obsessives notwithstanding), the Great Hall was only now starting to fill up. Hermione was sipping coffee (a relatively new trend) whilst absently skimming through a Transfiguration text as Harry sat beside her.

"Morning," he ventured.

"Morning," Hermione was too distracted by whatever she was reading to engage in deep conversation, so Harry left her to it as he trapped some toast, and tried not to seek out Cho's pattern.

Ron joined them a few minutes later, flushed from Quidditch practice, and with a look that told everyone he was in possession of the most incredible secret the world had ever known. Harry didn't like that look at all.

"Morning you two," said the Gryffindor Quidditch captain, taking a seat opposite his two best friends, and starting to pile food on to his plate. Early morning Quidditch was an excellent way to work up an appetite.

"How was practice then?" asked Harry, conversationally, vainly hoping that if he could keep the conversation locked firmly on the game, Hermione would automatically tune out, and Ron would forget to ask him about Cho.

"Not bad, actually; I think if we mix up the play a bit, Hufflepuff should be kept guessing. I mean, I know everyone thinks Hufflepuff will be a walk over, but we can't be complacent..."

Clearly there was some sort of curse that went with Quidditch Captaincy, whereby whoever held the office became obsessed with the game beyond all normal measures. Harry didn't mind this in the slightest as he watched his friend extol the benefits of gruelling practice, punctuating his remarks with his cutlery.

Maybe even Oliver had been well-balanced before he was Quidditch Captain.

"Wow," said Harry, as Ron took a break from his report to actually eat something, "seems like you're really taking to this captaincy thing." He was determined to keep the topic of conversation on Quidditch. As expected, Hermione had completely tuned out of the conversation, and was utterly absorbed in Transfiguration.

Ron's head suddenly snapped up from the table, to fix Harry with a penetrating glare, "remind me, again, exactly what 'nothing happening' means, Harry."

Those words had clearly caught Hermione's attention, too, since she'd almost dropped her text book to look at Ron, then Harry.

"You mean *that's* who the cloak was for?"

"What, didn't you tell her?" asked Harry, surprised.

"Ron didn't tell me *anything*," responded Hermione, accusingly, and Harry discerned that the repercussions from Potions the day before had some way to run yet.

"Well *Harry* said not to tell *anyone*."

"Um, well, er, Hermione's not exactly anyone, Ron," said Harry, placatingly, "and she was the one with the cloak. I'd sort of assumed that you'd tell her."

"Well she never told us about the Time Turner, did she?" Ron snapped back.

Oh great, thought Harry, any second now and Hermione was going to mention...

"Well, you weren't talking to me at the time, since you were so convinced that Crookshanks had deliberately eaten Scabbers, *remember?*"

"Well what was I supposed to think?" exclaimed Ron, before adding, almost apologetically, "and I did apologise for that."

"And I apologised for the Time Turner," countered Hermione, softly.

Hermione and Ron looked at each other, and Harry could tell that the apologies they were referring to weren't actually the apologies they really meant. The whole subtext of the conversation was still rooted firmly in Potions.

Which was just fine by him, since that was about a million miles away from Cho.

"I'm sorry," said Ron, finally breaking the silence.

"I'm sorry too," agreed Hermione.

"I still think he's a git, though," continued Ron, a little grudgingly.

"And I still think you're a stubborn, overprotective Weasley," observed Hermione, affectionately. "But I know what I'm doing. Really. And it's not *like* that, anyway..."

Harry decided to escape whilst the going was good, and left Ron and Hermione to their moment as he made his way out of the Great Hall. As he stood up, he caught Cho's eye, again. She smiled, and he saw that she had a small piece of parchment in her hand.

She *was* going to meet him in the library. The day was officially looking up once more.

Lunch came, and Harry portkeyed to Azkaban, to find Dumbledore waiting for him, a troubled expression clouding his face, "Good afternoon, Harry, I heard about your speech the other day..."

"Yesterday? What speech? Oh... in the Great Hall at breakfast," Harry looked sheepish, "I just didn't want people to rush in when they didn't know what it was they were doing..."

"And a most admirable endeavour it was. You had your suspicions about Mont St Michel, then?" enquired the venerable wizard as the two made their way towards the rock doorway, Dumbledore's protection charm once again warding off the dreary rain.

"Well it just didn't make sense. As a Death Eater attack, I mean. Voldemort would have *known* it'd just send people scurrying to Tempus, something they couldn't have done if he'd waited until after the Tempus deadline..."

"And so," surmised Dumbledore, "you suspected it may have been a ploy by Tempus themselves."

"Well, um, yes," admitted Harry, "but I couldn't say that exactly, could I? Not without proof..." he tailed off, expecting the argument to be blown out of the water with a few choice words.

Except Dumbledore didn't contradict him. They'd be out of the rain soon, the rock entrance loomed ahead, and Harry could feel goosebumps rising on his skin as the temperature dropped. Dementors.

"So did you hear about Forte Mal this morning? I don't expect it would have made the Prophet just yet..." enquired Dumbledore, seemingly oblivious to the ice cold skewers of pain that stabbed through Harry's mind.

"Forte Mal?"

"Apparently Tempus staged a retaliatory strike against the Death Eaters in Forte Mal. The Sign of Tempus was projected into the sky. There were no survivors."

"It was all Death Eaters? This Forte Mal place?"

Dumbledore paused momentarily, and a distant muffled wail could be heard somewhere deeper in the rock. He gazed at Harry, those blue eyes, infinitely deep conveying an unshakable aura of wisdom. "I had never *heard* of Forte Mal before this morning. It's possible, of course, that Dark Wizards had, somehow, constructed a stronghold of which I was unaware, but..."

Dumbledore didn't need to finish that sentence. Harry *knew* exactly what he was saying. If there really had been a Death Eater enclave called Forte Mal, Dumbledore, or one of his agents, would have heard *something* about it. "More public relations?" asked Harry, somewhat depressed at his own cynicism.

The pair continued walking further into the labyrinth. Harry could sense Lucas' pattern, but the network of corridors in Azkaban was so complicated he couldn't begin to fashion a path to his cell.

"I fear that may be so," sighed Dumbledore, "imagine; Voldemort is resurrected, and all your worst nightmares from 14 years ago have come to life. Then you receive a summons from an organisation that has declared war on Voldemort. You'd be tempted.

"Then the Death Eaters stage what must be one of the most dreadful atrocities of the recent age, *before* you have to finally make up your mind as to whether or not to join Tempus.

"And then Tempus prove that they really are carrying the fight to Voldemort by annihilating a Death Eater enclave. It doesn't matter that the public have never heard of it - they'd expect it to be secret. To their eyes, Tempus have proven their legitimacy.

"Finally, don't forget the implicit threat in the summons in the first place - *join us, or die*. I have never wished so fervently that I was gravely mistaken in my life, Harry, but I have a terrible feeling about Tempus."

"So what do we do? I mean, the Order of the Phoenix," one day, Harry thought, he might get used to referring to Dumbledore's council by its full name. At the moment, despite the dark times, and the fact that they were negotiating the darkened, gloomy corridors of Azkaban, it was hard to keep a straight face as he got to 'Phoenix'.

"We fight, Harry, we fight," Dumbledore's voice carried a grim determination, mingled with, it seemed, a strange sense of disappointment.

They walked the rest of the way in contemplative silence.

"Welcome back, Albus, Mr Potter."

Harry was, of course, no longer surprised by Lucas' ability to discern who his visitors were without looking.

"Good afternoon, Lucas," replied Dumbledore, amiably, before again excusing himself to stand watch over the quartet of cells in that section.

"So, Mr Potter, I see that you've accumulated some considerable power since our last meeting."

"I think so," agreed Harry, "but I'm finding it difficult now to actually use it properly. Apart from sense, I mean. It's almost like I have too much ability, doing the small things is almost impossible..."

"Yes, yes," sighed Lucas, "this was, I fear, always going to present a problem... sit," he commanded, indicating the trunk at the foot of the bed once more. Lucas still remained prone on the bed, to Harry's relief - at least he didn't have to meet those vacant white eyes when they talked.

"You see, Mr Potter, a Mage's strength arises not from his power, but from his *discipline*. As they have said from time immemorial, power is nothing without control... You, my friend, have the power, but not the control."

"Yeah, I knew that," confirmed Harry, "I mean, I've been trying to move objects by force. I can do furniture easily. A little too easily. But if I try and move something small, it just smashes into the walls or the ceiling..." It was, felt Harry, all somewhat discouraging.

Lucas nodded slowly, the frosty white beard rippling on his chest as he lay. Harry realised then that of course Lucas had once been able to see, so he'd picked up all the visual habits of conversation, and these had remained with him even though his sight had been taken.

"You see, Mr Potter, you have acquired the power a Mage might not achieve in a lifetime. You've had exclusive access to a Key, and have set about draining it with, I might add, what appears to me to be considerable success to date..."

"Well," admitted Harry, "it hurts a bit when I do the power transfer..."

"A bit?" enquired Lucas, with mild surprise.

"Well, OK, a lot. And it's tiring, so I'm scared that I won't be able to make it back to the dorm without being caught, you know..."

"Back to the dorm?" Lucas sounded puzzled.

"Well yeah - I have to drain the Key at night, because its hard to get there unseen during the day..."

"Mr Potter, please don't tell me that you're running about Albus' school in the middle of the night, dodging staff, other students and whatever other types of ghouls that place has to get to the Key?"

Harry suddenly had the gnawing suspicion that he was about to admit to something awfully stupid, "er, well, actually... yes." Harry winced, before asking, "why?"

Had they been anywhere else but Azkaban, Lucas might well have laughed, "Harry," he used his first name to stress the point, "if you can sense it, you can drain it..."

Harry felt his face burning in embarrassment. Of course he could see the Key by sense from his Dorm. He could sense beyond Hogsmeade. All that subterfuge had been unnecessary. Which meant that Parvati wouldn't have become suspicious...

...and that he wouldn't have ended up in bed with Cho.

His method definitely had its compensations.

Nonetheless, Harry groaned to let Lucas know how stupid he felt.

"You certainly like to do things the hard way, don't you?" his mentor enquired.

"I don't know, that's just the way things seem to go for me," replied Harry with what he belatedly realised was an entirely superfluous shrug.

"So I've heard," replied Lucas, lightly. "But let's return to control, focus and discipline. The problem you face is that, quite, literally, you don't know your own strength.

"Typically a Mage would build their power up over many years. Decades. They would only seek to increase their power once they'd fully adjusted to their existing capability.

"You, on the other hand, have been forced to build up your power as quickly as possible, with no chance to comprehend what it has meant. Without focus, your power is nothing but a blunt instrument - a battering ram where a toothpick was required."

Harry nodded, this made sense, and he understood what Lucas was getting at, but, "so how do I acquire this control, then?"

"For that there is no easy path," conceded Lucas, "and all I can do is suggest some exercise to help discipline your abilities... Let's start with fire."

The rest of the afternoon consisted of Harry trying to utilise his abilities with vary levels of power, throttling down his energy to the lowest maintainable levels. It was ironic, he thought, that it took more effort to be subtle than to utilise maximum power. But, as he had seen, his maximum power was essentially useless without focus.

He found he no longer got so tired performing physical magic. It was still, of course, much more draining than wand magic, and by the time they'd finished going through the suite of exercises Lucas had suggested, Harry was drenched in sweat, his heart hammering and breath ragged.

"So what is all this in aid of?" asked Lucas.

"I have to face Voldemort," responded Harry, reflexively. And he knew he now had the beginnings of the tools available to him to succeed in this. Of course, Voldemort had the Beauxbatons Key, but Harry had the Hogwarts one, and he was aiming to get the Durmstrang Key drained before Voldemort did...

"Voldemort," repeated Lucas, "tell me Harry, do you fight the cause or the man?"

"Um," Harry thought about it. No doubt about it, he had a personal issue with Voldemort. His parents. Cedric. Sirius' forced life as a fugitive.

"What I mean," persisted Lucas, "is this. You face down Voldemort. You win. Then what?"

"I don't know," admitted Harry.

"Evil never dies, Harry, know this now. To fight the man, and treat the cause as incidental, is to seek revenge. And revenge, as I have said before, is not a wise path to tread."

Lucas left Harry to ponder these words as he opened the door to summon Dumbledore.

"Thanks Lucas," said Harry, preparing to leave, "look, is there anything I can get you next time I visit? Food, or drink or books?"

"Books?" asked Lucas, in a tone of voice indicating clearly that books were of little use to a blind man.

Realising the insensitivity of his question too late, Harry attempted to retrieve the situation, "I mean, I can get Hermione to cast an audio spell on them, y'know, so that they read to you. 'course, you'd have to put up with her voice doing the reading, but..."

"'s been a while since I had anything to read," replied Lucas, as Dumbledore and Harry left.

A while, thought Harry. Twenty-five sodding years. Hermione would know a good book for Lucas, he was sure of it.

Harry chose a table by the History stacks, feeling partly elated at the prospect of seeing Cho, and partly sickened at the thought that he may have got hold of completely the wrong end of the stick about their relationship.

As always, he had his back to the door; it made no difference to him, as he was maintaining a sense of the library's immediate surroundings anyway. He ventured a flick out towards the dungeon, where Hermione was in detention with Snape, no sign of Malfoy though. Typical Snape - wouldn't dream of giving a detention to someone in his own house.

And Ron was somewhere near the Beauxbatons corridor, with a group of patterns Harry couldn't place. *Interesting...*

A shimmering blue entered the library, and Harry's stomach did the all too familiar flip-flop routine. Damn, he didn't even have to *see* her these days - just pick her up on sense.

"Hey Harry."

"Hi. Sorry about earlier."

"That's OK - thanks for the note."

"I'm *really* sorry about that. Anyone else and I'd have put them off, but this was someone I couldn't..." Harry frowned, this was not the start he'd wanted to make. "Cho, the thing about me is that I have lots of... secrets."

"I know. Well, I think I do. And I don't want to pry..."

"But?"

"But it's not any of my business, is it?"

"Cho..." Harry ran his hand through his hair, temporarily spiking it up even more than usual, "look, can we put the secrets to one side this evening? Not for ever. At least, I hope not. I'd like to talk to you about... well," he could feel the heat rising to his face, "about us."

He winced as he finished the sentence. Had he blown it? Would Cho now be terrified that he'd got completely the wrong end of the stick and never talk to him again? But he had to know. He couldn't bear living thinking one thing, and Cho thinking the other, and it all ending up in a huge mess.

"I'm confused," admitted Cho, almost apologetically, taking the opposite seat at the table.

"Me too," confirmed Harry, softly. "Look, do you want to go somewhere else?" They were both aware of inquisitive glances being sent their way from other students in the library.

"Away from all these spies, you mean? There aren't too many places we could go, though, are there?"

"Oh, I think I can come up with something..."

"Mr Harry Potter sir!" Dobby flung himself ecstatically at Harry's legs in greeting.

Cho raised her eyebrows, "*this* is your idea of a secluded date?"

They were in the Great Kitchen, underneath the Great Hall, standing at the head of what were now the five long tables for the houses. A gaggle of House Elves were busying themselves at the opposite end of the room, where the sinks, fires and other kitchen equipment were located.

"Um, well," protested Harry, "we won't meet too many students down here, that's for sure... Hi Dobby - I like your socks, are they new?"

"But how did you even know how to get here? I never knew this place existed. Never even thought about it actually..."

"No, theys is not new socks for Dobby, but Dobby likes them all the same..."

Harry felt as though he were at a tennis match, as his head switched from Cho to Dobby maintaining both conversations.

"The Weasley Twins told me how to get in here," he admitted.

"But how did *they* know?" asked Cho, the Ravenclaw in her pursuing the path of knowledge.

"Dobby, could we have a drink, please? Cho, coffee or tea? Or hot chocolate?"

"Mmm, coffee? Would that be OK?"

"I'm sure it would. Dobby, please could we have some coffee?"

"Of course, Mr Harry Potter sir!" cried Dobby enthusiastically, before disappearing off to the kitchen end of the great room.

"Well, Cho, where do you want to sit? Anywhere but Slytherin." He was Gryffindor, Cho was Ravenclaw, but Harry had the distinct feeling that Cedric, a Hufflepuff, was with them too, in thought. They should, he thought, ruefully, have gone straight for the neutrality of Beauxbatons.

Perhaps Cho had been thinking on the same lines, "let's be Beauxbatons - besides, it's in the corner and out of the way..."

"Good thinking," agreed Harry, relieved that they'd sidestepped the awkwardness of Hufflepuff.

"But how did Fred and George know about this place?" persisted Cho, once they'd taken seats opposite each other at the end of the Beauxbatons table.

"Ah, that was probably the Map," explained Harry.

"Map? They've got a map of Hogwarts?"

"Not just a map, they had the Marauders' Map, before they gave it to me. Thanks Dobby," the House Elf had brought two mugs of coffee to the table, and then, in a most uncharacteristic display of sensitivity, had immediately disappeared back to the kitchen end of the room.

"Marauders?"

"Yeah, it's an enchanted map of Hogwarts, which not only shows all the rooms, but all the secret passages..."

"There are secret passages?"

"Yeah," Harry nodded, "I, uh, used one to get to Hogsmeade in the third year... anyway, that's not the really cool thing. The cool thing about the Marauders' Map, and the reason I'm telling you, is that it also tells you who is where. People show up as dots, with their names next to it."

"OK," said Cho, nodding her head slowly, "that's got to be some pretty heavy duty charm work. But why are you telling me?"

"Because Ron's got it at the moment... and this morning, remember?"

"Um...Oh! You told him because he was..."

"...about to prime the map anyway, at which point he'd have seen two dots, one labelled 'Potter' and the other labelled 'Chang'."

"Oops," said Cho, giggling lightly.

Well, they'd broached the subject now, albeit indirectly, so Harry steeled himself to ask the question, "so, Cho, I mean... what about us? Are we?"

Cho looked pained, then sorry, as she reached out to hold Harry's hand across the table, "Oh Harry, I don't know..."

Damn, thought Harry, as his entire body went numb. He tried to smile weakly, but found he couldn't.

"...I'm just... confused," Cho continued. "I mean, I *do* like you, but... Cedric."

"Oh, I'm sorry Cho, I didn't mean..." except he wasn't sure that he hadn't meant. But she did like him. She'd just said so, "I mean, I *really* like you. A lot. But I don't want to ruin things between us..."

"I'm not saying I *don't* want to try being more than friends, Harry," continued Cho, earnestly, "but I don't want to ruin things either... I'm just not sure if I'm ready..."

If Harry thought he'd been confused in the morning, it was nothing to how he felt now. He cursed himself for being completely unable to come up with the right thing to say as they sat there, looking at each other.

"It was nice, waking up this morning," said Cho, blushing slightly.

It was Harry's turn to feel the blood rush to his face, "more than nice."

"Look, Harry, we don't have to put a name to what we have just yet, do we?"

"Um, well no, I'm just afraid of doing the wrong thing... I don't want to... lose you. If that doesn't sound presumptuous..."

"I know what you mean... it's just that, I don't think I can do the whole couple thing in public just yet."

"In public," repeated Harry, cautiously.

"In public," she confirmed. "I like being with you, Harry, but as soon as we become an official couple, there'll be all sorts of pressure on both of us... and people have only just stopped asking me if I'm OK every six seconds..."

"I'm sorry," said Harry, and he really was. Cho was right - they really would be in a goldfish bowl once, if, they became an 'official' couple.

"And I am OK, really," continued Cho, "but Cedric hasn't just gone away. Part of him is still here. And I want to be fair to you..."

"Cedric was a good guy," remembered Harry, "he helped me with the Second Task."

"But you helped him with the dragons."

"He told you about that?"

"Yes... and did you really reach us all first in the lake?"

"Um, yeah. Look, it wasn't my fault! I thought we were supposed to take the clue literally. So I got to Ron, but I couldn't leave Hermione, or you there. I mean, really my person could have been any of you three..."

"You're sweet. Cedric was really embarrassed, you know. Kept on beating himself up that he hadn't thought to stay with the hostages like you did."

"Cedric did it the right way. I know they said I showed 'moral fibre', but really Ron was right, I was just being a dense prat..."

"Well I didn't think so when I found out what happened. And I *know* Fleur and Gabrielle didn't either."

Harry didn't want to think about Fleur. "What I mean, Cho, is this; oh, this is going to sound awful..."

"No... tell me..."

"Well, I mean, it's OK for you still to like Cedric. I don't want to replace him, we're different. So I'm not, I'm not trying to, y'know, *intrude* on that... But if we could, well..."

"That doesn't sound awful at all, silly. I don't want to make things difficult between us..."

"You're not!"

"No, well, yes, but... it's still hard sometimes, OK?"

"I'm here for you, Cho. Always know that."

"Thanks, and likewise..."

Harry revelled in the weak smile, and the warmth of those nearly black eyes. He still wasn't entirely sure where they had arrived at, but he knew he liked it there. And then recollection hit him once more, and his expression clouded.

"What is it?" she asked.

Harry winced, "like I said before, Cho, I have a lot of... secrets. And sometimes I have to do things, and... well, there are things about me that I can't tell you. Yet. Not because I don't want to, not even because I don't trust you, because I do.

"So," Harry took a breath, "please understand I would *never* do anything to hurt you... but sometimes there are things going on that I can't explain. One day, one day I really want to, but until that day, can you trust me to do the right thing?"

"Harry! Of course I trust *you*. You're the Boy-Who-Lived - don't try and duck it, because I know that's just as much a part of you as Harry. And I really don't know how you manage to live with that burden."

"I have to," explained Harry with a shrug. He remembered having a similar conversation with Parvati, except that she'd told the Boy-Who-Lived to get lost. Cho seemed willing to accept the whole package in, well, the 'thing' they had.

They talked long into the evening, sitting at the Beauxbatons table in the Great Kitchen. And he really didn't care what exactly the nature of his relationship with Cho was at that point. She was there, and he was there, and it was good.

Chapter 32

How many stirs are required between adding the Mandrake leaves and the dragonblood when making Polyjuice Potion?

Hermione was already in the Common Room by the time Harry returned from the Great Kitchen, buzzing on the high of finally talking, properly talking, with Cho. Ron, however, was nowhere to be seen.

"So how bad was it?" asked Harry, perching on the arm of the chair next to Hermione's.

"It could've been worse," mused Hermione, looking up from her textbook, before adding, "I suppose."

"That bad?"

"Bad enough. And if I don't see another disembowelling in my *life* it'll be too soon."

"If there's any justice in this world - or the next - Snape will be reincarnated as a horned toad."

"We can but hope," agreed Hermione, although still in a somewhat downbeat tone. Until she seemed to remember something; "Anyway, you can run, but you can't hide, Harry Potter: what's going on with you and Cho?"

"Shh!" hissed Harry, although he was relieved to see that no-one in the Common Room appeared to be paying attention to them; Hermione often chose to squirrel herself away in the corner, to avoid distractions whilst she read. "Have you seen Ron?"

"Nice try, Harry. You and Cho... well?"

It was clear that Hermione would be somewhat harder to shake off than Ron. Harry supposed he could try engaging her in a discussion about *Hogwarts: A History*, but that smacked of desperation. "We don't know... yet," he admitted.

"But you slept with her!" exclaimed Hermione, although she still managed to keep her voice down, "how can you not know?" She almost looked affronted, and Harry began to suspect he was about to be reprimanded for ungentlemanly conduct.

"We didn't sleep together! Well, OK, we did, but not like that..." Harry ran his fingers through his hair distractedly. "Look, can we not talk about this? Please? We'll tell you when we can tell you, OK?"

"So there is something to tell!" deduced Hermione, triumphantly, closing her text book with a snap, clearly getting ready to launch the full inquisition.

"Please... can we just let it drop for the time being..." Harry's voice was starting to take on a pained edge. Hermione's questioning was forcing him to wonder what he and Cho *did* have, and he didn't particularly want the warm buzz he was experiencing to be replaced by doubt.

Further discussion was cut short by the arrival of an elated Ron, who marched through the portrait hole, arms stretched wide, announcing to the world, "Whew, people! You will not *believe* the night I've had!"

Hermione and Harry raised eyebrows at each other before turning to face their friend, who was making his way towards them with a grin like the Cheshire Cat's.

It turned out that the patterns Harry hadn't recognised with Ron in the Beauxbatons corridor earlier that evening had been a few Hufflepuffs and a couple of the Beauxbatons girls. The particular Hufflepuff that was the cause of Ron's excessively good mood was, of course, the fourth year Chaser, Samantha Bones - Susan's younger sister.

So Ron spent much of the evening telling Hermione and Harry how Fluffy's lair was now the Beauxbatons Common Room, and was *much* more welcoming these days, and explaining how grateful the Beauxbatons students had been of Hagrid's help when they escaped from Voldemort's attack.

Ron had accidentally let slip the 'fact' that he and Hagrid were close friends, which had resulted in his receiving near royalty treatment from the French contingent. It was a relief, thought Harry, that Ron could be famous for something other than being the best friend of the Boy Who Lived. Although whether living off the reputation of being a friend of Hagrid's was actually much better remained in doubt.

The only thing that puzzled Ron about the whole evening had been the fact that *everybody* seemed to hate Fleur. "You check out the Great Hall next mealtime," Ron urged, "Fleur sits at the opposite end of the Head Table to Beauxbatons, and stares the other way all meal. Apparently the feeling's mutual."

"Isn't Gabrielle in Beauxbatons?" asked Hermione, remembering Fleur's younger sister from the Second Task.

"No," replied Ron with a shrug, "but I'm not sure she'd have been eleven anyway. How old was she, mate?" he directed the question at Harry.

"Dunno," admitted Harry, pondering Ron's discovery about Fleur, "but did I tell you what Dobby told me about Fleur?"

"Dobby?" asked Hermione, "did you talk to him about her this evening?"

"You went to see Dobby?" asked Ron, puzzled, "what did you do that for?"

"Ah," said Hermione, knowingly, "he had a..."

"A sudden need to get some coffee," explained Harry, interrupting Hermione before she could reach the word 'date'. Hermione scowled back at him, but did at least keep her lips sealed.

"Eh?" Ron had missed the looks flashing between Harry and Hermione, but could still sense that someone was missing out something vital in the conversation.

"Yes, Dobby," started Harry, determined to run with the conversation, thereby keeping it away from the subject of Cho, "he was telling me that Fleur invited Winky, and *only* Winky, to go back to Beauxbatons with her in the summer..."

"Winky was Crouch's House Elf," remembered Ron, "but what's that got to do with anything?"

"Winky was Dark!" exclaimed Harry, "don't you see? All that caring for Crouch? Fleur obviously wanted her because they knew she could be trusted..."

"I don't think you should pick on Winky just because she was doing as she was told," sniffed Hermione, indignantly, "I mean, you saw the poor thing at the end of the World Cup, she was *distressed*."

"But she was hiding something, wasn't she?" persisted Harry.

"Well let's face it, mate, Dobby wasn't exactly forthcoming on his activities in the second year, was he?" Ron seemed, for once, to be taking Hermione's side of the argument.

Harry frowned, "but then why would Fleur even *bother* to take a House Elf back to Beauxbatons?"

"Maybe she liked her?" suggested Hermione, who was clearly working hard at this. She didn't usually take the charitable view of Fleur.

"In which case," persisted Harry, "why did she leave her *back* at Beauxbatons when she became Snape's assistant here? I think Fleur knew that Voldemort," to his credit Ron didn't flinch quite as noticeably this time, "was planning an attack, and that they thought it would be helpful to have a loyal House Elf behind the scenes."

"That's barmy, Harry!" exclaimed Ron, "you're saying you think Fleur's a Death Eater."

"Yes, that's right, I am," he confirmed.

"Don't be ridiculous Harry!" admonished Hermione, "Dumbledore wouldn't let..."

"Dumbledore," interrupted Harry, slowly, and levelly, "isn't here."

Ron was sitting on the edge of Harry's bed as the students gravitated to their dorms that evening, "So mate, what's it like?"

"What's what like?" asked Harry, gingerly.

"You know... with Cho?"

Harry closed his eyes, and exhaled slowly through clenched teeth, "Nothing. Happened."

"*Fine*," retorted Ron, "don't bloody tell me then. After all, it was only me who covered up for the two of you shagging all night. It was only me who went and asked Hermione for that sodding cloak of yours so you wouldn't get another 30 pointer."

"Ron," said Harry, pleadingly, "*really*, we just slept together. You know, as in being asleep in the same bed..."

"That doesn't even remotely qualify as being a 'just', Harry," persisted Ron, who then added, incredulously, "are you really telling me that you had the girl of your dreams..."

"Shhh!" cautioned Harry, as Neville emerged from the bathroom.

Obligingly, Ron lowered his voice, "...had the girl of your dreams in bed with you, *all bloody night*, and you didn't do *anything*?"

"Um, yeah," admitted Harry, warily, as he watched conflicting emotions play across Ron's face. On the one hand, he could tell quite plainly that Ron wanted to believe him. But on the other, he could also see that his best friend seriously doubted that Harry could ever be so completely *thick*.

"No way, man," said Ron, bewildered, shaking his head, "*nothing*?"

"Nothing," confirmed Harry, "well, OK, we hugged, but that was it. So can you just let it drop, OK? I don't want to talk about it."

"What, are you and she not...?" asked Ron, confused.

Harry saw his chance to kill the conversation, "I said I don't want to talk about it," he said, with an air of finality, fully suspecting that Ron would deduce that things had not worked out between he and Cho as hoped, and that Harry was therefore cut up about the whole thing.

Mercifully, that seemed to be the case, for the next thing Ron said was, "Oi, Neville! What's that on your arm?"

Neville was only wearing his pajama bottoms as he crossed the circular dorm to join Ron and Harry, which therefore left his arms completely uncovered.

Harry looked in dismay at the burning blue tattoo on Neville's upper right arm, consisting of a capital 'T' inscribed within a circle. The tattoo, just like the lettering on the summons, was a vivid blue in colour, shimmering as though it were liquid, but with the brightness of a flame. The Sign of Tempus.

"Whoa Neville!" exclaimed Ron, thunderstruck, "you signed up then?"

"Yeah," said Neville, sitting down on Harry's bed as he pulled his pajama top on, covering up the mark. "You know, I know I'm pretty useless in a fight..." he waved away Ron and Harry's admittedly half-hearted protestations, "but I had... had to make a stand, you know?"

Harry was almost consumed with inner pain, seeing his friend innocently sign up to the summons with only the best of intentions, not aware of how grievous a mistake it could prove to be.

Neville was still talking, "...Mont St Michel, but then Tempus, well, they... they hit back," he punched his right fist into his left palm, "did you hear about that?"

"Yeah," said Ron, slowly, "Lilia from Beauxbatons told us, Death Eater place called, um..."

"Forte Mal," supplied Harry, tonelessly. He couldn't bear this, and got up to brush his teeth, leaving Ron and Neville talking on his bed.

Neville had fallen for it, and Harry felt as though he'd personally let the boy down. He should have been more forceful. Hadn't he asked everyone to wait until the month was up before signing? Hadn't he warned them that they shouldn't do anything until they knew what it was the Order of Tempus stood for, really?

When Harry returned to his bed, Neville was still there, being subjected to Ron's extended rhapsody on the theme of Samantha. Ron then left, leaving Harry wondering how he was supposed to get rid of Neville.

"My parents were Aurors, you know," started Neville.

Harry had to stop himself admitting he knew this, "were they? I didn't know that - but you live with your Gran, don't you?"

"Yeah, I live with Gran. Mum and Dad, well... they're... they're not dead. They... they're ill," stammered Neville.

"I'm sorr..." started Harry, but Neville had cut him off.

"I see them every holiday," he continued, "but they... well, they don't... I don't think they recognise me. Or Gran... I was a baby. They were... tortured. Badly... went mad..."

"Y'know, I used... I used to think that they'd... well, that they'd get better. Remember. Remember me... or Gran... or something. But every time we're there... they're just... just empty, y'know? They don't even know who I am... at all"

Harry could only listen, open-mouthed as Neville spoke, almost devoid of emotion. This was the burden Neville had carried for virtually all his conscious life. Just as Harry had no recollection of his own parents, so Neville had no memories of his mother and father actually in those roles. All he knew of them were the blank faces in St Mungos.

"So, y'know... I did this," Neville patted his arm, "for them... they fought against, against You-Know-Who... and I had to make a stand. For them. Right? I mean, I'm doing the right thing... I just... well, I really wish they'd be proud of me. Could be proud... one day. I know I'm not much..."

"Neville, don't say that!" exclaimed Harry, realising that tears were forming in his eyes.

"Harry, we can't all be like you... or Ron... or Hermione. You're *you*. You'll do great things. You have before and you will again. I can't be great like that. But I can do the right thing... and I'm going to. Going to do the right thing. Make a stand."

"Yeah Neville," agreed Harry, trying with superhuman resolve not to let a sense of *defeat* tinge his voice. "G'night," he prompted, and Neville rose and padded back across the circular room to his own four poster.

The bed was a lot bigger than he remembered it, he realised, as he lay back. "G'night Cho," he whispered, trying to pretend that it was her absence that had made him miserable.

But he knew he was deluding himself. Neville might not know it yet, but Harry knew; the Order of Tempus had betrayed one of his friends. Someone was going to pay for this.

At breakfast in the Great Hall the following morning Harry caught Cho's eye as she sat down at the Ravenclaw table. She smiled at him, an act that reassured him that the buzz he'd felt after their talk in the Great Kitchen hadn't been misplaced.

"Where's Ron?" asked Ginny, as she, Dean, Lavender, Parvati and Seamus arrived together.

"He defected," explained Harry, "torturing Hufflepuffs," indicating the table behind with a nod of his head.

"Well at least he'll give me less grief over Ginny now," observed Dean.

"Why's that?" enquired Hermione, puzzled, and looking up from Ancient Runes.

"Well Sam-an-thar," he strung out the name for emphasis, "is even younger than Ginny!"

Harry shook his head, pityingly, "no good, Dean. Ron's kind of protective of his little sister... ow! What'd you kick me for?" he asked of Ginny.

"You mock my situation!" declared Ginny.

"Pain, Sweetie, you mock my pain," corrected Dean, gently, as he leant over to kiss her temple. No way, thought Harry, would Dean have got away with that had Ron been at the same table.

"At which point," interjected Seamus, "I say, life is pain, Highness..."

"...and anyone who tells you different is trying to sell something," concluded Dean.

"Princess Bride," explained Seamus.

"Grrrrreeeat film," noted Dean, with a flick of his pink dreadlocks.

Ginny nodded, sagely, taking this all in, "I liked the bit about 'Highness'," she noted.

"One wouldn't dream of referring to you as anything but," confirmed Dean.

Hermione, who'd been sitting next to Harry, nudged him lightly to verify that he'd seen the same scene play out before them as she had. He nodded, discreetly.

Harry left the hall slightly earlier than the rest, deliberately walking slowly so that Cho would see him. She took the hint, and rose too. Obvious, he screamed inwardly, but just as long as they didn't look too guilty...

"I missed you," he whispered as they fell in step outside the Great Hall.

"I missed you, too," confessed Cho.

They paused at the top of the main staircase - left was Gryffindor and right was Ravenclaw. "Well what do we do now?" asked Harry, confusion battling its way to the surface once more.

Cho looked into his eyes, "this isn't *fair*," she whispered, barely audible.

"I'm sorry! Sorry, sorry..." stammered Harry, hurriedly.

"No, not you!" corrected Cho, "me. When I'm alone... I think of you. And when I'm with you... I think of... Cedric." She bit her lip as her eyes sparkled.

A sense of futility swept over Harry, and he did the first thing he could think of, which was to sweep his arms around Cho to hug her. They stayed like that for a few seconds until, mindful of the risk of detection, Harry kissed the top of her head lightly and stepped back.

"Are you going to be OK," he asked gently?

"Yes, I'll be fine," she assured him, "I'm really sorry, Harry," she added.

"Don't worry, it's fine. It's really fine..."

"But I want *this* too..."

"And so do I... but we can take our time, can't we?" It was Harry's turn to bite his lip as he said this. Time. What Cho didn't know was that they didn't have much more time left together at Hogwarts; once he'd drained the stone, he'd have to move on.

They parted, heading for their respective dorms, the last contact being a fleeting touch between fingertips as they turned from each other.

The rest of the week passed in similar fashion, with Ron seeming to spend a great deal of time with the Hufflepuffs and Beauxbatons, and Harry and Cho catching the odd, fleeting conversation. A brief hug, the occasional chaste kiss.

If anything, Harry thought, he seemed to see even less of Cho now than they had before. Before the 'thing' they had. They had a much deeper connection now, but still, part of this new life felt like torture. He could sense her pattern anywhere in Hogwarts, knowing she was that

close to him, yet constrained by public appearance to seem little more than friendly acquaintances.

Freed of the need to flit about the castle at night, Harry had taken to drinking from the Key whenever he could. Its pattern was noticeably dimmer these days, although its scale still remained vast. Nonetheless, Harry suspected that he'd broken the back of his self-imposed task to drain the Key, and it was now only a matter of time before it ran dry, and he'd be actively forced to consider what he was going to do next.

Simultaneously, he was working through the focusing disciplines Lucas had shown him, and was, once more, starting to get to grips with the power he commanded. The days of wand use seemed remote and distant now, and even with Ron and Hermione covering him when they could, he knew it was only a matter of time before his disguise was uncovered.

Three weeks had passed since the arrival of the Hawks of Tempus, and the full moon was approaching later in the week. Harry knew that Sirius and Lupin would be reporting back to the Order of the Phoenix, and he was anxious to find out what they had learned. Fortunately, then, Dumbledore's usual invitation had arrived that Monday morning, requesting that Harry meet him at one o'clock.

What with Tempus' campaign against the Death Eaters being so vigorously pursued, and Death Eaters' own activity on the European mainland (some of which Harry suspected *were* real, and some not), support for the mysterious order had been growing swiftly. Many students had signed the summons, already, although Neville was the only one of the fifth year Gryffindors who'd joined.

Cho had said that a significant number of Ravenclaws had signed, although there were a few who maintained reservations, including, of course, herself. Nonetheless, as the deadline for response loomed closer, the argument became not so much why they should join the Order as 'why not?'

Potions failed to get any better, Harry reflected, as he dutifully stirred the alarmingly purple potion (it was supposed to be bright blue, but he suspected Pansy had overdone it with the dragon's blood). He could sense Cho in Greenhouse 3, and was momentarily distracted by wishing that he could actually see her, rather than just her pattern...

Crash! The specimen jar containing the Byrestaffs had somehow fallen to the floor, the suspension liquid spilling across the dungeon's stone floor at a leisurely pace. The Byrestaffs themselves had spilled out in a fan shape, their red, green and blue hues contrasting against the dull black of the tiles.

"Clean that up, Potter!" snapped Snape, looking up from whatever paperwork he had been attending to at his desk.

Harry reluctantly got out of his seat to start collecting the broken fragments, when Snape's voice interrupted him, "not by *hand*, you Muggle-raised imbecile! A simple cleaning charm and *Reparo* would be more than adequate."

Harry froze, and in that moment, Snape suddenly seemed to sense blood.

"I'm sorry, *Champion* Potter, is there a problem? Surely someone as esteemed as yourself can manage a simple *Reparo*?" Snape's voice was silky smooth, but his eyes had the bright glint of revenge.

Next to him, Pansy's eyes had also widened, in what Harry strongly suspected might be hope dawning. He still hadn't moved, crouched at the foot of the desk as the clear gloom seeped towards his shoes.

All eyes in the classroom fell upon him, as Snape's goading tones cut through the air once more, "Come on, *Champion* Potter, we're all waiting..."

Chapter 33

What is the highest point of Durmstrang's buildings?

Time had frozen still. Harry was analysing the veined patterns of the cracks in the stone tiles of the classroom's floor. He wondered, absently, whether the classroom had ever really been used as a dungeon. The question, he realised, was academic; Potions with Snape was torture enough.

The thick, clear liquid that had been holding the Byrestaffs in suspension was oozing slowly towards his shoes, moving like golden syrup. Snape's eyes were locked on Harry in triumph, and he could see the beginnings of a superior sneer twisting the corners of Pansy's mouth as she revelled in Harry's discomfort.

He had his back to Malfoy, but knew, just *knew*, that the Slytherin was wearing the unflustered look of someone appreciating the inevitable.

Harry closed his eyes, and silently offered his sincerest, heartfelt apologies to Neville before applying an intensely strong fire to the base of Neville, Goyle and Crabbe's cauldron.

All heads in the room snapped round to the back corner, as Neville's cauldron exploded from the sudden heat. A cloud of purple fog rolled across the desks, as bright blue potion (it was just Neville's luck, thought Harry, that he'd been forced to sabotage a potion that had been going well) rained across the desks.

Before Harry's eyes, the specimen jar reassembled itself, and he used his Mage force to collect the Byrestaffs and put them back in the jar. The suspension liquid evaporated from the tiles as the commotion across the classroom subsided.

"Um, I think we'll need some more suspension, Sir," suggested Harry, proffering the freshly restored specimen jar. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hermione discreetly pocketing her wand.

Snape's intensely suspicious gaze locked on to him, and it was a little while before he managed to grind out his response, "thank you, Mr Potter. 20 points..."

For the remainder of the lesson, Harry sought every opportunity to use his Mage powers as substitutes for flames, summoning charms and anything else that sprang to mind. He could see Malfoy's eyes flicking to his desk every now and again, monitoring closely the activity. Snape hardly looked at anyone else all lesson, and Pansy satisfied herself with a sotto voce threat, "nice recovery, Potter, but you can't fool all the people all of the time."

Harry chose not to respond, instead flamboyantly summoning a replacement specimen jar from the wall shelves, grinning in mild satisfaction at Pansy's puzzled frown. Internally, though, he had realised that he may have won that day's battle, but he was losing the war.

"Thanks Hermione!" whispered Harry as they made their way to the Great Hall for lunch, "that was close!"

"I think Snape suspects, though," observed Ron, somewhat needlessly.

"Snape *knows*," corrected Harry, bleakly, "he's now just waiting for an opportunity to catch me out."

"What are you going to do?" asked Hermione.

"Well," said Harry, with a shrug, "the first priority has to be to drain the Key. Then I've got to get to Durmstrang. Somehow, and drain that before Voldemort gets there."

"If he isn't there already," interjected Ron, optimistically.

"Y'know, I've only just realised," said Harry, stopping momentarily, "I've not had any visions at night since Lucius Malfoy."

"Well," suggested Hermione, "that may be because Vol... because You-Know-Who has been busy overseeing some of the Death Eater strikes. Did you hear about the French Ministry?"

"Yes," confirmed Harry, glumly. The French Aurors had been brutally slaughtered in a surprise attack the previous night, and the Ministry had virtually ceased to function. Perhaps Voldemort had overseen that raid, thought Harry. Anything, he pleaded, anything but Voldemort making a move on the Durmstrang Key.

"Hey," suggested Ron as they resumed their journey to lunch, "maybe he's got to find someone else who knows how to do the power transfer thing from the Key? 'cos, y'know," he continued, getting into his stride, "I'll bet Malfoy wouldn't have shared that knowledge..."

"You're right!" agreed Hermione (although Harry privately thought there was no need for her to look *quite* so amazed), "because Lucius Malfoy would've wanted to hold that information as a bargaining chip, wouldn't he?"

Maybe, thought Harry, just maybe they were alright for the time being. "I've got to meet Dumbledore this afternoon," Harry informed his friends, "Lupin and Snuffles should be back from their scouting mission."

"Ooh they cut that close!" exclaimed Hermione, "it's a full moon tonight!"

The Gryffindor fifth years sat down to lunch in their usual grouping - Harry at one corner of the group, Parvati at the extreme opposite end. They'd left spaces in the middle for Seamus and Lavender, who slid in to join them after whatever distraction had caused their lateness.

Lavender's eyes were wide with what Harry strongly suspected was some extremely juicy gossip. He wasn't wrong.

"So Hermione, you kept that quiet, didn't you?" teased Lavender.

"Kept what?" asked Hermione, puzzled.

"Draco... Mal..foy," elaborated Lavender, drawing out the syllables for emphasis, and beaming a conspiratorial smile.

Harry saw Ron's knuckles whiten as he gripped his cutlery, clearly trying to master control of his temper. Not, thought Harry, that anything obvious appeared to have been going on between Hermione and Malfoy; he'd been most stand-offish with all three of them the rest of the week after Potions. But then, he remembered, Hermione and Malfoy had been their usual conversational selves in the last lesson.

Ron was speaking, "nothing happened," he announced on Hermione's behalf.

Judging by Hermione's expression, sitting next to Ron, however, Harry suspected that Ron's conviction may have been ill-founded.

"Oh, that's not what I heard," pressed Lavender, in her best conspiratorial-sister voice. "Right, Hermione?"

Hermione shifted uncomfortably in her seat, "um, what *exactly* did you hear, then?"

Ron had now laid his cutlery down, and turned to face Hermione, "You *said*... you *told us* that it wasn't *like* that," he reminded her, "nothing happened... no wait, that's Harry's line..."

"*What's* Harry's line?" snapped Parvati, acidly, joining the conversation.

Ron opened his mouth as he composed a reply, and then his brain kicked into gear, "ah... um..."

Lavender helped him out, "nothing happening. Apparently."

Since they were talking about her, Harry looked across to the Ravenclaw table. Unfortunately Cho was looking at him, and flashed a smile back, a gesture not unnoticed by Parvati. She narrowed her eyes, "Do you two have to make eyes at each other over *every* meal?"

"We're friends," protested Harry, weakly (he dropped the 'just'). Which wasn't actually lying. Understating things, perhaps, but impossible to deny. They were, at the very least, friends.

Ron snorted, and Parvati snapped her head around to fix Ron with a steely glare, "and what does Ron know that makes him think otherwise, hmm?"

Since Ron valued full functionality in his legs, and Harry was sitting opposite, he declined to elaborate further. Hermione, to Ron's left, looked desperately uncomfortable, and an awkward silence fell across the table.

Ron, however, was clearly processing thoughts in his head, and he levelled his gaze at Lavender, "so, Lavender, what *did* you hear?"

Belatedly picking up on the somewhat hostile atmosphere, Lavender tried to backpedal, "well, nothing really... just a rumour..."

"Enlighten us, do," invited Ron, forcefully, ignoring Hermione's terrified expression and Harry's silent pleas for him to let the matter drop.

Lavender hadn't often been the subject of the Weasley wrath, and it clearly wasn't a situation she found to her liking, "um, well, you know, last week..."

"Oh, that's *old* news, Lavender," interjected Harry with a forcedly dismissive tone.

"...Hermione and Draco, skipping Potions..."

"See?" prompted Harry, trying to cut Lavender off.

"...in the Astronomy Tower..." continued Lavender, hesitantly.

Hermione made a small whimpering sound, as Ron turned to glare at her, "the Astronomy Tower? The *Astronomy Tower*?"

"Ron," pleaded Harry, "we can talk about this later, OK?"

Lavender nodded her fervent agreement, anxious to back down from the uncomfortable atmosphere.

"Funny you didn't mention that when you were so busy telling us *nothing happened*," observed Ron in a tone completely devoid of humour, "although I'm beginning to wonder if maybe I think that phrase means something different to the rest of you," he continued, glaring at Harry.

Parvati glared at Harry from her corner of the group. The Patil twins had put two and two together before and come up with an implausibly large number. Harry didn't doubt that the same process was being undertaken that second. With his elbow on the table, he rested his forehead against his palm, willing Ron to shut up.

"Funny that you managed to keep that part of your innocent little friendship with Draco *sodding* Malfoy out of the conversation, wasn't it? Odd that Harry forgot to mention it too, I think..."

"Um, guys, I have to... be somewhere," announced Harry, cautiously. He leant into Lavender and whispered "try not to let them kill each other, OK?", and then got up to leave the room.

Cho shot him a questioning look from Ravenclaw, and Harry returned a barely perceptible shake of the head. She replied with an equally slight nod, and Harry slipped out of the Great Hall, fishing his pendant out from underneath his robes.

Sensing that no-one was in visual range, he portkeyed out.

"Harry," Sirius nodded a greeting as Harry and Dumbledore apparated into the circular council chamber. Kolchan was missing, as was Mundungus, but the rest were there.

"Hi Sirius, Prof... I mean Remus," Harry thought he would *never* feel comfortable referring to the former Defence Against the Dark Arts professor by his first name. "Good trip?"

"Informative, and yet not distressingly eventful," confirmed Lupin, which Harry took to be an affirmative.

Moody had fixed Harry with his half and half stare, one eye normal, the other magical, as soon as he'd appeared in the room, and Harry now returned the glare, with interest.

"Yes Alastor, I assure you, it *is* Harry," confirmed Dumbledore with infinite patience.

Moody looked at Dumbledore to nod confirmation, but his magical eye remained fixed on Harry. He vowed not to let the embittered Auror get to him this meeting.

"Well," announced Dumbledore, "all those expected are present, so if you could report your findings, Remus?"

"Certainly, Albus." Lupin looked about the circular table to make sure he had everybody's attention, drawing even Moody's magical eye towards him. "The news, I'm sorry to say, is not good news. We were not able to find the base from which the Order of Tempus operate, nor were we able to find any information as to the structure of the Order, or its leadership..."

"So it was a waste of time," scowled Moody, seemingly unaware that Harry could obliterate him into a million pieces with a lightning bolt. Just like that.

Really. Maybe two million, if Harry really tried. He belatedly remembered that he wasn't going to let Moody get to him today, and turned his attention back to Lupin.

"On the contrary," smiled Lupin, seemingly enjoying the opportunity to contradict Moody, "Sirius and I found a great deal of disturbing information. Firstly, the situation in Europe is bleak. Sirius?"

Sirius took over the narrative, "essentially, the declaration from Tempus has split the magical community three ways. There are the Death Eaters, the Order of Tempus and the neutrals. From what we could ascertain, people are flocking to one or the other for protection, and the band of neutrals is diminishing quickly.

"Of course," continued Sirius, "neutrality would appear to be a technicality once the summons deadline expires at the weekend, since Tempus will then have declared war on anyone who hasn't joined."

"But people are joining the Death Eaters rather than Tempus?" questioned Monica, surprised.

"Oh yes," confirmed Lupin, "most certainly. In fact, I do not understand why our own press haven't picked up on the loyalty tattoo yet. Bill, if you would?"

Bill snapped his head up, causing the fang to swing merrily from his ear, "the loyalty tattoo. Yes, nasty little bugger, that is. What we've got, there, is an enforced loyalty curse. If the wearer tries to cast an offensive spell at another member of the Order, firstly, that spell is ineffective, and secondly, they themselves get a jolt of pain."

Harry blinked. This didn't sound good.

"And that pain increases in magnitude the more frequently you try and attack members of the Order. Excellent way of maintaining discipline amongst the troops."

"But that's not all, is it Remus?" prompted Sirius.

"No, that isn't all," confirmed Lupin, "from what we've picked up on our travels, there are different levels of branding. So the standard army grunts, which would appear to be anyone who answers the summons, can't hurt any member of the Order. Then you've got your commanders, who *can* attack the grunts, but not their equals or higher..."

"...and so on right to the top," breathed Moody. "Tempus are attempting to enslave the whole wizarding world, aren't they?"

"That's my reading," agreed Lupin.

"And they've effectively negated the opposition already, since huge numbers of people have signed the summons on the back of the strikes, counter strikes and public relations battles that have been played out these past weeks," concluded Sirius.

Moody snorted in disgust, "how could people be so damned foolish? Signing up to a bloody unheard of Order? The deadline hasn't even expired yet! And what's our Ministry saying?"

"The Ministry, Alastor, is maintaining its advice that the public should strongly consider lending its support to the initiative," relayed Dumbledore, with a weary sigh.

"Obviously, we shall relay Sirius and Remus' findings to him, but I expect it's asking a bit much of Cornelius to expect him to back down from a publicly declared position."

"Afraid of looking a fool," noted Arabella, "which is ironic. You think he'd be used to that by now."

"A lot of students have signed up," reported Harry, with an apologetic shrug, "I tried to get them to at least wait until the deadline, see what we could learn, but, you know, all the business with Mont St Michel and Forte Mal and stuff... people seemed to be convinced that Tempus were doing the right thing."

"Try and convince the rest not to, Harry," urged Dumbledore, quietly.

Harry nodded, wondering how he was going to achieve that. As if the students didn't think he was full of himself already.

Bill spoke up again, "I can crack this, though, the loyalty curse."

"Really?" asked Arabella, seizing on this faint ray of optimism.

"Yup," he confirmed, although the grim face was soon explained, when he continued, "but it ain't pretty. It's painful to remove, both for the wearer *and* the breakers, and once its gone the wearer won't be able to do much for the next couple of days."

"Breakers?" asked Lupin, picking up on the plural.

"Two person job," replied Bill with a shrug, "this is heavy stuff."

"Get the Aurors cleaned first," suggested Arabella, "we need their firepower."

"Any damned person fool enough to sign that summons," snarled Moody, forcefully "shouldn't be an Auror. Sack 'em."

Harry was astonished to find himself actually agreeing with Mad-Eye, but took comfort from the knowledge that their alliance was bound to be short-lived.

"We're going to need all the people we can get, Alastor," sighed Monica, "all of them."

One of the great things about skipping History of Magic was that the Ravenclaw sixth years had a free on Monday afternoons, so Cho and Harry shared a table by the History stacks, more to enjoy the simple physical presence of each other's company rather than to talk.

Cho had asked why he had a free when none of his fellow fifth years did, to which he'd simply replied, "one day." She'd frowned at that, but reluctantly accepted that he didn't get to choose which bits of his life were secret.

And he was going to tell her. He had to. Just not yet. He looked up from Slytherin's journal to watch Cho work on her Ancient Runes assignment. Everything about her was poised - she was as graceful writing her homework as she was playing Seeker at Quidditch. Even now, with their newfound closeness, Harry still felt clumsy, almost bloated, in her presence.

Cho looked up, and they locked eyes.

"Cho," he started, "this afternoon I was..."

"Shhh," she whispered, "don't tell me. If I don't know, it can't be dragged out of me. And I trust you."

Harry wondered what he'd ever done to deserve that trust, "thanks Cho, I'd really like it if you could know, though. I don't want to keep things from you..."

"I know Harry," she sympathised, "but sometimes, it seems, that people ask a lot of you. Maybe too much. But you're doing the right thing not telling me, and I understand that. I don't *like* it, but that's not to say I'd like the truth any better. And I dare say you don't like it either."

"I just wish I could let you in. Tell you everything."

"There'll be time enough for that, one day," Cho echoed Harry's own promise, and returned to her Runes.

Ron came in to the library after Quidditch practice to collect Harry on his way to Dinner in the Great Hall. Fortunately Harry and Cho had already said their goodbyes by that point, and she'd long since disappeared to the Ravenclaw dorm.

"C'mon mate, food," announced Ron, helping Harry file the books back on Madam Pince's book trolley. "Learn much?"

Harry knew Ron wasn't referring to the History of Magic project, "yeah, quite a bit, actually, most of it not good. I'll tell you both later." As he said those words, Harry thought it odd that Hermione hadn't come into the library with Ron. "Um, you two are *talking* to each other at the moment, aren't you?"

"Draco sodding Malfoy!" hissed Ron, incredulously, by way of answer.

Harry took that as a 'no', and felt his shoulders droop as he sighed.

They sat down at the Gryffindor table with the usual bunch of fifth years, except there was no Parvati and no Hermione. Harry frowned, "anyone seen Hermione or Parvati?" he asked.

"They got a note from Sprout in History of Magic," replied Neville, "and so did Ron, actually."

"Did I?" exclaimed Ron, "damn! I must've forgotten - Quidditch practice," he shrugged as though this was all the explanation needed. Captaincy of the team was clearly getting to him.

Harry frowned as he swept his sense out to the Greenhouses. There was no sign of either Hermione or Parvati, and he couldn't find them in Gryffindor Tower either. His frown deepened, "Lavender, where would Parvati go if she wasn't in Gryffindor Tower or here?"

"What's it to you?" snapped Lavender, icily, before adding, half-heartedly, "she might have gone to see Trelawney."

A quick stab towards Trelawney's demented classroom ruled out that location. And he knew Hermione wasn't in the library.

"You alright mate?" asked Ron, picking up on Harry's worried expression.

"I can't find either of them," he explained.

"Who?" asked Ron.

"Hermione or Parvati," replied Harry with rising concern as he started sweeping the entire castle with his sense.

"She's probably snogging Malfoy," suggested Ron, bitterly.

"No Ron," sighed Harry, patiently, "I. Can't. Find. Them."

Ron looked at Harry with a piercing gaze, "you can't find them? What, *anywhere*?" he asked, obviously recognising that Harry was conducting his search whilst sitting at the table.

"They're not in the grounds," said Harry, "I'll try Hogsmeade, just in case," he continued, shutting his eyes to allow his sense to focus.

Nothing. Or rather, plenty, but not the two familiar patterns he was seeking.

"Of course," admitted Harry, "it's *possible* that I'm just missing them, somehow... "

"Not bloody likely," asserted Ron, laying down his cutlery.

"Er, guys," Harry interrupted the various conversations going on between the Gryffindor fifth years, "has *anyone* seen either Hermione or Parvati since History of Magic?"

Something in Harry's eyes must have convinced them all that this was not an idle enquiry, and they regarded him curiously as everyone returned a negative. "I'm going to look for them," he announced, standing up from the untouched food on his plate.

Ron followed suit, "I'll get the map."

Seamus and Dean exchanged a glance, "you want a hand?" asked Seamus.

Harry nodded briefly, and Seamus and Dean stood, followed by Neville, Lavender and Ginny, who these days seemed to be an honorary fifth year as far as the grouping was concerned.

"Right, Ron - Gryffindor Tower. Seamus, dungeons. Lavender, library. Ginny ground floor classrooms, Dean you take the first. I'll take Ravenclaw, Neville can you do Hufflepuff's wing? Meet back in the entrance hall in ten minutes, OK?"

"Smoke me a kipper," confirmed Dean, "I'll be back for breakfast." 'Ace' Rimmer was one of Dean's favourite Red-Dwarfisms (although even Ace had to take second place to the toaster).

The mass exodus of the Gryffindor fifth years at the start of the meal turned a few heads, but was soon forgotten. Once outside the hall, the group disbanded to search their chosen sectors, which saw Harry lightly jogging through the corridors in the Ravenclaw wing.

Moving staircases, trick steps and false doors all combined to make a manual search somewhat arduous, but even though Harry was convinced his sense wasn't lying, he forced himself to visually check everything.

"Harry, what are you doing over here?" it was Cho's voice - obviously she was heading down to dinner somewhat late.

"Um, looking for Hermione and Parvati," he explained, "no-one's seen them since History of Magic."

"Well it's a big castle," shrugged Cho, "I'm sure they're somewhere around."

Harry locked eyes with her, "no, they're not."

And he could tell, by the look in Cho's face, that she realised that he *knew* they weren't in the castle. "*How* do you do that?" she asked, incredulously, before adding, "no, don't tell me, it's probably best that I don't know, isn't it?"

"I have this sense," Harry explained, whilst continuing walking - Cho had joined him, apparently leaving dinner till later, "and I can sense, er, energy patterns. That's how I knew where you were that night. I can recognise individual people from their pattern."

"That's.... that explains so much!" she said, "so how far can you sense?"

Harry looked at her apologetically, "um, beyond Hogsmeade?"

"Through walls?"

"Um, yup," he admitted. He could see Cho putting pieces together in her mind.

"And you can't sense Hermione or Padma's sister anywhere in the castle?"

"Nope."

"Then why are you looking?"

"Because," said Harry, eyes full of concern, "I'm hoping I'm wrong."

"OK, I'll take the floor above, meet you at the end of the corridor, alright?"

"Are you sure you want to help, I mean..."

"Harry, I don't doubt that no matter how hard Parvati's trying to hide, if she sees *me* she's going to scream the place down. So if anyone's going to draw her out, it'll be me."

Harry looked at Cho, momentarily puzzled until he realised what she'd just said, "you heard about that? About what Parvati thought?"

"Padma had a word with me, yes. Several words, actually."

Harry winced, "I'm really sorry about that..." he started.

"Don't be," Cho cut him off, and kissed him lightly on the cheek, "see you at the end of the corridor," and the Ravenclaw Seeker darted up the spiral staircase.

Having joined in Harry's search, Cho returned with him to the Entrance Hall to meet with the other Gryffindors, and a collection of raised eyebrows. "Cho offered to help," announced Harry, before realising that they were still holding hands.

"Uh huh," observed Seamus, knowingly.

"Ron, map?"

"Here," announced Ron, handing it over. The group huddled over the parchment, expressing collective amazement.

"Wow," breathed Dean, and then, not one to miss working a quote in, he added "where do you get these *wonderful* toys?"

"Need to know only, I'm afraid," said Harry, apologetically, "sorry man."

Dean didn't seem unduly ruffled. The map itself showed a colossal concentration of dots in the Great Hall, which was hardly surprising, since most students were at Dinner. 'Delacour' was in the Potions classroom (a fact confirmed by Seamus on his sweep of the dungeons) and 'Trelawney' was holed up in her Divination classroom.

But nowhere could they find 'Granger' or the second 'Patil'.

"Why don't you do a temporal reversal on it?" asked Cho.

The Gryffindors looked at her as though she'd spoken Martian.

"Temper what?" asked Ron.

"Temporal reversal. We could get it to play backwards, and, eventually we'd see Hermione and Parvati leaving class this afternoon, right?"

"Do you know the charm?" asked Harry.

"Yes... Oh, of course, it's Sixth year - sorry," she dug out her wand, and muttered a few words. Nothing much seemed to change on the map, until suddenly the dots in the Entrance Hall started to disperse back across the castle.

Cho made a spooling motion with her wand, making the dots on the map move faster. The Great Hall on the map suddenly started to empty, a huge outpouring of ant like dots sweeping to the dorms. And then, after a little while, the dots poured out of the dorms, and into the classrooms.

"Why is the ink getting lighter?" asked Ginny, curiously, as the previously dark ink noticeably faded on the parchment.

"Temporal reversal picks up on decayed magical signatures," explained Cho, flicking her wand to slow down the rewind, "but the further you go back, the weaker the signatures are... I guess that must be why the ink's fading. Hopefully it'll start to get darker again as we get nearer to now." She flicked the wand up, and the map froze.

"OK, now we go forwards again," she announced. All eyes were on Binns' classroom, although Harry noticed, guiltily, that Chang and Potter were two faint labels next to each other in the library. Not that they seemed to be a secret amongst the Gryffindors now, but still...

"There they go," breathed Ron, pointing at the two dots marching across to the greenhouses.

"No Sprout," noted Lavender, checking the greenhouses. She looked up from the map, "but who's Pettigrew?"

Chapter 34

Name two of the four wizarding schools located in the Southern Hemisphere.

Harry and Ron both snapped their heads up to look at Lavender, exclaiming in unison, "Wormtail!"

Lavender was puzzled, "no, Pettigrew... rings a bell."

Harry looked back at the map, where the two faint dots, Patil and Granger, were marching unknowingly towards Pettigrew, waiting in Greenhouse 3. It was no use panicking now, he reminded himself, the map was replaying events from two hours ago, so it was with a strange sense of powerlessness that he tried to bring the group up to speed. "That," he said, pointing to Pettigrew on the map with his wand, "is Peter Pettigrew. But his nickname's Wormtail."

Seamus obviously had sharp eyes, "Wormtail? So he was one of the Marauders - the people that wrote the map? Moony, Wormtail... and two other weird names."

"Padfoot and Prongs," confirmed Ron.

"You've probably heard of all the Marauders," explained Harry, "Moony is Professor Lupin..."

Dean whistled, impressed, "Lupin wrote this? *Dude!*"

"We've told you that Wormtail's Pettigrew," continued Harry, "but Padfoot's Sirius. Sirius Black."

"Whoa!" exclaimed Seamus, "*Sirius Black!*"

Many of the eyes in the group suddenly widened at this revelation, and Cho's hand squeezed Harry's slightly tighter. The reminder that they were still physically touching like that temporarily distracted Harry, before he returned to his explanation.

He thought he'd better get it over with, "yes, Sirius. He's innocent. Prongs was my dad." An inexplicable wave of sadness washed over Harry at this point. His dad had helped make this map. It was one of the few things Harry owned that had a physical connection to his parents, the Invisibility Cloak being the notable other. Harry thought it was a pretty bitter irony that both things were useless in his hands as a Mage.

"Your dad?" breathed Cho, understanding, "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be," said Harry. But inwardly he was grateful that Cho had realised that the reason he was the Boy Who Lived was because his mum and dad had become the Parents Who'd Died. Strange how that was something he always knew, but didn't think about.

"Sirius Black is innocent?" asked Lavender, "but... but he broke into Gryffindor last year. With a knife..."

"There were... extenuating circumstances," explained Harry, "I'll tell you all later." The group returned their attention to the map, although it hadn't escaped Harry's attention that they were all taking on board a lot of new information that night.

They watched the dots on the map converge at the entrance of Greenhouse 3, and then all three started moving together, through the building. Neville, being familiar with all the greenhouses, was able to help here, "they're walking through the Bubotubers," he observed, "and... I think, um, that's one... one of the old store rooms. Isn't it?"

"Is it?" asked Ron, not afraid to admit to his ignorance when it came to classes.

"Um yeah, I think so... Sprout's been keeping it locked... ever since I saw that rat..." explained Neville.

"*Rat!*" exclaimed Ron. "*Rat?*" he turned to fix Neville with a hostile, almost accusatory glare.

Neville flinched at Ron's outburst, which appeared to be out of all proportion.

"Rewind!" prompted Dean, suddenly, flicking his eyes at Cho.

They all looked at the map, but the three dots had vanished. Cho murmured the incantation once more, and slowly spooled her wand anticlockwise. The three dots materialised once more in the room Neville had identified as being an old store room. She flicked her wand up, a move Harry assumed froze the replay on the map.

"Forward," muttered Dean, flicking his index finger lightly, eyes fixed on the three dots.

The others watched as Dean and Cho flicked the map backwards and forwards in time until they'd found the exact point at which the trio disappeared. It almost looked as though the three had walked straight through the Northern wall of the store... except that they hadn't appeared on the other side.

"Neville," asked Harry, slowly, "when, *exactly*, did you see the rat?"

Neville looked like a rabbit caught in headlights, "I... I can't... remem... remember," he stammered.

"You should have said something!" said Ron.

"Ron, he didn't *know*," countered Harry, "we can't blame him. He didn't know."

"Know what?" prompted Seamus.

"Wormtail- Pettigrew - is an unregistered animagus," explained Harry, resignedly, "and his animagus form is a rat."

"Not just any rat, mind," added Ron, "but Scabbers."

Ginny shrieked in surprise, "*Percy's* Scabbers?"

"Percy gave him to me!" protested Ron, defensively, forgetting that it wasn't necessarily a thing to be possessive about.

"We going then?" prompted Dean, cutting off the conversation, "to the greenhouse?"

They moved quickly across the grounds to the Greenhouses, the moonlight providing ample illumination for the excursion. The door to Greenhouse 3 was still ajar, and Neville tutted as he closed it behind the group, fearing for the plants' wellbeing.

Harry, used to either being by himself or as part of the Trio, found being part of a larger group quite strange, and, although he knew he was being uncharitable, he found it almost unwieldy; Dean, Seamus, Lavender, Ginny, Neville, Cho, Ron and himself. Eight.

He, Ron and Hermione were a team. They knew each other, knew how to cover each other, watched their collective backs. Knew their strengths, and their weaknesses, and could play their hands accordingly. He wasn't sure that more people was necessarily better in situations like these. They were his friends, he knew he could trust them. But they didn't *know* the world like the Trio did.

Greenhouse 3 was a long, squat building, thick with vegetation. A sweep with his sense suggested to Harry that nobody was present, but, with all the vegetation around it was hard to be certain. Some of the plants were clearly immensely powerful, and had patterns on a level with some of the younger students.

The group had slowed down, warily, to a cautious walking pace as they made their way along the partially illuminated central path in the darkened greenhouse. Pools of light were placed every twenty feet or so, cast by glass cylinders similar to the ones in Madam Pomfrey's ward, the fading circles of light just failing to meet one another.

"Can you see anyone?" asked Cho, nervously.

"No," replied Harry, carefully, "but with all these plants," he waved an arm about him, "it's hard to be sure... they all have... patterns, too. If someone were here, and they moved, I'd know about it. But... well, if they were remaining still, just watching, they might... be hard to spot." There was no point, he thought, in giving them false confidence in an ability they had no real right to trust in.

"Hmm," acknowledged Cho, weakly, starting to look about her more nervously, as though she could feel hidden eyes boring in to her. The others in the group were doing likewise, and their pace slowed further still, as though they all sensed they were marching towards some hidden terror.

Seamus reached the store room first, "'s locked," he announced, with a shrug of his shoulders, "what do we do now?"

"*Alohamora!*", commanded Ron, pointing his wand at the door in question, and ignoring the scandalised look on most of the group's faces.

"Sorry guys," explained Harry, apologetically, "we forgot you're new to this..."

"Do you do this routinely?" asked Cho, half teasing, half... well, an emotion Harry couldn't quite place - was it fear? Or was she slightly impressed?

"Um, only when we have to," hedged Harry, feeling slightly uncomfortable with the admission. He hadn't realised quite how blasé the Trio had become at breaking school rules when it was clear it was in their immediate interest. "Look, if any of you don't want to be part of this..."

"That's *not* what we were saying," interrupted Cho, "it's just... um, unexpected how you do these things..."

"Sorry," apologised Harry, grinning, "we're wicked. We know."

The group made their way into the room, and stared at the Northern wall. It was immediately apparent now why the map showed Hermione, Parvati and Wormtail disappearing; the wall contained what appeared to be a doorway, except that it showed, dimly, as though through fog, a seemingly circular room, lit only by moonlight flowing through the arrowslits in the heavy stone walls.

"That's a portal!" exclaimed Ron, somewhat unnecessarily.

"But where to?" asked Dean, eyes narrowing.

"It makes sense, I s'pose," conceded Seamus, "after all, you can't apparate into the grounds here, can you? And, well, if Pettigrew had a portkey on him, they wouldn't have needed to walk through the greenhouse, would they?"

Harry surveyed the apparent room beyond the portal. It seemed to be circular, and, assuming that the portal had been placed in a wall at the destination point, he couldn't see anyone else there. "I'm going through," he announced, "I'll try and come straight back, so that we know if it's two-way or not, but if I'm not back within 20 seconds... um, do something, but *don't* come after me."

"Don't be stupid!" Cho had grabbed hold of his arm, "you could be stuck... well, Merlin knows where, with no way to get back. It could be a trap. You don't know what's waiting for you... let's get help first..."

Harry locked his gaze onto Cho's eyes, and willed every ounce of complete honesty into his eyes, "Don't worry about me. I can get back," he assured her, and he saw, again, that she believed him. He didn't mention that it would require a detour via Azkaban, that was detail that didn't need to be broached at this point. "But Hermione and Parvati are through there," he nodded in the direction of the portal, "and I need to see if they're still there. Twenty seconds, and I'll be back. Promise."

He could clearly see the misgivings in her eyes, but Cho released Harry's arm, and he made his way to the portal. Ron started to move also, "no Ron, you stay here; it only needs me for the first trip. No point both of us getting stranded," or killed, he thought.

Standing in front of the haze in the portal, Harry leaned left and right, trying to see as much of the destination room as possible, before, taking a breath, and willing up an encompassing energy shield, he stepped through.

The stone keep felt cool as he stepped into it, but then, he remembered, he had just stepped out of a greenhouse. As it had appeared from the store cupboard, the room was circular, with only arrow slits for windows. The walls were made of large stone blocks, and the whole place had a castle-like air.

The only illumination in the room came from the moonlight seeping in through the arrow slits, and a soft, hazy kind of glow from the portal. Harry swept his sense outwards, and discovered that he appeared to be on the first floor of a three story tower, positioned at the corner of some kind of wall.

The wall ran towards a cliff, and stopped, the cliff being marked by what seemed to be a similar tower. Beyond the cliff was a body of water that Harry assumed was a lake.

Reaching out further, there was a short expanse of what he assumed was woodland, before he detected a large castle. Probably larger than Hogwarts, even.

The two towers he'd first swept were empty. He picked up Parvati's pattern first, underground, in some kind of room underneath the open land between the walls and the castle proper. Hermione was next to her. There were a handful of other patterns in the same general area as the two Gryffindors, but nothing too alarming.

However, as he swept his sense through the castle, which was surprisingly empty, he eventually came to a burningly bright pattern. It was in a space with walls on three sides, the fourth side appearing to be open to the lake.

It was a Key. And not just any Key. The portal had brought him to Beauxbatons. Voldermort's lair.

Harry rubbed at his scar in reflex, and was astonished to then realise that it wasn't even twinging. Perhaps Voldermort wasn't nearby, then.

Harry turned about, and stepped back into the portal, hoping that it would indeed turn out to be a two-way device. It was only as he stepped into the hazy image that he suddenly realised he hadn't been able to see any of his friends in the Greenhouse store room.

"Well, it works," concluded Harry, stepping into the store room, and seeing everyone visibly relax. Clearly, then, it was pointless trying to use portals to see who was at the other end - they didn't show in the image.

"Where'd you go?" asked Ginny, "you just disappeared - we couldn't see you in the room..."

"Well, the room I landed in looked like that," said Harry, nodding his head backwards. "It's Beauxbatons..."

"Beauxbatons!" exclaimed Lavender, "but that's where... where... You Know..."

"Voldermort."

"You Know Who is!" finished Lavender, flinching at Harry's correction.

"Hermione and Parvati are there," Harry continued.

"You don't know that for sure," cautioned Seamus.

"Actually," corrected Harry, "I do."

"He does," confirmed Ron and Cho in unison, causing most of the group to look at Cho, appraisingly. Cho was looking at Ron, who was in turn looking at Harry with his eyebrows raised, inviting explanation.

"Later," murmured Harry. "The castle's practically empty," he continued, "so I'm going to try and get Hermione and Parvati back. I don't think they thought we'd track them this quickly."

"With you," confirmed Ron, needlessly. Harry knew, despite Ron and Hermione's current spat, Ron would be in on any rescue mission.

Dean and Seamus exchanged a look, "we're on the Away Team," confirmed Dean, lapsing into Star Trek speak.

"I'll come, too," volunteered Cho, softly.

"Well we don't want *too* many people, you know - I've got no idea whether we'll be setting off any wards when we portal into that room. It's a Death Eater's lair, it's not a trip to Hogsmeade," explained Harry, earnestly. He would be grateful for the additional numbers, and Cho had already proved her worth with the charm work on the Marauders' Map, but it wouldn't do to get carried away.

"We know that, Harry," explained Seamus, "but, great as you are," he paused, to indicate that he was mocking the Boy Who Lived, ever so slightly, "you can't do everything."

Harry didn't bother saying that Seamus spoke truer words than he knew. He had to have a wizard, or a witch, with him to do the charms. There were bound to be locking spells at the very least, and those were unbreakable as far as a Mage was concerned.

He took a breath, "OK, Neville, Ginny, Lavender; someone needs to guard the portal, and someone needs to find a member of staff to alert them to the situation."

"But *not* Snape," stressed Ron.

The others gave a half-hearted chuckle - it was quite clear that Snape would be the last person any of them would have run to for help.

"Um... OK," volunteered Neville, "I'll go and find one of the professors."

"Yeah, Sprout, or Flitwick, or McGonagall," suggested Harry. Any of those three would be fine. And Neville knew Sprout. "Ginny and Lavender - are you two staying here?"

The two girls nodded confirmation.

"OK," confirmed Harry, "if anyone, *anyone* but one of us five or Hermione or Parvati comes through that Portal, stun them. *Petrificus Totalus* or *Stupefy*, OK? And then, um, send up sparks... no, just get out."

"Right, are you four ready?" asked Harry, looking particularly at Seamus, Dean and Cho. He knew Ron would follow him to the ends of the Earth if Hermione was in trouble. But the other three needed to know what they were getting into. "This is going to be hairy. In a worst case scenario, I can get us out, but you all have to stay close. OK?"

The group nodded their assent, and Harry stepped to the portal, "OK, follow me." He stepped back into the stone keep.

Sweeping the grounds with his sense, as the others joined him in the keep, Harry couldn't detect much change in the surroundings. Hermione and Parvati were still in the rooms underground, the entrance to which was via the main castle building.

It seemed as though they were at a minor entrance to the grounds, certainly there were much bigger rooms, gates and other features at the opposite end of the massive castle, and Harry was silently thankful that at least they weren't marching up to Voldemort's front door.

The lack of any kind of convergence of foreign patterns towards the keep also suggested that either their presence hadn't been detected, or that it hadn't been perceived to be threatening.

Cho came through last, looking distinctly nervous, and Harry extended a hand that she took gratefully. "OK," Harry whispered, "we're in a tower on the castle wall. The castle is over there," he gestured with his free hand, "but we have to go through a forest first to reach the back entrance.

"Hermione and Parvati are being held in a room underground..."

"Dungeon," deduced Ron, in the same tone that he might have noted that the Owl post was late.

"...and there are... one, two, three, four... there are six patterns guarding them, none of which I recognise."

"Five against six," surmised Dean.

"I know," said Harry, running his hand through his hair, "but we have two things in our favour, firstly, the element of surprise. And secondly, er..." Harry felt his face flushing in embarrassment, "I, um, hate to say it like this, but, well, we have me."

"You're right, you know," agreed Dean, "modesty is *so* last year..." he flashed a good natured smile, indicating that they all understood what Harry meant. Whether he liked it or not, he *was* special. There *was* something about him, and it gave them an edge.

"Right," said Ron, "where do these stairs go?" The room had two doors, aside from the portal, both leading to a spiral staircase. Ron was indicating the nearest set.

Dean appeared to consider the situation carefully before replying, "down."

Ron, who'd never seen Ghostbusters, glared at him.

The floor below, the ground floor of the keep, turned out to be a small armoury. Cho was the only member of what Dean insisted on calling the Away Team who hadn't been a member of Vellum's fencing club, so she waited whilst the boys helped themselves to a sword each.

Harry slung the scabbard over his back, so that the sword's hilt stuck just above his shoulder. The sword itself was about two and a half feet long, with a gently curved blade. There was an inscription on the blade, which, according to Cho (who was the only member of the Away Team who took Ancient Runes), read *Fear my song*.

They'd all looked dubiously at her, until she'd admitted it was a pretty old dialect, and she might have got it wrong. Harry didn't care - it was pretty cool to have a sword, a real sword, and even cooler that it had an inscription on the blade.

Ron, being the biggest, had chosen a large broadsword, choosing power over dexterity. It reminded Harry of how they flew - he, nimble, fleet and quick, Ron was larger, more powerful but at the cost of manoeuvrability.

Seamus and Dean, both taller than Harry, chose similar swords (it was clearly only the mechanics of biology that stopped those two behaving to all intents and purposes as brothers), in between the two extremes occupied by Harry and Ron.

All kitted out, the Away Team edged to the Keep's wooden door, and waited for Harry to give the all clear. Harry swept the woodland between the Keep and the castle with his sense. He couldn't see anything too hostile, but the forest wrapped around the castle, and the further away it got, the denser the patterns became. He was, however, confident that there was nothing in the immediate vicinity. He looked at the others, questioningly.

"Red five, standing by," confirmed Dean.

Cho and Ron exchanging puzzled looks before the Away Team crept outside, momentarily squinting as their eyes adjusted to the brightness of the moonlight compared to the darkness of the Keep.

They were on bona fide enemy territory now. The castle was about a quarter of a mile from the Keep, and they were jogging lightly through the rough woodland that spanned the intervening distance. With each step they took away from the Keep, however, the safety of the portal back to Hogwarts also receded.

Harry patted the portkey at his throat, to make sure it was still there. Dumbledore had said that it was impossible for it to be taken off Harry by anyone other than himself, but it was still reassuring to feel it in his hand. The down side of using the Portkey was, obviously, the fact that it was set to Azkaban, only this time there would be no protection charm of Dumbledore's to protect Harry from the Dementors.

No, if possible, they'd get back via the portal.

Harry picked up a pattern moving across the wood towards them. It was moving incredibly quickly. "Guys," he hissed, "incoming." Harry unsheathed the sword from its scabbard, as Cho's hand tightened its grip.

"What?" asked Seamus, perplexed, drawing his wand.

A throaty growl came from the darkness of the wood, as a silver-furred body hurled itself at Seamus, snarling viciously as it tried to bite him. The force of the blow knocked Seamus sprawling on the ground, and the two went rolling across the floor. The beast was at too close a range for Seamus to be able to train his wand on it, and they were squirming too much for the others to be able to cast any kind of hex.

A second growl echoed through the night air, as a large, black wolf appeared where Dean had been moments previously. It launched itself into the meléutee, and a pierced yelping cry echoed through the night as something drew blood.

Harry was ready to fire a lightning bolt at the attacker, as soon as he could get a clear line of sight, but with the black wolf, which he could sense was Dean, and Seamus both fighting the beast, there was no way he could get a clean shot.

Eventually, snarling, the black wolf managed to wrest the silvery beast off Seamus, tearing huge tracts of flesh across its throat. It emitted a rasping howl, before fleeing into the forest. Harry considered blasting it with a lightning bolt, but that would have created yet more noise, and would have pinpointed their location to observers.

He switched his attention back to Dean and Seamus. Seamus was trying to sit up, but his right arm had been torn in the attack, and blood was seeping through his clothes. He grimaced as he pulled himself up to a sitting position, and turned to look at Dean.

Dean was in a bad way. The black wolf had vanished, and Dean was in its place, curled up in a foetal position, shivering uncontrollably. His skin was cracked all over his body (the bits that they could see, anyway), and he was moaning in agony.

Ron looked at Harry. They both knew this was still their best chance of getting Hermione and Parvati back. "You two go on," he hissed, indicating Harry and Cho, "I'll take Dean and Seamus back to the portal."

"Shouldn't I take those two back?" suggested Cho, "you two are better at... this than I am," she confessed.

Ron shook his head, "you'd never be able to carry Dean. He can't walk. Seamus, you can walk, can't you?"

Seamus grimaced, but nodded affirmatively, "probably. Yeah." his face looked ghostly white in the moonlight.

"We'll go then," confirmed Ron, taking charge.

"Well shall I come too?" offered Cho, nervously.

"No," replied Ron, "Harry needs you." He paused, and then added, a little hurriedly, "you know, for another wand on the charms and stuff..."

"Sorry guys," apologised Seamus, needlessly.

"Don't be stupid," said Harry, "whatever it was, you saw it off. Just get yourself to Pomfrey, and Ron, make sure Dean's OK, right?"

"Will do," confirmed Ron, and then, as an afterthought, he added, "tell Hermione I said 'Hi', alright?"

"We will," assured Cho, softly.

"Ron, I'll watch you on sense until you go through the portal. Any problems there, just wait, and Cho and I'll come and we'll all portkey out."

"You watch yourself, Harry, Cho," cautioned Ron, "I'll see you back at Hogwarts."

With those words, Ron helped Seamus to his feet, before scooping up Dean's shivering body. They headed back to the Keep, whilst Harry and Cho worked their way towards the entrance to the castle. They reached the doorway - a stone archway some fifteen feet high, and waited as Harry tracked his three friends' patterns as they entered the first floor of the Keep.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the three patterns vanished, "they got back," he confirmed to Cho, and they turned to face the darkness of the Beauxbatons castle.

Cho grabbed Harry's hand once more, and whispered, nervously, "and then there were two."

Molly Weasley was preparing supper in the kitchen at the Burrow. Arthur would be home shortly, although whether Percy would be joining them was anybody's guess. She sighed, worriedly.

All that business with Crouch last year, and then Fudge's confrontation with Dumbledore, had driven a wedge between Percy and the rest of the family. Sometimes Arthur would insist that Percy apparate back home with him to the Burrow, but it was getting rarer and rarer.

Molly sighed once more, hoping that the divisions would soon heal. The Burrow was the children's home, and she hoped Percy still thought of it as such.

Absently checking the kitchen clock to see whether Arthur had moved from 'Work' to 'Travelling', Molly Weasley froze for one second, a second that seemed to stretch on to eternity as she tried to process the clock's message.

Her horrified scream echoed through the kitchen, unheard in the otherwise empty house.

Chapter 35

Who currently plays Seeker for the Irish national Quidditch team?

The entrance to Beauxbatons was invitingly dark, as far as Harry was concerned. No light suggested no people (a fact confirmed by a cursory sense sweep anyway), and the two students stepped across the threshold, through the ornately carved stone moulding, and into Beauxbatons castle.

They shuffled left, in the direction of the lake, as that's where Harry's sense indicated the entrance to the dungeons were. It wasn't completely black - moonlight seeped in through the elaborately mullioned windows, sufficient for Harry to notice that the floor was polished wood, rather than the crude stone flags at Hogwarts. Maybe Fleur had had a point when she'd been belittling her Champion's accommodation last year.

A couple of the portraits gave startled murmurs of surprise as they passed, but since the portraits appeared only to speak French, Harry didn't try to engage them in conversation. At the end of the corridor, a flight of stone steps to the left dived underground, and Harry took this to be the entrance they were looking for.

Holding a finger to his lips, in the universal gesture for silence, Harry positioned Cho behind him as he descended the stairs, grateful that he'd changed out of school robes, and was therefore wearing his favoured 'stealth' squash shoes.

The staircase ended at an arched entrance, flanked by two large columns, which led directly into a long corridor, about 12 feet high, and wide enough for four people to walk abreast, comfortably. It ran for about forty feet, columns supporting the ceiling at regular intervals.

His sense told him that there were three energy patterns in the chamber that the corridor opened out into, and, as they crept along, the lumbering form of a troll could be made out at the far end of the chamber.

This was not a troll like the one he'd encountered in the First Year, he realised. This beast was almost black in colour, and looked much more squat and powerful. As they inched along, the troll suddenly sniffed, and let out some kind of challenging roar.

Instantly two skeletons sprang into view, completing the pattern count in the room. Harry gave up on subterfuge, and pulling Cho behind him, they entered the first chamber.

This was serious Dark magic - the two skeletons, dressed in tattered robes and token scraps of armour, advanced on Harry and Cho, the vacant eye sockets making the fixed skeletal grin of the teeth seem even more disturbing. The troll hung back, seemingly content for the skeletons to do its work.

To his right, Harry saw Cho transfixed with terror, "Use *Impedimentia!*" he urged, trying to snap her out of her paralysis. She didn't move, however, seemingly unable to respond to the advance of the skeleton approaching her.

Harry's skeleton was advancing with its sword drawn, whereas Cho's opponent had a battleaxe. Reaching up to his shoulder, Harry brought his sword into play, and as the blade sliced through the air, it cut a shimmering noise, much like the sound made by rubbing a wine glass.

As Harry brought the sword back across his body, in the defensive starting position Parvati had drilled into him, it chimed another note. *Fear my song*. It suddenly made sense, he realised - Flitwick had mentioned charmed artefacts back in the fourth year, and one such object was a song blade. It created sounds as it moved through the air.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Cho retreating, walking backwards from her skeletal opponent. His skeleton lunged with an attack, which Harry parried, whilst simultaneously willing a hammer blow with his Mage force at Cho's opponent.

The second skeleton smashed apart, in a splinter of bones, torn rags and ripped metal, as the force of the blow rammed it into the dungeon wall. The shock of the unseen attack seemed to snap Cho out of her daze, and she flung herself against the wall, presumably seeking security from the troll's attentions.

Meanwhile, Harry was involved in a fencing duel with his own skeleton warrior. The troll started to march across the room towards Cho, its black, wrinkled skin seemed thicker than elephant hide, and Harry could feel the stone resonate with its footsteps.

Thrust. Parry. Block. *Feet!* Advance. Block. Block.

The sword really did sing a song as Harry fenced. A bone chilling sequence of shrill, piercing sounds. Not a weapon of subtlety, but it was clearly designed to instil fear into its opponents. And Harry found the macabre melody actually quite calming. It told him he was in control of this battle.

Cho appeared to be trying to cast *Impedimentia* at the troll now, but Harry seriously doubted that even a sixth year would be able to match the monster's power. He switched to purely defensive blocks, and allowed the skeleton to force him backwards in the chamber, as he willed a lightning bolt at the troll.

The bolt of electricity slammed into the troll's arm, causing it to drop its massive stone mallet, but not seeming to do much further damage to the beast. He had, however, succeeded in attracting the troll's attention, and it now made for him, leaving Cho in the corner.

Parry. Parry. *Feet!* Flick. Twist. Slice!

Harry's sword severed his opponent's forearm, and its sword clattered on to the floor, useless in the fight. Harry had expected the skeleton to give up its fight having succumbed to such a mortal wound. But he'd forgotten it was already dead. It continued to advance, attempting now to simply rain kicks and blows upon him.

However, now that he was no longer forced to think about defending himself from sword attack, Harry was able to concentrate to supply another hammer blow of force to his opponent. The impact slammed the skeleton twenty feet across the chamber, into the solid rock of the opposite wall, the shattered bone spraying about the room from the collision.

The troll gave a warning groan as it rounded on Harry, but he was now able to give it full attention. The troll had pulled back its right arm, ready to punch Harry, but a childhood apprenticeship of dodging his cousin's gang suddenly came to good use.

He dropped the sword, and dived into a forward roll across the floor, springing out of the troll's reach. In one fluid movement, Harry brought himself to his feet, arm outstretched. "Dean," he murmured, "this one's for you..."

The troll, startled by its prey's sudden disappearance, rounded on Harry slowly.

"*Hasta la vista, baby*," said Harry, and slammed a full force lightning bolt into the beast. The accompanying clap of thunder reverberated around the stone chamber, causing Harry's ears to ring. But he didn't care. The troll had been thrown into the opposite wall from the force of the impact, and from the angle of various limbs, it had to have broken several bones.

The flesh was scorched where the bolt had earthed, and smouldered slightly. In his sense, Harry saw the troll's pattern flicker and die, as the beast slumped onto the floor. He rushed over to Cho, "Cho, are you alright?" he asked. Then mentally scolded himself for asking such a stupid question.

Looking back from the smouldering corpse of the troll, Cho turned to Harry with a mixture of suspicion and fear in her eyes, "What *kind* of a wizard are you, Harry?"

"Er, I'm not. I'm a Mage. I'm not a wizard at all. Any more," he suspected it would be helpful to devise a really well worded explanation and commit it to memory for just such questions. "But I'm still Harry. Just trust me, OK?"

Cho nodded mutely, although Harry could discern the alarm in her eyes.

Harry absently summoned the song blade from the floor into his outstretched hand, and then flicked his sense out beyond the dungeon, to check on the castle. "Cho, believe me, I would *never* do anything to hurt you. Ever. And once we're out of here, I'll tell you all about this. But, in return, you mustn't tell a soul... this is pretty bad stuff, OK?" At Cho's continued silence, Harry added, "I didn't ask for all this... I'm just trying to make the best I can of it... really."

"I know," whispered Cho, "but... it scares me. Really."

Patterns were starting to move in the castle, heading towards their side. "Damn!" muttered Harry, and then, at Cho's questioning look, "people moving this way in the castle... I can get us out of here, OK? But I'm going to have to block the entrance; try and slow them down."

"Block?"

"Yeah... stand back." Harry extended his sense into the structure of the dungeon's entrance, seeing the gaps around the columns, and the supporting walls. The twin columns at the mouth of the dungeon seemed the best place to start, and he slammed first one, then the other, with as much force as he could muster, toppling them out from their position supporting the tunnel entrance.

They could dimly see the entrance collapse through the stone corridor, rubble piling up as the ceiling gave way. It wasn't enough, though, so Harry worked his way down the entrance corridor, swinging his arms about wildly as he willed his energy to tear the structure apart.

As the dust from the final collapsing section enveloped them, Harry turned to look at his partner, licking the dust from his lips. She was still beautiful, even covered in brick dust, her robes streaked with white, and her ruffled hair covered with a light dusting of beige. But tear tracks were evident on her face, and it was plain to see that she was terrified.

He realised that the whole dungeon business had been hard on Cho. The attack in the forest hadn't exactly been pleasant, and now she'd found out that Harry wasn't a wizard as she'd thought, but something else. "I'm sorry, Cho, really I'm sorry," he murmured, as he pulled her into a one-armed hug (the song blade was still in his sword hand).

Cho sniffled lightly as she wrapped her arms around Harry, and the two enjoyed each other's closeness in the improbable setting. Harry's sense told him that the guards, who'd clearly been alerted by the commotion in the dungeon, were waiting for them in the chamber beyond the next corridor.

He kissed her hair as he broke the hug, "C'mon, three more to go, and then we can get out of here..."

"Three?" her voice quavered in the dim chamber, the hovering dust cloud slowly settling to the floor.

"Three patterns. The next corridor's empty - they're in the room beyond."

But as they started to move, Harry's sense picked up a new series of smaller patterns, coming out of the castle. Too many to count reliably - probably about thirty or forty, he guessed. Shrill calls could be heard, dimly, through the rubble, and Harry was amazed to see the new patterns start to worm their way through the collapsed entrance hall.

Cho, sensing Harry tense, looked at him questioningly.

"Something's coming," he said, turning to face the rubble that marked the former corridor to the entrance, and spinning the song blade to a more comfortable hold.

Holding Cho's right hand, so that she was standing behind him and to his left, Harry slowly edged backwards in the chamber, sword drawn and pointed at the pile of rubble as he sensed the new patterns edge closer.

Scraping, scratching and shrill chatters were coming from the mound of crumbled masonry, getting louder, and, by implication, increasingly closer.

"Wand, Cho," prompted Harry, and she released his hand to draw her weapon.

"What should I use?" she asked, nervously. Never before had the folly of concentrating on how to turn rabbits into teapots struck so hard.

"*Impedimentia*'s always good. I s'pose you could try *Expelleriarmus* too," he suggested. "And there's *stupefy*, *petrificus* and the leg-locker curses too..."

"How do you know all these?" asked Cho, bewildered.

Harry shrugged, sensing the new patterns nearing the boundary of the rubble, "Well, y'know, we've always mugged up on charms and hexes. And then I needed to know as many as possible for the Third... sorry." The Third Task. Not the most sensitive time to remind Cho of Cedric, he thought.

"Well why don't you use your wand, then?" Fear seemed, temporarily, to be losing out to Cho's thirst for knowledge.

Harry decided that keeping Cho talking would keep her mind off trying to imagine whatever it was that was coming to face them now, so he started to elaborate, "I used to be a wizard, obviously. That's how I ended up at Hogwarts in the first place.

"But you were right about Vellum. Dumbledore didn't trust her. She cast a new curse at me... a magical drain. It was supposed to rob me of my powers, but I fought it, somehow, and the end result is this. I'm not a wizard, my wand's useless. But I'm a Mage instead. I was lucky. I was this close," Harry held his thumb and index finger fractionally apart, "from being turned into a squib..."

A small pebble of masonry tumbled down the mound of debris. Followed by a larger piece of what had been the ceiling. And then a shiny black body emerged, looking like a cross between a cockroach and a lobster, with two long antennae, a segmented armoured body, and evil looking pincers at the front. The cat-sized beast scurried down the mound of rubble on its eight legs, but Harry blasted it with a lightning bolt before it could move any further.

The beast twitched spasmodically a couple of times, before its pattern faded out. But by that time, the whole wall of rubble was starting to dissolve, as further beasts, which Harry mentally labelled Crawlers, arrived.

By the time Harry had conjured an intense wall of Mage fire, a deep violet in colour, three of the Crawlers had made their way into the chamber, and were approaching the two students. The wall of fire was keeping any further creatures from joining this front trio, and Harry slowly started to push the flames out towards the entrance, watching by sense as it consumed the crawlers still within the rubble.

The three that had made it through were fast, and scurried about the chamber, dodging Cho's attempts at hexing them. As soon as one dared come into sword range, Harry ran it through, the blade piercing the soft underbelly as it had attempted to launch itself at Cho.

Cho finally landed *Impedimentia* on one of the remaining beasts, after which Harry skewered it, before finally dismissing the last with a casual lance of energy.

Wordlessly, the two turned to leave the chamber, heading into the corridor that connected them to the deepest chamber of the dungeon, which held Parvati and Hermione.

The door at the far end was shut, of course, but Harry could sense three patterns moving about in the room beyond, in addition to Hermione and Paravti, motionless in two of the cells.

There were several smaller cells off the corridor, and, about half way down its length, Harry pulled Cho into one of these. "Stay here until I've got rid of the last three," he whispered.

For a second, it looked as though Cho was about to argue about this, but it seemed that common sense prevailed. Harry reasoned that Cho would be safe enough in the cell, and it would give him one less person to worry about in the coming battle. He fervently hoped that at least one of the patterns beyond the door belonged to Wormtail.

The final battle turned out to be the simplest, and quickest, of the lot. Cho being safely positioned in her cell, Harry flattened himself against the corridor wall, and moved the dead troll to the corridor's far end.

The patterns in the chamber beyond had arranged themselves in a fan formation in front of the door, which struck Harry as a little stupid. They were all in direct line of fire once the door opened. But what they didn't realise is that Harry wouldn't be opening the door himself.

Swinging his arm through the air, as though hitting an imaginary baseball with an imaginary bat, Harry smashed the door to pieces, and then hurled the troll's corpse into the room with as much force as possible.

He heard a single cry of "*Crucio!*", but Harry was pretty certain dead trolls didn't feel pain. The troll connected with two of the patterns, leaving the third free, but Harry could now see that the third, at least, was simply another skeleton.

He resolved to deal with the undead creature last. He needed to neutralise the wizards.

A wand hand struggled to gain purchase on the troll's leg, as the person trapped underneath tried to free themselves. Harry sent a modest lightning bolt at them, and they dropped the wand. He flicked that out of the way with his Mage force, and at the same time saw that the third pattern had died out.

Advancing into the room, Harry blew apart the skeleton with another hammer blow, and saw the remains of half a skeleton protruding from the troll's corpse.

Drawing his sword once more, he moved the troll's body off his captive Death Eater, who started to move upwards only to find a sword point at their throat.

"And who might you be?" enquired Harry, lightly.

"Fool!" snarled his opponent, evidently not deterred by the fact that he was unarmed, and faced a hugely more powerful opponent. "The Dark Lord will never allow you to escape. You should give up now."

"Name?" asked Harry, determined to ignore the hollow threat.

"I don't answer to children," spat the Death Eater, and jerked his head forward.

It was only by virtue of Harry's Seeker reflexes that his opponent hadn't ended up impaling himself on Harry's sword, and it was with a dawning horror that Harry realised that that had been his prisoner's intention.

"It's OK, they're all done," he called out, not wanting to use Cho's name. Of course, his opponent knew who *he* was - the lightning bolt scar was a subtle pointer, but he didn't want Cho's name to be associated with him. Not unless it was unavoidable.

Cho's soft footsteps entered the room, and she eyed Harry's captive with wand drawn.

"Petrify him," suggested Harry, and Cho complied. Their captive, whose name was still unknown, froze solid, and Harry let him fall to the ground.

"Need to buy us some more time, I think," said Harry, as he started collapsing the corridor they'd just entered the room by. The chamber itself was roughly square in shape, about fifty feet to a side, with three of the sides each containing five cells.

The cells all had barred fronts, and a single, rough bed in them. Parvati and Hermione had cells next to each other, but it was immediately apparent that neither were aware of this neighbourliness - they were both in some kind of enchanted sleep.

"OK, Cho," said Harry, as the blackened rubble blocking the entrance smouldered slightly, "I'm now going to do something a bit weird. Don't be scared, I'm fine..."

Cho's eyes widened with fear, but she didn't speak as Harry extended his sense out to encompass the Beauxbatons Key. It was too good an opportunity to miss, and every scrap of energy he took from it was prevented from going to Voldemort.

Revelling in the liquid sensation to the energy, which seemed to have a different... taste to the Hogwarts Key, Harry sliced his arms through the pattern, watching as tendrils of blue, green and red dripped from his fingers towards the dungeon's stone floor.

"What *was* that?" asked Cho.

"Um, it's kind of complex, but, basically, that was magical energy. Physical magic energy, and I'm draining it from the Key... a storage kind of thing."

"Does it hurt?"

"A little... but it's fine. I have to do this. If I don't, Voldemort will take it for himself." A thought occurred to Harry, "Why don't you set about breaking the locking charms whilst I drain this? I can't help you with those, see, and you can't help me with this..."

Relieved to have something to do, Cho readily assented, and set about disarming the charms that had been placed upon Parvati's cell. Harry was glad that she was with him, but he also felt guilty for putting her in this much danger. But at least she knew he was a Mage now. Nonetheless, he couldn't help thinking that Ron or Hermione would have known to set about breaking the prison charms unbidden.

But, he reminded himself, that was hardly Cho's fault. She was new to this.

Through the rubble, he started to see the small patterns wriggling forward once more; Crawlers. Coming back for more, it seemed - still, they had a little time yet, and he could always lace some fire through the rubble if they got too close.

But better hurry things along somewhat, anyway. Harry flung both arms wide and willed himself into the Key's pattern, the energy dripping from the length of both arms, falling in a curtain of shimmering energy as his flesh burnt with the assimilation.

There was a certain kind of pain, or discomfort, that was almost enjoyable. Rather like wobbling a loose tooth with his tongue. The salty tang of discomfort let him know that the process was working, and that he was draining power from the Beauxbatons Key.

As he snapped himself back out, he heard the static discharge of the energy subside, and turned to see Cho murmuring something with her wand pointed at Hermione. She gave up, and turned back to face Harry, "They're in some kind of stasis, and I can't revive them. They're alive, though..."

The Crawlers were working their way through the rubble, and getting closer. Harry extended an arm, willing a wall of Mage fire that swept through the crumbled masonry, the patterns flashing bright then winking out as the beasts burned. More patterns were pouring out of the castle now, though, and it was only a matter of time before they got through.

It was time to leave.

"OK, I can get us back to Hogwarts..." started Harry, cautiously, as his muscles recovered from the drain. He'd joined Cho in the prisoners' cell, where she'd been trying to revive the hostages.

"Right," said Cho, nervously, "but why do I sense a 'but' in that?"

Harry fished the smooth green pendant from his neck, "This is a two way Portkey, with one of the destinations set for the Astronomy Tower." He winced as he thought of the other destination. Its current setting.

"And where's the other destination?" asked Cho, picking up on Harry's hesitation to spell it out.

"Azkaban?" Harry used a questioning tone of voice, as though Cho might not have heard of the place. Checking that she was prepared to go through with this. Or maybe he feared how she might respond.

"And it's... it's set for that... place?"

"But we'll then be able to portkey straight to Hogwarts... arrive, leave. It's the only way..."

"It is now," conceded Cho, glancing at the pile of rubble blocking the entrance to the dungeon. The crawlers appeared to have given up squirming their way through the debris, but it was only a matter of time before they renewed their assault.

"Are you OK with this?" asked Harry, "I'm sorry, Cho. This was never going to be easy..."

"I'm OK," replied Cho, looking completely terrified, "but... will you be OK with the Dementors? Should I hold the portkey, in case you... well, you remember?"

"The portkey only works for either me or Dumbledore," explained Harry, regretfully. Why had Dumbledore tied it down so specifically? "I have to issue the command."

They stopped, silently contemplating the implications of their escape route. Hermione and Parvati were both unconscious, still. Cho had tried *Enervate* and *Finite Incantum* but to no avail. Still, Harry reasoned, it was probably better that they hadn't seen the battle in the dungeon, and wouldn't be seeing Azkaban.

"OK," whispered Cho, squeezing Harry's hand tightly, "I'll hold Hermione, you hold Parvati, and let's get out of here..."

"Agreed," confirmed Harry, sensing new patterns arriving at the entrance to the dungeon. He'd made a pretty big mess of the place, but it wouldn't take a team of wizards too long to work their way inside. They had to leave.

Harry checked that all four of them had some kind of contact with Dumbledore's pendant before bracing himself to utter the command, "Translocate."

As he felt the pulling sensation build from the pit of his stomach, he steeled himself for what they were jumping into.

It was to prove far worse than he'd expected.

Cold.

They landed at the portkey point in Azkaban, it was dark, and raining. There was no moonlight from the overcast sky, and the wind was whipping the sleet-like rain into their faces. But the cold went beyond the elements.

This was the coldness of fear. A freezing sensation. The metallic taste of despair.

Voices. He could hear voices in his mind, "*Subsumatum*" screams and energy flow. Pain and torment. "*Crucio*." His nightmares relived themselves in his conscious mind, Nagini circling him, red eyes fuelled with hate. Luminous serpents of malevolent energy.

Captives at the Beauxbatons Key, their flesh forming burning tendrils of energy as skin fell from their bodies. A metallic, cold, humourless laugh. Indifferent pleasure to others' tortured screams.

Falling. Spinning, out of control. Pain lancing through his body, petrification by fear.

His jaw was almost numb with cold, and his rapidly diminishing sense showed a trio of patterns gliding through the dungeons, presumably headed towards the portkey point as Harry tried to stammer at the command to get them back to Hogwarts.

And his scar was on fire. He felt his knees buckle as the pain hit him from all sides. Ice cold skewers slicing through his body. A numbness enclosing his mind. Distant voices, screaming. Echoes. Pure, pure fear. Ice in his veins.

The wind howled, the rain fell, and the Dementors glided closer. In his mind, the voice again, *Kill the spare!*. Cedric, glassy eyed. A lifeless corpse.

"Harry!" that was Cho's voice.

It kicked off further memories, *No, not Harry! Not Harry!* Flashes of green light. Screaming. Pain. The voice again, *Avada Kad...*

His flesh stung, a brief flash of fire on his cheek, and he reconnected to the present, Cho's horrified face in front of him, Parvati and Hermione mercifully unconscious of the horror around them. Cho lowered her hand, "Get us *out*, Harry... please Harry... Harry..."

The Dementors were moving closer, they'd reached the doorway in the rock.

"Trans..." so cold, so cold, "...lo..." more voices, pain. Bitter cold. Blackness approaching, the void. It looked warm there... warm... if he could just rest. Rest for a few seconds, and he'd be OK. Somewhere, his brain snapped a last, panicked adrenalin fuelled command, and he stuttered the last syllable before his muscles gave way completely and he dropped the pendant from his grasp, "...cate..."

For one dreadful moment Harry thought it hadn't worked. Thought that the portkey hadn't recognised the command. Thought that he and Cho were stranded on the island fortress, at the Dementors' mercies, for the rest of their lives. His muscles were completely gone now, burned from drinking the Beauxbatons key, tired from carrying Parvati, and now shocked by the intense cold of Azkaban.

He couldn't do it again. And Cho couldn't command the portkey for him.

But then the pulling sensation built in the pit of his stomach, and the black rock, black sea and black sky dissolved from view.

The Astronomy Tower slammed into focus about the four, and if relief could be said to be the absence of dread, then relief it was that Harry felt as they stood at last on friendly ground. This was Hogwarts, they were safe.

The freezing pain intensified, however, spreading through his body, and Harry felt his fingers turn to ice. He was mentally exhausted, so any kind of physical magic was out of the question. Drinking from the Beauxbatons key had only added to his fatigue, and all he could do was mumble some stifled groan of relief.

His scar still burned intensely, although the pain was subsiding. He was dimly aware of the thought that Voldemort must have been nearby, at Azkaban. He was too worn out, too numb, however, to process that chain of thought any further.

Cho uttered one word, soft, a broken whisper, as tears fell silently down her face, sparkling in the moonlight. She was, truly, the prettiest girl Harry had ever seen, but that word cut Harry like a knife; "Cedric..."

Stunned and exhausted, Harry and Cho had both slumped to the floor, each still holding their respective captive. It didn't take a genius to guess that Cho must have heard voices relating to the Third Task as the Dementors had approached.

Kill the spare. Would those three words haunt him forever? Would they haunt *them*, he and Cho, forever? Too weak to move, Harry looked at Cho, who was slumped against the wall, motionless, crying the same tears as at the Leaving Feast.

He'd put her through this. He'd told Cedric to take the cup. This was what he did to his friends. Gave them pain.

Eventually, whether it was a minute, twenty minutes or four hours Harry had no idea, the two of them appeared to have recovered sufficient strength to attempt to move, and get to Madam Pomfrey.

Cho's attempts at reviving Hermione and Parvati failed, so, still numbed from the cold pain of Azkaban, the two friends staggered down from the Astronomy Tower, heading towards the Hospital Wing. As luck would have it, it wasn't a long trip, and it was also mainly downhill, as it were, since they'd Portkeyed into the highest accessible place in the castle.

Nonetheless, neither Harry nor Cho were really in any fit state to do anything physical. Cho was much better off than Harry, who was face was frozen stiff with cold, his jaw gaping stupidly open, and saliva dribbling uncontrollably on to his face. But, as seemed typical with Harry's fifth year luck, they didn't meet anyone on the trip to give them a hand.

At length they made it to Madam Pomfrey's domain, Harry's mind weak with exhaustion. He could barely think beyond the next stride as he staggered through the doors, and into the ward proper.

People. Friends. Ginny, Neville. McGonagall was there, looking... shocked. Stunned? Horrified.

"Harry!" that was Neville. He looked pale. But not as pale as Ginny.

"Mr Potter! Miss Chang!" McGonagall started at the sight of the two of them, and immediately rushed over to take first Parvati, and then Hermione, laying them, temporarily, on the nearest bed. "Poppy!" she called, "the others are here." There was an edge to McGonagall's voice that Harry had never heard before.

It made him uneasy.

Everyone looked grim, as though someone had... "Dean?" Harry asked, fearfully. His face felt like the skin would crack from the effort of talking, and his entire body felt like ice.

"Mr Thomas will be fine," assured Professor McGonagall, with a slightly quavering voice.

"Seamus?" he asked, the deep fear inside starting to burn fiercely, an sense of foreboding circulating within the pit of his near frozen stomach.

McGonagall paused, uncertainly, and Harry felt his knees start to buckle. Not Seamus, he thought. Not Seamus. Not...

"Mr Finnigan is currently in the... dungeons," explained the Head of Gryffindor, "we thought it best under the circumstances."

"Cir... Circum... stan... ce..ce.. ces?" stammered Harry. He glanced at Cho - the tears were still streaming silently down her face, and in all this time she hadn't said a word. Hadn't even moved. And didn't give any indication that she could even *see* anyone around her.

Madam Pomfrey emerged from the crisp white curtains hung around one of the beds, and took over the explanation, "Mr Finnigan was bitten by a wolf-like creature during a full-moon. Obviously, lycanthropy has to be considered a possibility." As she talked, the medi-wizard had crossed the ward to take hold of Cho, and guide her to one of the beds. As soon as she touched the Ravenclaw, Madam Pomfrey snapped her head up to face Harry, "Where... what... *how* did Miss Chang get so cold, Mr Potter?"

"Azkaban," he replied, dully, mind still reeling from the news that Seamus might be a werewolf. He'd only been trying to help; Seamus and Dean both. And Harry had hospitalised one, and given the other a lifelong curse, with a huge stigma attached. And he'd put Cho through Azkaban...

Professors McGonagall and Pomfrey had looked horrified at Harry's answer, but before they could pepper him with further questions, a thought struck Harry. A thought relating to an emptiness that he'd detected ever since he and Cho had portkeyed into the Astronomy Tower. Something was missing from Hogwarts. "Where's Ron?" he asked.

Ginny gave a muffled wail, and slumped into Neville, who did his best to hold on to her as he replied, "It was Sprout, Harry."

"What was Sprout?" asked Harry, dread consuming him. He could see McGonagall's lips quivering. Pomfrey just looked stunned, and Ginny, well Ginny was almost out of her mind.

"*Avada Kedavra*," replied Neville.

"Whuh?" stammered Harry, willing, wishing, hoping that the pieces of the jigsaw were not going to assemble themselves this way. He had to have misunderstood. This couldn't have happened.

"R.. R.. Ron's dead, Harry," replied Neville. "Ron's dead."

Harry slumped to his knees, letting out an anguished scream. He felt as though his lungs had been ripped from his chest. Never in his life had Harry experienced a more physical sensation

of emotional pain. It was there... a form, a presence. It filled his entire body, all consuming grief. A torment beyond words, beyond description, beyond despair.

He couldn't see, he couldn't hear, he couldn't feel.

And he never wanted to wake up again.

Chapter 36

What age did the oldest recorded Veela reach, in years?

There was a split second between the moment Harry awoke from the latest dose of Dreamless Sleep and the moment he remembered.

In that split second, he knew, even without exercising his sense, that the Hospital Wing was more crowded than normal. The air was thick with the tension of people making a conscious effort to be quiet, thick with a dread expectancy; that questions as yet unasked would find answers.

Thick with grief.

And then Harry remembered.

Ron.

His jaw shuddered involuntarily, and his body felt almost as if it was attempting to physically purge itself of the pain. His incoherent moan brought the swift click of heels to his side, and Madam Pomfrey's face finally loomed into the range of his limited focus.

Harry had been to the Hospital Wing on numerous occasions during his four years at Hogwarts. He'd grown used to Madam Pomfrey's somewhat brusque bedside manner, which seemed to carry implicit the accusation that her patients only arrived at her door with self-inflicted injury.

But not today.

For the first time, Harry saw that the medi-wizard's mask of professional care had been replaced with a face almost overflowing with compassion.

"Are you in pain?" she asked, the softness of her voice only heightening Harry's alarm, the question itself presumably a reflex of training. Then, as Harry dully shook his head, as though he were immersed in treacle, she added, "I'm so, so sorry... you do remember, don't you?"

Harry gave the vaguest of nods. Oh yes, he remembered.

Ron. His best friend of four years. Ron, who had been with him as they eluded Fluffy, chasing the Philosopher's Stone. Ron, who'd helped him rescue Hermione from Quirrell's troll. Ron, who went with him into the Chamber of Secrets.

The best friend with the almost completely inexplicable fascination with the Chudley Cannons, and a fondness for Sugar Quills. Brilliant at chess, but unfortunate with domestic animals. Ron had been a part of Harry's life in almost everything he'd gone through at Hogwarts; the same sense of humour, the same disdain for Trelawney and distaste for Snape.

Ron, who had willingly born the burden of being forever in the shadow of the boy with the lightning bolt scar he'd met on the train.

Ron - the person Harry would miss the most, in the words of the Second Task.

He was gone. And whatever means that the judges had gone to in arriving at the name of Harry's hostage for the Second Task, he knew now that they'd chosen the right person.

He wished he didn't know.

Madam Pomfrey was re-arranging the bed's pillows as he affixed his glasses, letting the rest of the room snap into focus. Cho was in the bed on his right, hair still matted with dust, tear stains still evident on her face. She looked across, and tried to smile, but the effort only resulted in her lips quivering, and she returned her attention to the mug of coffee held firmly in her hands.

There were two beds beyond Cho, containing Hermione and then Parvati. Neither seemed to be awake yet, though, and Harry quickly turned to check the bed on his left, which contained Dean, who was also asleep. His skin was now veined with faint red lines, residual scars from the previous night, Harry guessed, where the skin had torn, like drought-parched earth, when Dean had transformed back into his human form.

Dean was an animagus, Harry suddenly realised, and looked at the still form in the bed, marvelling that he'd kept the ability quiet. Although perhaps he hadn't been fully ready to undergo the transformation, and this was the price he'd paid.

"There are people to see you," Madam Pomfrey informed him, "are you awake enough?"

Harry wondered what right he had to even consider refusing. His best friend was dead; in the face of that, who would even consider hiding from people, no matter who they might be? "Mmmm," Harry assented, shifting himself to a more comfortable sitting position.

As Madam Pomfrey's heels once more clicked across the ward's tiled floor, Harry chanced another look at Cho, but she remained unmoving, staring at her coffee, seemingly oblivious to the world. Azkaban. He'd put her through Azkaban; he wondered what echoes she'd heard. Wondered, and yet didn't want to know. He wondered if she'd ever forgive him.

And then he wondered if he had a right to such forgiveness.

"Harry, you're safe!" Molly Weasley's voice, fractured and quavering, carried across the ward, causing even Cho to note the visitor's entrance. Mrs Weasley's eyes were puffed and bloodshot, and her appearance dishevelled.

Harry moved his mouth, trying to convey some kind of apology, or greeting, or... anything, but no words came out. He just sat there dumbstruck, trying to comprehend how he was supposed to even begin to put into words the enormity of the impact Ron's death had had.

As it happened, he didn't need to speak, as Mrs Weasley wrapped him in a motherly hug, her own body convulsing with tears.

"He loved you, Harry," said Mrs Weasley, as Harry felt hot tears fall onto his forehead, "and..." she never finished that sentence, however, and the two stayed locked in their embrace for a short while.

Harry fervently wished that there was some way he could demonstrate the pain of his loss, share with the Weasleys just how much Ron had meant to him, but words couldn't even begin to describe it, and he felt his own tears fall as he pondered his inadequacy.

Mrs Weasley finally released him, sniffing, and dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cho watching on with a slight smile. "Cho," Harry indicated her to Mrs Weasley, "was with us. And Cedric... she and Cedric, the Third Task..." More advanced explanations, ones that perhaps made sense, were beyond him at that moment, but Mrs Weasley seemed to have picked up enough information, and went round the bed to Cho's side.

Harry saw her take Cho's hand, and looked away, again examining Dean's prone body as a murmured, stuttering conversation took place to his right. McGonagall had said Dean would be alright, in time, but what about Seamus? Was he now a werewolf? Or would they not know until the full moon waned, tomorrow morning?

Hermione and Parvati were on the other side of Cho, but Harry wilfully refrained from looking in that direction, not wanting to intrude on whatever was happening between Mrs Weasley and Cho. Still, his sense told him that they were alive, so that was something.

Taking as deep a breath as he dared, Harry exhaled slowly as he recalled more moments from Ron's life - his awestruck amazement when Fred and George had given him the Nimbus 2001. Barely three months ago. His new dress-robos - never worn.

The unflinching determination in his eyes when he completely wiped the board in chess. His exuberation when Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup in Third Year. So many memories. And now they were stopped.

He remembered his final conversation with Ron, and in particular, the red-headed Gryffindor's request that he and Cho tell Hermione that he'd said 'Hi'.

For some inexplicable reason, Harry felt it was imperative that he pass that message on.

Neville and Ginny came in a little later, Ginny mute, pale and drawn, and distressed at the sight of Dean's crazed skin. Neville appeared to be shellshocked, "Sprout, Harry. Sprout..." he kept on murmuring, taking his favourite teacher's betrayal hard.

Ginny hadn't been able to speak, and Harry found that he couldn't find any words to say to her, so the two squeezed hands as Ginny stood, trembling by the bed, Neville next to her, half supporting her with an arm about her waist.

It occurred to Harry that he still didn't have the full picture as to what had happened the previous night, once Ron, Dean and Seamus had returned from Beauxbatons, but there would be time enough for the detail later on. Knowing things didn't change them.

And yet he remained bewildered. Ron had made it back to safety. Hogwarts. The safest place in the wizarding world. He and Cho had stormed the dungeons in Voldemort's private castle, and emerged with two hostages rescued. Ron had arrived back to safety, and, somehow, he'd died. Not died, Harry corrected himself, Ron'd been killed.

Perhaps nowhere was safe, anymore. If it ever had been.

Mrs Weasley, Neville and Ginny left together, muttering something about breakfast, although Harry seriously doubted that anyone had an appetite. However, once the patients had the ward to themselves, he slid out of bed, and over to see Cho. "Hi."

Cho smoothed down the sheets, inviting him to perch on the edge of the bed, next to her, as she weakly returned the greeting, "Hey you."

Taking her hand in his, Harry looked into Cho's fathomless dark eyes, seeing only pain and hurt in them, "I'm so, so, sorry... I didn't know it would be that bad..."

"It was hard... so hard. I heard... voices. Cedric... the Third Task."

Harry was lost for words, and wished there was some physical means to convey adequately what he felt about her, for her. She'd been forced to relieve horrors that he'd been instrumental in engineering, entirely at his behest. Guilt squared, as it were. If he hadn't told Cedric to take the cup... and if he'd sent Cho back with Ron, and Seamus and Dean...

But then he'd never have got Parvati and Hermione out of their cells.

Cho was whispering, now, "...sorry, so sorry for you... and, and Ron. And Dean... Seamus. Everyone," she shook her head, disbelievingly, as the two tried to assimilate the enormity of the night's events.

Not really knowing what possessed him, Harry leant forward and kissed Cho's forehead, once again feeling the masonry dust on his lips, "you're so, so pretty," he whispered, before sliding back off the bed, returning to his own, their fingertips stretching out the contact between them as he stepped away.

Seamus was next in, looking drawn, with dark circles around his eyes, and his arm in a sling.

"lo Harry, Cho," he mumbled, entering the ward on the balls of his feet, as though expecting to have to leap away from danger at any second.

Harry mumbled a response, whilst Cho simply nodded, tightly, eyeing Seamus warily as he perched himself at the foot of Harry's bed. "Sorry, man," apologised Harry, still trying to come to terms with the possibility that Seamus might now be a werewolf.

Seamus massaged the back of his neck with his good hand, whilst staring at an indeterminate spot on the wall, somewhere between Harry and Cho, "mmm," he acknowledged, seemingly on another planet. "Dean?" he glanced across at Dean's prostrate body, evidently still under some kind of sleeping charm.

"McGonagall said he'd be alright," replied Harry, not feeling any conviction behind his reassurance. "Sorry... it's not fair," he continued, shaking his head, "you two shouldn't have... and Ron..."

"That was a bitch," said Seamus, in a strangely lifeless voice. He twisted on the bed to look directly at Harry, "Sprout. I mean, we made it back to the tower thing..."

"Yeah, I know... I tracked you..."

"You're going to have to tell us about that," observed Seamus, a trace of interest flickering into his voice, and some of the old spark alight in his eyes. But that soon passed, as he went back to his narrative, "so we got back to the tower, and then Ron went through with Dean, and I followed..."

"Yeah," prompted Harry, watching Cho out of the corner of his eye. She seemed uncomfortable. His mind went back to the conversation at the start of term, and her dislike for werewolves... but this was Seamus. Surely, he thought, she wouldn't feel wary of *Seamus*?

"Anyway, the three of us got back, and Ginny went spare at the sight of Dean." Seamus let out a sigh, and craned his neck back, eyes squeezed shut. He rolled his head back to look first at Cho, and then back at Harry, "he was in a pretty bad way..."

Seamus drifted off again, looking across at Dean's bed.

"Yeah, but McGonagall said he'd be alright..." persisted Harry.

"Yeah," agreed Seamus, frowning, "so there's me, Lavender, Ginny, Dean and Ron by the portal, and Ron sets off to find someone to help us get to the hospital wing, or whatever... don't remember. Just know that Ron went off ahead... to help. Something..."

"Anyway, he's just disappeared into the Greenhouse, and we hear him, say 'Professor Sprout!' and we're all looking at each other, 'cos he's found help, and, y'know, everything's going to be alright, and then the next thing we hear is Sprout's voice, and 'Avada Kedavra!'"

"And then Ginny's looking at everyone, and it's like... unreal, y'know. Next thing we hear is McGonagall, screaming 'Stupefy', and we're still in the storeroom, not knowing what's going on out there... Lavender was completely terrified, just saying 'no, no, no' all the time, and... well Dean was in a mess, I was all chewed up, and Ginny was gone, man, just gone. So I'm thinking no way can we defend ourselves here, but the next thing we know is Neville standing there, at the doorway, white as a sheet... and then McGonagall arrived..."

Seamus frowned, as though trying to make sense of what he'd just said.

"And you?" prompted Harry.

Seamus shrugged, the dark circled eyes conveying a sense of powerlessness at his fate, "don't know yet, it takes about a day for the bite to work through the system... so it's likely I'll turn tonight."

"If it really was a werewolf," interjected Harry, with false optimism.

"Oh, it was," replied Seamus, resignedly, "I'm in this cell in the dungeons - tied to the bed. Lavender came down, but I sent her back up to Gryffindor - not nice to see me like that, you know?"

"I can get Lupin here, if you want," suggested Harry, "I mean, you're my friend, he'd want to help..."

Seamus looked up, hopefully, "d'you think he would? I mean, he *knows*, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, he knows... and, well, his friends they stood by him, and we'll all, well, we'll all stand by you, y'know... won't we?" Harry directed the last question at Cho, who, though tense, nodded tightly. He vowed to talk to Cho about the werewolf thing. She was a pureblood, he knew, and they had deep seated opinions on such matters (Ron was, *had*, been the same), but he knew that she was too rational to be blinded by prejudice.

"Anyway, you made it. You got them back," observed Seamus, jerking his head towards the two beds beyond Cho, "what happened?"

Cho finally entered the conversation, "well we waited until you'd gone through the portal, and then we went into the castle... found the dungeon, and Harry... fought the guards..."

"Guards?" asked Seamus, "you said there were six, right?"

"Troll, four charmed skeletons, wizard," listed Harry, flatly.

"...and the Crawlers," prompted Cho.

Harry shivered at the memory of the black, segmented beasts, "yeah, there were some of those too. We got rid of them, though... then Cho broke the charms on the cells, and we portkeyed out."

"You had a portkey? So that's how... why you went through first... so you got straight back to Hogwarts."

"No..." started Cho, but the memory of whatever she'd seen at Azkaban was obviously too much, and tears started running down her face once more.

"Harry!" exclaimed Seamus, worriedly, "what... where?"

"Azkaban," stated Harry, flatly, as the voices in his mind started to replay; '*Avada Kedavra!*', '*Kill the spare!*'

"You portkeyed out to... Azkaban?" asked Seamus, bewildered, "but you, and Dementors and..."

"Worse than you think. Nearly didn't make it back - only did 'cos Cho slapped me..."

"Sorry," whispered Cho, hoarsely.

"No, I'm serious, I was drowning there... if you hadn't brought me back, we'd have never got out. I'm sorry... I never, ever wanted to take you there... never. So, so, sorry... sorry..." Harry felt a fresh wave of guilt crash over him. He should never have put Cho through that, should have let her stay with the others in the Greenhouse.

But then he wouldn't have been able to get Hermione and Parvati out. Unless Ron hadn't gone back with Seamus and Dean. So maybe they should have left those two behind, too. Just him and Ron. But then the werewolf would've got them, and Hermione and Parvati would still be Voldemort's captives.

His initial reaction on hearing the news had been 'anyone, anyone but Ron.' Which was fine, until the other half of his mind said, 'OK, then name a name.' And Harry knew that he couldn't. None of them deserved to die. He wanted Ron back, desperately, but not at the expense of someone else.

Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick arrived next; Harry had never seen Flitwick looking anything less than irrepressibly cheery, but that morning he looked drawn. On edge. Every move he made was sharp and precise, and he had his wand drawn.

"Miss Chang, Mr Finnegan, Mr Potter," Professor McGonagall addressed the three with her usual crispness, "the Ministry representatives will be arriving at eleven, and Madam Pomfrey has agreed to you remaining here until that time..."

"Ministry representatives?" asked Seamus, voicing Harry's own question.

"Yes, well, under these circumstances, the... unexpected death of a student, the Ministry launches a full investigation. Naturally all those involved in last night's... events will be questioned," Professor McGonagall explained, as Harry, Cho and Seamus eyed each other warily.

"So we have to be back here by eleven, then?" asked Cho.

"Ah, well, actually, I'm afraid you won't be leaving here until at least after the Ministry has spoken to each of you," replied McGonagall, in the special tone she reserved for the completely non-negotiable. "Miss Weasley, Mr Longbottom and Miss Brown have been summoned also, and should be joining you shortly."

Whilst his Head of House had been relaying news of their virtual imprisonment in the Hospital Wing, Harry had noticed Professor Flitwick moving agitatedly between Hermione and Parvati, flicking his wand and muttering to himself. He called his counterpart over, and the two of them engaged in a brief conversation, before leaving the ward. Harry tracked them with sense, and saw them enter Madam Pomfrey's office.

"The Ministry," noted Seamus, warily, "wonder what they'll do?"

"Question us, I guess," supposed Harry, "although Cho and I didn't really see what happened."

"They might question us about what *we* did, too, though," interjected Cho, wearing a frown that Harry recognised from their joint study sessions in the library. "And why. And *how*."

Harry noted the emphasis on the last word, and looked from Seamus to Cho, "Ah," he said, "that wouldn't necessarily be good news for me." He would have to tell all the group he was a Mage eventually, but, right now, if they were to face Ministry questioning, possibly (who knew?) under Veritaserum, he couldn't tell the rest until the interrogation was over.

But Cho needed to know the risks, in case she inadvertently said something, "Um, Seamus," began Harry, "I, er, need to talk to Cho... alone, for a couple of minutes. Is that... OK?"

Seamus looked mildly hurt, and Harry felt terrible for his apparent betrayal of the friend who'd taken a werewolf bite for him, "Seamus, I wouldn't ask unless it was *really*, erm, personal." He'd meant to say 'important', but had pulled back at the last second - the last thing he needed was Seamus to say that Harry had discussed 'something important' with Cho before the Ministry arrived.

"Alright," relented Seamus, looking puzzled, and clearly wondering what kind of priorities were wheeling around in Harry's mind if he considered muttering sweet nothings to his girlfriend more important than discussing the events of the previous night. Nonetheless, Seamus wandered the length of the ward, to gaze out from the far window, across the grounds to the lake.

This time Cho slid out of bed, and padded over to Harry, her dark eyes questioning.

"Cho, you remember I told you I was a Mage?"

"Yup, physical magic. Can't use a wand. Something to do with Vellum?"

"Yeah - ignore Vellum, that bit's not important. What *is* important is that if the Ministry find out I'm a Mage, I'll be sentenced to life imprisonment."

Cho blinked, "you're joking."

"Nope. Oh, they blind me, too," Harry effected an indifferent shrug, "'s the penalty for being a Mage. It's an old law, from Slytherin's campaign against the Magi..."

"Life? Blinded? Just for being what you are?"

"That's about it," confirmed Harry, as he slid himself into a sitting position at the edge of his bed, facing her, his legs dangling over the side, "so, you see, I'd appreciate it if you, um, didn't exactly mention any of the physical magic stuff. Specifically."

"OK," agreed Cho, her concentration frown intensifying.

"I'm not asking you to lie, though," added Harry, quickly.

Cho was nodding, "no, no, just, erm... tell the truth *selectively*, right?"

"Yeah," agreed Harry, thankfully, allowing himself a weak smile that Cho returned.

Her eyes remained troubled however, and, as they faced each other, the expression started to crumble, "why... why does everything happen?" she asked, stepping closer to Harry, who slid off the bed to meet her in a hug.

Harry felt Cho's body shudder from her sobbing as he held her in his arms, and lightly kissed her hair. "Why does what happen?"

"Why does it always get taken away? Cedric... you... why?"

Harry found he had no good answer to that, and instead he just held her, as McGonagall, Flitwick and Pomfrey re-entered the ward, and approached Hermione's bed.

Cho still cradled in his arms, Harry had looked over his shoulder to catch Seamus' attention, and summoned him back with a jerk of his head.

"Everything OK?" asked Seamus.

"Not really, not just yet... but it will be. Looks like Flitwick's trying to revive them," observed Harry, this time nodding in the direction of the group of staff huddled about the furthest bed.

"Hope *they're* OK, at least," said Seamus, before adding, as a reminder, "but they don't know about Ron yet."

Harry sighed; too much was happening for him to properly comprehend the fact that Ron was dead. He knew it, of course, but at that moment it was just a dispassionate statement, on a par with knowing that a bezoar would be found in a goat's stomach. He knew enough to understand that these things were cyclical, and that the punch to the stomach on hearing those words would soon return, but, for the time being, it was just another fact.

Neville, Ginny and Mrs Weasley had returned to the ward, along with Lavender and the Twins proper (no Lee). Seeing the intense activity about Hermione's bed, the new arrivals headed over to the three awake patients, using Harry and Cho's beds as impromptu sofas.

"Harry, Seamus and...?" nodded one of the Twins, his face a deathly white.

"Cho," confirmed Harry, since her face was still buried against his chest. And, to be brutally honest, he found it comforting to hold her like this, swaying gently as he leant against the bed.

"Ah," noted the second Twin, nodding slowly. "Bad night."

"Very bad," confirmed Seamus, with a flick of his head towards Dean.

The first Twin sucked air through his teeth on taking in Dean's appearance, and then turned back to Harry, his voice low, "things are happening, mate. Something big's going on... Vellum's disappeared..."

That took Harry by surprise, "Vellum?" he queried, shifting his arms a little lower on Cho, so that he could twist to face the conversation properly.

"And Snape wasn't at breakfast, either," added Neville.

"Hang on," said Harry, and closed his eyes as he swept his sense through the castle searching for the patterns of his two least favourite teachers. And coming up blank. "Both gone?"

"And that's not all," continued the other Twin, "dad's not here because the Ministry's in uproar - spoke to him over the fireplace. The Dementors have left Azkaban."

"Disappeared," confirmed the first Twin, "took some of the prisoners with them. The rest are being transferred to a rock off Cornwall... Dad's up to his neck..."

But Harry had suddenly connected the pain of his scar from the previous evening, "Voldemort!" he exclaimed, as everyone flinched, "he was there when we portkeyed into Azkaban. Last night."

"Whoa," breathed the first Twin, seemingly unaware that he'd broken the natural order of their sequential responses. "So You-Know-Who was at Azkaban, you reckon he was getting the Dementors on his side?"

"...and that'd explain the prisoners, wouldn't it?" concluded the second Twin. "Death Eaters..."

"Well, Tempus should be able to handle them," opined Neville, triggering Harry's memory of discussions at the Order of the Phoenix. His heart sank still further.

"Neville," Harry began, cautiously, "about Tempus... that tattoo, it's a loyalty charm. You can't attack anyone else who wears it."

The rest of the group looked at Harry enquiringly, and even Cho craned her neck up to lock her eyes on him.

"Siri.. I mean, Lupin and Snuffles found out about this, and told me; the Order of Tempus have different levels of tattoo - the blue one is the lowest, but there are higher levels, where they can attack people within the Order who are at a lower level..."

"Well... well that's not a problem, is it?" countered Neville, "I mean... I mean, why, why would you want to attack people in the Order?"

"Oh no," sighed Cho, "no..."

"Wait a minute," interjected Seamus, "you mean that the top level of Tempus will be immune from any resistance from their followers? They could do whatever they wanted?"

"Yup," confirmed Harry, weakly, watching Neville for his reaction.

"Well... well, that's still not a problem, though, is it? I mean, they're against You-Know-Who..."

"But why are they against him?" asked the second Twin.

"Because he's evil? Or because he's in their way?" prompted the first.

Further discussion was cut off by Hermione's frantic shout, "Wormtail!"

Chapter 37

In what year was Grindlewald born?

Hermione's startled cry was cut short as she sat upright in bed, clearly adjusting to the unexpected surroundings. By Harry's bed, everyone looked uneasily at each other; no-one wanted to be the bearer of bad news. Fortunately, Madam Pomfrey was doing her best to keep Hermione's mind occupied, peppering her with questions, and plying her with some kind of potion as Flitwick and McGonagall attended to Parvati.

Hermione had now pulled herself up into a fully upright position in the bed, nodding occasionally to Pomfrey's questioning as Parvati regained consciousness in the bed next to her, equally disorientated. Perched on Cho's bed, Harry watched Mrs Weasley compose herself - he figured that it probably made most sense for Ron's mum to break the news to them. In so far as it made sense for anyone to be forced to be the bearer of such grim tidings. Especially to someone who had only just become aware that they'd been kidnapped, and somehow rescued.

With a heavy sigh, Mrs Weasley, still pale faced, stood up, and, squeezing Harry's arm, left the small group of friends and made her way first to Madam Pomfrey and then to Professor McGonagall. Not wanting to watch, yet somehow unable to turn away, Harry saw Mrs Weasley take Hermione's hand in hers as she started to talk.

Hermione's expression turned from one of pleasant surprise to bewilderment. A half-chuckle of disbelief was then followed by a face that spoke only of pure shock; Hermione twisted around to look at the group assembled about Harry's bed; Harry, Cho, the Twins, Seamus, Neville, Lavender and Ginny. And Harry could see the fear in her eyes, before the tears started to fall.

In the next bed, Parvati, who had clearly picked up on the content of Mrs Weasley's message, also looked across at the rest of the Gryffindors, as if pleading them to contradict her. Seamus shook his head slowly at her; this really wasn't some sick joke.

Seeing his friends' reaction to the news of Ron's death kicked off Harry's own grief once more, and the ward dissolved through a haze of tears.

There had been several sets of visitors to the ward by the time 11 o'clock came round. Padma had come in to visit her twin, and Seamus' sister, Colette, had also ventured in, although she was treating her brother with something close to caution. Harry assumed that she'd already been told that he'd been attacked by what could well have been a werewolf. That his own family now appeared wary of him didn't bode well.

Dean was still under sedation, although Madam Pomfrey assured everyone that he would be awake that evening, and would be up and about the following day. Nonetheless, to give him a little privacy, the Twins had pulled the curtains about his bed.

To Harry's complete surprise, Lupin and Snuffles had arrived at 10 o'clock, albeit to the traditional greeting, "Professor Lupin! What are *you* doing here?"

Lupin, though looking somewhat worse for wear (after all, it had been a full moon the night before), rolled his eyes in mock exasperation at the greeting. One of the benefits of his former stint as a Professor at Hogwarts was that none of Harry's friends needed introducing; nonetheless, Harry noticed Lupin's eyebrows raise fractionally on 'Miss Chang'. Cho and he were now sitting side by side on the bed, fingers intertwined absently. Their attention also drawn, Harry noted with slight dismay that the Patil twins' eyes narrowed simultaneously.

The round of greetings finished, Lupin turned back to Harry, "a word, if I may," he ventured, indicating the individual room Harry had been installed in after his duel with Vellum. Snuffles had already padded inside as Harry reluctantly slid off the bed to join them.

Closing the door behind him, Harry looked from Snuffles to Lupin, unsure how he was supposed to act, and not knowing how much of the situation the two Marauders were aware of. "Ron's dead," he stated, bluntly - the numbness was back once more, which greatly aided explanations, but he knew it was only temporary. Already that morning there'd been periods where he'd been unable to string two words together, so overwhelmed was he by the loss.

Lupin sighed, and looked far, far older than his thirty odd years. "Yes, Harry, we heard, and... well, all I can say is that I am truly, truly sorry. To lose any life is terrible enough, but one so young... and in such a manner..." his voice trailed off into contemplative silence. Harry was starting to understand what people meant when they said that words couldn't express their feelings. What words could do this justice?

With a shake of his shaggy coat, Snuffles transformed into a grave, stricken looking Sirius, the haunted look Harry had always associated with Azkaban now exaggerated. He wrapped his godson up in a bearlike hug, whispering, "I don't know what to say, Harry, I really don't..."

"Are you safe here?" asked Harry, breaking what had been a few moments of contemplative silence, "I mean, McGonagall..."

"*Professor McGonagall*," Harry, chided Lupin, gently.

"Sorry, *Professor McGonagall* told us that the Ministry would be here at eleven. They're going to question us. Well, I assume they are."

"I'll be safe enough, Harry," assured Sirius, "I'll be slipping back to Remus' quarters after we've spoken, and I'll stay out of the way."

"Remus' quarters? What, here? Are you coming back?" in a sea of blackness, this was the first piece of good news Harry had received in what seemed like a lifetime, although in actual fact barely twelve hours had passed since Harry had learned of Ron's fate.

It seemed that Lupin never ceased to be amazed by the respect his former students held for him, and a brief smile flickered across his face, "indeed I am - I understand that Professor Vellum appears to have disappeared, and Minerva called me this morning."

"That's great!" exclaimed Harry; finally a lesson he'd be able to look forward to.

"But let's not get side-tracked," urged Sirius, "Harry, what the *Hell* did you *do* last night?"

"Well," started Harry, marshalling his thoughts, "it all started really at dinner, when I couldn't see Hermione or Parvati at the Gryffindor table..."

Harry talked the two men through the night's events; the initial search of the castle. Using the Marauder's Map and Cho's Temporal Reversal spell (Lupin nodded approvingly at that point). The discovery that Pettigrew had been on the grounds - this caused Sirius to suck sharply through his teeth, and a dark look flashed across Lupin's eyes - and then the group following the Map's trail to Greenhouse 3.

The discovery of the portal, and Harry's first jump through, determining it led to Beauxbatons, and the relative emptiness of the place. Then the composition of the rescue party - he, Cho, Seamus, Dean and Ron. Sending Neville off to find a member of staff, Ginny and Lavender being left to guard the portal itself.

The moonlight attack, Dean's transformation, Seamus being bitten. The group splitting up, Ron taking the injured back to Hogwarts, ("I thought I was sending him back to safety!" protested Harry, the guilt starting to build), he and Cho making their way into Beauxbatons, and into the dungeon.

Harry glossed over the battles, and also the intense pain that had seared through him when the four had Portkeyed to Azkaban (the very mention of the place caused Sirius to flinch). Then Portkeying to the Astronomy Tower, and Cho and he finally making their way to the medical wing.

Sirius was looking at his godson, wide-eyed with disbelief, "Sweet Snape on toast," he muttered, before adding, defensively, "it's just an expression."

Harry stifled a grin (it was a scary image), before turning to Lupin, "um, Professor Lupin, I told Seamus you might be able to talk to him..."

"Of course I will, Harry," assured the Professor, "if he really *was* bitten last night, then it's most probable he'd transform tonight... and if he hasn't transformed by tomorrow night, we can be fairly confident he's in the clear."

"He's not, though, is he?" contended Harry, dismally.

"Well... no, probably not," admitted Lupin, resignedly. "Sirius, we've spent long enough, I fear, so you'd better switch back to Padfoot before the Ministry people arrive."

Wordlessly the shaggy dog rematerialised in the place of the escaped convict, and the trio exited the room to join the main group of students still congregated about Harry and Cho's beds. Harry saw Lupin exchange a few words with Seamus, before announcing that he was returning to his quarters, but would be back once the Ministry had conducted its interviews. Harry could see why a known werewolf and an escaped convict wouldn't want to spend any more time in the company of Ministry Aurors than they had to.

A strange silence fell, and they all looked uneasily from one to the other, waiting for the Ministry's investigation team to arrive.

A team of ten people had entered the Medical Wing at 11 o'clock precisely, six wizards and four witches, all dressed in deep black professional robes, some of them with their wands drawn, and a look of near paranoia about their faces.

"Good Morning," announced a stern, silver-haired witch, looking even more severe than Professor McGonagall on a bad day, "I am Violet Ventura, and I shall be heading up the investigation into last night's... unfortunate events. You will be pleased to know that Minister Fudge himself is taking a personal interest in this case," (Harry groaned, inwardly), "and it is my responsibility to ensure we are able to tie up all proceedings as quickly, and efficiently as possible, and bring appropriate charges to bear.

"I trust it goes without saying that I expect, and demand, even, your full co-operation in this investigation, and although I appreciate these may be trying times for you, please understand we are acting only in the best interests of the public as a whole."

If these words had been calculated to reassure, they failed spectacularly. The knowledge that Fudge was taking a personal interest in the case rather suggested to Harry that the Minister was just itching to get one back on Harry for his outburst in the Hospital Wing (he'd actually been laid up in what was now Hermione's bed) after the Third Task.

"As I explained," continued Ventura, "I am heading up the investigation, and will be assisted by me three colleagues, Majella Madagascar," a glamorous, African witch nodded briefly, her long hair braided with black beads rattling quietly, her dark eyes cold with suspicion, "Hunter Carpathia," a thick set wizard, bald, but with a straggly goatee beard of silvery hair, and watery blue eyes, "and finally Vigo Dreht," a dark haired wizard with sharply chiselled features and a disturbing scar running vertically from the corner of his left eye to his jaw.

"The other members of the team are security personnel, and need not concern you." Of course, this last statement had exactly the opposite effect, and the group anxiously assessed the threat the six hit-wizards appeared to present. "Now, would all those people not *directly* involved in the events of yesterday evening please leave. *Now.*" commanded Ventura.

Watching the Twins, Mrs Weasley, Colette and even Padma reluctantly leave the ward, Harry suddenly started to feel vulnerable.

The investigation team split up into four teams to do the interviewing - Ventura, Dreht, Madagascar and Carpathia did the questioning, having appropriated a series of classrooms on the first floor for this purpose. Each of the questioners had a hit-wizard for protection, leaving the final two members of the investigation team watching over the ward.

Harry's interview was conducted by Carpathia, whose 'security' was a tall, gangly wizard with sandy hair and pockmarked skin. The hit-wizard's wand was trained on Harry from the moment he left the ward, which wasn't exactly the most pleasant of situations to be in. The team had also required Harry to surrender his own wand for the duration of the interview, not realising that in Harry's case this would be a pointless gesture.

They were in the Ancient Runes classroom, a place Harry had never been before. In design it was essentially similar to Flitwick's Charms classroom, with the big desk, in front of a large

window overlooking a courtyard. There were stone tablets with impossibly ancient inscriptions lining the walls, and a mini-library of ancient texts along the back wall.

Carpathia was filling in some kind of pre-inked parchment, sitting at the large desk, and indicating that Harry should sit opposite, barely glancing at the interviewee. The hit-wizard took position behind, and to the left of Carpathia, never once letting his wand stray from being trained at Harry's forehead. His scar started to twinge at the thought.

Finally, Carpathia looked up from his writing, and locked eyes with Harry, seemingly trying to determine guilt or innocence simply through a staring contest. Years of putting up with the Dursleys had taught Harry never to give in to these games, and he matched his inquisitor look for look.

"Drink," intoned Carpathia, his eyes not straying from Harry's face as he indicated a small glass of water with his quill hand. The water was perfectly clear, which, to Harry's mind, immediately summoned up memories of Snape's threat the previous year to add some Veritaserum to his pumpkin juice.

"Veritaserum," observed Harry, as a statement rather than a question.

"Standard Ministry questioning procedure," confirmed Carpathia, "and I might add that if you refuse to drink it, that will, er, reflect *poorly* upon you in the trial."

Harry didn't doubt for one second that that would be the case, and lifted the glass to his lips. He deserved this. He'd got Ron killed, he'd been instrumental in Cedric's death. He'd forced Cho to relive the night of the Third Task... so much guilt, and here was a way of finally admitting that burden. He drained the glass, and put it down carefully at the edge of the desk.

Again Carpathia appeared to be playing some kind of mind game, considering Harry intently for maybe forty seconds before asking his first question: "Name?"

"Harry James Potter," confirmed Harry, automatically, and unthinkingly. He wondered what would have happened if he'd tried to lie as Carpathia scribbled his answer down.

The started off with the search for Hermione and Parvati at dinner the previous evening (Harry left out the bit about his search by sense), and then collecting the Marauders' Map.

"This Map, you mention, where is it now?"

"Um, I'm not sure - R.. Ron had it last. I think."

"Hmmm." Carpathia had a way of acknowledging answers in such non-committal fashion that Harry was never sure whether he'd given a good answer or a poor one.

"And the map showed Pettigrew in the Greenhouse..."

"Pettigrew? Is that another student?"

"No, Peter Pettigrew. The person Sirius Black was accused of murdering when my parents... were... killed..."

Carpathia exhaled slowly through his nostrils, "Fudge warned me about this," he muttered to himself before taking a deep breath and fixing Harry with a steely glare, "look, Laddie, I know that Black must've put one Hell of a Confundus Charm on you. Fudge told me all about that night. Face facts: Pettigrew was killed by Sirius Black, who, I might add, also took out another twelve people with that curse. Once you get that *fact* straight in your head, life becomes much more straightforward. So you went to the Greenhouse. What did you find?"

"It was empty, but the storeroom had a portal to Beauxbatons inside it."

"Was the storeroom you refer to locked or open?"

"It was locked. Ron cast *Alohamora* to open it."

"You wilfully broke into school property, outside of classroom hours, without informing anyone in authority of your actions?"

"Yes." Harry watched as his tormentor scribbled something on a second piece of parchment. Probably a charge-sheet, he thought, gloomily.

"Once there, what did you do?"

"I stepped through the portal, to see where it led, and to check if Hermione and Parvati were there."

Carpathia's quill hovered over his parchment, and he looked at Harry incredulously, "did you honestly walk through a completely unknown portal, without informing *anyone* of your actions, without... are you completely stupid? You had no idea what you might face on the other side of that thing!"

"I had to find out where it went. I had to know if Hermione and Parvati were OK."

"And how did you plan to achieve that?" asked Carpathia, in a superior tone, as though he'd seen immediately the flaw in Harry's plan.

"By sense," Harry found himself answering, even though he'd willed himself to remain silent. Or profess ignorance.

"Sense? What's that?"

"I have the ability to sense energy patterns - I can recognise people that way within a large radius. I was more than confident that if Hermione and Parvati were within about two miles of that portal I'd know about it."

"You're a Parselmouth, too, aren't you?" observed Carpathia, with a trace of suspicion.

"Yes," confirmed Harry, surprised that Carpathia hadn't chased down the sense thing.

Carpathia scribbled some further notes, before once more locking eyes with Harry, "seem to have a talent for not mentioning special... attributes, don't you? Let me make it perfectly clear, Potter, we take a dim view of people who hide abilities that could be associated with the Dark Arts."

"This Boy-Who-Lived nonsense doesn't phase me - I got pulled off the Diggory case last year, before we had a chance to conduct questions," Carpathia was nodding his head slowly, as though a huge jigsaw in his mind was starting to piece together, "but even then it was evident that you've not been dealing with a full deck for a long time now... Mr Harry Potter, you are going down for this."

"What?" exclaimed Harry, startled by this turn of events, and perturbed by the resurrection of Cedric's death.

"You must think we're completely thick. This whole thing was a setup, wasn't it? You knew that Granger and," Carpathia looked at his notes, "Patil would be missing, because *you* set that up. You knew there was a portal in the Greenhouse, and you *knew* you would come to no harm jumping through because you've already been using it regularly..."

Harry's eyebrows were raised at this incredible flight of delusional fancy.

"And you tell us that the portal took you to Beauxbatons, which is where You-Know-Wh..."

"Voldemort," corrected Harry, by reflex.

The hit wizard spoke for the first time, "I can take him now, Sir." Harry, startled, looked at the tall wizard, who up to that point had been perfectly silent. The wand was still locked rigidly on his forehead.

"Please show me your left forearm, Mr Potter," commanded Carpathia, ignoring his protector's observation.

"What?!" cried Harry, stunned. Surely they couldn't think that he was...

"Your left forearm, please," persisted the Ministry official.

Shrugging, Harry rolled back his robe, indicating bare skin, and noting a look of disappointment cross Carpathia's face at the lack of a Dark Mark. "You can't seriously think I'm in league with Voldemort?"

"Let's see: you're the only witness to Cedric Diggory's death, and the only person who claims to have seen He Who Must Not Be Named. You're a parselmouth, you have an abysmal track record when it comes to respecting authority, and you somehow nonchalantly walked into what is reputed to be the Dark Lord's lair, and came back, with two hostages, completely unscathed. That paints a pretty convincing picture of collusion in my mind, I'll have you know.

"And," he added, menacingly, "I assure you that any right minded jury will be in full agreement."

"I'm not in league with Voldemort!" protested Harry, hotly. This was Veritaserum he was under, surely Carpathia knew he couldn't be lying?

"Then tell me why you were so confident of walking through that portal!" demanded Carpathia.

"I knew I could get back. I have a Portkey," admitted Harry, deciding that owning up to the Portkey, which was bound to be covered later anyway, would be better than being assumed to have done some kind of deal with Voldemort.

"You have a Portkey," repeated Carpathia, in a tone of near disbelief.

Harry fished the stone pendant out from his robes, "Dumbl... Professor Dumbledore made it for me, it switches between here and Azkaban. I knew that even if I couldn't get back through the portal, I would be able to Portkey first to Azkaban and then back here using this."

"And that is how you got back, isn't it? Via Azkaban?"

"Yes," confirmed Harry, wondering why Carpathia suddenly seemed to scent blood.

"And by a truly *amazing* coincidence, the Dementors all vanished from Azkaban last night. The *very night* that you Portkeyed there. Entirely innocently, I'm sure."

Harry's blood ran cold, as he saw yet another line of scribble added to what he was now convinced was a charge sheet. Things were starting to look bad.

The questioning continued. By the time he got to the battles in the dungeons, Carpathia had sensed that Harry was holding something back in his account; "tell me, exactly which spell did you use against this... troll creature?"

"I summoned a lightning bolt," explained Harry.

"Yes, you said, but what was the incantation? That's serious Dark Magic for a fifth year student."

"There was no incantation. I can summon lightning bolts."

"How is that possible? The three basic tenants of Magic are that you need the Will, the Word and the Wand. I ask again, *which incantation did you use?*"

"I don't need a wand, or an incantation," explained Harry, brokenly, "because I'm not a wizard. I'm a Mage."

Chapter 38

Who is credited with having made the first wand?

Returning to the Medical Wing, Harry was puzzling as to why he hadn't been immediately sent off to Azkaban, having admitted that he was a Mage. Certainly, Carpathia had scribbled another note on his list at the revelation, but it hadn't triggered any further reaction.

Still, it wasn't as if Harry was going to press the point. Carpathia had been singularly unimpressed that the Portkey could not be removed from Harry's neck; Harry took no small delight in noting how ineffectual the Ministry agents' efforts at unbinding the pendant had been. Dumbledore was widely reputed to be the greatest wizard alive for a reason, after all.

Cho and Hermione were talking on Cho's bed, and Seamus, Neville and Ginny were huddled in low conversation on Harry's bed. No Lavender, and no Parvati, though - a quick flick of the sense towards Gryffindor Tower indicated that they'd already returned to their dorm. Harry shrugged; it would have been nice if they could have all talked together first, but with Dean still out, maybe it was for the best.

"lo guys," greeted Harry, "so was I the last?"

"Yup," confirmed Seamus, "how'd it go?"

"Pretty badly," responded Harry, slumping on to the corner of Cho's bed, "they basically accused me of being in league with Voldemort, killing Cedr... you know, and staging Hermione and Parvati's kidnap. They also suggested that I was instrumental in getting the Dementors to abandon Azkaban." He sighed, wearily, "but that wasn't the worst part... I mean, you lot were all under Veritaserum too, right?"

The group nodded assent.

"I'm sorry, Harry," apologised Hermione, "as soon as I saw Wormtail I knew, but we didn't even have time to draw our wands..."

Harry waved away Hermione's apology, "nothing we can do about that now... the important thing is we got you back. Got you both back..." he ran his fingers through his hair, reflecting on the cost of the rescue; Ron was dead. Seamus was, more than likely, a werewolf, Dean had seriously injured himself, and Harry's identity as a Mage had been revealed. He'd put both himself and Cho through the trauma of Azkaban, and the entire Weasley family through the trauma of having lost Ron.

But, he was beginning to realise, it wasn't possible to balance lives as though they were weights on a pair of scales. Ron's life wasn't worth more than Parvati and Hermione's. And Parvati and Hermione's lives weren't worth more than Ron's. You simply couldn't compare the two. Or he couldn't, anyway.

Cho looked troubled, "you OK, Cho?" asked Harry.

"I had to tell them... about you..." she confessed, "but... well, you're still here, so maybe..." she trailed off. Having all been through fairly brutal interrogation, everybody's mind was numb, and forming coherent sentences was proving tricky.

"I told them too," responded Harry, with a slight frown, "but I think they'll be back; then we'll probably find out what's been going on..."

"Harry," interrupted Ginny, "before I forget... Dean and Seamus... the swords are still in the Greenhouse... Mum's taking us all back to the Burrow until... until, the service... so I didn't want to forget."

"Thanks Gin," replied Harry. "Service? Um... when is that?"

Ginny shrugged, still slumped as she was against Neville, "have to ask Mum... she said she'd be coming back at four thirty, with the Twins."

"I've got to be back in the dungeons by six," volunteered Seamus, "moonrise is at half past..."

"You spoken to Lupin yet?" asked Harry.

"No," admitted Seamus, "he said I should call in on him after the Ministry... guess that'd be about now, then. Apparently he's got his old office again."

"Lavender and Parvati have already gone back to Gryffindor," reported Hermione. "Ventura said we were free to leave the Hospital Wing after questioning. But we can't leave Hogwarts..."

"I can," corrected Ginny, softly.

Harry stifled a yawn. He wondered whether everybody's evident fatigue was a side-effect of Veritaserum, or simply the natural reaction to the night's events. "Well," he started, "not a lot of point staying here then... Gin, where's your Mum meeting you?"

"Gryffindor... thought it'd be simplest."

"OK," Harry nodded his head, noticing that his body's movements were getting increasingly lethargic. He had a strong suspicion that if he remained still for much longer he'd fall asleep. "Neville, do you want to come across to the Greenhouse with me, see if we can pick up the swords? Ginny and Hermione might as well head back to Gryffindor... Cho?"

"I want a shower, and some sleep... other way round though..."

"And Seamus, you can find Lupin," suggested Harry. He swept his sense out to the Greenhouses, and noted that there were a number of patterns in Greenhouse 3, checking out the storeroom. "Ginny, whereabouts were the swords?"

Neville replied, "we hid them behind the Bubotubers... they should be safe..."

"Well the Greenhouse is crawling with people right now... best forget about them for the time being. Cho, walk you to Ravenclaw?" offered Harry.

"Sure," she accepted with a light shrug, "you can stop me falling asleep on my feet..."

Harry gathered up his cloak from the previous evening, and was astonished to discover that the song blade was still there; there was a sense of rightness as he grasped the scabbard and swung it back over his shoulder once more. He then put on the cloak, so as to minimise the weapon's presence, "see you back at Gryffindor, then..." He extended his hand to Cho, and pulled her to her feet, and then they exited the ward, heading for Ravenclaw.

They were standing on the second floor corridor in the Ravenclaw wing. Harry knew for a fact that the Ravenclaw dorm's tapestry was on the floor above, but it went without saying that students never gave away their dormitory's exact location to other Houses. Cho of course knew that Harry was aware of exactly where Ravenclaw's entrance was located, but it was the middle of the afternoon, so for the sake of appearances they had to pretend to play the game.

"OK, I'd better head back to Gryffindor now," sighed Harry, resignedly. He and Cho hadn't actually talked on the walk from the Hospital Wing - just the simple presence of each other's company was comforting enough. "I'm really, really sorry, you know..."

"I know," confirmed Cho, "but it *was* horrible... No! I'm not saying that to make you feel bad... Just, so... so you know... and I think it was worse for you..."

"Everybody's different, Cho... we can't compare things like that. I don't know what you felt, and you don't know what I felt... but I really would never have asked you to do that... I would never willingly..."

Cho interrupted him by resting a petite finger to his lips, "I know... and I want you to know that if you ever asked me to do that again," her voice trailed off, and echoes of pain flickered across her eyes, before she finally finished with an almost inaudible whisper, "I would."

"Cho," whispered Harry, wincing at the pain. How could he hurt something so pretty?
"Y'know that if I ever could avoid putting you through that again..."

This time they didn't hug - they stood facing each other, both lost in the other's eyes, and the fingertips of Harry's right hand just touching the fingertips of Cho's left. Wordlessly they broke the connection, and Harry headed back to Gryffindor.

As he entered the Common Room, Harry heard the conversation level drop as all eyes turned first to his entrance, and were then quickly averted. Lavender, Hermione and Parvati were all in their dorm, he noted by sense, and Neville was in the boys' dorm. Flicking his eyes across the sombre gathering, Harry decided it would be best to retreat to the dorm, and made his way to the stairs.

As he walked, a few people mumbled indistinct condolences, but Harry wasn't really listening; his eyes were focused on the door at the head of the stairs. He'd never really considered the door before - polished wood, the varnish scored and chipped with the typical abuse meted out by fifteen and sixteen year old boys with their minds on other things.

It was closed, of course. Presenting a blank face to the Common Room below. Harry knew that beyond lay a circular dormitory, with five four-poster beds. But three of them would be empty that night - Seamus would be in the dungeons, wondering if he would transform into a werewolf. Dean was still in hospital, his flesh torn apart as a result of his animagus transformation. And Ron.

Ron was dead.

Harry grasped the brass door handle, and noticed, as though he were standing outside his body, that his arm was shaking. He tried to remind himself that it was just a room, that it was his home as much as it had been Ron's. He tried to pretend that the memories the room would trigger wouldn't affect him.

Opening the door gently, noticing, really noticing for the first time the little 'snick' it gave as the lower edge caught the carpet where the floorboard had started to rise, Harry took a deep breath and entered the room. He looked at his bed first, and then, as though compelled by some dread force, his head twisted round to Ron's bed.

Ron's school robes from Monday lay neatly folded at the foot of the bed; Harry recalled enough of his dorm-mate's habits to realise that he hadn't left them like that. Probably Ron had just thrown his school robes on to the bed in a heap, and the House Elves had tidied up, unseen but ever present, making sure that Hogwarts kept ticking.

Even when your best friend was dead.

The Chudley Cannons scarf, vibrant orange, was wrapped around one of the head posts, and Ron's Cannon's pennant was fixed to the wall, next to a photograph of the team, grinning and waving cheerily from the noticeboard, oblivious to the lack of an audience. Ron's bag lay on the far side of the bed, perfectly aligned, again obviously placed just so by the House Elves.

Sniffing in sharply, and blinking tears from his stinging eyes, Harry scanned the rest of the room, eventually meeting Neville's own gaze. The two boys remained motionless in their respective positions as Harry considered the cost of Monday's so-called 'rescue', a bitter darkness welling up inside of him.

He had a mad urge to return to being 'Just Harry', locked in the cupboard under the stairs at 4 Privet Drive. If he hadn't met Ron... if he'd just managed to stay out of other people's lives, kept them away from Voldemort's sights, none of this might have happened. Dean wouldn't have torn himself apart, Seamus wouldn't be living with the mark of a werewolf. Hermione and Parvati wouldn't have been abducted. And Ron wouldn't be dead.

Harry slumped onto his bed, and leant back against the post, his head thumping against the scarred wood. The three empty beds in the room stared at him accusingly, guilt made physical. Too broken to cry, he just sat there numbly, lost in blank thoughts.

"Harry," one of the Twins was standing beside him, face still white, and his eyes flicking repeatedly to Ron's bed, "Mum's here, we're going to the Burrow..."

He looked up at the seventh-year's drained face, "Fred?"

"George," corrected George, feebly, "Ginny said you wanted to say g'bye..."

That *did* prompt the tears, but Harry struggled to his feet, and vacantly followed George down into the Common Room, where Mrs Weasley, Fred and Ginny were waiting. The rest of the room was empty, for which Harry was grateful.

The parting was difficult, consisting mainly of half-choked sobs, and frequent attempts at apologies on Harry's part. One of the Twins, Harry had lost track of which, and was too tired to use sense to definitively distinguish them, squeezed his shoulder, and fixed a penetrating look upon him, "Don't give in, mate. Don't."

And with those final words, the four left the Common Room, leaving Harry staring at the portrait hole.

Seamus had returned whilst Harry was in the shower, trying to wash the guilt from his body with water as scaldingly hot as he could bear. Harry emerged from the bathroom to see Seamus sitting crosslegged on his bed, staring into space. "lo Seamus, how'd it go?"

"'s a good guy, Lupin," replied Seamus, nodding lightly, his body bouncing softly on the mattress as he did so. "Going to the dungeons at 6... precaution, y'know," he shrugged as he delivered the news in a monotone, "he's lending me his dog, too..."

"Snuffles? He's a good guy... dog. Really good," asserted Harry, trying to cover up his slip. He needn't have worried, however, since Seamus seemed lost in his own world, and barely registered Harry's endorsement of Lupin's hound.

"Are you... you scared?" asked Neville, who was still sitting where he had been when Harry had first entered the dorm.

Harry stared at Neville incredulously, but Seamus seemed to consider the answer carefully, "Not really, I think. I don't know." He shrugged again, frowning as he uncrossed his legs and moved to a sitting position at the edge of the bed, "I mean, I can't change what happened last night..."

"I'm really, really..." started Harry.

"Don't," commanded Seamus, flatly, cutting Harry off, "I can't change it... so it either happens tonight - or tomorrow - or it doesn't. It's hard to be scared of the inevitable. I think that fear's more *real* when you have a choice. Y'know - stay and fight, turn and flee. Scared *then*, but when there's nothing you can do," he half snorted a humourless chuckle, "I'm sort of indifferent to the fear."

"'s Colette OK?" asked Harry, remembering how wary Seamus' little sister had seemed in the Hospital Wing.

"She's freaked. Can't say I blame her... Lavender's a bit phased, too. Guess everyone is apart from me... you see, that choice thing. They can all choose whether or not to know me after; I guess that's where the fear comes in. Me, no choice, pointless to fear."

"Isn't that a bit... fatalistic?" asked Harry, before immediately cursing himself for the stupid question.

Fire sparked in Seamus eyes as his head snapped around to glare at Harry, "Well what the Hell would you do, then? I can't run from this. If it's got me, it's got me.

Lupin says the pain's terrible, drives you insane, crazy. They don't joke when they call it a curse, y'know. You lose your mind - if I turn tonight, I'm going to have no recollection of what I did. Of what I was... and what I will be every full moon. *Every* full moon, for the rest of my life. It's happened, it's decided. And I have to live with that... so what's the point in fearing the future? It's already happened." Seamus threw himself backwards, staring up at the ceiling of his bed, arms spread wide.

"I'm really, really sorry, Seamus... it should've been me," the heat from the shower had long since dissipated, and Harry started to towel himself dry as he made his way to his own bed.

"It was me," countered Seamus, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Harry's apology, not moving from his prone position on the bed. Neville was looking from Harry to Seamus and back again, seemingly lost for words.

At ten to six, the fifth years gathered together in the Common Room, which was once more full of subdued Gryffindors anxiously avoiding eye contact with the stricken group. "You don't have to come, you know," Seamus reminded them, "and, well, I don't want you to stay... I don't want you guys to see me like..."

"We'll come down with you, though," affirmed Hermione, before adding her own apology, "oh Seamus, I'm so *stupid*, I just didn't think when we went to the Greenhouse..."

"Hermione," interjected Harry, "*no-one* knew that Pettigrew was there. It wasn't your fault."

"That's right," agreed Lavender, supportively as the six made their way into the corridor, "it was nobody's fault..."

"Oh no," contradicted Harry, malice burning in his eyes, "there was fault. Pettigrew. Voldemort. They're to blame... and if you hadn't been my friends, you wouldn't have been..."

"Don't even *think* about finishing that sentence," admonished Hermione, "you don't choose your friends, Harry, you *earn* them. And we're not abandoning you now. Never."

"I can't ask you all to willingly stand there and be targets for Voldemort!" exclaimed Harry.

"You never did ask. And we know you never would," persisted Hermione, "but don't kid yourself. We all know who you are, and *what*. We know what that makes you. And I'm not running away from you. I'll be by your side throughout this. We all will."

Harry realised that the girls had probably already discussed this at length in their dorm, as Lavender and Parvati were both nodding at Hermione's words. Parvati somewhat less enthusiastically than Lavender, but she was nodding.

As they made their way down through the castle's many floors, Harry turned to Hermione, "Just before he headed back - Ron, I mean - he told us to say, tell you that he said, 'Hi'."

"Oh!" said Hermione, in a half sob, half cry, eyes watering. She didn't bother to wipe the tears from her face as they finally entered the dungeon, where Professor Lupin and Snuffles were waiting for them, next to two open cells.

"Hello again, Seamus," greeted Lupin, somewhat gravely. He nodded at the remaining Gryffindors, who stood awkwardly huddled together.

"Hi," replied Seamus, looking as though a more eloquent reply was beyond him.

"I apologise for the accommodation," continued Lupin, trying to lighten the mood, "would you like the North suite or the South?" the two cells in question faced each other across the stone corridor - thick iron bars ran vertically floor to ceiling, allowing an uninterrupted view into the bare room. There was a rough bed, with thick olive green blankets, but no other furniture. With alarm, Harry noticed the lengths of chain on the floor, and remembered what Seamus had said about being bound.

"Mmpg," indicated Seamus, selecting the cell on the right hand side - presumably the Southern one, if indeed Lupin had been accurate in his description. He walked numbly into the room, and sat on the edge of the bed as the Gryffindors also entered the tiny room.

"Do you want to be bound again?" asked Lupin, gently, "I strongly recommend it, as it will limit the amount of damage you can do to yourself in the transformation. *If* you transform, that is..."

Seamus let out a ragged breath, and nodded weakly, lying face up on the bed. Before he was secured, the remaining five fifth years said their goodbyes - light kisses from Hermione and Parvati, a much more serious effort from Lavender. Neville and Harry squeezed Seamus' shoulder before Lupin started to flick his wand about, conjuring binding with the lengths of chain.

"Now my dog, Snuffles, will stay with you in the cell..."

"But what if I escape?" asked Seamus.

"I assure you that Padf... *Snuffles* can more than adequately cope with a werewolf, Seamus," responded Lupin, a slight wince crossing his face at the near use of Sirius' *other* name. "Particularly if it's a first transformation..."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Harry found himself wondering exactly how many names Sirius needed. Sirius. Padfoot. Snuffles. A guy could get confused.

"Pad?" asked Seamus, as the chains tightened, a puzzled frown on his face.

Snuffles glared reproachfully at Lupin, who gave an apologetic shrug.

Seamus narrowed his eyes, "Pad... *Padfoot*? Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs? That's right, isn't it?"

"Yeah," confirmed Harry, adding, "it's OK, trust me."

Seamus nodded his head as much as the restraints would allow, "Yeah," he agreed, seeming to relax ever so slightly, "yeah."

Lupin appeared to recover his composure, "Harry, if you wouldn't mind locking me in my cell?"

"Sure," agreed Harry, closing the opposing cell's door on the Professor. Evidently Lupin would have been taking Wolfsbane potion for the preceding week, and would be completely docile once transformed. Unfortunately, Seamus had not had the luxury of being forewarned.

The remaining fifth years were now all gathered in the corridor between the two cells, as Snuffles swept in, and curled up in the far corner of the cell. "G'night, Seamus," said Harry, as he closed the railed door.

The iron slammed together with a resounding 'thunk!' that echoed solidly through the stone corridor. Everyone visibly flinched at the sound, which immediately brought to Harry's mind the image of sealing somebody's tomb.

Chapter 39

Who was the first recorded wizard with the ability to speak Parseltongue?

That evening's meal had been a somber one at the Gryffindor table. The whole school knew of Ron's death, of course, but the absence of the remaining Weasleys, together with Dean's continued residence in the Hospital Wing and Seamus's imprisonment in the dungeons didn't exactly lighten the mood.

The Hufflepuffs seemed equally stunned, trying to assimilate the fact that their Head of House, the House that prided loyalty above all other traits, had murdered a student the previous evening. Not only murdered him, but used one of the Unforgiveables to do so. The black banners, replacing the traditional houses' pennants, seemed to be mourning more than the simple loss of a life - it was the loss of an entire belief.

Something fundamental had changed in the world. Hogwarts was no longer 'safe'.

As for the other Houses, the Ravenclaws were subdued, but Harry was certain he felt the gaze of a hundred accusing eyes upon his back. The Beauxbatons were able to whisper in their native French, safe from the possibility of eavesdropping. It was only the Slytherins where life appeared to even approaching the normalcy of routine. Pansy and Draco were, as usual, seated at opposite ends of the great table. Draco had a closed, guarded look about him, but Pansy was gossiping quite merrily to her companions.

Evidently sensing Harry's gaze upon her, Pansy looked up, and sent a gloating smile across the Great Hall, all brilliant teeth, bright eyes and cold malice.

Scanning the staff table, Harry noted that Professor Grubbly-Plank had returned. As expected, Vellum and Snape were still absent - Fleur caught his eye and sent a weak, sympathetic smile his way, causing Harry to smile back before he could stop himself. Somewhat irked, he broke his gaze, and continued tracking across the staff table, surprised to find Professor Flitwick leveling a considered gaze at him.

Finally reaching Hagrid, Harry was grateful to see the huge man return his look. Hagrid nodded slowly at Harry, as if to say "yeah, I understan' what'ya feel," his black eyes carrying a reassuring heft. Harry knew that, no matter what, Hagrid would always believe in him. Life was a lot easier to face when you knew you had a half-giant on your side.

The chimes of the glass rang out across the Hall, as Professor McGonagall got to her feet. "Thank you for your attention," she announced, "I would like to draw your attention to a number of staffing changes that will be taking place with immediate effect. Firstly, it is with great regret that I am forced to announce that Professor Sprout has retired from teaching, and has already left Hogwarts."

Harry had assumed that 'retired from teaching' had been a delicate euphemism for 'was slung into Azkaban to rot in Hell for murdering Ron Weasley,' but was in fact mistaken.

"Now, I wish to make it quite clear that the Ministry's representatives found no evidence of wrong-doing on Professor Sprout's part, and indeed declared her fit to return to teaching

duties. Unfortunately, and to the school's great loss, Professor Sprout felt unable to resume her post, and it is with great sadness that she left this afternoon."

Harry and Lavender were exchanging open-mouthed looks of horror at each other; Lavender had *heard* Sprout cast an Unforgiveable, and Harry had heard Seamus's own painful retelling of the event. Yet the Ministry had cleared her.

Hermione suspected she had the answer, "Imperius," she hissed, as Professor McGonagall continued her eulogy to Sprout's stewardship of Hufflepuff, a House, which in the Deputy Headmistress' words, had experienced more than its share of tragedy this last year.

"But who... who cast it?" asked Lavender.

Recalling that Snape and Vellum, both top of his suspected Death Eaters list, had vanished, Harry was about to nominate either for the villain's role, when another name presented itself, "Wormtail," he hissed.

"What, that Pettigrew bloke?" asked Neville.

"Shhh!" commanded Hermione, as the five tables broke out into a *very* weak round of applause in recognition of Sprout's leadership of Hufflepuff - the House that had last won the House Cup in 1973.

"These are, of course, trying times," continued a tight lipped McGonagall, and Harry wondered exactly what news she was going to relay next, "and we must all work together in the interests of the school. On this basis, then, I am... informing you that Professor Trelawney will be taking on Professor Sprout's role as Head of Hufflepuff House."

The applause that greeted this announcement was even weaker than the previous round, mainly being carried by the Beauxbatons table, who were basically clapping out of form - after all, they'd never had to suffer Divination Studies. Opposite him, Harry noticed Hermione distinctly stifle a snort, and tried himself to remain completely straight faced as Lavender considered him with an arch glare.

It didn't do to mock either Lavender or Parvati's favourite teacher. Even if said teacher was a completely demented bat.

Pausing for a sip of water, Professor McGonagall continued the staffing narrative, "I am sure you will be pleased to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be taking on the role of Herbology Professor on a permanent basis."

This time, the applause was warm, though subdued. Most students respected Grubbly-Plank, since she'd clearly proven that she knew her stuff when standing in for Hagrid in the fourth year, and was a good teacher.

"Professor Snape has..." there was a pause as McGonagall appeared to search for the correct terminology, "...has taken a leave of absence. Mademoiselle Delacour has kindly agreed to take over all Potions classes in his absence, and I would ask that you all continue to display the same respect to Mademoiselle Delacour as to the Potions Master..."

Half the boys in the Great Hall appeared to believe that Christmas had come early, and Fleur flicked her platinum hair back as she bestowed a sweet, charming and utterly Veela smile on the rapt students. "Honestly!" scowled Hermione, elbowing Neville in the ribs. Harry was one of the few males in the room who wasn't immediately overjoyed at this news. He didn't trust Fleur. Not. One. Bit.

Professor McGonagall was still talking, in what had to be the longest mid-term staff reorganisations Hogwarts had ever seen, "...and Professor Vector will therefore be taking on the role of Head of Slytherin House..."

Harry raised his eyebrows questioningly at Hermione, who, taking the prompt, replied, "she's OK, she's really fair in Arithmancy, so hopefully Slytherin won't get such an easy ride in the House Cup from hereon in."

"And finally," concluded McGonagall, somewhat wearily, but relief evident in her voice that she had made it this far, "Professor Lupin has returned to Hogwarts, and will be taking Defence Against the Dark Arts for the remainder of the term."

As Lupin's re-appointment generated the warmest round of applause to date, Harry thought it notable that Vellum had been the one person whose disappearance McGonagall hadn't even attempted to explain.

Professor McGonagall resumed her seat, to the left of Dumbledore's empty chair (no-one thought of it as Fudge's place), she caught Hermione's eye, "Miss Granger, please advise the fifth year Gryffindors that I wish to see them all in my office after this meal... all those present."

Hermione nodded, and turned to Harry, "Cho?"

Ignoring Parvati's scowl at the Ravenclaw's mention, Harry looked over his shoulder and caught Cho's eye - she gave the most imperceptible of nods, and a weak smile.

"Ah, Miss Chang," noted McGonagall, as the six students filed into her office, "I'm glad you were able to join us. Minister Fudge has given his approval for you to be kept abreast of developments in the events of yesterday evening, but I would urge you not to abuse that trust. Matters discussed in this office must not, *must not* be discussed with any other people. Do I make myself clear?"

"Excuse me Professor, but what about Seamus? And Dean?" asked Lavender.

"Oh, I do apologise, Mr Finnegan and Mr Thomas, both, as they were, directly involved in last night's events, are of course entitled to this information. As is Miss Weasley. But I would ask you not to destabilise the school by discussing this matter with others - matters are far from clear cut at present, and investigation will only be made more difficult if word of events were to leak out."

The six students nodded their comprehension, settled as they were in the six chairs facing McGonagall's large desk. Harry was pretty certain that there had only been two chairs the

previous time he'd been in McGonagall's office. But then, she was the Transfiguration teacher... conjuring up new furniture would hardly present a challenge to her.

His mind then almost got completely sidetracked on wondering what it was he was *really* sitting on. One of Neville's willow-pattern rabbits, perhaps?

"Now let me start by saying what a dreadful tragedy this has been," commenced Professor McGonagall, blinking repeatedly, "especially so soon after Mr Diggory's death in June..."

Harry winced, and Cho tried to stifle a sob. Did McGonagall *really* have to remind them all about Cedric. It wasn't as though they'd forgotten him. Cho least of all, it seemed, he noted, trying not to feel jealous. After all, he'd told her it was OK still to like Cedric, hadn't he? They hadn't had a chance yet to talk properly about Monday's events; maybe he'd catch up with her after McGonagall had finished with them.

"Now, it pains me greatly to say this, but say this I must. As Head of House, I am extremely disappointed in your behaviour on Monday evening. Now I *understand* that you were concerned for your friends' wellbeing, and fully sympathise with that, *but*, and as we have seen, you should have realised that this was a situation well out of your depth. Your first course of action should have been to alert a member of staff..."

"But, but we sent Neville!" protested Lavender.

"Yes, indeed Mr Longbottom did seek me out, but by that time the rest of you had already walked through the portal in Greenhouse 3, *with no thought for the possible consequences of your actions*. And we sit here this evening with the dreadful knowledge of the price such recklessness cost you."

"But... but... Harry had already checked," protested Neville, "and, well, he seemed to think it was OK..."

"Understand I am not trying to make this any harder for you, but, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Mr Potter's assessment was somewhat *over optimistic*. Besides which, Mr Potter is hardly the most cautious Gryffindor I've ever met. You are fifteen and sixteen year olds, and you put yourselves into a dangerous situation well beyond your comprehension.

"Did you not stop to think that Miss Granger and Miss Patil were simply being used as bait to entice Mr Potter into exactly such a foolhardy rescue? Instead of simply having two students missing, we could have ended up with seven missing, and, amongst them having willingly handed The Boy Who Lived to He Who Must Not Be Named on a plate."

Professor McGonagall fixed Harry with an arch glare, "you have a *responsibility*, Potter. We do not know yet what role you have to play, but play it you must. You cannot go off on hare-brained schemes leaping into the jaws of danger."

Abruptly, however, McGonagall's demeanour sweetened, "I'm sorry to have to have said all that, but understand that it did have to be said. Mr Weasley lost his life as a result of the rescue attempt, and we are extremely fortunate that the situation was not even worse..."

The group considered this silently for a few moments - Seamus was probably a werewolf, Dean was still in hospital. Harry's status as a Mage was now known by the Ministry, and Ron was dead. When you looked at it like that, Harry supposed that, yes, it could've been worse. But not by much.

"But perhaps if we could start at the beginning," suggested McGonagall, breaking the silence, "Miss Granger, when did you receive the note from Professor Sprout?"

The next few minutes were spent replaying the events of the previous evening, with McGonagall asking clarifications of certain points (she was particularly interested in the whereabouts of the Marauder's Map). The conversation followed the thread of the Away Team's journey, up to the point where Ron, Seamus and Dean returned to the Greenhouse, Lavender replaying what the four had heard as Ron left to find help.

"Yes, fortunately Mr Longbottom had impressed upon me quite successfully the urgency of the matter, and I was on hand in time to arrest Professor Sprout before she could cast any further spells," noted Professor McGonagall, "although," she added, more softly, "I wish I'd been earlier still."

"What happened there, Professor?" asked Hermione, "why did Professor Sprout attack Ron? *Why?* Why him?" Hermione's composure was starting to break, as Lavender put a comforting arm around her shoulder.

"Ah, well the Ministry inform me that Professor Sprout was acting under Imperius. Apparently she'd been under the curse for some time now, but all she remembers of her assailant was that he had a silver arm..."

"Wormtail," concluded Harry, flatly. It was hardly a surprise.

"He was the one who killed Cedric," added Cho, who had by now heard the full, unedited version of the events in the graveyard after the Third Task. "He killed Cedric, he killed Ron, he kidnapped Hermione and Parvati..."

"Yes, my dear," agreed McGonagall, "but rest assured that the Ministry is extending every effort to locate him, and he will be brought to justice... although, Mr Potter, are you really certain that the silver-armed man is Peter Pettigrew? It's just that, well, as you know, Sirius Black murdered Peter Pettigrew..."

"It's Wormtail. Sirius didn't murder him," replied Harry, before adding, "wish he had, though." He'd stopped Sirius and Lupin killing Wormtail that night in the Shrieking Shack; how many times would Harry live to regret that decision? If Pettigrew had died that night, then Cedric would still be alive. Voldemort wouldn't have risen. Ron would still be here. Dumbledore had once said that Harry might one day be glad that Wormtail owed him a debt of honour; there would have to be some huge payback involved to even come close to breaking even on that deal. Notwithstanding the fact that Harry doubted that anyone who had spent twelve years living as a rat would have the first idea as to exactly what honour constituted.

"What happened to Dean?" asked Neville, as the conversation had died, "I mean... he, he was all cut up and bleeding when we got to him. Seamus said he'd turned into a wolf. Is Dean, was Dean... I mean, did he get bitten too?"

"Ah, no," Professor McGonagall actually smiled at this, "Mr Thomas is, in fact, an Animagus - although he was much too early in the training to transform; I suspect that the adrenalin surge augmented his ability to a sufficient extent to allow him to transform, but, lacking the training and discipline, he wasn't able to revert back smoothly... Rest assured, Mr Thomas will be fine, and although he put himself through an excruciating amount of pain, his Animagus ability will now be almost fully developed. Obviously, as an Animage, he will be required to formally register his transformation with the Ministry - until that time, however, it is not to be considered public knowledge. It should be Mr Thomas' decision as to whom exactly his ability should be divulged."

Dean an Animagus. Harry had to admit, that was pretty cool - and McGonagall sounded like not only would Dean be OK, but also he'd be even further on in his training. Glancing around the group, Harry noticed that Hermione seemed to have been considering McGonagall's explanation of Dean's situation with even more than her usual interest.

"And, well, do we know about Seamus yet?" asked Lavender, somewhat fearfully.

"Ah," confessed McGonagall, somewhat regretfully, "I am sorry to say that the answer to that question is that yes, we do. Mr Finnegan has transformed - we have watching wards set up in the dungeons - but the restraints appear to be working satisfactorily. Please do not attempt to visit Mr Finnegan in his current state. For one thing, he will have no recollection of the night, and for another you would probably find the transformation... disturbing. The moon will be setting in the early morning, so Mr Finnegan will be able to join you all for breakfast in the Great Hall, as, Madam Pomfrey informs me, will Mr Thomas."

As McGonagall explained Seamus's situation, Harry saw everyone's shoulders droop, as the feeble ray of hope they'd all been clinging to was finally extinguished. "But he can stay at Hogwarts, can't he?" prompted Harry, remembering that the Marauders had been forced to keep Lupin's transformations a secret.

"It so happens that Hogwarts is probably best equipped to deal with lycanthropy cases at the moment, and we actually have a Defence Against the Dark Arts professor who might be considered a specialist in the field to boot," confirmed McGonagall, setting Harry's mind at rest in terms of Seamus's future. "Nonetheless, it would be best not to broadcast Mr Finnegan's condition - it might cause... unrest in your fellow students. Or their parents."

Having more or less ascertained the events surrounding the return of the first half of the Away Team, Harry and Cho gave a brief run-down of their infiltration of Beauxbatons dungeons, and the subsequent escape via Portkey, first to Azkaban and then to Hogwarts. Professor McGonagall had tried to find out more about Harry's Portkey, but as soon as he'd explained that Dumbledore had given it to him, she dropped the subject, obviously recognising that whatever purpose it had been intended for was not for public consumption.

"...and so that, more or less, was it - Cho and I got to the Hospital Wing, and that's when we saw you," concluded Harry.

Professor McGonagall nodded, "yes, yes, well, as I said at the outset, it was a most reckless and foolhardy endeavour that you set out on, but be that as it may, the fact remains that you succeeded in retrieving Miss Patil and Miss Granger from the Beauxbatons dungeons, and we must be grateful that the losses were not greater." This time there was no real conviction

behind the scolding, although, of course, the cost of the rescue weighed heavily in everyone's mind.

But what would have been the alternative? Leave Hermione and Parvati in the hands of the Death Eaters? No matter how quick the Ministry, Harry couldn't see them getting a team of hit wizards out to Beauxbatons to rescue Hermione and Parvati before the castle's defences were strengthened (he had a strong suspicion that at least some of Azkaban's Dementors had been earmarked as dungeon guards). No, he thought, if they hadn't have gone right then, at that moment, they wouldn't have succeeded in getting Hermione or Parvati back at all. Despite McGonagall's words, deep down, Harry was pretty certain they'd done the right thing that night - but it had cost much, much more than any of them had ever suspected.

"Now," concluded Professor McGonagall, "may I remind you all that everything we have discussed this evening is *strictly confidential*. The Ministry has gone outside its usual code of conduct to allow me to explain present findings to you - please do not abuse this privilege if you wish to be kept abreast of developments. And, by the same token, I expect to be kept fully informed of any developments you yourselves might happen across. And in particular, I would be most grateful if the map, the magical map of this castle, could be handed in to me immediately - the prospect of that document falling into enemy hands is, well, frankly, too awful to contemplate.

"Thank you for coming - you may all return to your dormitories now. In view of the distress recent events have caused, you are all exempted from lessons for the rest of the week, should you so wish, although you may find it better to return back to routine. The school leaves that particular choice to you. Lessons for all will resume from Monday, however, and please note that my door, as well as Professor Flitwick's," here she nodded at Cho, "and Madam Pomfrey's, will remain open to any of you at all times, should we be able to be of help. Good night."

The group mumbled replies as they got up from their chairs.

"Ah, Mr Potter, might I have a word?" enquired Professor McGonagall, her tone making it clear that such a word would be confidential.

"See you back at the dorm," murmured Hermione, as the rest of the students filed out of the office.

Harry sensed with dismay Cho's pattern heading off towards Ravenclaw as the other four returned to Gryffindor. He'd really thought she'd wait for him.

"Now, Mr Potter," Professor McGonagall peered over the top of her half-moon glasses (standard issue, it seemed, for teacher in positions of authority at Hogwarts), "there are many things in your tale that do not make immediate sense to me. No doubt you have your reasons, but I wondered if there was anything you wished to tell me?" Her tone lay somewhere between compassion and suspicion, and though the voice was soft, a hard edge of accusation lay underneath.

"Um, well... it really started with Vellum," began Harry.

"*Professor Vellum*," corrected McGonagall - Harry kept on forgetting to use his teachers' titles; he almost suspected they were resigned to it.

"*Professor Vellum*," agreed Harry, "just before Halloween. I was in a demonstration duel with her, and she cast *Subsumatum* at me." Harry looked into McGonagall's eyes, looking for a trace of recognition, anger perhaps, but saw nothing.

"*Subsumatum*, Potter?" queried his Head of House, confirming Harry's suspicions that she knew nothing of the curse.

"It's a curse that drains magical power, Lup... I mean Professor Lupin could explain it better to you, I think..."

"Are you saying that Professor Lupin knew what had happened to you, when I didn't?" asked McGonagall, looking slightly affronted.

"He's, um, a family friend," explained Harry with an apologetic shrug, trying to defuse the situation, "and Dumble... Professor Dumbledore said not to tell *anyone*..." Harry trailed off. Actually, he'd thought he'd done a pretty good job of keeping the consequences of Vellum's attack secret. He'd only told Ron and Hermione. Well, Sirius and Lupin knew too. And Dumbledore, obviously. And he'd told Cho (who he sensed, with surprise, hadn't returned to Ravenclaw, but was at the top of the North Tower instead). Oh, and the Order of the Phoenix. But apart from that collection of people, he hadn't told a soul.

"Yes, well... so Professor Vellum, *eroded* your power? Is that what you're saying? I must say, I've never heard anything like it in my life."

"Yes. And no. It's complicated. The way it's *supposed* to work is that *Subsumatum* completely drains its opponent's magical ability, and turns them into a squib..."

"Merlin's teeth!" hissed McGonagall, "she turned *you* into a squib?"

"Well, that's what she tried to do. The other thing about *Subsumatum* is that it actually transfers the opponent's power into the caster's, so you're kind of feeding off their power to make yourself more powerful..."

"You really must continue with your story, Potter, but just this one question: how do you know about this curse?"

"I have these visions," replied Harry, apologetically, lifting his fringe away from the lightning bolt scar, and also feeling that'd he'd done this once already. "Anyway, I saw Lucius Malfoy perform *Subsumatum* on a victim... Jonas Ren... Ren-guh, um, sorry, can't remember his name. Anyway, I saw Malfoy cast it to prove to Voldemort that the curse worked."

"Lucius Malfoy? He's involved in this?" exclaimed McGonagall in surprise.

"Well, he *was*... but, um, he's dead now."

"Mr Potter! I hadn't been informed of this... when did this happen? What arrangements have been made for Draco Malfoy? Lucius Malfoy? Are you... sure?"

"Pretty sure," confirmed Harry, trying to steer the conversation back on topic, "anyway, Vellum's curse was supposed to transform me into a squib, and give *her* my powers. But, I was... lucky, and I managed to resist some of the energy drain, and my mind re-ordered itself."

Harry flashed a weak smile at McGonagall, to check that she was following the story, but her face remained impassively stony. Sighing inwardly, Harry ploughed on, "I'm not a wizard any more. I can't use a wand... instead, though, my mind's magical structure rearranged itself to become a Mage."

Harry was expecting McGonagall's face to remain expressionless. Instead, a scowl of immense distaste contorted her features, "you, Potter, turned yourself into a *Mage*?" she queried, her tone dripping with malice and accusation.

Harry flinched backwards in his chair; he hadn't been expecting this response, "I didn't *know* that's what I was doing!" he protested, "I was just trying to fight the magical drain... you, you know what a Mage is, then?"

"Yes, Mr Potter, I am, as it happens, *fully* aware of what a Mage is, and what they do. And, though I have enormous respect for Albus, I must question the wisdom of allowing you to remain at Hogwarts... there is a life sentence for being a Mage, you know." A rage was simmering in her eyes, both hands had balled into fists, knuckles white with tension.

Harry was getting a *very* bad feeling about this, "um, Professor McGonagall, how come you know so much about the Magi?"

She gave a derisive sniff, "he was supposed to be the last of them. There was a warrant, it was a legitimate arrest... twenty five years ago. You don't have any brothers or sisters, do you Potter? I don't suppose you'd understand..."

Harry considered McGonagall carefully, she had a distant look upon her face, evidently lost in recollection of someone. Presumably a sibling, given the brothers or sisters question. Twenty five years ago, and 'he was supposed to be the last', Harry had an unpleasant feeling that he knew where this conversation was heading.

"I used to have a brother, Potter. Malcolm McGonagall - an Auror. About, oh, thirty years ago now..." Professor McGonagall's voice had lost all of its Professorial rigidity, and she sounded almost like a great-aunt reminiscing about cricket being played on village greens, bobbies riding bicycles and cream teas with the vicar.

"The Americans contacted the Ministry - they'd unearthed a new sect of Magi, located in St Lucia," at Harry's raised eyebrows, she elaborated, "small island in the West Indies. They wanted our help in neutralising the threat. Of course, Malcolm was at the top of his field at the time, so he automatically was assigned the case. That was why he joined the Ministry, of course. To protect the public. Take the risks that others wouldn't - he was a great Chaser, too, you know..."

"Neutralise?" queried Harry, somewhat reluctantly.

"Of course," responded McGonagall, back in teacher mode, "we couldn't leave a threat like that sitting just off the coast of the Americas, could we? According to the records, there were

twenty four Magi all told. The campaign came under the jurisdiction of the Americans, and so special dispensation for legal use of the Killing Curse was given... You have to understand, Potter, these were the Magi - evil, evil people. The Killing Curse was the only thing they seemed to understand..."

Harry recalled having read almost exactly the same sentiment, word for word, in Slytherin's campaign journal.

"But what Malcolm didn't know is that the American's records were incomplete. There was a twenty-fifth Mage out there, a, a *savage* named Lucas, and having escaped the neutralisation operation, he came after Malcolm, to seek revenge. He killed him, Potter - that, *Mage*. He entered *this* country - after having killed a number of American Aurors, I might add - he tracked down my brother, and killed him. Murdered. Pure, spiteful, hateful revenge."

Harry kept his lips in a tight line, although internally he was wondering if McGonagall had any idea what she sounded like on the outside.

She was still talking, "...but because he was actually captured in Britain, just outside Diagon Alley, as it happens, the Ministry's murder case took precedence over extradition. Unfortunately we could not apply the death penalty... don't get me wrong, Potter, I'm normally against capital punishment, but, in... exceptional cases I do believe it may serve a purpose."

Exceptional cases, Harry supposed, would be those involving direct members of the McGonagall family. But at least he now understood Lucas' warning that revenge was never satisfied - Harry suspected he'd started out on a revenge mission that had got out of hand... on the other hand, though, it sounded as though the Americans had instigated a campaign of genocide. Harry was of the opinion that if you started flinging *Avada Kedavra* about the place, you ought to expect the odd person to take issue with you.

"But Professor McGonagall, what did the Magi *do* for the American's to decide to, er, *neutralise* them?" asked Harry, delicately.

"What did they *do*? They were the Magi! A Mage is one of the most extreme examples of practitioners of Dark Magic. Their powers are solely destructive, solely rooted in malice and anger. They were a dark breed of people; I do believe it was Slytherin himself who first realised the threat they posed, but all four Founders saw the need to pursue his campaign to rid the world of their evil threat..."

Harry recalled that time in the library where he'd almost sensed the walls hissing their distaste at his presence. As no-one else seemed to have heard of the Magi, he'd been completely unprepared for McGonagall's open hostility; was this the sort of reaction he should expect once word got out about his status?

"And so you, Mr Potter, are a Mage," observed McGonagall with a steely glare somewhat reminiscent of her mood when 'welcoming' Harry and Ron to school in the second year, courtesy of stolen, illegally charmed flying car. "I shall have to inform the Ministry, of course..." she continued.

"They know," interjected Harry flatly, "I told them. So did Cho."

"Excellent, well, I'm sure they will know how best to proceed. In the meantime, I will have to announce your... *revised status* to the school. This is a school of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Mr Potter, and your presence here is somewhat against the ethos established by the Four Founders."

"Are you... *expelling* me?" asked Harry, incredulously.

McGonagall paused, seemingly considering the question, "No, Mr Potter, I am not. But let me make this *crystal* clear: the *only* reason I am not expelling you from this school forthright is because Professor Dumbledore has displayed his faith in you. One does not go against Albus' decisions lightly. Nonetheless, one *step* out of place, Mr Potter, one shred of evidence that you are succumbing to the darkness that now infests your mind, and I will have *no* hesitation in summarily expelling you. Do you understand?"

Harry, struck dumb by the concept of having an 'infestation' of darkness in his mind, nodded weakly.

"Well, I must owl the Ministry at once," concluded McGonagall, "you may leave, Potter. You are no longer required to attend Transfiguration, since that skill is now beyond you." She reached for a quill and parchment and started to write.

Harry stared at his Head of House, dumbfounded, gripping the arms of his chair.

McGonagall looked up from her writing, to lock eyes with Harry once more, "that *will* be all, Potter. Dismissed."

Chapter 40

Who founded the Durmstrang Academy of Wizardry?

Harry left McGonagall's office, walking tentatively on the balls of his feet, as though expecting to be magically banished from Hogwarts any second. The grey stone walls of the corridors once again seemed almost buzzing with distaste at his presence; *this is a school of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Mr Potter*, the bit unsaid being, *we don't like the Magi*.

This was, had been, anyway, his *home*, he protested mentally, as he swept up the third staircase, instinctively sticking to the shadows. What was left open to him now? He supposed he could return to the Dursleys, in much the same way that he supposed that Dudley could part the Atlantic.

The Order of the Phoenix would look out for him, he knew that - perhaps he should join up with Sirius - escaped convict and condemned godson on the run together. He wasn't sure if he could face a diet of cold rat for the rest of his life, though.

As he took the spiral staircase at the end of the corridor, he got sidetracked wondering if it would be cannibalism if Snuffles were to eat Scabbers. It was only after he'd mentally admonished himself for being so *sick* that Harry realised he was nowhere near Gryffindor, and had instead ended up at the foot of the North Tower.

The familiar, shimmering blue pattern was still alone at the top.

The North Tower was a tight column of stone, just wide enough for a spiral staircase to wrap itself around the central pillar, small windows every quarter rotation. It wasn't as tall as the Astronomy Tower, and really no-one ever had much call to venture up it. Which, Harry supposed, as he started to slow down his ascent, was probably why she'd chosen it.

He paused, one revolution out of sight, wrestling with the decision; should he carry on up, or should he leave Cho alone? Did she expect him to come up here - after all, she knew that he'd be able to locate her by sense anywhere in Hogwarts.

Eventually, the somewhat double-edged Gryffindor courage urged his feet back into motion, and he completed the last revolution, bringing him out on to the open turret, to find Cho slumped against the wall opposite, staring directly at the stairwell, still crying, the tears sparkling in the flickering light of the four torches placed at the turret's compass points.

The part of him that wanted Cho's face to light up, or at least receive a smile of recognition was disappointed. Since that was pretty much all of him, he was beginning to regret his decision to climb the tower.

After what seemed an eternity of the two looking at each other across the open turret's width, both equally fixed, Harry half raised his hand in a gesture that was half greeting, half apology, "Hi... um, shall I... well, d'you...?" The natural eloquence that had plagued Harry's conversations with Cho in the third and fourth had returned with a vengeance, it seemed.

Cho pulled a shoulder back, and nodded her head to indicate her right hand side, as an invitation that Harry should join her, which he accepted, walking across as though he were walking across eggshells. Both slumped against the wall, Cho leant her head on Harry's shoulder, fingers intertwined, but making no attempt to stem her tears.

"So what did McGonagall want?" asked Hermione when Harry eventually returned to Gryffindor, having first shepherded Cho back to Ravenclaw (the curfew had long since passed), "and did it take all this time?"

Harry perched himself on the arm of Hermione's chair by the fireplace, "Went to see Cho after - just got back from that," he explained, "but McGonagall wanted... well, er, basically, she hates the Magi, and she wants to expel me."

"*What?*" exclaimed Hermione, astonished, "but... *McGonagall?* But you haven't done anything *wrong*..."

"Lucas killed her brother," replied Harry, before summarising his discussion with their Head of House.

Once he'd finished, he watched as Hermione marshalled her thoughts, her frown increasing as she pondered the ramifications; "So, well, at least we won't have to pretend you're a wizard any more," she concluded, "if McGonagall's going to tell everyone in the morning..."

"Yeah," agreed Harry, downcast; McGonagall's reaction had indicated that it was unlikely he'd be winning many sympathies for his predicament. "Anyway, I want to make sure all the Away Team find out before McGonagall tells them... 's not fair that they all took the risks on Monday not knowing about me. Are Lavender and Parvati still up? They're both on Parvati's bed, so I guess they must be... sorry, sense thing," he added, apologetically at Hermione's raised eyebrows.

"What, d'you want to tell them tonight?"

"I think so - I mean, I told Cho, and you know. I'll catch Dean and Seamus tomorrow morning, so if we tell Lavender, Parvati and Neville tonight, that's everyone."

"Everyone apart from Ginny," corrected Hermione, "but yes, you're right - shall I go and get them, then?"

"Yeah - tell you what, bring them up to our dorm - that way... no," Harry winced as his brain caught up with his mouth - he didn't want to launch into an explanation of what he'd become whilst standing next to Ron's empty bed. "Um, can I bring Neville into your dorm? I don't want us to be overheard, and, well..."

"Give us five minutes to make sure everyone's decent - can't have Lavender and Parvati giving Neville impure thoughts, can we?" Hermione's tone was bright and teasing, but her eyes were clouded, and it was evident she hadn't failed to pick up on Harry's reluctance to hold the meeting in the boys' dorm.

"Five minutes," confirmed Harry, and headed up his own staircase, steeling himself as he opened the door, knowing that he'd be immediately confronted once more by Ron's empty bed. And Seamus's bed. And Dean's... His shoulders slumped as the cost of others' friendship to him once more hit hard.

"...so you see, McGonagall's going to tell everyone tomorrow. *And* she's told the Ministry, so who knows *what's* going to happen there..." concluded Harry, noting Neville's expression of complete bafflement, Lavender's non-plussed shrug and Parvati's somewhat suspicious eyes.

"So if you were a Mage since, what, Halloween, wasn't it?" asked Parvati, "why did you stick around all this time?"

"Well, basically, I needed to drain the Key - the soakstone, remember? - to build up my powers as a Mage... and also to make sure that Voldemort couldn't drain it himself if he took Hogwarts."

"Bu.. bu.. You-Know-Who could never take Hogwarts!" protested Neville, wildly.

Harry shrugged, "They took Beauxbatons, didn't they? Won't be long before he makes a move on Durmstrang, I'd guess - that's where the Third Key is. And so, somehow, I've got to get to the Third Key before Voldemort does - the least I can do is stop him becoming more powerful than he already is..."

"How do you drain these Keys?" asked Lavender, curiously.

"Like this," announced Harry, closing his eyes, and allowing the dim pattern of the Hogwarts stone to envelope him, the familiar creeping pain now comfortingly warm as iridescent tendrils of energy swirled about his mind. The stone itself was virtually dry now - in fact, he suspected that, if he really wanted to, he could finish it off that night. He snapped his head forward once more, and offered the remaining four Gryffindors an apologetic shrug.

"Well," commented Parvati, "that was... *different*."

"Yeah - the ironic thing is that I used to think I had to actually be physically next to the Key to drain it - turns out, though, that all I have to do is be in sense range..."

"But how could you pull that human torch act standing in that quadrangle without being spotted?" asked Lavender.

"I drained it at nights. Very late nights..."

Lavender twigged, "So you really *weren't* seeing Cho!"

"Um, yeah, that's right," recollected Harry, warily - Parvati didn't seem to be greeting the deduction with good humour.

"Didn't exactly stop you two shacking up the second we split, did it?" noted Harry's ex-girlfriend somewhat bitterly.

"Ah, well, um - we're not exactly *official* yet, guys," protested Harry, weakly.

"How charming!" purred Parvati, getting into her stride, "and for your first date, you take her with you to rescue your ex-girlfriend... tell me, where you *trying* to rub it in, or is that just a kind of natural talent you have?"

"Wai... bu... Parvati, it *wasn't* like that! Cho offered to help... we were all worried about you... really."

"Oh thanks," responded Parvati sadly, but softly, before adding, "but tell me honestly, would you have *bothered* trying to rescue us if it had just been me? If they hadn't taken Hermione too?"

Life didn't get any easier, thought Harry wearily as the alarm woke him at six the following morning. First off, there'd been the conversation with McGonagall, and her less than enthusiastic reception to the news that he was now a Mage. Then there'd been the whole North Tower thing with Cho - good in parts, awful in others. They'd both cried about Cedric, both avowed revenge against Wormtail. Grieved for Ron and worried about Seamus.

It had been good, in that they'd shared an emotional connection deeper than any they had before. It had been awful in that, knowing her that well had meant that Harry felt even more honour bound to protect her from harm. And the cardinal rule, it seemed, in staying out of harm's way in the world appeared to be to have nothing to do with one Harry Potter.

So they'd returned to Ravenclaw with Harry delighted that Cho was refusing to distance herself from him, but equally guilty, knowing that by their very association Cho was placing herself in grave danger. He couldn't help but feel that someone worthier than he would have done the right thing, and severed all ties so as to protect those closest to them. It proved he was weak - which made it all the more baffling that Cho still wanted to be with him... notwithstanding all the Cedric stuff that was still, even he could see, eating her up from the inside.

And then, fresh from torturing himself over the rights and wrongs of his tentative relationship with Cho (they seemed to be back to the 'it hurts to touch' phase), he'd then walked into his meeting with the remaining fifth years, and Parvati's question about whether he'd have launched a rescue mission if it had just been her.

His pause before answering had been fatal - no matter what his response, he knew, now, that the fact that he'd had to *think* what the right course of action would have been had really hurt Parvati. She knew, everybody knew, that rescuing Hermione wasn't a question. Harry hadn't needed to think. Hadn't thought. And Ron was now dead because of that rashness..

Ron. Inside him, Ron's muffled voice started muttering, "Oy Harry, what bloody time do you call this? Six 'o' clock? Let me sleep..." Harry smiled at the memory; Ron was, correction, had been, many things, but a morning person hadn't been amongst that number.

Showered and dressed, Harry winced at his stubble in the mirror - no Ron around to do the BeardBeGone Charm, and irksome though it was, it wasn't yet sufficiently irritable for Harry to risk asking Neville to 'help'. He then flitted down the corridors, headed towards the

dungeon - it was still dark outside, but the moon had long since set, so Harry was reasonably sure that Seamus and Lupin would have transformed back.

Sure enough, when he finally reached the two opposing cells, the slumbering forms of Lupin and Seamus were evident through the bars - Harry was alarmed to see red welts on Seamus' forearms, presumably from struggling against his bindings in the night.

Snuffles, detecting Harry's presence even whilst sleeping, snapped awake, and in that trademark shake of the head, transformed into a somewhat drawn looking Sirius, "Harry," his Godfather noted, "what brings you down here?"

"Morning - McGonagall told us about Seamus," started Harry, "so... wait a minute! They have watching wards on these cells - you'd better transform back to Snuffles before you're spotted!" That was all Harry needed to cap a perfect week - for Sirius to be recaptured because he'd been helping one of Harry's friends adapt to Lycanthropy.

Sirius didn't respond, as he'd immediately reverted back to his Animagus form. It didn't do to take risks, after all.

"Anyway," continued Harry, "McGonagall found out I was a Mage. She's not happy - Lucas, you remember him, right? Well he killed her brother... it's a long story, but essentially she's saying all Magi are evil, and Dark and, well, y'know... and she's this close," Harry held his thumb and index finger fractionally apart, "to expelling me... She's going to tell the whole school about me this morning - something about responsibility for student welfare, so I wanted to explain to the gang what I was before they heard it from someone else."

The huge black dog nodded its understanding, and then jerked its head towards Lupin's cell, indicating that Harry ought to awaken the Professor before waking Seamus.

"Good thinking," acknowledged Harry, he didn't particularly relish being the one to confirm Seamus' nightmare. At least Lupin *knew*. As the magnitude of the fate that had befallen Seamus began to sink in, Harry started to doubt the wisdom of his own presence in the cells... but he had to be fair to Seamus. It just wouldn't be right for him to learn of Harry's dubious status from, say, Ernie.

Once a drawn Lupin had woken sufficiently to recognise Harry, he'd immediately scanned to his opposite cell, "He *was* bitten, Harry," he sighed, defeatedly.

"I know," replied Harry, "but I need to talk to him about the Mage stuff... McGonagall's going to tell the whole school this morning, and I wanted him to hear it from me..."

Lupin pursed his lips together in thought, before responding slowly, "I'm not sure that now is a good time, Harry. Seamus and I have a lot to discuss, and although I can understand your need to tell Seamus yourself... well, just not now, Harry." Lupin shook his head slowly, "We don't want to make a difficult morning any more complicated right now..."

Realising that Harry had been putting his own predicament ahead of Seamus' life-long curse of Lycanthropy, he nodded his understanding, "Um, well, I'll head up to the Hospital Wing and see Dean, then, shall I? How about I come back at, um, eight?"

"Quarter to would be fine," modified Lupin, "but, er, expect Seamus to be at best a little disorientated, and, more likely, angry, bitter, accusatory... It's a terrible thing, Harry - and the reason why I cage myself three nights a month is to try to make sure that I never bring about this on someone else; I couldn't bear to live with that responsibility," admitted Lupin, his eyes dark, "it's hard enough to live with what I am now..."

Harry had never before connected with how deep a sense of self-loathing afflicted Lupin after his transformations, and he was now worried as to how Seamus would react. Seamus was a pretty laid back, goodnatured guy. After all, he'd been pretty sporting about Exploding Hair... except Lycanthropy was a bit higher up on the scale of personal wrongs than falling victim to Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. At least, he fervently hoped so, although Fred and George could have a somewhat perverse sense of humour at times.

"Quarter to, then," confirmed Harry, and reluctantly set off to the Hospital Wing, tuning his back on whatever horrors Seamus would be facing once he woke, his feet feeling as though they were made of lead.

Madam Pomfrey had eyed Harry extremely suspiciously when he'd turned up at the Hospital Wing a little while later, "Mr Thomas is not yet awake," she'd insisted in her clipped, professional tones.

Dean, however, was obviously not a regular patient, as, ignoring the implied instruction as the mediwizard's voice carried down the ward, he cried out "Oy, Harry mate! How's things?"

Harry beamed at Madam Pomfrey, "Oh, it sounds like he's just woken up," he observed, innocently.

"Evidently so," she conceded, tight-lipped, stepping aside fractionally to allow just enough width in the doorway for Harry to enter.

"'lo Dean," greeted Harry, pleased to see that the crazing pattern on his friend's skin had virtually disappeared, "how you feeling?" Dean had remained in the bed at the far end of the corridor, but the curtains were now pulled fully back against the wall, and Dean was sitting up in bed looking pretty much fully recovered.

"Not bad, all things considered," admitted Dean, "but *man*, she's a *nightmare*!" he exclaimed in a whisper, indicating Pomfrey's office with a flick of dreadlocks (now restored to their traditional black - it didn't seem the time to be cavorting about the place with neon pink hair, somehow).

Harry smiled, having long ago reached the same conclusion, "But you know, Dean, it's..."

"..for my own good," finished Dean, morosely, "yeah, I know... but I tell you, mate, I'd better be *unbelievably* good after finishing that stuff," he pointed to a potion of swirling blue and murky yellow, which, from the evidence borne by Dean's grimace, tasted even worse than it looked. No mean feat for a Pomfrey concoction - Harry knew he was scarred for life from the Skele-Gro incident in his second year.

"I'm sorry about Ron, mate," said Dean, suddenly, the jovial countenance vanishing, "was partly my fault... should never have tried to transform when I wasn't ready..."

"Dean!" exclaimed Harry, "you fought the thing off. *You* did... if it hadn't been for you, then Seamus would probably have been killed outright... we might all have been. I mean, I didn't have any silver on me - did you?"

"No," sighed Dean, "but... and Seamus, too. I should've known we were expendables..."

"Expendable?" asked Harry horrified.

"Yeah, y'know, the token red-shirts who beam down to the uncharted world with the usual Away Team... y'know, that one that looks like paradise, but the crew soon discover that all..."

"...is not quite as it seems," nodded Harry, grinning, "yeah, I think I saw that episode," he added, with a straight face, knowing that it was hardly a unique plot device.

The grins faded, "But you got Parvati and Hermione back, didn't you? McGonagall came to see me last night - after she'd spoken to you lot, congrats, man - sounds like heavy stuff you went through, though... and what's with you and Cho, too? Kept that one close to your chest, so to speak, didn't you? First Parvati, then Cho... not bad, Harry, not bad..."

"The Cho thing's not that straightforward," admitted Harry, "ghosts of boyfriends past, and all that..."

Dean's knowing smirk vanished, "Sorry Harry, I didn't mean... well, I, er..."

"s OK, Dean... just, erm, well, sort of don't mention it, alright? Anyway, I need to talk to you about some stuff... About what I am these days..."

Dean raised his eyebrows, inviting the explanation.

At the conclusion of his tale, Dean seemed to be deep in thought, before finally giving in to the smile that had been fighting to assert itself, "Y'know, that would have been perfect, if you'd known all this beforehand.."

"What?" asked Harry, puzzled.

"You can't win, Vellum," replied Dean, in his best Obi-Wan impression, "if you were to strike me down, I will become..."

"...more powerful than you can possibly imagine," concluded Harry, placing the quote. "Hey, you'd be proud of me, I got *Hasta la vista, baby* in against the troll..."

"Cool!" approved Dean, before checking, nervously, "you didn't make it sound, er, cheap, did you?"

Chapter 41

What is the tallest magical structure in the world?

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

There was no other word for it. Stupid.

Hermione glared at her reflection in the dorm's mirror. Some brainbox she was, if she hadn't even spotted that the note from Sprout was a trick; Sprout had *never* had cause to see Hermione outside of class before. She should have suspected something right then - you could hardly blame Parvati, who was new to all this stuff.

Poor Parvati, she mused - she knew Harry hadn't meant to hurt her, but sometimes he could be so alarmingly *honest*. Not that it was really a fair question to have asked him, but that was Harry for you. Sometimes you couldn't read him for the life of you, and at other times he answered with such naked honesty that, well...

Maybe Parvati had learnt her lesson now, she mused, dabbing her eyes with the flannel to try and lessen the tear stains; never ask a question unless you *really* want to know the answer.

And *Ron*. She gave up on the flannel as her eyes watered once more at the memories of their last... exchange, "Honestly, you can be so *stupid* at times!" he'd raged, "I mean, Malfoy! Draco bloody Malfoy! Hermione..."

And her vicious comeback, "Well, Ronald Weasley, at least it makes a change to have an adult conversation with someone, rather than be subjected to your juvenile rants. In fact," and at that point she'd got to her feet, "I'm fed up with defending myself when I've done nothing wrong. Just *grow up*, Ron. Grow. Up." And with that she'd swept off to Binns' classroom, purposefully sitting at one corner of the classroom, knowing that Ron would take the opposite, and that they'd devote most of their energies during the lesson to ignoring one another.

She still couldn't quite work out why that was: why should it take a conscious will to *ignore* him? Sort of a contradiction in terms, when you thought about it.

And those had been the last words they'd said to each other. He'd rushed off to his stupid Quidditch practice, and she and Parvati had gone off to the Greenhouses together to meet with Sprout. Or so they'd thought; Parvati hadn't had a clue why they'd been summoned either, so they'd spent the walk highlighting Harry and Ron's numerous failings to each other.

Harry was right, she reflected - it *was* better this year, having got to know her fellow fifth year Gryffindors this year, she could actually have a proper conversation with Parvati and Lavender these days. Well, OK, she conceded to her accusatory reflection, it was more of a bitch about boys than a conversation proper, but at least Parvati seemed to understand the problem with Ron.

At the time Hermione had wished she could have explained some more about Harry to Parvati, but what would it have helped? Not that Parvati was right for him anyway - how could you not *trust* Harry to do the right thing? This was *Harry*; despite everything, and even

though Hermione knew full well that he'd never stopped hoping about Cho, he would *never* betray Parvati.

Still, she had to agree, he hadn't exactly wasted time with Cho once he and Parvati had split up. She'd nearly fallen out of the armchair when Ron had appeared that morning to ask for the Invisibility Cloak (Cho still had that, she reminded herself), alluding to the presence of a girl in Harry's bed. The thought that he even dared to have a female in bed with him was strange enough, but to then find out at breakfast that it'd been Cho... Cho! In Harry's bed! Cho and Harry!

Hermione's reflection shook its head at her; she didn't really know Cho at all - they'd had that brief conversation in the Hospital Wing, but...

Well, for starters, Cho was *older...* and OK, well she knew that Viktor was four years older but, well, that was *completely* different. And then, even with the age difference, and the different Houses thing, the other *huge* obstacle for Harry and Cho was Cedric. Cho was still grieving, that much was obvious in the Hospital Wing, so she hoped Harry would have the sense to let Cho cope with that. Give her space, not rush things.

Not get too attached.

It was pretty clear to Hermione that Harry was just going to be a transitional person for Cho. Not that she thought Cho was malicious, or using Harry... just, well, it wasn't go to work out long term, was it? Plus she was that year older. A year quicker into the big bad world. A year's headstart on meeting new people, making new relationships...

Honestly, thought Hermione crossly, agreeing with her reflection's expression, was she the *only* one around here who thought things through? It wasn't that she wished Harry and Cho ill, but, well, she just hoped he wouldn't get hurt too much.

Lavender's jewellery sparkled as it lay on the small wooden chest beside the sink, scattered as it had landed as she'd flung the various items off, Parvati and Hermione trying to console her. Hermione grimaced; breakfast had been *awful*.

Neville had been waiting in the Common Room for the girls that morning, Harry had already vanished. Poor Neville, he always seemed to be on the outside of things, but with Seamus and Dean both out of the dorm that night and Ron, well...

Ron!

Anyway, they'd all gone to breakfast together, the four of them, and been joined shortly afterwards by a grim looking Harry, who, it transpired, had been running about half the castle, seeing Sirius, Seamus, Dean and Lupin. He had that focused look about him, the one that said 'bring it on'. The one that scared her slightly, the reminder that Harry, best friend that he was, had something about him that was not quite of this Earth.

Even more so with all the Mage tricks he could do now. But that was just incidental to what he was... honestly, Hermione believed that even if Harry were a squib, he would still do -

what was the phrase? - *great* things. She thought about all those years he'd endured at the Dursleys, locked in the understairs cupboard.

Locked in a cupboard. Harry! And they hadn't managed to break him; he'd risen above that, somehow, with that indefinable presence he had still intact.

Anyway, so there he'd been at breakfast, told them that Dean was with Seamus, and that they were on their way, but not saying much else. Hermione had wanted to ask about the transformation, whether Seamus was alright...

Alright? He was a *werewolf*! They didn't come in 'alright' varieties. Poor Seamus... and it wasn't as if it was a secret now.

Hermione was alarmed at the tightness of her expression in the mirror, as she mentally ran through her list of hexes and curses in search of something suitably... *nasty* to inflict on every Slytherin that ever walked the Earth as she remembered that bit.

"They're coming," Harry had announced, not even looking up. That still disturbed her, the way that he could sense whatever was going on at Hogwarts, recognising whatever patterns it was that he 'saw' in his mind. Neville, Lavender and Parvati had looked confused, but then Seamus and Dean entered the Great Hall, and they all knew that Harry had been right.

And then, not four paces into the Hall, it had started - she'd been looking at Seamus, who had rings under his eyes, and looked drained, so she'd not seen who was the first - a mocking wolf howl rising from the Slytherin table.

Oh yes, *really* witty.

And Seamus' face! He'd been so hurt, he'd just frozen, mid-step.

Fortunately, Dean had been there, had gripped Seamus' arm, and urged him forward, not looking across the room at the Slytherins, who had now established a whole chorus of taunting howls, which, in turn, had generated first puzzled, then knowing, and then hostile glances from the other tables.

Harry, beside her, had narrowed his eyes alarmingly, and Hermione had grabbed his arm quickly, in a bid to distract him before he did something truly terrible. Because no question, after four years, Hermione knew when Harry was riled, and he'd been riled that morning.

But even that hadn't been the worst part. Dean and Seamus had sat down at their appointed spaces, "The Wolves have arrived," announced Dean, indicating the two of them, one Animagus and one werewolf.

"Er, isn't that a bit, um, non-PC?" she'd asked delicately, to which they'd both shrugged. Well, the seventh years had the Twins (all three of them), and now the fifths had the Wolves... um, well, maybe...

Everything had been fine until Seamus had reached for his cutlery. His *silver* cutlery, which he'd immediately dropped, ugly red welts on his palms where it'd burnt his flesh... and then, worst of all, Lavender had grasped his hand supportively, not realising her dress rings were silver.

Poor Lavender had been completely distraught, and virtually sprinted out of the Great Hall, ripping rings from her fingers as she ran, Parvati and Hermione both in her wake.

And Pansy, that... that *bitch* had called out, "What, having second thoughts about having his puppies now, are you?" It was fortunate for Pansy, Hermione reflected, that she'd put being a friend to her dorm mate over exacting just revenge on the Slytherin there and then.

Hermione's reflection had eyes with a coldness she didn't recognise in herself, as she flicked her wand tip across the mirror's surface, "Watch yourself, Pansy," cautioned Hermione to the empty room, "because there *will* be a day of reckoning. And, my dear, you won't know what hit you..."

It was a Wednesday, and McGonagall had said that they were excused from lessons for the rest of the week. It was Herbology first thing, and *no-one* wanted to face the Greenhouses quite so soon - even if it was with Grubbly-Plank. However, there was only so much moping around in the Common Room the fifths could do; everything in there just said, screamed *Ron!*

The 'chess table', where he summarily beat all comers at the game. Hermione was prepared to admit now that it *really* irked her that she'd never beaten him; she'd read the books, she'd practiced against her Dad, she'd practiced against Harry. She was actually quite good, but she had *never* beaten Ron.

And now she never would.

All because she'd been so stupid, *stupid* to fall for just about the oldest trick in the book... come and meet me at the dark and unoccupied Greenhouse after lessons, because there's something I have to tell you even though you didn't have Herbology today, and that the next lesson isn't until Wednesday.

It was so *obviously* a set-up. She'd let them all down, falling for it - they expected her to be the brains, to see these things. She was the thinker, she wasn't supposed to fall for such idiotic schemes.

Then there was 'their' corner, scorch marks on the wall from Saturday's incredible house of Exploding Snap cards that had almost reached the ceiling before it had succumbed in one horrendous explosion. Even she'd had to admit it had been impressive, and Ron's triumphant grin had been really... special.

"So what're you going to do?" she asked Harry, who was staring off into space.

Harry shrugged, "Kind of anti-climatic, wasn't it? McGonagall, I mean - she goes through the whole announcement business, and then 'by the way, Potter's a Mage', and the whole Hall goes, 'huh?' and just looks blankly back at her. I was kind of expecting them to be more hostile... but I guess they will be." He ran his hand through his hair, it spiking up briefly before flopping haphazardly once more, "What did you say?"

"What are you going to do today? I'm probably going to the library..."

"Dunno," said Harry, "I'm meeting Flitwick at break, he wanted a word about Charms... probably going to give me the McGonagall speech again. Honestly, you'd think I'd *like* getting out of lessons, but it's not as much fun when you're made to..."

"What's Cho doing?" asked Hermione, trying to sound casual.

"Oh, well she thought it'd be easiest to just keep back in the routine, y'know, so she's just going to lessons as usual," Harry shrugged, not looking terribly upset at the prospect.

Hermione wondered just exactly what kind of relationship those two had, if any at all... after all, outside the Hospital Wing, she couldn't actually recall having seen them together at all.

There was, indeed, no place like home for Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, and for Hermione, there was no place like the library at Hogwarts.

Part of it, obviously, had to be the fact that she loved books, always had done, always would. Part of it was, naturally, that she loved Hogwarts - loved the atmosphere, the eccentricity and the sheer *magic* of the place. But the library was more than just a room full of books at Hogwarts. It was almost a monument to knowledge - stack upon stack of leather bound volumes full of arcane knowledge, unfathomable power, there to be tapped.

Tapped by those with the knowledge, and the power, and the wisdom to appreciate what was written before them. With the vision to piece together the fragments of the jigsaw, scattered across centuries, filed away in volumes sprinkled across the bookstacks in a seemingly random fashion.

All that scholarly endeavour of previous wizards and witches, all that power, all stored, waiting for the right person, with the right idea at the right time.

As Hermione searched through the stacks in the Restricted Section, humming fragments of a Weird Sisters tune Parvati had been playing incessantly since the start of term, she was confident that she was the person, she had the idea, and there was no time like the present.

It being a Wednesday, the afternoon was devoted to Runes, Scripts and Lore, notionally being taken by Madam Pince, although in truth, after the first couple of weeks, where the librarian had shown the fifth years the basics of how things were catalogued and stored, and given them the obligatory cautionary tales about the Restricted Section (none of which applied to Hermione, in possession as she was of full permission from McGonagall to freely look through any and every volume the place possessed), the lesson had basically turned into a free for all.

Cottoning on, some of her less dedicated peers had taken Runes, Scripts and Lore to essentially be a double 'free' on a Wednesday afternoon, conveniently forgetting that they had an assignment due in at the end of May. A few of the more studious Slytherins and Gryffindors had remained true to the spirit of the lesson, however, those being, essentially, Draco, Blaise (*that* had been a surprise), Hermione and, of course Harry and Ron. Except, she

reminded herself, as she fished another likely tome from its location under 'Parallel Dimensions: Communication', that Ron wasn't attending any more.

For the time being.

So as Hermione returned back to her desk, with another armful of somewhat dark texts cradled in her arms, she wasn't exactly surprised to see Draco waiting for her. No sign of Blaise or Harry though.

"Afternoon, Draco," said Hermione, as she laid her books on the desk, spines facing away from the Slytherin: she didn't want people to know what she was up to just yet, and Draco was more than sharp enough to put two and two together.

"Hi," he returned, with a tight lipped smile and frown, looking oddly uncertain, which was certainly a novelty. "Um, Hermione... er, well, I'm sorry about Ron. For you..."

Hermione raised her eyebrows... the last bit, 'for you', in particular, "What? You hated him... or at least, you pretended to. In so far as much as we can hate at sixteen...."

"I didn't like him, no. And he didn't like me, either."

Well, thought Hermione, you couldn't question Draco's sincerity. Or bluntness - take your pick.

"...but, well, I know that you were friends," he was continuing, "and, well, I s'pose you could say we've both lost people recently..."

Hermione wasn't about to hold out for a long drawn out apology from Draco for the way he'd treated Ron (or Harry, come to that) in their previous four years at Hogwarts, but it was nice that he'd made the effort at least to recognise her own loss. And he was right, they *had* both lost people, although, "But it was my fault," whispered Hermione, her eyes stinging, "I was so *stupid*..."

Draco leant across, elbows on the desk, hands clasped underneath his chin, "How, exactly was that *your* fault?" he enquired.

It was odd, thought Hermione, but the expected tone of disbelief, the 'don't-be-silly' undertone, didn't seem to be there. It was almost as if he'd asked that question for the information itself. Fortunately, she'd got to know his mannerisms over the course of the year to date, and knew that he sometimes just didn't convey the same cues as... well, 'normal' people. But that was hardly his fault, she conceded, when you considered his upbringing.

At some point in the retelling, Draco had taken one of her hands in his; she wondered if anyone else got to see this version of Draco. He was a good listener - made attentive noises in the right places, asked prompting questions at the right time... something felt a little odd - almost as though she was being pumped for information, but she'd know if he was *really* just fishing for information, and she put down the slight disquiet to Draco's somewhat... severe social skills.

Still, Hermione felt she'd really managed to get through to the real Draco in these conversations - ever since the incident with the heart in Potions, it was like he was almost a completely different person - one that only she got to see...

Draco casually let her hand drop, his eyes having flicked momentarily over Hermione's shoulder towards the door. Picking up on the cue, she twisted in her chair, to see Harry making straight for her, for *their* table. Hermione smiled at him, before turning back to see whether Draco was going to retreat, as he usually did in these situations, or whether he would attempt to sit it out.

Clearly, he was opting for the latter; Draco remained at the table, earnestly studying his text on medicinal applications of dragon's blood. Harry reached the table, oddly enough still wearing his Seeker's glove.

"Malfoy," noted Harry, coldly, apparently completely forgetting that Hermione was even there. Perhaps, she thought, he'd considered their exchange of weak smiles sufficient greeting for the afternoon's purposes.

She cringed inwardly as Draco slowly raised his gaze to meet Harry's eyes, did he have to be so antagonistic to her friends, to Harry, she wondered.

"Potter," noted Draco unperturbed. He always knew exactly how to unsettle Harry.

"Um, well," started Harry, "I just came to check that Hermione was OK," he continued, pointedly, and Hermione found herself slightly riled at the implication that he thought she was in some way under threat at that moment.

"It's the library, Potter. And, fraught with danger though it may be, I assure you that Granger's life does not appear to be in immediate peril."

Hermione winced inwardly once more - although she agreed with the sentiment, Draco didn't exactly have a way with words. Actually, cancel that thought - Draco *did* have a way with words... and he knew it. Odd that he called her 'Granger' when talking to Harry, though.

"No," agreed Harry, "she certainly doesn't *appear* to be in danger," and she realised that Draco wasn't the only one who knew how to use language.

Deciding to defuse the situation before blood and House Points were spilt, Hermione invited him to join them, "We were studying Harry - do you want to sit here?"

"Yes, do join us, Potter," invited Draco, mildly. He then spoiled the effect, however, by adding, "although I think you'll find that most of the texts in here refer to witchcraft and wizardry..."

"Draco!" chided Hermione.

"What?" he asked, innocently, "I was just trying to be helpful and explain this resource's limitations to your friend."

Draco's careful use of the word 'your' wasn't lost on anyone.

"It's alright," noted Harry, "I was just leaving."

Hermione stifled a grin, since she could tell that Draco was just *dying* to smirk at that.

He had instead to content himself with the mild protestation, "But you only just got here!" and effecting a wide-eyed look of innocent surprise.

Hermione sighed, inwardly, the points had definitely gone to Draco on that exchange. But did he *have* to rub it in?

"What've you got your nose stuck in, anyway?" asked Draco, once the scowling Harry had stalked out of the library.

"Oh, just some research for my History of Magic project," she lied, taking care to ensure that her parchment covered up the tome's title: *Summoning and Interfaces: Communication with the Netherworld*.

Chapter 42

Which is the more common wand core - Unicorn hair or dragons' heartstrings?

Harry tried not to let the library altercation with Malfoy dampen his mood too much; he'd wanted to tell Hermione about his meeting with Flitwick, but wasn't about to do so in front of the Slytherin. Nonetheless, it was vaguely disturbing that Hermione seemed so, well, maybe not keen, but certainly not uncomfortable, in Malfoy's company.

Four years on since that first meeting on the Hogwarts Express, and Draco Malfoy had done absolutely *nothing*, as far as Harry could tell, to suggest that he deserved trust, still less Hermione's friendship. But, for some inexplicable reason, Hermione did seem to trust him, and although neither Harry nor Ron had agreed with that assessment, four years of friendship had taught him that the fastest way to strengthen Hermione's resolve was to suggest that she might be wrong.

So, against his better judgement, he'd deliberately held his tongue on the Malfoy issue. Obviously, if Malfoy did hurt Hermione, in any way, shape or form, Harry would rip him apart limb from limb. Might even get Colin to photograph it for posterity too. He chided himself for making light of the situation. No Colin, then... just he, Harry Potter, and Draco Malfoy reduced to his component parts.

Not that he was being over-protective, even if Hermione could out-duel Malfoy in five seconds flat. She didn't seem to see the same calculating glint behind those grey eyes. The obvious smirks had been banished, at least temporarily, but four years of watching Malfoy, or, more correctly, Malfoy's proximity to Harry's own back, had taught Harry volumes in how to read the Slytherin. And right now, all his senses told him that Malfoy was up to no good.

But as to what end, Harry had absolutely no idea. He tried to console himself with the idea that if Hermione was in genuine peril, Malfoy could have made his move at any of the earlier study sessions that term. So reluctantly, he'd left Hermione to defend the position she'd left herself in. After all she was pretty good at spotting danger, she was the brainiest person in the fifth year, *bar none*, and, as Neville knew, friendship was no protection from Hermione's wand.

Unfortunately, the fact that she seemed to have developed a Malfoy-sized blind spot this term sort of knocked the stuffing out of that set of rationalisations somewhat.

With each new intake of first years at Hogwarts, the whispering started up again; 'look, there he is...', 'see the scar?', '...the Boy Who Lived!' The novelty for the other pupils of attending school with a living legend eventually wore off (unless your surname was Creevey), and by about the third week he just got the occasional second glance.

But McGonagall's announcement at breakfast, despite receiving a somewhat underwhelming response from the student body as a whole, had induced several reconnaissance raids to the library to find out exactly *what* a Mage was. And so the whispering about Harry's presence had started up once more. Only this time, it was accompanied by an almost amusing 'parting

of the waves' as Harry walked the corridors; his fellow students suddenly wary of crossing the path of the Last of the Magi, stepping out of his way.

The castle was pretty quiet at that moment, however, since the final period of the day had not yet finished. His destination was a shimmering blue pattern in one of the first floor classrooms - of all things, he reflected ruefully, why did she have to have double Transfiguration today of all days? Still, as he clenched and unclenched his fist, reminding himself of the leather Seeker's glove's presence, his mood improved once more.

No doubt about it, Professor Flitwick was *cool*. Actually, the pint-sized, falsetto-voiced Charms professor had probably surpassed cool, and was currently hovering a close second to Dumbledore in Harry's 'most favoured Wizard' list.

Harry had gone to Flitwick's office at lunchtime as requested, expecting an encore of McGonagall's somewhat hostile performance of the previous evening. But what he'd got instead was an hour long conversation with a Flitwick seemingly possessed with inquisitiveness about Harry's capabilities as a Mage, and genuinely interested in comparing and contrasting the two different types of magic, Wizardry vs Mage.

Harry remained welcome to attend all of Flitwick's Charms classes, the diminutive Professor falling victim to the classic academic's assumption that the entire world shared their passion for study. He'd assumed that Harry would still be interested in seeing how Charms worked for Wizards, and besides, he'd continued, it'd encourage Harry to flex his own muscles in trying to use Mage power to replicate his fellow students' work.

And Harry was actually going to attend every single one of his remaining Charms lessons, because, quite simply, Flitwick was a Charms demi-god. Flitwick was to Charms what Everest was to foothills. The Head of Ravenclaw could give Harry detention every night of the week, he really wouldn't care, he'd still love the guy.

Because Flitwick had charmed the Firebolt so that it recognised Harry once more.

Harry Potter, Gryffindor Seeker, was back in his element. He had his Firebolt back, and, he noticed, he'd re-acquired a spring in his step, his vision had that sharpened bite to it, and, well, basically, he felt *good*.

So he lay in wait just around the corner from Transfiguration to ambush Cho, share the good news and see if she wanted to go head to head against the Snitch for a few, well days ideally, but he'd settle for a couple of hours.

And as he sat on the stone windowsill in the corridor, flicking his sense about the grounds (and making sure that Hermione and Malfoy remained in clear view of the rest of the library's inhabitants), he also felt that Ron would *want* Harry back in the air. And he vowed there and then that they were going to win the Quidditch Cup for Ron that year.

Cho had charmed the Snitch so that it glowed in the dark - it would have been impossible for her to spot otherwise (Harry could sense it, which he sportingly declared), and the two Seekers had spent the best part of an hour and a half progressively pushing each other, and their Firebolts, harder and harder.

Neither of them were keeping score, and they weren't actually trying to catch the Snitch so much as out dive, out feint, and simply out *fly* the other. No doubt about it, Harry reflected, Cho was good... but, unless she was holding back on him (which he doubted), he also felt he was better. Not by much, and the vagaries of the match Snitch could level them if it was so minded, but at that moment Harry felt pretty much like he could out-fly the world.

Cho suddenly appeared next to him, sitting up on the Firebolt to bring it to a hovering position, about a hundred feet up. Harry did likewise, realising as he did so that, away from the adrenalin of the chase, night had fallen, and it was *cold* out there. Cho's smile, he figured, probably reflected his own - he always relished getting back on the broomstick after the enforced summer break. The difference this time was that he was airborne once more, having believed that he would never again be able to chase a Snitch.

"'s quarter to, Harry."

"Quarter to what?" He'd completely lost track of time.

"Six," she replied, before adding, slightly more softly, "and moonrise is at six thirty, isn't it?"

"Moonri... oh bugger! I nearly forgot!" In actuality, he *had* forgotten, in so far as much as he'd not thought about accompanying Seamus to his cell that night. The elation from practice evaporated rapidly. "We'd better get in, then," he said, guiding the Firebolt into a gentle descent that Cho instinctively matched.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?" They were standing in front of the broomshed, having flown there rather than walked. Harry had also performed an outrageous piece of Mage force to summon the Snitch into his glove ("Try that against me nia match and I *will* kill you," Cho had warned, apparently in all seriousness).

"Thanks for asking me tonight - I had a really great time, and, well, y'know, we should do it again... sometime... soonish..."

"Thanks for playing, Cho - I've missed this," Harry waved the Firebolt in his left hand, "like you wouldn't believe. Actually, like *I* didn't believe..."

"Me too... I think we both needed this," she confessed, before standing on tip-toes to lightly, very lightly, kiss him on the lips.

Cho dropped back to her normal height, but continued to meet Harry's eyes directly with her own, even as the smile she wore started to drift into one tinged with sadness, a sadness that was echoed in Harry's own mind. At last he finally understood what 'bittersweet' meant.

Guilt and ghosts and grief.

They didn't talk as they made their way, hand in hand, back from the broomshed to the castle proper, Cho's smaller frame almost tucked in against Harry. Both seemed to sense that their connection went beyond words, and beyond the physical, even. A bond forged through the grief of Cedric's death, and through all that Monday night had brought; Ron, Seamus, Dean - even Hermione and Parvati. But it wasn't solely established in negativity; they were both

Seekers. Not Seekers as in a wizard and a witch on broomsticks who happened to be chasing after the elusive Golden Snitch in the pursuit of 150 points; Seekers as in two people, each fused with their own broomstick to create a single, airborne entity, and with a single goal - to catch the Snitch.

Catch the Snitch or die trying. Oliver should have known that Harry was the last person on the planet who needed to be told that. And Cho was in the same mould - the same mixture of ability, determination, instinct and sheer *spirit* flowed through them both.

The hour and a half he'd spent flying with her that evening convinced Harry, as if he'd ever needed convincing, that he and Cho, well, it *worked*. They might not be a couple in, say, the Lavender and Seamus mould; not to external eyes, anyway, but there was so much left unsaid in their relationship, and, for once, Harry wasn't finding himself trying to second-guess what Cho's thoughts might be. He didn't need to, because he knew, instinctively, that what they had was right, it was true and it was genuine.

Harry's sense had told them that the gang were already congregated in the dungeon, Padma too, he noticed with some surprise, so they both headed down into the depths of the Castle still dressed in their Quidditch robes. They'd progressively untangled themselves from each other as they'd neared the lights of the castle, and by the time they'd reached the cells, they were at the trailing fingertips stage, "lo guys," announced Harry.

The others turned from whatever Lupin had been explaining to acknowledge Harry's presence, and then, almost as one, did a double take, "Harry!" exclaimed Hermione, "aren't those *Quidditch* robes?"

Cho answered, "Flitwick charmed Harry's Firebolt so he can fly again," she explained, before adding, teasingly, "of course, if we still had to play you lot, he might have had second thoughts..."

There was a brief round of congratulations for Harry, together with general approval for the saintly being that was Professor Flitwick, before conversation returned, inevitably, to Seamus.

The group had all said their goodbyes - at least this would be the last transformation Seamus would undergo without Wolfsbane, assuming that a replacement for Snape could be found. Wolfsbane was beyond Fleur's ability; it was a demanding Potion to brew, and this was the first (but probably the only) time that Harry actually regretted the fact that Snape had disappeared. For all his faults, the former Head of Slytherin had indeed been a truly gifted Potions Master.

As Harry considered this, he found himself frowning at Hermione; under normal circumstances, she would have immediately volunteered to apply her not inconsiderable talent to the task. After all, although he and Ron had been there as general dogsbodies, it was Hermione who'd actually brewed the Polyjuice Potion in their second year. Thirteen years old, and she'd successfully made one of the most difficult potions known... Harry was puzzled - it was *so* unlike Hermione not to take on an academic burden; she must, he thought, be preoccupied with other things. And what with everything that had happened in the last few days, it seemed churlish to heap a new pressure on her.

With that, he dismissed the thought from his mind, and returned to the conversation.

Lupin suddenly cast an obscuring charm, catching them all by surprise. "Harry, can you vouch for all those present?"

"Hmpf?" queried Harry, glancing around the faces suddenly turned expectantly to him. "Um, well," his eyes lingered on Parvati and Padma, "yes, of course. Why?" He made a mental note to ensure that the Patil twins understood precisely what his definition of trust was after this discussion.

"As you all know, Hermione and Parvati were kidnapped on Monday night," began Lupin, who, in Harry's opinion, was overstating the obvious. "They were kidnapped by Peter Pettigrew," he continued, and paused, waiting for the objections.

"Well, Harry and Hermione both *said* that," observed Padma, "but, well... Pettigrew's, er, dead, isn't he? So, it can't *really* have been him. Not *really*." Seeing the hurt looks on Harry and Hermione's faces, Padma quickly added, "but it could've been his twin or something..." she tailed off.

"In answer to your question, Miss Patil," in teacher mode, Lupin had the luxury of not needing to attempt to distinguish the Twins, "no, Pettigrew is not dead..."

"But that's not possible!" she contradicted. "Sirius Black killed him... everyone knows that... don't they?" Padma and Parvati were looking at the rest of the faces about them. All the others present (with the exception of Hermione) had been there when Harry had asserted Sirius' innocence, over the Marauder's Map. They didn't know *why*, but that Harry believed, of all people, was enough to make them doubt recorded history's version of events.

"In actual fact, Miss Patil, the events of that day in November differ somewhat substantially from the recorded version. Harry or Hermione could provide you with the full tale, suffice it for the time being to say this: Peter Pettigrew betrayed Harry's parents. *He* was their secret keeper for the Fidelius Charm, and not Sirius. Pettigrew sold the Potters out to Voldemort. Sirius deduced this, and tracked him down, whence we arrive at the infamous duel..."

"What happened that day is that Pettigrew cast the curse that killed the innocent bystanders, and *he cut off his own finger...*"

"All that they could find was his finger," recalled Padma, eyes widening with realisation, and Harry started to feel that Padma wasn't actually that bad after all.

"That's right... Pettigrew framed Sirius for his murder, and it was for that that Sirius spent twelve years in Azkaban..."

"But... but that's *terrible!*" exclaimed Padma, who Harry was really beginning to like at this point.

"But then... what was all that stuff about Black saying it was his fault, then?" persisted Parvati, who wasn't doing herself quite so many favours in Harry's good books.

"An excellent question," noted Lupin, "and easily answered; firstly, Sirius was the one who suggested that the Potters use Pettigrew as their Secret Keeper..."

"Oh that's *awful!*" breathed Cho, who'd progressively inched closed to Harry as the conversation went on.

"...and secondly, Sirius has an over-developed sense of guilt. So are you convinced?"

"Well, I'm not sure that what you've told us is technically cast-iron proof," observed Padma, the sober Ravenclaw in her persona coming to the fore, "but," and she looked at Harry, "if Harry's convinced, then I'll go along with it."

"There's more to the story," confirmed Hermione, "we'll tell you later... Parvati?"

"Well what about the time Black broke into Gryffindor?" asked Parvati, clearly somewhat sceptical.

"There were reasons... Pettigrew's Animagus form is a rat. But, obviously, a rat with a bit missing from its front paw..."

"Not that filthy Scabies creature of Ron's!" exclaimed Parvati.

"*Scabbers*, Parvati, Scabbers. But yes, *that* was Pettigrew... and we all wish now that we had fed him to Crookshanks, but *that's* who Sirius was after," explained Harry.

"Well, OK," conceded Parvati, cautiously, although the sceptical expression remained. "What's with the dog?"

Snuffles had been following the conversation with some degree of amusement, it seemed, and had been absorbing Parvati's reluctant acceptance of the 'Sirius-is-Innocent' message.

"Snuffles?" queried Lupin, innocently.

"There is *definitely* something about that dog," persisted Lavender, darkly.

"Thought you said he was Padfoot," commented Seamus, entering the conversation for the first time. It wasn't a question, however, so much as a jibe at the Dark Arts Professor, a knowing smirk briefly flashing across Seamus' somewhat drawn features.

"Go on then," urged Hermione, talking at Snuffles, "most of them have guessed now, anyway."

Snuffles did the familiar head-shake-into-human transformation, and Sirius Black's eyes sparkled with something dangerously close to mischievous amusement at the conditioned flinches of the purebloods. "Pleased to meet you all, properly," he noted.

The unflappable Dean was first to shake Sirius' hand in greeting. "So you were in the cell when Seamus transformed last night?"

"Yes, but in the dog form - I used to be able to keep Remus in check that way... figured I could do the same for Seamus. After all, any friend of Harry's..."

"So could I, y'know, stay in the cell with him?" asked Dean, carefully.

"Wolf, right?" asked Sirius, having picked up the details from Harry's account of Monday night's excursion to Beauxbatons.

"Yup," confirmed Dean, "I screwed myself up pretty badly the other night, but McGonagall says that I've crossed the adaptation barrier now, so I can morph indefinitely..."

"Moony?" asked Sirius, deferring to the other Marauder's judgement.

"I think it might be best if, if Dean is really serious, if he were to stay in my cell this first night, and you stay with Seamus... the Wolfsbane this morning wasn't at full strength, almost palatable in fact, so it should be a reasonable test, but I should be less of a challenge than Seamus..."

"Dean! What're you doing?" exclaimed Seamus, who'd been following the conversation looking increasingly troubled. "I mean, one bite and you'd be a wolf too... you don't have to do this..."

"I know I don't," countered Dean, "but you'd do it for me, wouldn't you?"

Seamus didn't answer, and it was obvious to all that the reason for his silence was that he couldn't provide a convincing denial.

Evidently taking Seamus' silence as assent, Dean turned to Lupin. "OK, makes sense... I can go with that."

"Right, well time's pressing on," noted Lupin, "so we ought to start getting prepared."

Taking the hint, the group muttered their goodbyes to Seamus, who was starting to look more haunted every second. Lavender and Dean stayed behind - Dean deep in conversation with Sirius and Lavender with Seamus.

"Padma, Parvati, wait," called Harry, as the group started to make their way out of the dungeon. "look, Padma, why don't you come up to Gryffindor, so that we can all talk... there's a fair bit of history to cover, and you're in on this now..."

The Patil twins exchanged some secret-telepathic-twin glance, before Parvati answered for her sister, "OK."

"Cho too," Harry added, almost challengingly, as he locked eyes with his ex.

Parvati's eyes narrowed, almost imperceptibly, but narrow they did. "OK... you know we're not supposed to show our dorm location to other Houses, though, don't you?"

Harry figured that now was *definitely* not the time to reveal that Cho had actually spent a night in Gryffindor already, so decided to play it safe and offer an apologetic shrug. They were locked into a three way war - worrying about petty House rivalries seemed a little irrelevant.

Unless, of course, it concerned the Slytherins. But that didn't count as petty.

Unfortunately, however, events didn't quite run to plan - the seven students entered Gryffindor to be greeted by Alicia, looking somewhat emotional, clutching a sheaf of brilliant white parchments, each bound by a single black ribbon.

"These came this afternoon," she sniffed, handing scrolls to the Gryffindors, and pausing uncertainly at Padma and Cho.

"They're with us," explained Hermione, somewhat hurriedly, and certainly unnecessarily as she simultaneously scanned her parchment, "but... maybe, Harry? Perhaps we should do this another night?" Hermione's voice had started to quaver.

"Mmm", agreed Harry, the impact of the parchment taking him completely by surprise, "yeah, er, is that OK, you two? Sorry 'n all that, but..."

"That's fine," assured Cho, "isn't it?"

Padma nodded vigorously, wide-eyed. "You OK, sis?"

"He really died... I mean, well, I *knew*... but I didn't expect.. and..." Parvati was actually managing to speak far more eloquently than Harry could think, but it was obvious that the enormity of Ron's death was still sinking in.

Harry re-read the parchment once again:

Dear Mr Potter

*You are invited to attend
a Service of Remembrance
for
Ronald Stuart Weasley
beloved son of Mr and Mrs Arthur Weasley
to take place...*

The rest of the words were blurred by tears.

Chapter 43

Divination: who first coined the term 'The Grim'?

No-one had felt much like talking that night - all of Gryffindor seemed to have been invited to the funeral, and actually holding the stark white parchment in the hand seemed to impart a huge sense of finality to the events of Monday evening.

There was something incontestable about seeing the words in black on white; any lingering hope that there had been some huge mistake was finally swept aside. Tenacious thing, hope; it clung to the absolute slimmest of chances, offering seductive suggestions, such as maybe Sprout had merely Stupefied Ron. Or maybe there'd been some horrendous mistake and it hadn't been Ron at all. Even that he was living inside one of his dreams, and he'd wake, any second now, screaming, only to hear Ron half-mumble 'shut up' in his sleep. Then Ron really would wake up, even in his sleep knowing that it was *Harry* having a nightmare, realising the dangers such visions might foretell.

Returning to the Common Room from his dorm, Harry looked across at Hermione, who was sitting in her favoured armchair by the fireplace, knees hugged tight to her chest, obviously oblivious to the world. A discreet territory of unpopulated space surrounded her as the rest of the Gryffindors kept what they obviously deemed a respectful distance.

Harry joined her, perching on the arm of the chair, his arm draped across her shoulders as she leant her head against him. Wordlessly the both stared into the fireplace, mesmerised more by memories than by the flames.

Some of the reminders were blatant, such as Ron's empty four-poster bed in the dorm, which continued to glare accusingly at Harry whenever he was in the dorm. But some were more subtle, such as on Thursday morning, as the Gryffindor fifth years headed off towards the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom.

Professor McGonagall had been right; tempting though it was to make the most of being given *carte blanche* to skip lessons, as a group they'd all decided that getting back into the routine of lessons would probably be good for them. Not so much to take their mind off Ron so much as prevent them from thinking about nothing else *but* him. So it was that the group headed off to Vellum's old classroom, for the morning's first lesson, and Harry found himself automatically turning to his right hand side, to tell Ron how much he was looking forward to having Lupin back as their teacher.

Except, of course, that Ron was no longer at Harry's right hand side. No longer there to gripe about lessons, or roll eyes when Hermione was in particularly exasperating form ("Honestly, we've only got six months before the O.W.Ls start!"). It was only now, now that Ron was no longer there, that Harry realised how much he'd taken his best friend for granted. Hermione was still there, of course, but Ron provided a much needed brake on Harry's tendency to get swept up in things.

When danger leapt out in their path, Hermione was the one who would be trying to see around the corner to see what was about to happen next. Ron was always the one trying to assure the

other two that things weren't really as black as they were painting, not *really*, because, well, they couldn't be, could they? And Harry, well, he realised somewhat guiltily, he didn't think about what role he played. He just did the stuff as it came to him.

And that, an internal voice noted, accusingly, was the reason that Ron was dead. Because Harry had unthinkingly sent him back to Hogwarts, to his death.

Fresh from his transformation, Lupin looked a little drawn as he delivered the lesson (an introduction to curse breaking). Seamus looked even worse, whereas Dean looked tired, but... not content, maybe *assured*. The Wolves had explained over breakfast that Dean's vigil in Lupin's cell had gone well; Dean was therefore intent on staying with Seamus during the next full-moon, provided, of course, they could find someone to make the Wolfsbane for him.

They all looked older now, Harry thought as he scanned the class; particularly the Gryffindors, but even the Ravenclaws seemed to have an edge, and intensity and a focus about them that Harry hadn't noticed before. Hogwarts' insulating bubble of protection they'd all believed in had been punctured, and, with that illusion shattered, the real world, the world of Voldemort and Death Eaters, werewolves and kidnappings, suddenly seemed much closer to all of them.

It being Thursday, Transfiguration was after morning break, and, since Harry was most decidedly not welcome in the class, he'd headed off towards the library, more by default than by design.

"Well, Potter, I'd say that the score's Hufflepuff one, Gryffindor one now, wouldn't you?" Pansy and Millicent were just leaving the library as Harry got to the double doors, Pansy flashing her cold sneer at him as she finished her greeting, and the two Slytherins started to head down the corridor towards Divination.

Harry snapped his head up from staring at the stone floor to look at Pansy's retreating back, "You what?" he asked, perplexed.

Pansy stopped and turned round to face Harry, satchel hugged to her chest as she rolled her eyes, "Isn't it obvious? You kill Cedric - one-nil Gryffindor. Sprout kills Ron, one..."

The rest of Pansy's retort was lost as she was slammed into the stone wall of the corridor, Harry some fifteen feet away having flung his arm out in a gesture of rage. It was fortunate for Harry that Pansy had been standing virtually next to the wall anyway - she'd not really had a chance to get any sort of speed up before the wall winded her.

Horror-struck at what he'd done, Harry half started towards Pansy to help her to her feet when a platinum blonde bob of hair flashed past, "Miiss Parkeenson, are yew ahright?" asked Fleur, "zat was a nazty fall yew took..."

Harry froze; as if his troubles weren't deep enough, now he had Fleur to contend with.

"Is there a problem, Mademoiselle Delacour?"

Harry closed his eyes, his shoulders drooping at the sound of his Head of House's voice coming from behind him. Just perfect; *one step out of place, Mr Potter...*

"No, Professeur McGonagaul," replied Fleur, with disarming charm, "Miiss Parkeenson slepted on ze floor." Fleur turned her gaze to Pansy, adding, quite characteristically Harry thought, "zose shooz, zey do not soot yew, perhaps..."

All eyes in the confrontation turned to consider Pansy's somewhat impractically high stilettos, the heel of one indeed having snapped clean off. Harry frowned, trying to work out when that could have happened. McGonagall was still behind him, and Harry didn't need to turn around to know that her lips would be compressed into a razor thin line at that point, and if he knew anything about his Head of House, the next words would be...

"Five points, Miss Parkinson, for improper footwear during school hours."

Harry fought hard to stifle a grin - Pansy teetering on her shoes, one leg effectively four inches shorter than the other, and Fleur doing her absolute best face of patronising concern for the Slytherin's plight. Pansy's mouth was opening and closing, as though about to protest, but then reconsidering in the light of what Harry guessed must be McGonagall's supreme disdain.

"I would advise you to change your footwear this instant, Miss Parkinson," McGonagall added, before, with a swish of cloak, she headed down the corridor away from the library, and Harry relaxed somewhat.

Fleur was making every effort to appear to be helpful to Pansy, which was quite amusing to watch, since Pansy obviously did not appreciate the part-Veela's concern. Not one little bit, but even Pansy was not quite thick enough to actually insult a member of staff, so she was being forced to appear thankful for Fleur's flouncy assistance. As he watched the interplay between the two (Millicent having scarpered at her earliest opportunity), Harry got the distinct impression that not only was Fleur deliberately setting out to annoy Pansy, she was also enjoying her success.

Eventually, amidst much protestations that she really would be able to make it to the Slytherin dorms unaided, Pansy hobbled away with as much dignity as her single heel allowed.

As soon as Pansy had turned the corner, Fleur's smug expression darkened, "'arry, are yew ahlright?" she asked, joining him at the entrance to the library. "'zat was... unfo'givable, sayeeng yew keeled Diggorie..."

"I'm fine," replied Harry, somewhat surprised that Fleur had overheard the earlier conversation. "I didn't mean to hu..." Harry stopped himself just in time from admitting throwing Pansy against the wall - it was certainly better to let Fleur's account of events stand unchallenged.

"I would 'ave done ze same," admitted Fleur, "or even wurse... Parkeenson ees a zilly girl, and sayz 'urtful thingz, but, 'arry, you know ze truth in theze matteurs, an' yew must not let zem, 'ow yew say, bait yew?"

Harry raised his eyebrows - Fleur had actually *covered* for him? That was somewhat unexpected, "I'm sorry... it's just that, well, a lot of people think the way she does..."

Fleur took hold of Harry's hand, "Not as many as yew theenk, 'arry, and none zat matteur," she assured him. "I'm so sorry about Ronald," she added, "yew and 'e were both kind to me las' year... I 'ave to teach my class now," she concluded, and set off towards the dungeons, her platinum hair almost glowing against the dark stone background of the corridor.

Harry watched her disappear, reconsidering his initial assumption that Fleur had been a Death Eater. He'd been wrong about her, he could see that now. Whatever business it had been with Winky had to just be coincidence - after all, he reminded himself, look at what that Carpathia bloke had made of his own actions.

"Now then 'arry, 'ermione... y'all right?" Hagrid was sitting on the steps to his wooden hut when they went to visit him that lunchtime, Fang lazing at his heels.

Harry shrugged, "Sort of," he hedged, whilst Hermione simply bit her lip.

"'course not, really," observed Hagrid, "was a good lad 'n all, Ron. Din't deserve that, but," the half-giant sighed, and scratched his thick beard in contemplation. "Don't s'pose there's anyone that does at that... c'mon in, then, 'n I'll make us some tea."

Hagrid lifted his massive frame from the steps, and led Harry and Hermione into his hut. Instinctively Harry and Hermione adopted their usual positions, Hermione seated in Hagrid's oversized, overstuffed armchair by the fire, Harry spinning round one of the chairs at the table, and then realising that Ron wasn't around to perch on the footstool. The brilliant white Tempus summons lay on the mantelpiece, seemingly untouched.

Hagrid followed Harry's gaze, "Been won'ering 'bout that summons 'n all," he confessed, "there's some that's signed up already, 'n others ain't done yet, but who will by Saturday... wish Dumbledore were 'ere, 'e'd know wha' t' do. Great man, Dumbledore..."

"Don't sign it," urged Harry, with a little more force than he'd intended.

Not that Hagrid seemed to mind, turning a calculating gaze upon him, "Thought you might know more 'n you've let on 'bout that," he observed, sounding quite pleased with himself.

Harry and Hermione shared a smile - the tables had been turned for once, it normally being Hagrid who let things slip. On the other hand, Dumbledore had asked Harry to try and stop any more people signing up to Tempus, that request having been almost forgotten, later events having taken priority. "Dumbl... Professor Dumbledore," Harry was getting quite used to correcting himself on matters of title these days, "has, er, *doubts* about Tempus' motives... he's worried they're as dark as Voldemort."

Hagrid's jaw clenched on the word 'Voldemort', as he sucked the air in through his teeth. Nonetheless, he nodded slowly at this, "Knows a lot more 'n 'e lets on, does Dumbledore," observed Hagrid.

Hermione and Harry both 'mmed' in agreement. Dumbledore always seemed to have this ability to tell you just as much information as he deemed appropriate, whilst at the same time managing to convey the suggestion that, when viewed from his perspective, the big picture made sense, somehow.

They passed the rest of the lunchtime in conversation, at times eager, and at times awkward, as they remembered things with Ron - burping slugs after the disastrous attempt at cursing Malfoy, and then being bitten by Norbert ("Charlie says 'e's doin' well with the other dragons," Hagrid had interjected, not sounding quite as pleased as he should have done at the news).

Eventually it came time to leave, "'s always them's that don't deserve it that gets to suffer," observed Hagrid quietly, the emotion in his voice all the more powerful for the effort it evidently took the massive man to talk in a near whisper, "'n I don' thin' we seen the last of it yet." Abruptly, Hagrid resumed his normal volume (something quite close to what one might term 'booming'), "you two take care o' yourselves, now."

"Thanks Hagrid," replied Hermione, "and don't forget to look after yourself, too," she cautioned sternly, before she and Harry marched back across the grounds to the Greenhouses, where Herbology with Grubbly-Plank and the Hufflepuffs awaited.

Whether by accident or by design, Grubbly Plank had chosen to spend the lesson concentrating on the properties of Stalking Greenstem, tall whip-like plants that shuffled around Greenhouse 5 as the mood took them (Dean looked as though he had just about died and gone to heaven as he went all *Day of the Triffids* over them), Greenhouse 5 being about as far as it was possible to get from Greenhouse 3 and still call it Herbology.

Nonetheless, it was still a Greenhouse, still full of vegetation, and no matter how hard they tried to keep their thoughts elsewhere, the Gryffindors' minds kept on returning to Monday night. This was not particularly conducive to aiding concentration on the task at hand, which was to peel the outer, dead layer of the plants' central columns so that it could be used as dressing material in self-applying dressings. According to Grubbly Plank, bandages made with Stalking Greenstem flax would creep across the body to adopt the best possible position to heal the wound.

Unfortunately for the class, no-one appeared to have explained this part of the deal to the Stalking Greenstems, who clearly had other, somewhat fixed ideas as to what uses they could be put to. The plants looked a little like huge leeks, standing perhaps four feet high, with a collection of dark red ('blood coloured', Ernie had noted, somewhat unenthusiastically) tendrils hanging from the top, somewhat like a mop. The plants used these to pull themselves through surrounding vegetation, and also in self-defence.

"Y'know, by the time we've actually collected this stuff," observed Seamus (with a few colourful adjectives thrown in for emphasis), as a fresh lash from a particularly vicious specimen (already dubbed 'Predator' by Justin) caused another scratch to open up on his forearm, "we might actually be able to bandage ourselves up from the collection process... agh!"

Harry and Hermione exchanged uneasy glances as they tentatively approached their own assigned plant; the Greenstems apparently shared some sort of pack mentality, so once one was under threat, the others all adopted defensive stances. A defensive stance essentially consisted of the plant flailing its tendrils to ward off any potential predators, and it was Harry's considered opinion that the plants had far too high an opinion of their own desirability.

After being successfully warded off twice by the Greenstem, Harry suddenly realised that he didn't even need to touch the plant to remove its outer layer of skin, and with a quick, circular flick of his wrist he summoned the dead skin off the plant and into his hand, responding to the scowls from his classmates with an apologetic shrug.

It was nice, though, not having to hide the fact that he was a Mage.

It was as the group were walking back across the grounds to the main castle that it happened. Pansy, together with a few other Slytherins from various years, saw the Gryffindors approaching, and the sound of a playground song reached Harry's ears.

"Well," noted Lavender, tartly, "at least Pansy's learning to act her shoe-size..."

The others laughed, until the actual words reached them: *...standing on the wall,
and if one red Weasley,
should accidentally fall,
there'll be five red Weasleys,
standing on the wall...*

Hermione, Seamus and Parvati had their wands out in an instant, but the Slytherins had already stopped singing, wide-eyed, staring at Harry, who's eyes were burning with demented rage. Pansy could never exactly be accused of subtlety, but this was low, even by her standards, and a red mist descended over Harry's mind, as he raised both arms to shoulder height, letting his Mage force build up, preparing to obliterate the entire taunting group.

It was almost like winding a spring, as Harry slowly moved his forearms in a circular motion, ribbons of energy growing, sparks cackling across his body, and a shimmering curtain of power cascading from his robe and melting into the ground. Still Harry built up the energy, two coils of serpent like power now wrapped around his forearms, casting a blinding light in all directions as they fed upon the darkness in Harry's anger.

Finally the spring was wound, and Harry locked eyes with Pansy, who was staring at the spectacle before her, open-mouthed in shock, and, quite probably, terror. But all sense of pity had long since left him...

A soft hand landed on his shoulder, itself radiant with power of a completely different texture, but near equal in magnitude... and depth. "Perhaps, Harry," suggested Albus Dumbledore, his tone soft with measured control, "we should have a talk in my office..."

Chapter 44

Which is older: Beauxbatons, Durmstrang or Hogwarts?

"Tea, Harry?" enquired Dumbledore, as they entered what Harry presumed was once again the Headmaster's office.

"Please, thanks," he replied, settling into one of the two chairs in front of the desk as Dumbledore settled himself behind, absently conjuring a tray with teapot, cups and biscuits. Bourbons, Harry noticed, enthusiastically - they were Dudley's favourites as well, which meant that he never got a chance to eat them at Privet Drive.

As his Headmaster poured the tea, Harry surveyed the office once more. Circular in shape, with pictures of Headmasters past (but no Headmistresses, he noted) on the walls, most of the dozing lightly in their frames. Most of them; one, Marcus Marrentallian appeared to be considering Harry carefully - or perhaps just gazing off into space, it was hard to be sure.

Fawkes, evidently having just moulted, shuffled on his perch, his bright plumage almost glowing in the soft light of the room. Somewhat unusually, however, the bird remained on the perch, instead of greeting Harry. "lo Fawkes," Harry tried enticing the bird over, but it remained at the side (circular rooms tended not to have a wealth of corners), eyeing Harry carefully.

"Biscuit?" Dumbledore proffered the saucer Harry had eyed greedily moments earlier, "Muggle ones, Bourbon Creams, I do believe, and I must confess to being somewhat partial to them..."

Harry bit into his biscuit, and then was supremely conscious of the loud crunching noise as he tried to wolf it down as quickly as was decent so that he could talk. The obvious questions were usually a good place to start: "um, Professor, how come you're back at Hogwarts? I thought Fudge had, er, well, um..."

"Sacked me, Harry?" asked Dumbledore lightly, mild amusement in his eyes at Harry's somewhat miserable attempt at delicacy. "The events of Monday night, which we will return to in a while, appeared to have convinced the Minister that, great as he is, running the country *and* running Hogwarts may be too demanding for even his undoubted talents. As such, I was most delighted to be able to accept the Minister's kind invitation to retake my post as Headmaster..."

"I'm glad you're back; a lot's happened since you've been away though..."

"Indeed it has, Harry, indeed it has..." Dumbledore pressed his fingertips together in contemplation, before continuing, "I have, of course, been kept fully informed of developments at the school, and I will not be asking you to recall once more the events of Monday night - I'm sure you've relived those horrors enough without a doddering old fool pestering you more..."

"You're not a doddering old fool!" protested Harry, "how can you even say that?"

"Ah, dear boy, it does not do one good to revel in one's abilities," he paused meaningfully, "and it is always important to attempt to perceive yourself as others see you."

"But no-one thinks you're a doddering fool!" persisted Harry (diplomatically dropping the 'old'), at the same time as he started to suspect that Dumbledore's reply had actually been intended as instruction for himself.

"You'll find people can make the most peculiar assumptions about people, Harry. It does not do to leap to conclusions..."

Harry recognised that he'd been guilty of just that with Snape in his first year, and, more recently, he supposed, Fleur this year. But sometimes people didn't exactly make it easy to see their good side. He waited patiently for Dumbledore to continue.

"I do, of course, pass on my condolences to you for the loss of Mr Weasley; any death at such an age is tragic, of course, but I realise that you may feel the loss more greatly than some others... you must be careful, however, *not to rise to others' bait...*"

"But Pansy was..."

"Miss Parkinson was, as you correctly point out, behaving in a most unpleasant manner, and I *will* be taking up the matter with her Head of House, who is, dear me, it's hard to keep track.. ah yes, Professor Vector. The point I wish to make, though, is this: *do not try to take matters into your own hands*, Harry.

"Your grief is raw, and is easily turned to anger; especially by the manipulative. Anger and magic are not healthy bedfellows at the best of times, but in your case the situation is made more serious by the very nature of your powers..."

Harry's heart started to sink, "are you saying that M... Professor McGonagall was right when she said that I was infested with Dark Magic?" he asked, dismayed.

"That is... not, perhaps, how I would have phrased it. We are defined not by our abilities, but by our actions. Light and Dark are sometimes the same, depending on the observer's point of view. Nonetheless, some things lend themselves more to Darkness than others - I'm sure you can appreciate that?"

"Er, yes... I mean, my powers, they're all a bit... violent, aren't they? Apart from the sense, that is."

"Indeed they are. That is not to say that you cannot do great things with your magic, just that you must be careful not to, how shall I put this, not to give in to the temptation to use force where other options might be less *aggressive*."

"Lucas warned me not to take something I couldn't replace," recalled Harry, "and I can see that... but..."

"No 'buts' Harry," countered Dumbledore flatly, his piercing blue eyes seeming to bore deep into Harry's mind, "you command a terrible power. War is upon us, and the time draws near when battle will be joined. Frequently you will be challenged to make the choice between what seems easy, and what is right.

"I have faith in you, Harry; the burden of expectation is not lightly carried; of this I know enough myself," Dumbledore gave a half smile, causing Harry to wonder for the first time in his life whether the venerable wizard's reputation did in fact exceed his abilities.

"Well I'll do my best," ventured Harry weakly.

"Harry," replied Dumbledore, his eyes deep with warmth, "no-one would ever doubt that. In the course of these last four years at Hogwarts alone you have given more than any would ever dared ask. Risen to impossible challenges, and succeeded against improbable odds. There truly is Greatness in you, Harry, and loyalty, and bravery, and love...

"But alongside those things, even, some might say, as part of those things, lies temptation and Darkness. Don't give in to those things, for they will ultimately ruin you, and bring ruin to others..."

Don't give in, mate. Don't. Wasn't that exactly what Fred (or George) had said? Harry weakly nodded his understanding, recognising that the rage he'd been about to unleash against the Slytherins was exactly what Dumbledore was talking about. A light breeze ruffled his hair before he realised that Fawkes had settled on his shoulder, the Phoenix's presence alone serving to quell the darkness that had started to take hold in his mind.

Harry and Dumbledore made their way directly to the Great Hall using a secret staircase just opposite the Gargoyle, that brought them out at the top of the Great Hall, just by the Head Table, as it started to fill up for dinner. Harry took a moment to watch Dumbledore's face, as he paused to scan the room, with its tapestries and floating candles, the enchanted ceiling and the five huge student tables.

It was simply impossible to believe that Dumbledore didn't belong at Hogwarts. The school was as much a reflection of the wizard as he was a reflection of it, and Harry found himself smiling in recognition of his Headmaster's evident delight at being back *home*.

The reappearance of their Headmaster seemed to be the main topic of conversation at all five tables (Harry still couldn't quite work out how they'd squeezed the Beauxbatons' table in: the tables didn't seem smaller, the Hall didn't seem bigger, but everything somehow fitted in), and was almost unanimously well received.

Conversation at the Gryffindor table was deliberately avoiding the face-off with the Slytherins, talk instead being of Quidditch (much to Hermione's disgust).

"Harry," Alicia had ventured across from the seventh years' section, "I heard that you've got your broom back!" excitement clearly discernible in her voice, "so are you going to come back to the team now?"

"Yep," confirmed Harry, before remembering to add, "that is, if you'll have me..."

Alicia made a show of rolling her eyes, "of *course* we'll have you, stupid. There's no practice this weekend, of course..."

Alicia's eyes darkened, they all felt somewhat guilty to be talking about Quidditch at a time like this, but, reflected Harry, it was one of Ron's greatest passions. They owed it to him, "we're going to win the Cup for him, this year," promised Harry.

"That's the spirit!" agreed Alicia, relieved that Harry had found a way out of the awkwardness of the moment.

"No, it's not the spirit," corrected Harry, "it's a fact. We. Will. Win." He caught the eyes of the fifth years about him, to ensure that they could see that he meant it, and was greeted with nodded affirmations on their part.

"Yeah," concurred Alicia, adding, "we really will," before heading back up the table to join Lee, Katie and Angelina.

Dumbledore waited until the end of the meal before addressing the students, his voice, as always, magnificently calm, yet somehow carrying clearly across the huge room. Much as he had done with Harry, Dumbledore appeared to brush off Fudge's earlier treatment of him, seemingly assured that, somewhere, his great master plan was progressing smoothly.

As the Headmaster started to eulogise over Sprout's career as Head of Hufflepuff house, Harry allowed his mind to wander; Pettigrew, it seemed to Harry, had a lot to answer for. Firstly there was Ron. Then Sirius, and Cedric (facing the Slytherin table, as he usually did at meals, Cho was behind him - her shimmering blue pattern a welcome presence in his mind). And now Sprout.

With a guilty start, Harry realised he'd completely forgotten the twelve bystanders who'd been killed when Sirius had confronted Wormtail the week after his parents had been killed. Thirteen deaths by his wand directly, and responsible for the fourteenth (Ron). He'd put Sirius into Azkaban for twelve years, whilst masquerading himself as a pet rat amongst the Weasleys. It seemed typical of Wormtail's pattern of betrayal that his orders would have ended up killing one of the people who'd most cared for him in that time.

And finally there was Sprout, who'd completely disappeared from Hogwarts now, unable, it seemed, to face her students again, knowing that it had been she who had actually cast the Killing Curse on Ron. Imperius or not, Harry had to concede that would be an awful thing to live with, and felt genuinely sorry for the kind, round-faced Herbology professor. He wondered what she was up to now...

"...and I trust you will all have fond memories of Professor Sprout," Dumbledore was concluding, "why I myself remember well the time when she had that unfortunate trouble with the..."

"Headmaster," interrupted McGonagall, earning herself a few hurt looks from the students, who would quite liked to have heard some *really* juicy gossip on the former Hufflepuff.

Harry smiled at the interaction, but then frowned as he reconsidered Dumbledore. That bit about knowing what it was to carry the burden of expectation, and his assertion that he *was* a doddering old fool. Was Dumbledore *really* as powerful as his reputation said? Obviously, he was a formidable power - of that there was no question, having seen Dumbledore's fury at the

end of the Third Task, and heard Hermione and Parvati's telling of the Headmaster's entrance at the end of Vellum's duel. Nonetheless, something about Dumbledore's carriage was starting to make Harry wonder.

Wonder whether, really, toppling one Dark Wizard is more than enough for anyone. And Grindlewald had been defeated half a century ago. Unquestionably, Harry still thought that Dumbledore was the greatest wizard of his generation... but was Voldemort of that same generation? In his current incarnation, resurrected that summer, Harry suspected Voldemort probably belonged to a newer generation. One tied more closely to Harry's own.

It was a bit crowded at the top of the North Tower, the fifth year Gryffindors, Cho and Padma all in attendance. Seamus was safe from transformation for another 25 days now, although that was small consolation. Because, in 25 days' time, he would, once more, be required to lock himself in the dungeons once more.

The group had all sat in a circle, with their backs against the tower's stone walls, cloaks tightened against the December chill. Taking advantage of the somewhat cramped environment, Harry and Cho were nestled as close together as the proximity of Parvati and Padma would allow, fingers discreetly intertwined. Parvati had looked at them once, and then studiously avoided their section of the tower for the remainder of the evening.

It was the first opportunity they'd really had to piece together the various parts of Monday's puzzle - Hermione and Parvati's account of the meeting with Wormtail, Neville and Lavender getting to hear about the Away Team's fate at Beauxbatons. Seamus bore the questioning of his lycanthropy as well as could be expected.

It struck Harry in particular that not once had he heard Seamus claim 'it's not fair', the phrase that he felt sure would have been foremost in his mind had the situations been reversed.

Dean demonstrated his Animagus form willingly enough, a dark black wolf with bright, amber eyes. Yes, he could understand what people said to him as a wolf, yes, he knew who he was when he transformed, and yet he was also different. Part wolf, he perceived the world with a wolf's senses, and thought with a wolf's traits. On the subject of he and Ginny, however, when pressed by Hermione, he remained tight lipped.

For his part, Harry gave the group the full story, as he knew it, from Vellum to McGonagall, of his transformation from wizard to Mage, and the implications it brought. Not moving from his place next to Cho, Harry drained the last few drops of energy from the Hogwarts Key, a dim phosphorescence glowing about his left arm. He noted, as he pulled back from the drain, that the Key retained a dim aura, an indication that it was no ordinary rock from which the stone had been hewn.

Somewhat reluctantly, he explained as much as he knew about the Tempus loyalty tattoo, feeling hugely guilty as he watched Neville clutch his arm, horror struck, as though trying to tear the mark from him. He should've been there for Neville - should've been clearer about the threat. At least he'd been able to tell them that it *was* possible to remove the mark, although he couldn't cite sources, having sworn to keep the Order of Phoenix secret.

The group having been brought up to date as far as was practicable, Harry then outlined his need to drain the Durmstrang Key before Voldemort got to it, "not so much so that I have more power, as to prevent Voldemort from draining it himself. Any strength I can take away," Harry continued, "has got to be good news for us."

"Where *is* Durmstrang, exactly?" asked Cho.

As a general rule, the wizarding schools tended to keep their exact locations secret from one another, whether from genuine fear or just a desire to maintain mystique Harry wasn't really sure.

All eyes fell on Hermione, who blushed slightly, "well I, er, *visited* in the summer... it's unplotable, of course, but it's in the mountains that border Poland, the Ukraine and the Slovak Republic." Pausing from her guide-book recitation, Hermione wrinkled her nose, "it'll be absolutely *freezing* there now, though, in the winter."

"And how are we going to get you into the castle?" asked Padma.

Somewhat heartened by Padma's use of the collective noun, Harry responded in as an apologetic manner as he could, "well, actually, I can sense over a pretty wide area, so I don't need to be *that* close to the castle to drain the Key."

Dean was eyeing him shrewdly, "define," he invited with an expansive sweep of his hand, "'pretty wide' in that context."

"Er, well, I haven't actually measured as such," admitted Harry, "but, well, three or four miles, these days, I s'pose..."

"And you can sense people in that radius? Just through that... energy thing?" asked Lavender, eagerly.

"Well, yeah, um, if I know the person. It's no good if I've never met them, though. I could tell *someone* was there, but not who..."

Lavender brushed Harry's protestations aside, "so you know who is where in Hogwarts right this second? Just from here?"

Harry shrugged, "pretty much."

"So where's Ernie at the moment?" persisted Lavender, a curious spark in her eyes, and a resigned expression on Seamus' face.

"Ernie?" asked Harry, flicking his sense about the place, "oh he's in... *oh* the Astronomy Tower, with... wait a minute," Harry turned to face Lavender, "that's mean, Lavender. I'm *not* using my sense to spy on people." Silently, he added 'much' to that statement, as an afterthought... needs must, and all that, he reassured himself.

Lavender turned on her best wide-eyed, endearing expression, "oh go on Harry... you can trust *us* to be discreet," she promised, blinking her eyelashes beguilingly.

"Bet it's Lisa," opined Parvati, knowingly.

"No way," countered Hermione, joining in the girl-talk, "she's going out with Justin."

Lavender squealed, "I didn't know about *that*...."

Harry pulled Cho a little closer (after all, they were sitting at top of an open tower on a chill December evening, noble gallantry alone *dictated* that he had to ensure his companion was adequately protected from the elements), and shared resigned glances with his dorm mates as the girls dissected love lives...

As the boys got ready for bed that night, Neville came to sit at the foot of Harry's four-poster (all four of the boys avoided even touching Ron's bed, it remaining exactly as the House Elves had left it on, presumably, the Tuesday morning), "I'm so sorry, Harry... really... I, I really thought I was doing the right thing. I really thought that, well, if Tempus were against... against You Know Who, that, well, that they *had* to be the right side..."

Neville looked absolutely crushed, sufficiently so, indeed, for Harry not to correct his avoidance of Voldemort's name, "it wasn't your fault, Neville. Tempus were quite clever in the way they timed the summons, and how they made it look as though they were the good guys.

"Actually," he continued, trying to keep Neville's mood up, "for all we know, they may *well* be the good guys, but, well," he winced, "it's not... very likely, is it?"

"Mum and Dad," said Neville, "I really thought I'd show them... well, not that they can see. Or seem to see... but, it would've shown them that I'm not, y'know, hopeless. 'cept, of course, I am..."

"No you're not," contradicted Harry, though more with resignation than vigour, "look, even Fudge fell for the Tempus thing - you didn't do anything wrong, and, well, you did it for the right reasons. But," a thought had occurred to Harry, "there *is* something you could do..."

"Like what?" asked Neville, a trace of nerves detectable.

"Well, the Tempus deadline is this weekend... everyone has to make their choice. Would you, erm, well, will you help me warn the school? Show them what the mark's all about?"

Neville looked doubtful.

"I mean," continued Harry, getting into his stride, "this'd be the noble thing - you'd be saving your fellow students from making the same - *genuine* - mistake you made. You'd be, in effect, striking a blow against Tempus... Y'know, get your own back on them?"

"Well, are you sure? Wouldn't there be someone better do pick?"

"Neville," assured Harry, "there isn't anyone in Hogwarts better than you for this. You'll do it, won't you? I mean, I would, except that I'm not even a wizard, so what I've got in mind wouldn't work..."

"What are you thinking?"

"You'll do it, won't you?" asked Harry, anxious for verification *before* he elaborated on his plan.

Neville, by now, had swallowed the bait, "of course I will... but, well, what do I have to do?"

"Right," said Harry, settling himself against the headboard as he marshalled his thoughts, "what we're going to do is this..."

Chapter 45

How many gargoyles protect the Astronomy Tower at Hogwarts?

Pansy, and, indeed, all the Slytherins, were giving Harry a wide berth on Friday morning - Astronomy with Sinistra, and then Care of Magical Creatures with Hagrid.

The Threshers were growing at quite a rate now (Harry wondered whether any strategically placed Engorgement Charms had been applied between lessons), although conversation was still a pretty limited affair. Harry had named his Thresher 'Spark', for what he thought were obvious reasons. Unfortunately he was having a hard enough time to explain to the Thresher why it should have a name to even think about trying to explain his reasoning.

The Threshers did talk amongst themselves, Harry noted, but even that conversation was limited to pack-information - food, territory, weather and a general frustration at being cooped up in the pens the fifth years had constructed. Hagrid expected to release the creatures into the lake in January (*about a moon*, in Thresher speak), oblivious to the horrified glances shared between the students assembled as they were in their two house clusters.

Harry considered Spark in its cage (he wasn't sure of his creature's gender, and it seemed intrusive to enquire); still crocodilian, but the scaled skinn shimmered with crimson, brilliant blue and iridescent green patches, that rippled across its hide as it moved. The Threshers moved in sudden bursts, lying almost motionless for minutes at a time before suddenly snapping forward, or to the left or right, and then once more freezing in place.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Crabbe attempting to discover how close he could get to prodding his Thresher with a stick. There was a yelp of surprise as the caged beast suddenly moved like lightning, snapping the stick from the Slytherin's hand in a blur of sparks. Hagrid stomped grumpily off to deal with Crabbe - he didn't like it when people provoked 'his babies'.

As a spectator sport, feeding the Threshers left a lot to be desired - there's only so much wanton savaging of carcasses that the average teenager could take, after all, so once the beasts started eating, the students gravitated into their House huddles, trying to ignore the chill morning, and grim mood.

Seamus was frowning, "Hagrid, if these... Thresher things, if they're amphibious..."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, indicating that he was paying attention to Seamus' question.

"Well, if they're amphibious, and we put them in the lake..." Seamus trailed off, but, at Hagrid's expectant expression, he resigned himself to having to spell out the question, "well, er, what's to stop them just running off anywhere?"

"Ah, they don' like runnin' much," observed Hagrid, reassuringly, "so I don' thin' that'll be much of a problem there."

Seamus appeared to juggle his head from shoulder to shoulder, as Harry tried to suppress a smile; Hagrid could be endearingly oblivious to the threat posed by, say, half wild, electric,

dragon/eel/snake/crocodile amphibious poisonous hybrids wandering about the school grounds.

"Well yes," conceded Seamus, "but, well, what's to stop them, I dunno, what't to stop them, say, eating a student?"

"Well, if it was a Slytherin, why worry?" enquired Dean in a *very* subdued whisper. He was standing next to Harry, having long ago reasoned that the best place to be in Care of Magical Creatures was with either Hagrid between yourself and the subject, or to stand next to the only person who could communicate with the beasts. This particular morning, then, he was at Harry's side.

Hagrid paused for a split second, before recovering, "ah, well, I'm glad you asked me tha', 'cos it's related to yer homework this week... 'n what I wan's yer all ter do is to research... methods for restrainin' beasts like these Threshers, 'n how to keep 'em safely."

As recoveries went, even Harry was forced to admit it was a pitiful effort on Hagrid's part.

"What you mean is you hadn't thought about it, don't you?" enquired Draco, acidly, adding as an aside to Crabbe and Goyle, "honestly, the only reason that the brute doesn't get eaten by his own pets is because he's got the IQ of a pumpkin. Better watch himself if he develops a liking for herbivores..."

Crabbe and Goyle snickered dutifully at the quip, although Harry suspected that it had sailed well over their heads.

"I'm yer teacher in this subject, Malfoy," stated Hagrid levelly, "'n I set the lessons. 'n I'm settin' yer homework now. 's obvious that young Finnegan there's got his head set on straigh', can see 'e's thinkin' ahead... didn't cross *your* mind quite so quick now, did it?" challenged the half-giant.

Malfoy fixed his steely glare upon Hagrid, no words being needed on his part to assert that actually the thought had crossed his own mind more than once. This was hardly a surprise - all the fifth years had, outside of Hagrid's lessons, wondered about the suitability of Hagrid's domestication project for them.

"Right you lot, I thin' the Threshers 'ave 'ad enough for t'day, so yer can spend the rest o' the lesson in the library, lookin' up restrainin' methods..." Hagrid's booming voice curtailed the lesson half an hour early.

Seamus was obviously on top form, since Harry spotted him step on Hermione's foot as she drew breath to complain. Wisely, she took the hint, and clamped her mouth shut silently, and the group dispersed, more or less in the direction of the library. Somewhat less rather than more, noted Harry, wryly, as he and Hermione went over to talk to Hagrid, who was watching the class's retreating backs somewhat despondently.

"Ah s'pose the governors'll be gettin' an owl from his dad abou' this," sighed the half-giant, miserably, "'n, bein' fair, ah s'pose it'd be only right... don' make much of a teacher..."

"But Hagrid, we really like your lessons!" protested Harry, shooting Hermione a 'support me' look. It wasn't worth telling Hagrid that Malfoy Senior was no longer of this Earth - there

were plenty of other people willing to owl governors over a triviality such as proposing to release a pack of wild, bloodthirsty amphibians in a school.

"Yes," concurred Hermione, "they're really... different," she continued, giving Harry a half-shrug by way of apology for the somewhat lame endorsement.

Hagrid, as usual, was missing half of the conversation taking place in front of him, "than's you two... it's just, well," Hagrid got that dreamy look about him as his eyes locked onto the Threshers, "they're beautiful, though, aren't they?"

"Well, they're very... striking, Hagrid," agreed Hermione, cautiously, "but they are, well, they *could* be quite dangerous, don't you think?"

"Nonsense," replied Hagrid, although the denial lacked its usual conviction, "'n besides, they wouldn' hurt nothin' that didn' annoy them firs'..."

"Hagrid, do you really not know how we're going to keep them safe in the lake?" asked Harry, firmly, deciding that the time for skirting the issue had passed.

"Ah," said Hagrid and paused. "Well..." Hagrid paused again, and fingered his beard distractedly, "well, it's not like I haven' *thought* about it..."

"And?" prompted Hermione severely, as though she were still a Prefect, and Hagrid an errant second year.

"An', well, we go' plen'y o' time yet," concluded Hagrid. Hopefully.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a look of resignation, "'s OK Hagrid," said Harry, "we'll find something, don't worry..."

Hagrid's crestfallen expression disappeared, to be replaced by a beaming face bursting with pride, "than's you two, I knew you'd know what to do. Ah well, better get back to work," he concluded, before turning back to his hut, whistling cheerfully.

Turning his gaze from the massive bulk of Hagrid's retreating form, Harry found himself pinned by Hermione's accusatory glare, "what?" he protested, "it's *not* my fault!"

Hermione simply turned up the blame factor in the glare.

"Well what were we *supposed* to say, then?" asked Harry, unnerved by how his friend could make silence speak *volumes*. And it *really* wasn't his fault... and Hermione *loved* looking for things in the library, didn't she?

Neville and Harry were standing outside the Great Hall as it filled up for lunch. "But Neville," protested Harry, "you said last night you'd do this... and it'll be fine, really. Trust me," he added, wholly unconvincingly.

"But... but I didn't know you were going... going to do *this*!"

"Neville," pleaded Harry, "you *said*. I mean, *I'd* do it, if I could, but it has to be a wizard - you'll be perfect!"

"But Harry..."

"No, really we *have* to do this... and we have to do it today. The deadline's this weekend, and the more people we can stop from signing up to Tempus, the better. You can *do* this, Neville... it's why you're a Gryffindor!"

Harry was aware that he was being a little mean on Neville, but was consoling himself with the fact that the ends justified the means. Besides, nothing was going to happen to Neville anyway, and it would be clear to everyone that Harry was the actual instigator of the plan.

"Well couldn't you have asked Dean? Or Seamus? Or Lavender? Or..."

"Neville, neither of the Wolves have signed up to Tempus. Nor has Lavender. I need someone from Tempus, but someone who I can *trust*," replied Harry, laying it on thick, "someone I can depend on. Basically, I *need* you for this... c'mon, you'll be brilliant!"

"Um, OK," agreed Neville, hesitantly, desperately wanting to share Harry's confidence in his abilities.

They started to walk into the Great Hall when Harry grabbed his arm once more, "and remember, Neville, *don't throw a single curse!*" he hissed, warningly.

"I know," responded Neville, exasperatedly, "no curses, no hexes, no spells... I'm going to look really stupid, though... just, just standing up there like a lemon..."

"Not *half* as stupid as anyone who takes up the challenge," noted Harry, "ready?"

"Ready," confirmed Neville, with just a smidgen less authority than Harry was hoping for.

Still, he was sure Neville would be OK. Pretty sure, really. All things considered.

Getting the Hall's attention wasn't a problem: Harry raised both arms, index fingers pointing to the corners of the enchanted ceiling, and conjured two lines of brilliant blue fire, extending from each hand to the rafters. Then, cracking each stream of fire as though it were a whip, he sucked the energy back into his hand, simultaneously creating a cloak of crackling sparks about himself.

In the Hall, no-one breathed, all eyes fixed on the Mage's spectacular entrance, mouths agape, food hovering on forks held in mid-air. As Harry surveyed the frozen room, he reminded himself why he was doing this: Tempus were not going to subscribe any more Hogwarts pupils after this lunchtime, of that, Neville and he were going to make sure.

"Right," called the Boy Who Lived, his emerald eyes burning with the cold fire of determination, "who here has joined Tempus?"

Evidently mistaking the question for a challenge rather than the semi-idle enquiry it was, no-one dared answer, looking at Harry, transfixed. McGonagall had been about to say something, but Dumbledore had rested a hand lightly on her forearm, cutting off any protestation before it reached her lips. He nodded imperceptibly at Harry.

"Look, Neville here's joined," announced Harry, "I need one other person. *Hogwarts* needs another person." He scanned the room, and saw Cho flick her eyes discreetly towards the head of the Ravenclaw table: Roger Davies.

Perfect.

"Roger," asked Harry, directly, "have you signed up to Tempus?"

The former Head Boy got to his feet, locking Harry's eyes with a cold stare of his own, "yes I have, although what it is to you I can't possibly imagine." As a Quidditch Captain *and* a Seventh Year, Roger cut quite an imposing figure, over six feet tall, with a strong, muscular frame evident even beneath his Ravenclaw robes.

Neville, who knew what was coming, stifled a murmur of anxiety.

"Excellent," noted Harry in response to Roger's statement, "now, as I said, Neville here has joined the Order also, so, if you could both stand at the head of the tables..."

Neville made his way towards the head of the Gryffindor table, wand clutched tightly in his hand, clenching and unclenching his jaw as he tried to quell the inner panic. Roger hadn't moved, still eyeing Harry with suspicion, "would you care to explain what this is all about, Potter?"

"I'm trying to," Harry responded, with disarming helpfulness, "so, if you could take your place opposite Neville - you do have your wand with you, don't you?"

"You want me to *duel* Longbottom?" asked Roger, incredulously. "*Longbottom?*" He stifled a chuckle, "you're *not* serious..."

"What, don't you think he's up to it?" asked Harry, mildly, sensing how the entire Hall was hanging on to every word in the exchange.

"It's not going to be much of a contest," offered Roger, almost apologetically, as he marched assuredly to the head of his own table.

"You're right there," agreed Harry, "30 House Points if you can beat him."

"Who do you think you are?" cried Roger, spinning on his heel to face Harry once more, "you can't go giving House Points out.. you're a *student*."

"No, no, I'll sponsor Mr Potter's initiative," volunteered Professor Dumbledore, cutting off Roger's protestations, and causing everyone in the Great Hall to suddenly look at Neville with something akin to newfound awe. "30 House Points."

Roger looked carefully from Harry to Dumbledore and back again, "alright," he affirmed, drawing his wand as though his participation in the exercise was now justified on the honours he would be claiming for his House.

Neville and Roger faced each other in the gap between the five student tables and the Head Table, the students all craning their necks to watch the ensuing duel. Even if one of the participants was 'only' Neville Longbottom, it wasn't every day that you got a Wizards' Duel as lunchtime entertainment.

The staff were equally transfixed by the spectacle developing before them. As if Harry's audacious entrance hadn't been enough, they were actually about to watch a hopelessly mismatched Wizards' Duel unfurl between them - Roger Davies, the former *Head Boy* against the legendarily hopeless Neville Longbottom. The Headmaster's quiet air of contentment at the situation just made the whole event even more intriguing.

Harry had now joined the two combatants, "Neville, Roger, you both ready?"

"Yes," replied Neville hurriedly, his eyes snapping between Harry and Roger, his wand gripped tightly, but pointing directly at the ceiling, trembling slightly.

Roger simply gave an affirmative grunt, not once taking his eyes off Neville, his right hand pointing his wand directly at Neville. The wand tip was rock steady.

"OK then," announced Harry, "go!"

Neville tightened up even more, as he braced himself for the assault his instincts told him was about to hit, even though Harry had assured him that he wouldn't feel a thing.

"*Expelleriamus!*" thundered Roger, overdoing the theatrics somewhat.

As he soon found out to his cost. Wincing as though punched in the stomach, Roger took a few balancing paces backward, and trained his wand back on his opponent. It was quite clear that no mere Fifth Year was going to upstage the former Head Boy in a duel.

Roger's next attack was the leg locker curse, which this time actually caused the Ravenclaw to cry out in pain, an incongruity heightened by the sight of Neville's smile spreading broadly across his opponent's face.

Throwing one last curse at Neville, Roger tried the fully body bind, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" he cried, before staggering back again, and dropping his wand.

A murmur of amazement swept across the Great Hall, and Neville found himself the object of new found respect as he closed the gap between himself and Roger, and stooped to collect the Ravenclaw's wand.

Harry clapped his hands together once to get the school's attention, "OK, who else has joined Tempus? 60 House Points to anyone in Tempus who can best Roger this time..."

Harry flicked his fingers out in a quelling motion at Roger, who held his tongue, but didn't bother to tone down the hostility in the glare he returned.

"...and if you beat Roger, 120 Points if you can then beat Neville, as Champion..."

The promise of House pride lured Rohan Daniels to take up the gauntlet, unhesitatingly showing the Mark of Tempus, burnt into his right arm, the capital T inscribed inside the circle of bright blue flame, when Harry sought confirmation of his membership.

"OK Roger," whispered Harry as he returned the Ravenclaw's wand, "do not throw *anything* at Rohan. No hexes, curses, charms... just stand there and take it. Trust me, this is *important*..."

Roger and Rohan faced off, both locking eyes fiercely, causing Harry to wonder, off-handedly, whether there was a little more than mere House-rivalry going on between the two opponents.

The duel went as expected - Roger, having taken Harry's advice, watched with increasing bemusement as an exasperated Rohan hurled curse after curse at the Ravenclaw, each successive knock-back seeming only to heighten his rage. There was *definitely* some history there, noted Harry. Lavender would probably know, he thought - she seemed to know most things these days...

Eventually Rohan gave up, mystified, but defeated, and Roger serenely collected the Hufflepuff's wand from where it had clattered to the floor after the last curse.

A scattered collection of hands raised from fresh volunteers, undaunted by the dismal failure of challengers to date, but Harry cut them off, "OK, that's enough, I think - my sincere thanks to Neville, to Roger and to Rohan for ably demonstrating the true nature of the Mark of Tempus."

There was a collective puzzled blink about the Great Hall. The Order of Tempus were the *good* guys - what did that have to do with the duels?

"The Mark is a loyalty charm - as you've just seen," explained Harry, "wearers of the Mark cannot cast spells against other members of the Order of Tempus."

Harry paused to let these words sink in - the Great Hall was absolutely silent, as people tried to process the implications.

"In short," continued Harry, once he was certain that most people had jumped onto the train of thought, "the Mark of Tempus ensures your loyalty to that organisation - *even though we have no idea who they are, or what they want*. By signing the summons, you are signing away your ability to resist. Signing away your independence."

The difference in reactions was quite interesting. The younger students absorbed the news with something close to indifference, but the older students split into two distinct groups - the relieved, and the horror-struck.

"Well get this thing *off* me, then," demanded Roger, resentfully.

"Ah," started Harry, apologetically, "erm, it's *not* quite that simple, I'm afraid."

"Are you saying that this is *permanent*?" asked Rohan, his left hand clutching the offending section of his right arm.

"It would indeed appear so," confirmed Dumbledore in his measured tones, the distraction caused by his entrance into the conversation giving Harry time to wipe the surprised expression off his face.

Obviously, Harry reasoned, Dumbledore didn't want word getting out that the Mark could be breached. He thought about it; Dumbledore, as usual, was way ahead of him - if word got back to Tempus that the Mark could be broken, then any advantage they might have held was lost. Better to keep the curse-breaking a secret. Plus, of course, they didn't have the manpower to disinfect the entire school.

"My thanks to Mr Potter for his excellent demonstration to bring this matter to our urgent attention," continued Dumbledore, "and also to each of the combatants. 10 House Points each to Mr Longbottom, Mr Davies and Mr Daniels. As your Headmaster, I urge those of you who have yet to respond to the summons from Tempus *not to do so*. And those of you who have chosen to sign up, please register your name with..." Dumbledore flicked his glance across the Head Table, "with Professor Flitwick, so that we may keep you abreast of developments in the work to find a counter-curse."

Dumbledore paused for a few seconds, before advising everyone to return to their 'most-excellent food', which, reluctantly, given the excitement offered by the duelling, they did.

Roger nodded curtly at Harry and Neville (but not Rohan), before returning to the Ravenclaw table, shrugging off his housemates' attempts at consolation. Neville, on the other hand, received a near hero's welcome at Gryffindor... he'd beaten the Head Boy in a Wizards' Duel, in front of the entire school.

Of such things were legends made.

Chapter 46

Who was the youngest witch or wizard to take the position of Headteacher at Beauxbatons?

It was Sunday morning, and about him Seamus, Dean and Neville were also getting ready to travel to Ottery St Catchpole. They still had a little time left, however, whereas for Harry, Charlie Weasley had already made his way into the Gryffindor Common Room, and had commandeered Parvati's normal chair, in the alcove next to the door, as he waited for Hermione and Harry to get ready.

Harry wasn't totally sure how he felt about this: the Weasleys had insisted that both he and Hermione should take the Floo Network to the Burrow, and then travel to the church with the rest of the Weasleys. Half of Harry was enormously flattered that the Weasleys had included him as 'family', and the other half was aghast that he was deemed welcome at a time like this.

Frowning at the mirror, and running a hand through his hair once more, Harry squared his shoulders, trying to fight the ghoulish urge to laugh. Mad as it seemed, it was either laugh at the absurdity of the situation (Ron! Dead! He *couldn't* be), or cry... and everyone knew that fifteen year-old boys didn't cry.

Conversation in the dorm was thin on the ground, and it was to a series of mutual non-verbal grunts and murmurs that Harry finally snapped himself away from the unseen mirror, and left the dorm, every movement precisely calculated, so as not to intrude on the sanctity of the moment.

Charlie, looking paler, and older than normal, stood up when he saw Harry descending the staircase, Hermione already having taken Lavender's chair opposite him, her bag perched on her knees. "They're new, aren't they?" he asked, frowning in the direction of the crossed swords hung on the wall to the left of the fireplace.

"Just a little decoration," returned Harry, evasively, following Charlie's line of sight to Seamus and Dean's swords, hung as they were.

"And *that* one," continued Charlie, with a dangerously dream-like cast to his eyes, looking to the right hand side of the fireplace, "she's a beaut..."

The song blade, not having a partner to cross with, was hung up in the right hand alcove, the Away Team having decided that the best hiding place for the weapons was in the open. At least they were closer to hand than being hidden under beds, or at the foot of a chest or something. Charlie's eyes had been drawn to them, but most of the Gryffindors appeared not to have noticed the additions - there were already plenty of pictures, coats of arms and other adornments in the room.

"Picked it up in Beauxbatons," explained Harry with a shrug, as though he were talking about a box of chocolate frogs he'd collected from Honeydukes.

"Well," announced Charlie, changing the subject, "I promised Mum we'd be back before ten, so..."

He left the prompt hanging as Hermione and Harry exchanged an easy glance.

"Are you *sure* your Mum wants us at the Burrow?" asked Hermione, tentatively, "I mean, well, we wouldn't want to intrude..." she trailed off, with the same expression in her eyes that Harry had felt since walking down the stairs. Half wanting to be there, right at the epicentre of the storm, the closeness of the bond with Ron formally acknowledged for all to see, and half not wanting to be seen to intrude.

Not wanting onlookers to mutter and grumble about 'presumptuous so-called friends', catching fragments of whispered exchanges '*...lack of respect...*'

"Both of you," said Charlie, firmly, "are coming to the Burrow, now. Mum wants you there, Dad wants you there... we *all* want you there." He paused, before adding softly, "and Ron would've invited you, if he could."

But he couldn't.

He still hated travelling by Floo, but as Harry stepped out of the fireplace into the living room at the Burrow, that distaste was far from his mind. It all *looked* the same, he thought, as he surveyed the room, and stepped quickly from the fireplace itself to make way for Hermione, but it *felt* different.

Heavy feet flitted down the staircase, bringing Harry's attention to exactly what it had been that felt different: it was quiet.

"Fred," announced the Twin whose entrance had been heralded by the fanfare of drummed stairs, nodding at Harry.

It seemed typically Twin of him, Harry thought, that Fred's greeting to other people consisted of confirming his own name. But at the same time thoughtful - today was not a day for playing the indistinguishable Twins game. Fred looked pale, much like Charlie, really. His lips were drawn into a tight line, and the eyes had a far-off look about them. "Lo' Fred," replied Harry, as a whoosh from the Fireplace indicated Hermione's arrival.

"Hi Hermione," greeted Fred, extending a hand for her to steady herself with, and once more introducing himself, "it's Fred. The others are still getting ready," he added, with a jerk of his red hair towards the ceiling.

"Hello Fred," replied Hermione, still blinking from the Floo Powder, as she allowed herself to be lightly tugged away from the fireplace, thereby making way for Charlie's return.

Charlie, obviously a seasoned veteran of Floo, stepped from the fireplace as though it were simply another door, his arrival coinciding with George's entrance from the stairs. Various greetings were exchanged, before Charlie disappeared into the kitchen to make some tea.

Harry and Hermione had taken seats on the sofa, and the Twins had perched on the arms of one armchair each, looking somewhat uncomfortable in their formal robes. No-one said anything, as the clock ticked, and the sound of Charlie marshalling tea cups, kettles and whatever else was deemed necessary trickled through from the kitchen.

The somewhat strained circular exchange of weak smiles was brought to a halt by Hermione, "is that *Ginny*?" she asked, incredulously, eyes fixed on a small, framed portrait on the wall, next to a small tapestry of red and gold.

Gryffindor colours, Harry noted, approvingly, as he followed Hermione's line of sight, and then, frowning, rose to inspect the signature; "Dean?" he exclaimed, surprised, "*Dean* drew this?"

"Oh, it's really good, isn't it?" noted Hermione, "her hair's lovely..."

Soft footsteps on the stairs (and a discreet helping of sense) alerted Harry to Ginny's arrival - he noted she looked half embarrassed, half proud of the drawing, "wow Ginny," commented Harry, "why didn't you show us this before?"

Ginny shrugged, "well, y'know... Dean insisted that I get it framed... and I thought you'd see it in the summer. But, well..."

"Those were the robes you wore at the Champions' Ball!" observed Hermione, still engrossed with the drawing, and then frowning, "but... but when we got back to Gryffindor, we all went straight to our dorms, didn't we?"

Harry winced - the Champions' Ball, had, more or less, been a nightmare that year; he'd spent pretty much the entire evening staring at Cho and Cedric (and yes, she *had* noticed - which put her with just about every other person in the Great Hall on that count, apparently), and Hermione and Ron had ended the evening with a truly spectacular row... virtually everyone in the Common Room had ducked.

"Oh, yes, but Dean and I... er, well we went for a walk in the middle, to cool down, and then he fished out his sketch pad and drew *that*," Ginny clarified, now standing next to Hermione, and leaning against the older girl slightly, Harry noticed.

Fred seemed scandalised, "Thomas took a *sketch pad* with him to the Ball? No wonder he didn't have a date!" Ignoring the indignant look on Ginny's face, he continued, "and how come he didn't draw me 'n Angelina? I mean, *that* would have been... um, what's the word, George?"

George, flashing a superior smirk at his Twin, offered "fluffy? Cute? Bafflingly romantic?" before dodging a lightly tossed cushion headed his way.

Charlie entered the living room at this point, George noticing just in time to check returning the cushion with a volley of his own, and made a great show of plumping it out, "just, y'know, sprucing the place up a bit," he extemporised, wilting somewhat under Charlie's patented 'I work with Dragons, don't try it on with *me*' stare.

"Fine," observed Charlie, mildly, taking a sip from the mug of tea in his hand, "tea's in the kitchen," he added. Clearly, tea-making duties didn't actually extend to *servicing* the stuff as well. "Are Mum and Dad down yet?" he asked, of no-one in particular (the answer was self-evident), "Bill should be here any minute..."

Bill, Harry suddenly remembered, was a member of Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix; he wondered if he'd managed to ensure that none of the Weasleys had joined Tempus. Harry was

about to make a general, what he hoped would be discreet enquiry, when he another thought struck him, "er, where's Percy?"

Fred gave Harry a long-suffering glance, "our most esteemed..."

"...and learned..."

"...brother, has taken upon himself the weighty..."

"...yet noble..."

It was, Harry reflected, sort of like watching a tennis match, trying to follow a conversation with the Twins. But *how* did they know when to stop and when to start?

"...undertaking of ensuring..."

"...nay, personally *guaranteeing*..."

"...that today's events pass exactly..."

"...precisely..."

"...and completely..."

"...according to plan."

"He's over at the church already, getting things ready," translated Ginny, for Harry and Hermione's benefit. Charlie appeared to have switched off from the Twins' dual delivery; he'd probably had more than enough experience of it over the years.

"There's a plan?" asked Harry.

Charlie snorted, "oh yeah... alphabetised, bullet-pointed, with footnotes and a reading list."

Despite himself, Harry smiled - yes, he thought, that sounded like Percy, "Hermione, Ginny, did you both want tea?" offered Harry, making his way to the Burrow's kitchen. As the two nodded their affirmatives, and then returned to their own, private conversation, Harry reflected on how strange it was to see everyone packed into the living room - normally it was the kitchen that was the hub of activity.

Charlie had left a series of mugs on the kitchen table, steam swirling gently in the stillness of the air, and Harry selected three at random, taking heart from the familial feeling of the place. None of the mugs matched each other, one had a chipped handle, one was a Cannons mug, a garish bright orange, with the Cannons' logo slowly spinning round and round the outside.

As he scooped three mugs up, two mugs in one hand, balanced carefully so as not to burn his knuckles, Harry caught sight of the kitchen clock, and a lump formed in his throat.

Most of the hands were clustered at 'Home'. Bill's indicated he was at 'Work', whilst Percy's was pointed at 'Village'.

Ron's, on the other hand, pointed fixedly at two words: *At Rest*.

Eyes bright, Mrs Weasley had welcomed both Harry and Hermione with near crushing hugs, and threatened to break the truce of emotional restraint that had been carefully maintained since the two Gryffindors' arrival. It was, Harry decided, so much easier to pretend that he was OK if everyone else played the same game.

Trying to be, strong... unmoved, perhaps was a better word, in the face of Mrs Weasley's clear anguish was virtually impossible. And hot on the heels of the grief was the guilt. If Ron hadn't joined him that first day on the Hogwarts Express... he wouldn't have been bitten by a dragon in his first year...

...not to mention being knocked unconscious by Professor McGonagall's somewhat brutal transfigured chess-pieces. Nor, in all probability, would he have ended up with a broken leg in his Third Year. Harry frowned, recalling the four brief years he'd shared with his best friend, who had willingly taken the role of Best Friend to the Boy Who Lived; naturally, there'd been times when Ron'd been jealous of the fame, the wealth, the *aura* that accompanied Harry whether he liked it or not, but, looking back over his time at Hogwarts, Harry felt wholly undeserving of the friendship that had, ultimately, cost Ron his life.

Friendship wasn't supposed to have a price attached.

Sniffing, and blinking back tears, Mrs Weasley had eventually released Hermione, and the extended family had gathered robes, scarves and umbrellas (true to form, when fate came to address Ron Weasley, it was raining), preparing to walk the short distance to St Majella's, the village church.

Hermione had been a little odd, Harry reflected, as they left the Burrow's front garden - she'd asked Ginny if she could 'borrow her mirror', meaning if she could use her room to straighten herself up before they left. Ginny had, of course agreed, and they'd all waited a few minutes as Hermione had dashed upstairs. But only Harry knew that it wasn't Ginny's room she'd gone to... he'd tracked her with his sense as she'd gone into Ron's room instead.

Maybe, he thought, he should've done that - but he wasn't sure if he was quite ready to face it. All those stark reminders of Ron - the posters, the books, even the clothes. And the very colour orange. Sometimes Hermione was braver than he was, he supposed - or maybe she just wanted to spend some time alone to marshal her thoughts about their joint best friend. Harry wasn't going to begrudge her that, and didn't mention her detour to the rest of the family.

Mr and Mrs Weasley were at the front, with the alarmingly reserved Twins next. Charlie was walking between Ginny and Hermione, arms linked with both of them (as the shortest of Ginny's brothers, he was deemed the most appropriate escort). Which left Bill to pair up alongside Harry, dawdling somewhat, to give create an insulating space from the rest of the family.

"Look Harry," said Bill, quietly, but with force, breaking the instinctive silence that had been maintained ever since they'd left the Burrow, "things are going to get hairy from this point on."

Looking to his right, Harry met Bill's eyes, which had about them the steel of resolution, as though tensed for a fight, "hairy?"

Both returning their eyes to face the front once more, the black umbrellas meshing in the rain, Bill continued, "people are watching out for you... me amongst them. But you're going to have to be careful. More careful, that is."

"I didn't *know*... Bill, really, if I had, I wouldn't..."

Bill snorted weakly through his nose, "yes you would. And if you hadn't, Ron would have gone on his own... always was a bit rash. And you... well..." Bill trailed off, the two walking along in reflective silence for a few steps, before he resumed; "this is *war*, Harry..."

The right hand holding the umbrella, Bill swept his left outwards in a gesture that encompassed the village, and, Harry understood, the greater world beyond, "I know it all looks normal. The same as before... but it isn't. We've got Tempus on the one hand, we've got the Death Eaters on the other. As if that wasn't bad enough, Fudge is doing his best Canute impression, pretending that the Tide of Darkness isn't about to sweep the land..."

"Canute?" asked Harry - it rung a bell, vaguely.

"Stupid Muggle king... thought he could command the tides, just 'cos he was King. 'course, he drowned, swallowed by the sea, as he commanded it to turn back. Fudge is the same... thinks that the battle's not going to be joined here. This shook him," continued Bill, nodding in the direction of the church, where Harry could see groups of figures in black filing into the church.

This, thought Harry, had shaken everyone. They were approaching the graveyard now; his last visit to a graveyard hadn't exactly been a pleasant occasion either, he thought, remembering Cedric's glassy-eyed stare, dead at his side. *Kill the spare*.

An uneasiness started to well up inside him, as he reflected on the casualness of Cedric's death: *kill the spare*. The command was three words, casual, almost an afterthought, as though Cedric had merely been a distraction. Two words to kill him.

Two words to kill Ron. Dealing death might be simple, but dealing *with* death most certainly wasn't. The uneasiness had grown, nausea building... but it wasn't grief, it was realisation. He'd come within a hair's breadth of joining the ranks of those he despised when he'd prepared to annihilate the taunting Slytherins...

What was he becoming? What sort of dark creation? There were emotions, near-black surges of violent feeling moving in his mind... scores to settle. Wormtail, Vellum, Voldemort - pretty much the whole of Tempus, he added, with a shrug.

What, an inner voice asked, had happened to the noble Gryffindor who had spared Wormtail's life in the Third Year? What had happened to that vivid, burning line in his mind, the one separating Good from Evil?

Lucas' voice rang inside his head, exhorting him to think carefully before he took something he could not replace. Dumbledore's own measured tones, soft, yet carrying a solid weight of command; to know how to make the choice between what was right, and what was easy.

Snapping out of his thoughts, Harry realised that he had stopped in the graveyard, heavily eroded headstones to the left and right of the slick flagstones, a cracked one a little further back. People were milling around, filing wordlessly past him, heading towards the cold dryness of the church itself.

Being without the benefit of discreet application of magic to make the place more accommodating, it was freezing inside the church. The ancient central heating system wheezed some heat into the radiators, but it was a token effort on the dark December day.

Thock. Step. Twist-then-flick. Thock, step, twist-then-flick.

The stilted rhythm alone caused every eye of the seated congregation to turn and consider the latecomer... a wooden leg, the scarred and pock-marked face missing what seemed to be key ingredients; a quarter of his nose, and, for good measure, an eye. Mad Eye Moody.

Seeming undaunted by the the open-mouthed surprise that greeted his arrival, Moody made his way to the second row of pews, the *thock* of his wooden leg on the stone floor echoing off the walls. "Arthur, Molly," nodded the retired Auror as he settled his battle-worn frame into the space behind them (the other occupants of the pew, two of Ginny's friends from the fourth year, Kate Rivendell and Freya Gwendolen, shuffled as far away as discretion and space allowed).

Mr Weasley managed a stiff nod in response, but Mrs Weasley seemed oblivious to her surroundings, staring fixedly ahead, one hand gripping her husband's, the other dabbing a white handkerchief to her eyes. Moody nodded in turn to each of the Weasleys present (Percy was somewhere behind the scenes, apparently), before his gaze landed on Harry, seated as he was at the far end of the pew.

Harry knew that he and Moody had their differences. Actually, he wasn't altogether convinced that he had any real similarities with Moody beyond a vague reassurance that they were, ultimately, on the same side. Nonetheless, the force of the hostility in Moody's gaze was like a slap in the face.

One good eye, one magical, both trained on Harry with a venom so intense he could almost taste it. Eyes welling, Harry was distinctly at a disadvantage in the staring contest, and nodding briefly at the Auror, he quickly turned to face the front, trying to pretend that he hadn't seen Moody remain absolutely motionless in response.

There was no such thing as a good funeral. Well, possibly, Harry conceded, he might take some small delight in seeing Voldemort put finally, firmly, and irretrievably to rest. But for real people, it seemed a pretty awful thing.

What made it harder was that, as well as all the memories of Ron, prompted as they were by various speakers' readings, Harry found the end of the Third Task replaying in his mind. *Kill the spare.*

Sometimes the spare was Cedric. Sometimes it was Ron. And then, in turn, he saw his friends enveloped by the green flash in his mind - the price they paid for being aligned with the Boy Who Lived. He might be the one with the target burned into his forehead for the world to see, but they were the ones who presented the easy pickings.

Ron was dead. That was his coffin - gleaming black, on wooden trestles, a wreath of white flowers (why white?) over his chest. The Reader continued on from his pulpit, although Harry had long ago tuned out the words... his grief didn't need prompting. His memories of his best friend sharp enough, clear enough, not to need the forced reminders of what was lost.

Closing his eyes as the tears fell, he felt Hermione's hand tighten its grip, a connection no doubt echoed throughout the stone chamber. When Neville had broken the news to Harry, that Monday night in the Medical Wing, he'd been consumed with grief for his own loss.

As the week had worn on, he'd felt guilt for the loss he'd inflicted on Ginny and the Twins. Mr and Mrs Weasley. Ron's other brothers. He'd seen how the loss had affected the Gryffindors - fifth years and the rest. The impact it had had on the other Houses too. And now, here in the church, the impact of Ron's death could be seen reverberating across the wizarding community.

He hadn't realised, until that point, just how many people would have had some connection to the Weasley family. Just how many people would have shared a sense of loss at Ron's death.

Just how many people he, Harry Potter, had to answer to, responsible for his best friend's death.

At what point had it been final? Not when Neville had stuttered at that crazed explanation on Monday night. Not, really, when the nightmare had been confirmed the following morning. McGonagall had, Harry supposed, added some concrete to the knowledge, and the Ministry agents' interest in the matter made some mad hoax impossible.

Seeing the Weasleys' collective grief that morning had certainly augmented the chillness in his stomach that said *this is real, this is Truth*. And the black coffin at the front of the church had shrieked its presence in Harry's mind with a silence more deafening than any scream.

But no, it was here, now, having seen the coffin slowly lowered into the rectangular hole, six feet deep, and hearing the thud of the wet earth landing on top with leaden solidity. *That* made it real. Ron Weasley. Sixteen years old, buried in a black box in a village churchyard... all for being friends with the famous Harry Potter...

"See yer thinkin' better of that hare-brained scheme now, aren't ya Laddie?" hissed the malevolent, biting voice of the one person Harry least wanted to see at that moment. The Weasleys were congregated around the coffin's site, the rest of the mourners standing a little further back, maintaining a respectful distance.

Really feeling that he would have been intruding if he'd stayed with the closest thing he would ever remember as a family at that moment, Harry had retreated, and stood by the church wall, partly sheltered from the persistent rain, unseeing eyes pointed in the general direction of the red-haired clan. "I didn't..." Harry sighed, he knew he wasn't going to win an argument today of all days."

"Yer didn't think," Moody finished off for him, making sure Harry knew that he was at that moment the focus of pure, unadulterated fury. "'s right, innit Laddie? That's the beginnin', the middle 'n the end of the whole tale. You. Didn't. Think."

Harry blinked, cursing the fat tear that chose that moment to slide down his face, as he turned to face his accuser, "but... I didn't *know* what was going to happen... I... we.. Hermione.. and Parvati!" he protested.

Moody shifted his balance - the tip of his wooden leg had started to sink into the soft ground - "You didn't know. That's right... and so the first thin' you should a' done, boy, is *sought help*. You're kids," Moody sniffed, derisively, "trying to play games in the grown up world... 'n it's a lot scarier than you gave it credit, innit?"

"I didn't force them to join me," responded Harry, defensively, starting to feel the fire return to his eyes. "But I wasn't going to turn down help..."

"You, boy," said Moody, jabbing what Harry alarming noted was only most of his index finger (he really didn't want to know what had happened to the rest of it), "are stupid. It was a trap. D'ya get that into your thick skull? A trap. They didn' want yer friends... they were the *bait*, to lure *you* back to your own death. But you didn' think o' that, did ya? Just wen' harin' off in chase... 'n look what it got ya.

"Finnegan's a werewolf - yes, I know all abou' tha' - the Weasley lad's dead. The black kid nearly killed issel, an 's wonder you didn' all get killed... an' then, on top o' that, you get the Ministry involved... you're not feelin' quite the hero now, are ya?"

"But..."

"No buts, Laddie - not this time. Not today... I' known Arthur a long time... he 'n his missus always been good ter me. You can' even imagine the pain 'n anguish the loss o' their boy has caused them. 'n you, Laddie, *you* brought that on 'em. Some way to repay their frien'ship..."

Harry looked across to the Weasleys once more, to see Molly sobbing uncontrollably in Arthur's arms, and a grim looking Charlie holding his distraught sister. The stilted rhythm of Moody's walk told him that the embittered Auror had obviously said his piece, leaving him alone once more in the rain.

But not for long.

A shimmering blue pattern had detached itself from her normal group of friends, and slipped her hand into his, "you OK?"

"No."

Chapter 47

How many Goblin Rebellions were there within European borders in the fourteenth century?

The North Tower had become the Away Team's official haunt. Having a Sixth Year in the group had its advantages - Cho was able to form a shielding charm to stave off the persistent rain, that particular trick being a late Fifth Year topic (still, it hadn't escaped Harry's attention that Hermione had instantly adopted that focused look of hers when presented with glimpses of new knowledge).

A simple drying charm had made the surroundings a little more comfortable, and they were now all huddled around one of Harry's Mage fires; Gryffindor red and orange flames illuminating the ring of students slumped against the circular wall, mostly lost in thought.

Following Moody's outburst at the funeral, Harry had eventually made his way back to Gryffindor via Floo with Cho, rather than returning to the Burrow. He'd explained this to Charlie, who had nodded in quiet understanding, before adding, "look mate, if you ever need to, well, get away from it all, you're welcome at the camp. Anytime..."

Form had ensured that Harry had thanked Charlie for the offer (although his wits had not been so dulled as to have missed the glance of confirmation the dragon-enthusiast had nodded at Bill), but he was hard pressed to understand exactly how camping in the midst of a pack of dragons constituted 'getting away from it all'. There was more than a tiny echo of Hagrid in Charlie, mused Harry.

But for now they were all clustered against the battlements of the North Tower, beneath the (rather girly) pink protection bubble, the translucent surface rippling as the rain hit. He'd tried, he'd really tried, to push them all away after the funeral; tried the argument that they were putting themselves in peril by their very association with the Boy Who Lived. But, and secretly he'd been heartened by it, they'd all resolutely refused to abandon him. That didn't mean he would again be taking them with him on insane missions, no, he'd learnt his lesson on that one, but he wasn't alone in the world. At least, not at Hogwarts, anyway.

It was Parvati, of all people, who'd put it into words, "if we abandon you now, then Ron... well, that was for nothing. We're stronger than that, and we owe it to Ron not to let you take on the world alone."

Lost in reflection, Harry idly played with the flame's colours, from a dark, brooding black flame all the way through to a painfully bright violet, with the fire's tongues spiralling upwards in helix formations. The flames would only live as long as he maintained the will for them to exist - however, he'd become quite adept at maintaining the two streams of consciousness now, and could quite easily manage simple Mage tricks whilst, say, holding a conversation. The more dramatic manifestations of his power, however, would always require total concentration.

"Does anyone know how to make a Portkey?" asked Padma, breaking the silence. She and Parvati were sat a quarter of the way round the tower from Harry and Cho, with Seamus and Lavender between them. Hermione was on Harry's right, next to a rather hopeful looking Neville. The intertwined figures of Ginny and Dean completed the gathering.

A series of blank looks confirmed that none of the Away Team knew that particular secret, although Hermione, reliably, had some snippets, "well, I've read that it's really difficult. And you have to have a component drawn from the destination point," Hermione frowned in the firelight, as her brain reassigned itself from whatever had been preoccupying her earlier (Harry had noticed that she'd been unusually reserved, even given that they'd seen Ron buried barely six hours previously).

Having readjusted her posture, a habit Harry recognised as an indicator that she was entering full-scholar mode, Hermione continued, "and, naturally, it's really advanced magic. I think they teach the theory in Seventh Year."

Harry was impressed - he barely knew what his own year's curriculum consisted of (and would have been hard pressed to have given a definitive listing of the Fourth Year, come to think of it), yet Hermione was apparently familiar with lesson content two years away.

Having got their attention with the initial question, all eyes returned to consider Padma once more: "well," she elaborated, "it's just, I thought that it'd be the best way to get Harry to Durmstrang. You know, the soakstone, Key thing. If we could make a Portkey to get him there..."

"Except," noted Cho, regretfully, nestled against Harry's shoulder, where she'd made herself (and Harry) comfortable, "none of us know how to make one."

"But I'll bet it's in the library," persisted Padma.

"Yeah, but in the Restricted Section," countered Cho, still downbeat about their prospects.

"That wouldn't necessarily be a problem, actually," noted Harry, lightly, looking at Hermione. They had *carte blanche* to take whatever books they wanted from the Restricted Section, he recalled. Well, OK, it was Hermione who had the access, but hey, All For One and One For All. "Hermione?"

"It'd help if we knew roughly where we should be looking," suggested Hermione, "I mean, portals cross a number of disciplines..."

"All well and good," interrupted Dean, "but aren't you forgetting something? We need something from Durmstrang to prime the portkey with its destination..."

"Well actually," admitted Hermione, "Viktor gave me a small carving in the summer..."

Seamus snorted, "showed you his *carvings*, did he?" before being elbowed quiet by Lavender, although not before she'd directed a penetrating look at Hermione herself, raised eyebrows indicating that her dorm-mate would find she had some explaining to do later.

"Well yes," continued Hermione, looking uncharacteristically flustered, "but *he made it from a piece of the battlements at Durmstrang*. We have a key for the destination! And, naturally, it'll be easy enough to get a source from Hogwarts... Padma - if I get the books, can you look into how to make it?"

Padma, predictably enough for a Ravenclaw, leapt at the opportunity of acquiring new knowledge, "definitely - I mean, we're all in, aren't we?"

The group murmured various assents, before a thought struck Harry, "Hermione, if Viktor's *carving*," he stressed the word, since it was too good an opportunity for a dig at his best friend to miss, "well, if that *carving* was taken from the battlements... does that mean that's where I'll Portkey to? Right into the middle of the castle?"

"Well not the middle, per se," contradicted Hermione, "more the tower at the Western corner."

"Oh, well that's all right then," said Harry with false relief, "so I'll just materialise into the middle of the enemy's fortress, probably setting off six million alarm wards, and try to drain the Key without being spotted..."

Dean frowned in the halflight, "no-way round the wards?"

"Nope," confirmed Hermione, Padma and Cho simultaneously.

"Couldn't we make him, I dunno... *invisible*, somehow?"

Cho, with a start, nudged Harry in the ribs.

"Dean," stated Harry, firmly, "you're a genius..."

"Eh?"

"But Harry, it won't work on you as a Mage," started Hermione, who'd picked up on idea, "unless... oh! You mean..."

"Yes!" agreed Harry, enthusiastically.

Hermione's triumphant expression vanished, as she frowned once more, "but Flitwick wouldn't..."

"No..." conceded Harry, "but... hey! *Bill* might." Bill might indeed know how to get the Invisibility cloak to recognise him as a Mage. Harry looked around the various baffled faces, realising that they were mostly in the dark on this, "erm, you remember the Marauders' Map, don't you?"

The group nodded confirmation.

"Well, um, I have something else of my Dad's too..." he began. This was going to work, he could just feel it.

A sense of conviction was forming in Harry's body as Hermione summarised the plan: "so, let's recap..."

"A *white* hole?" asked Dean, incredulously, interrupting Hermione's fifth summary of the plan.

Harry smiled and Seamus snickered. Hermione scowled, glaring, tight lipped, at the unrepentant Dean. But she did take the hint.

Breakfast, Monday morning, and the natural rhythm of student life was starting to reassert itself. It was Charms first thing, and Harry was genuinely looking forward to seeing his favourite teacher. Even Potions with the Slytherins before lunch wasn't looking too terrible a prospect, now that he knew that Fleur was on his side.

Cho was waiting for him outside the double doors leading to the Great Hall; they exchanged one light kiss before entering hand in hand, to the astonishment of three Houses of onlookers (the Beauxbatons were uninterested, and the Gryffindors already knew... sort of). Still, there had to be a first time, and they'd decided that they might as well deal with the gossip and the rumours sooner rather than later.

Breakfast at Hogwarts was always slightly more informal than the other meals, and the traditional separation of Houses was less rigorously enforced. Partly this was down to the simple fact that whereas with lunch and supper everyone sat down to eat at the same time, during breakfast there was a definite spread to arrival times, with the early risers having left before the sloths had even got out of bed.

So it was that Cho joined the Gryffindor table that morning, sitting with Harry, Ginny, Dean and Hermione, who seemed almost bursting to tell them something; "Durmstrang!" exclaimed Hermione excitedly, "it's fallen to Tempus!"

That stopped Harry in his tracks, his hand frozen in mid-air as he'd been reaching for the pumpkin juice, "you what?"

"'s true, mate," confirmed Dean, who'd just finished tidying some loose tendrils of Ginny's hair, tucking them behind her ear, "apparently the Sign was projected over the castle last night. So You-Know-Who..."

"Voldemort," the correction was pure reflex, and Harry flicked his hand apologetically, inviting Dean to continue.

"Yeah, well... well he's not likely to try and take the Third Key any time soon, is he? I mean, Tempus have declared their opposition pretty solidly."

"Well," noted Harry dubiously, "we still don't know what Tempus are up to... so I still need to drain the Third Key. We can't just assume that Tempus will protect it for us."

"No," agreed Hermione, taking over the conversation in a manner that made it clear that she and Dean had already gone through this discussion, "but it buys us *time* so that Padma can make the Portkey."

It vaguely troubled Harry that Hermione wasn't taking it upon herself to make the Portkey. It just didn't seem like her - normally she'd have been desperate to try something like that - the more arcane and dangerous the better.

"Well that's good," noted Cho, "I mean, I agree that Harry needs to drain the Key... once its neutralised, it can't be misused, can it?"

Cho's unspoken assumption, that Harry wouldn't misuse the Key's power himself reminded him of the huge responsibility his power as a Mage now carried. He owed it to them all not to fail in that regard.

"Harry, Harry!" Alicia appeared at his elbow, spearheading the Seventh Year Gryffindors who were assembled behind her, "we've been talking, and, well, since you're back flying, and, well, um, Ron... well, we want to offer you the Capt.... hey, isn't she a *Ravenclaw*?" Alicia's attention had suddenly been caught by Cho's presence at the table.

"Cho's with me," replied Harry, firmly, ensuring that Alicia fully understood the double meaning, "and besides, we've already played *Ravenclaw*..."

"I know... um, well," Alicia's eyes darted towards Cho once more, who smiled genuinely back, enjoying Alicia's display of paranoia, "well, what we wanted to say was... will you be Quidditch Captain?"

Having already sworn to win the Quidditch Cup for Ron, it was an easy answer, "yes. Definitely. Absolutely," he confirmed, levelly. "I mean, thanks, I never really wanted to be Captain before, but now... well, now we've got something. We're going to win the Cup for Ron - I'm going to make sure of that." The conviction in Harry's voice almost astounded himself, and with the passing of the mantle of Captaincy, Harry was vaguely aware of an Oliver-like tone developing in his voice, "so we still on for practice tonight, yeah? It's going to take more than me catching the Snitch, you know... you're all going to have to play beyond yourselves. We're going to storm this Cup. Completely storm it."

Behind Alicia, Harry saw the Twins nodding their heads at Harry's sentiment, and the fierce determination in Angelina and Katie's eyes. They were going to destroy Hufflepuff, and slaughter Slytherin. This wasn't just House pride, this was about a debt of honour. Harry was starting to understand what it meant when people were described as being 'driven'. Which, he reflected, was much better than being described as 'obsessed', not that there was necessarily much distinction between the two.

Gryffindor weren't going to know what had hit them with Harry as Captain, let alone the opposition. Already Harry was mapping out strategies in his mind for that evening's practice, and made a mental note to see Madam Hooch about booking additional pitch time. The team were going to be begging for Oliver to come back, so that they could take it easy.

"I'm glad we've already played you lot," opined Cho, as the Seventh Years retreated to their section of the table, "'cos you look as though you mean business now. Still, might I remind you that you're currently in *third* place?" she enquired, lightly; as a *Ravenclaw*, Cho was too classy to actually *gloat*.

"A small detail that shall be overcome, Cho. We are going to play *like you wouldn't believe*." Harry paused, and locked a gaze of pure determination upon his partner, "seriously."

The Away Team chose to drag out breakfast as long as possible, and by the time Professor Dumbledore had arrived at the top table, in robes of a blue so deep it was nearly black, the full complement was there, including Padma, another refugee from the *Ravenclaw* table. Discussion was full of Quidditch, Tempus and Durmstrang. The pieces of the jigsaw were starting to fit together, and there was a confident buzz about the group. Things were on the up.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry noted that Dumbledore hadn't yet taken his seat, and instead remained standing - this fact was slowly drawing the attention of the rest of the tables, and an expectant silence filled the Hall, "Good Morning to you all," announced the Headmaster, smiling benevolently. "If I might have a moment of your time, I have some exciting news to announce..."

Well, Harry reasoned, it would be nice to have confirmation of Tempus taking Durmstrang from Dumbledore himself - not that he doubted whatever mechanisms had divulged the information to Dean and Hermione, but when Dumbledore spoke, the words carried that extra weight of authority.

"These have been troubled days of late, but one must not dwell on past sorrows. That is not to say we should forget, either," he cautioned, "but one can respect memories without stopping the nature of life. And, in some cases, the best tribute we can make is to ensure that we rise above grief, and sorrow, and embrace the joy of life once more. To do otherwise, to allow events to curtail our capacity for happiness is to give in to Darkness, is to let Evil win."

This wasn't the announcement Harry had been expecting, and, from the look of the other faces about him, everyone else was as nonplussed as he was. There was also an air of expectancy, of subdued excitement. Dumbledore had something lined up for them. Something good.

"Therefore, and in view of the popularity and success of the event last year, I am delighted to announce that Hogwarts will be hosting a Yule Ball this year," beamed the Headmaster, watching eyes widen and jaws drop about the Hall. "Now, I have spoken to Mr and Mrs Weasley, who share my conviction that we should not allow the passing of their son to destroy the very spirit of Hogwarts. The greatest tribute that we can offer Ronald Weasley is to continue to uphold the values he held so dearly, and to continue to ensure that his very zest, his sheer enjoyment of life, is reflected in our own conduct within these walls."

"Having discussed the matter with the Heads of House, we have decided to hold the Ball on the last Thursday of term. There will be no lessons on the Friday," he added, with a sparkle in his eyes that suggested that even if there had been, he wouldn't have expected much attentiveness from the students. "As was the case last year, the Ball will be open to Fourth Year students and above, but," the Headmaster cut off the indignant wave of protest before it had started, "there will be Common Room parties for those not attending the Ball. I trust that whichever function you attend, you will all have a most enjoyable evening."

That concluded the Headmaster's speech, and there was a brief, shell-shocked silence across the Great Hall as the announcement sunk in. A Yule Ball. At the end of term, so even people who weren't staying for Christmas would be able to attend. Harry felt a brief sadness that Ron wouldn't be there (the dress robes presented to him by the Twins remained unworn), but Dumbledore was right - Ron would have loved it. And if they all denied their own enthusiasm for these things, then Voldemort had won, had succeeded in destroying lives.

Cho was looking at him, with an expression that seemed half expectant, and half hopeful.

"Er Cho," Harry began, wondering why, even when it was practically a dead cert that she was going to say yes, he was suddenly nervous about asking her. After all, she was almost certainly going with him. Almost certainly. Certain. Almost. "Um, well, would you, will..." he could *feel* the blood rushing to his face, and his tongue suddenly seemed to have lost all fine motor control, "ah, well, I was... y'know... but, would you like to go to the Ball? I mean, with

me?" Harry was acutely aware that the words came out far faster than was strictly allowed, but there, he'd asked her.

"Harry," she replied, with a sweet smile that lit up the entire Hall, "I would be honoured."

This, Harry concluded as he exhaled in relief, a smile creeping across his face, was turning into a *great* morning. Even if the rest of the Away Team were making knowing 'ooh' noises at his and Cho's expense. Why was it that Dean and Ginny, who were actually *kissing* each other (presumably that was Ginny's non-verbal answer to Dean's invitation to the Ball) at the table, didn't get this kind of hassle?

"Post!" noted Neville, as the Great Hall was filled with the beating of hundreds of wings, and all eyes looked expectantly to the birds swarming beneath the enchanted ceiling, to see what news the day would bring.

"Ack!" exclaimed Hermione, refolding the *Daily Prophet* back in half with a snap. All eyes focused on her as she delicately peeled the newspaper apart once more, her expression possibly modelled on someone having their tooth pulled, "Harry," she said warily, "um, I don't think you're going to like this..."

Closing his eyes, Harry groaned, running his fingers through his hair; "damage?" he asked, tentatively.

Next to her, Dean winced as he caught sight of the headline in Hermione's hands, "ouch. And what, *terrified? Vulnerable? Her?* Man... this gets worse and worse," he continued, cheerily.

Dean's somewhat intermittent commentary, coupled with Hermione's eyebrow gymnastics, was something of a frustrating spectacle to observe, and Harry found his arm outstretched, wagging his fingers for the paper, for a lot longer than he'd anticipated. "Um, Hermione? Can I see? Please?"

Folding the paper back in half, so that the headline was once more obscured (he wished she wouldn't do that - it just increased the anxiety on his part), Hermione passed the paper over, "don't worry about it, Harry," she urged (a statement which *always* had the exact opposite effect), "and trust me, I'll kill her... well, maybe not kill, but I *swear* that bitch will..."

The rest of Hermione's diatribe against the as yet unknown female was lost as Harry's full attention was turned upon the *Daily Prophet*, and that morning's main headline:

Boy-Who-Lived is a Dark Mage: Hogwarts Gripped By Terror

In an astonishing turn of events, the Daily Prophet can exclusively reveal that The Boy Who Lived, Harry Potter (age 15), has been hiding the fact that he is, in fact a Mage. Readers will recall that Potter, who is also battling with a long term addiction problem, has a history of reticence when it comes to disclosing his abilities, as fellow student Pansy Parkinson explains.

"No-one was really surprised when Professor McGonagall announced that he was a Mage," said the startlingly pretty Fifth Year, "I mean, he's always had this Dark aura, and he's

always been deliberately hostile to other Houses. I mean, there was that whole business three years ago, when we found out he was a Parselmouth."

A Parselmouth is one with the ability to speak to snakes, and it is generally considered to be an indicator of Dark Magic. Interestingly enough, research has revealed that the student at the centre of the mysterious events at Hogwarts that year was none other than Miss Veronica Weasley, herself closely associated with Potter.

A pattern of betrayal emerges when one considers Potter's record since starting at Hogwarts, notes Mariella Marin, author of The Story Beneath the Scar: The Unauthorised Biography of The Boy Who Lived: "persistent rumours abound at the school that he killed a member of staff in his first year. In the second year, as mentioned above, a close friend was in grave peril, and another was petrified. With hindsight, it is apparent from Potter's actions that he was working with the escaped convict Sirius Black (himself Heir apparent to the Dark Lord), a liaison that resulted in an unprovoked attack on another member of the Hogwarts teaching staff, and further injuries to his supposed friends."

Events from last year are well known, but suffice it to say that it seems more than coincidence that Cedric Diggory should end up meeting his death in mysterious circumstances, with Potter as the only witness.

Finally, one week ago today, another friend of Potter's was killed under suspicious circumstances. The pattern of a Dark wizard betraying friendships for personal gain and glory is one that we have seen throughout the ages, and all the signs indicate that we are witnessing the rise of Darkness once again.

"It was terrible," continued Parkinson, terrified and traumatised by her encounter with Potter's dark Magic. "He could have killed us all; he just seemed to sink into this demented rage, and had all this dark energy swirling about his head." The students were only saved by the Headmaster's fortuitous intervention, but once again Albus Dumbledore's judgement in allowing a Mage to attend a school of Witchcraft and Wizardry must once again be questioned. Potter's Dark presence amongst such vulnerable students poses a huge risk.

Julyan van Greenhaugh, the Ministry's foremost specialist in Dark Arts, takes a dim view of the Magi, saying "the only good Mage is a dead one. The Magi were an evil, barbaric tribe, and the Four Founders will be spinning in their graves at the thought that Hogwarts' sanctity has been defiled in this way."

At present, the Ministry imposes a life sentence on any Mage found within the extent of the Warlock Borders, although sources have revealed that this policy is under urgent review (practice in other wizarding nations is known to extend to the Death Penalty). It is surprising, if not irresponsible, that Hogwarts staff did not immediately hand Potter over to the relevant authorities when news of his duplicitous behaviour first came to light.

There was, of course, plenty more, but Harry had got the gist of the article by that time. And further reading was rendered impossible because things had just taken a further turn for the worse.

A vaguely suspicious, and somewhat hostile buzz of conversation had been building momentum as the students digested the day's post (Hermione wasn't the only student with a subscription to *The Daily Prophet*), and with just about every unfortunate escapade to have befallen Harry in his time at Hogwarts (and, being fair there had been a few) being dragged back up in the article, the Away Team were finding themselves the subject of a fair amount of unwelcome attention.

The sharp glances and hostile whispers were immediately silenced, however, as the Great Hall's double doors were flung open, and four wizards in professional robes marched in, three with wands drawn. The fourth, leading the group, was none other than Percy Weasley, headed straight for the Gryffindor Table, a scroll of parchment clutched in his hand.

"Harry James Potter?" asked Percy, in severe, professional tones, amplified by a *Sonorus* charm to ensure that the entire Hall could hear.

Harry let his shoulders slump in exasperation; as if being the infamous Boy Who Lived wasn't enough recognition factor, Percy was choosing to ignore the fact that he'd been in the same House as Harry during their overlapping periods at Hogwarts, and the tiny, trifling detail that he had been his brother's *best friend*. "Yes, Percy?"

"You will address employees of the Ministry with the professional respect they are due," ordered one of the accompanying hit-wizards, with a tone that indicated that 'Percy' wasn't deemed to be remotely near 'professional respect'.

Harry wondered bitterly what sort of reaction he'd get if he called Percy 'Wetherby' instead.

The tedious problem of identification over, fraught with difficulties though it had been, Percy was finally free to deliver his text. Straightening his back even more, clearing his throat, and discreetly puffing out his chest (well, Percy thought it was discreet), his crisp tones echoed through the silence in the Great Hall. Percival Weasley's finest hour; 350 people hanging on his every word: "Harry James Potter, under the powers granted to me, as executor of the Minister for Magic's Emergency Directive under the Aurelius..."

"Mr Weasley," interrupted Dumbledore, his tone mild, but the force in his voice evident, "is this really necessary?"

Percy turned to glare at his former Headmaster, "yes, *Professor* Dumbledore, as I am sure you are aware, custom dictates that the full charges must be presented in public..."

"Yes, yes, I am aware of tradition, *Mister* Weasley," returned Dumbledore, a trace of irritation evident as his piercing blue eyes burned coldly, "but I'm sure we could come to a more... discreet arena for..."

"My instructions from the Minister were most explicit," replied Percy, cutting off Dumbledore, "and I am sure I need not remind you that the Minister still retains overall responsibility for the administration of this establishment."

"Yes, I do believe that our respective roles are perfectly clear in that regard," acknowledged the Headmaster, settling back into his seat, but retaining a cold look of anger.

Sensing his victory, Percy allowed himself a small grin of satisfaction before turning back to face Harry and the parchment's script, "*as I was saying*; Harry James Potter, under the powers granted to me, as executor of the Minister for Magic's Emergency Directive under the Aurelius Extension, I hereby arrest you on the following charges:

"Charge 1: the murder of Cedric Diggory in June of this year.

"Charge 2: attempting to pervert the course of justice with respect to Charge 1.

"Charge 3: instigating the resurrection of, and liasing with, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in his subsequent rise to power in the European mainland

"Charge 4: using an Unforgivable Curse, namely the Imperius Curse, on a former member of teaching staff at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

"Charge 5: the kidnap of Hermione Granger and Parvati Patil, both students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

"Charge 6: construction of a portal between two protected areas, namely Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and Beauxbatons Academie

"Charge 7: instigation of insurrection within the Dementors at the Ministry's former incarceration facility at Azkaban

"Charge 8: direct culpability in the murder of Ronald Weasley, a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

"Charge 9: the Ministry notes that you are a Mage, and as such, Slytherin's Edict applies."

Percy paused, drawing breath. Frankly, Harry was amazed that he'd been able to read the (admittedly impressive, though amazingly flawed) charge list without stalling. Every eye in the room had transferred from Percy (who didn't exactly hold the eye when talking) to consider the Boy Who Lived in the light of the freshly revealed catalogue of crime, and those eyes remained on him as Percy delivered the final section of his speech.

"Charges one, three, four, five, seven, eight and nine all carry mandatory life sentences. Charge two carries a fine of 6,000 Galleons, charge six a fine of 11,000 Galleons. Charge nine also requires that you be permanently blinded prior to incarceration.

"You are therefore sentenced to life imprisonment at the Ministry's incarceration facility of Blackrock, and a fine of 17,000 Galleons is imposed."

"Sentenced?" exclaimed Harry, shocked, "but... but, but what about a trial?"

Percy sneered at him disdainfully, "the Ministry reserves trials for the innocent." He nodded curtly at the three hit-wizards, "take him away."

Chapter 48

What is a Grindylow's main food source?

"What?" snapped Cho, spinning round to look incredulously at Percy, who had already started to turn to head towards the Great Hall's double doors once more, his work done.

Percy paused, and then, with infinite disdain, looked down at the assembled, shocked Gryffindors (with attendant pair of Ravenclaws), "as you heard, Mr Potter is to serve out a life sentence for his crimes. Please do not attempt to interfere with official Ministry business, thank you." Percy concluded this brief statement with a curt nod, and waited, impatiently, as two of the hit-wizards approached either side of Harry's chair.

Harry was still holding *The Daily Prophet* in one hand, and a piece of toast in the other, the alarming turn of events that morning having completely stunned him. Strong hands gripped his upper arms with unnecessary firmness, and dropping the paper and toast (Hermione tried to hide her dismay that her newspaper had landed on top of the butter dish), he was forced to his feet.

The quintet made their way out of the Great Hall - Percy in front, marching imperiously towards the double doors, Harry next, frogmarched by a hit wizard either side of him, both maintaining vice-like grips on his arms. The third hit-wizard was behind, wand drawn, and trained at the base of Harry's neck; "one move, sonny, and we *are* licensed to use *extreme* force for self-protection."

The Great Hall had never seemed quite so massive before; Harry felt as though they'd been walking for hours, and yet the exit seemed no nearer. A hissing had erupted across the Hall, which Harry had first mistakenly assumed had been directed at the Ministry employees, until first applause and then cheers had broken out, led, of course, by the Slytherin table, but soon spreading to the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws.

The worst thing, Harry reflected, was the look of betrayal he'd seen in Colin Creevey's eyes as he was forced past the Fourth Years' section of the table (minus Ginny, of course). He'd hated every second of the Creevey brothers' adulation of him, but to see that even his most ardent of fans would automatically swallow the Ministry's version of so-called-truth was crushing. There and then, Harry realised that sympathy across the world at large for his plight would be thin on the ground.

Dumbledore's pattern was leaving the staff table, he noted, as the doors finally loomed large in his vision, offering respite from the jeers and taunts that had acted as a salute to his arrest. *Choose between what is right, and what is easy.* Right now, it was laughably easy to obliterate his four captors with a single thought - attempting to hold a Mage at wandpoint was a crazy notion.

If, mused Harry, they'd leapt out on him in an ambush, and cast, say, *Stupefy* before he'd even known what was happening, then yes, they'd have him. But to stand around waving wands in his face was ridiculous. But because it would be easy to escape, did that make it right? And, insufferable though he was, it was *Percy*, and he'd already been the cause of one Weasley's death; to actively attack another was... unthinkable.

Numbly, Harry let himself be marched through the Entrance Hall, past the ever watchful gargoyles, and down the flight of stone steps out of the castle. Out of Hogwarts. Out of the only place he had ever felt that he had truly belonged...

"Percy! *Percy!*" Ginny's voice cut across the still air of the cold December morning.

Percy, in front, stopped, and turned round, irritation etched across every feature of his face, "yes? Miss... Weasley?" he asked, feigning only the barest of acquaintance with his sister.

Harry was desperate for his captors to turn around themselves, so that he could see Ginny (and Dean, Seamus... hell, *everyone* seemed to be there), but their hold remained resolute. He'd tried looking over his shoulder, but a not so gentle prod with the third hit-wizard's wand, stabbing him right at the top of his spine, told him that such aggressive moves were uncalled for.

"Don't you 'Miss Weasley' me, Percy, you miserable git," snarled Ginny, of whom Harry now felt insanely proud, "this is wrong and you know it!"

In his mind's eye, Harry had a distinct image of Dean physically restraining Ginny from leaping at Percy and clawing his eyes out with her bare hands.

Pity.

Irritated, Percy stepped past Harry and his captors, so, frustratingly, all the dialogue was now taking place behind his back, and all he had to look at was the lake, the school gates in the distance.

"You are attempting to interfere with official Ministry business," warned Percy, in his clipped tones; it didn't take much imagination on Harry's part to visualise the look of irritation on Percy's face. "Mr Potter is a Mage, and shall be treated as such."

"That's not 'Mr Potter!'" shrieked Ginny, "that's Harry! *Harry!* You remember him, don't you? Remember? *Ron's best friend.* Mum and dad pract..."

"*This,*" interrupted her elder brother, with what Harry assumed had to be some sort of gesture to himself, captive as he was in the hit-wizards' merciless hold, "is a Mage. He *betrayed* every one of us all... winning friendship through lies, duplicity and falsehood. He's a *Mage*, Ginny; we invited a Mage into our own house..."

The disgust in Percy's tone was chilling; Harry couldn't understand how Percy's attitude towards him could turn so completely on one simple detail.

"...but of course, you're probably letting your own immature feelings for him cloud your judgement. Wake up, Ginny, and see the *real* Harry Potter. The conniving, traitorous, *murderous* Mage."

"Now *that,*" stated Dean, carefully and flatly, in a tone of warning Harry had never heard from him before, "was uncalled for..."

"I'll tell you what's uncalled for," countered Percy, hotly, "Ministry operatives being harangued by schoolchildren whilst apprehending dangerous criminals. *That* is uncalled for,

and, unless you wish to *join* this... Mage, at Blackrock," Percy paused, evidently savouring the sudden looks of horror he was now receiving, "oh yes," he assured, "I'd be quite within my rights to haul each of you up for obstruction..."

"You wouldn't," protested Hermione's voice, aghast.

"Oh, he would," contradicted Ginny, in a bitter voice, before directing her ire at her brother once more, "but mark my words, Percival Weasley, this has *not* ended."

"You're in danger of pushing family connections too far," warned Percy, "but let me assure *you*, finally, that this *is* over. We, the Ministry, are acting to protect the public - if you could see beyond your own petty self-interest, you might appreciate the greater good being accomplished here." Percy's tone then took on a new level of insufferability, as he added, patronisingly, "But, I suppose, it's too much to ask of children that they see these things."

Then, without waiting for a response, Percy was suddenly back in Harry's sight once more, and the group resumed their march across the Hogwarts grounds, towards the school gates. With his sense, Harry watched the patterns of his friends stay on the steps, brightness diminishing as the gates loomed nearer in his eyes.

Stepping across the line of the gates, onto the rough surface of the road that led to Hogsmeade, Percy turned once more to face Harry, all trace of any recognition he might have for the captive long since banished. "We will now Apparate to the Ministry," he announced formally, "you may find the experience of Forced Apparation disconcerting..."

Harry wasn't certain, but he thought he detected a ghost of a smile on Percy's lips as he disappeared from view. Then the hitwizards all mumbled their own incantations, and the world was pulled from beneath his feet.

A searing 'zing' of pain sliced through Harry's skull like a skewer, every muscle in his body suddenly locked rigid, as first the Ministry surroundings snapped into focus, and then the floor slammed into Harry's face.

Hard.

"Oops, sorry 'bout that, Perce," apologised the left-hand hit-wizard, with minimal sincerity, "must've let our grip slip..."

"Guess Spencer drew the short straw on the Azkaban stake-out," observed his right-hand counterpart.

Drawing himself to his knees, ears ringing and his jaw still frozen stupidly, mouth agape, Harry straightened his glasses to take in the new surroundings. His arms ached from where his two captors had maintained their death grip on him as they marched out of Hogwarts, but they'd evidently released him as soon as they landed at their destination. Probably with a little humorous shove for added gaiety.

Harry tried to move his jaw up and down, as he felt the frozen skin start to soften and warm up, wiping the drool away with one hand. Still kneeling (the wand tip had been reapplied to

the back of his neck as soon as he'd pulled himself up from the floor), Harry sensed what he could of the room, the taste of cheap carpet still upon his tongue.

They were in a medium sized chamber - probably some kind of reception hall - a door led into a multi-sided office, where he recognised Fudge's pattern, together with three others that he could not place. On the other side of the office lay a similar chamber to his own, this one containing several people, one of whom was Albus Dumbledore. Harry suddenly felt reassured by his Headmaster's presence - at least the *entire* world wasn't against him.

"Get him up off the floor," commanded Percy, not even looking at Harry, seeming to be too intent on preening himself, and ensuring his robes were hanging correctly.

"Mmpf!" Harry winced as hands once again gripped his arms (he could *feel* the bruising already), hauling him to his feet with as little grace as they could manage. At least, he reasoned, with two people holding him, he'd be unlikely to fall over - his legs still hadn't fully recovered from his Forced Apparation.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Harry took a moment of time to reflect how ingenious the Wizarding world appeared to be at concocting newer, and even more unpleasant means of travel. And he'd thought Floo was bad...

The doors opened, and a small-framed, elderly witch greeted the quintet with a severe glare, "the Minister will see you now," she intoned, the immense favour the Minister for Magic was doing by granting an audience at that time made explicitly clear.

Percy nodded curtly once more (Harry sorely hoped that Percy would develop whiplash as a side-effect of working at the Ministry) and Harry was marched past the secretary, who scribbled some notes with a magnificently black quill that just screamed style, elegance and expense.

The Minister's Office was, all things considered, quite something. Now having a chance to count the walls, Harry was able to determine that it was a seven-sided room (Hermione would probably know the correct word, he thought), two walls contained massive double doors; one through which he, Percy and the hit-wizards had just entered, and the other led through to what had to be the main reception, containing Dumbledore, amongst others.

One wall was a window from floor to ceiling, overlooking a courtyard of some description, the courtyard itself having, again, seven walls; he was beginning to detect a theme here. Sweeping outwards with his sense, Harry saw that the courtyard was surrounded by the seven sided building he was standing in. Beyond the building the jumble of patterns and boundaries became too dense for him to make much out, but sweeping his sense through the various levels of the Ministry (he was unsurprised to learn that they were on the sixth floor), Harry soon found Arthur Weasley's pattern - on one of the opposite sides, and on the second floor.

In front of the window was a huge desk, an old, but obviously expensive leather armchair behind it, currently empty. To the window's right stood a large grandfather clock, with a vast array of hands, all pointing to what Harry took to be different Departments within the Ministry, the names too small for him to discern from the doorway.

An identical clock stood to the window's left, but there were only three hands, and none of them carried names.

In front of the desk were three large, leather sofas, of equal vintage to the armchair. These were arranged in a horse-shoe formation around a large coffee table, snowed under with parchments and quills, and, strangely, a seemingly forgotten decanter of red liquid.

The remaining walls carried portraits of Ministers past, all considering events within the office with the utmost consideration, which, at that moment in time, seemed to mean that they all felt compelled to glare at Harry.

This put them in the same category as the three people seated on the sofas (the secretary remained standing, attending, it seemed, to some filing at a cabinet against one of the back walls). Cornelius Fudge Harry knew, of course, but the other three were strangers. In appearance only, he soon found out: "welcome, gentlemen." Cornelius Fudge extended an arm in greeting that somehow pointedly managed to exclude Harry, despite the fact that he remained sandwiched between three hit-wizards.

"This is Irene Stark," the Minister continued, "from the Daily Prophet, together with the editor, Darius Cassell. Ms Stark, Mr Cassell, this is Percival Weasley, who headed up The Capture."

Harry could hear Fudge's capitalisation of 'The Capture', as though Percy had singlehandedly triumphed against Herculean odds, as though the whole morning was the very stuff of legend. And then, with a start, he realised that that was probably very much how it would be played out, particularly since Stark (who had written the hatchet job on his so-called-addiction to Dreamless Sleep), not to mention Cassell, were both present.

"Gosh," breathed a wide-eyed, excited (yet entirely unconvincing) Stark, "was it... dangerous?" she enquired, Quick-Quotes Quill poised over parchment.

Percy puffed his chest out once more, before responding, "nothing I couldn't handle," choosing, for modesty's sake, not to relieve the swashbuckling escapade.

Harry would have *loved* to observe that Percy's stiffest challenge had come from a fourteen year old girl, but suspected that any statement from himself would only serve to worsen the situation. Experience had taught him this year that even when he thought he'd reached the bottom, and things were as black as they could get, the situation could usually be relied upon to take a further turn for the worse.

Rapidly.

"Quite so," agreed Fudge, enthusiastically, "Order of Merlin, Second Class, I don't doubt, and we'll see you as Under-Secretary yet..."

"Tipped for high office, eh?" enquired Cassell, white bushy hair, and horn-rimmed glasses, behind which sharp hazel eyes flicked animatedly. The rest of Cassell was, well, unremarkable, his robes somehow managing to convey, if not quite neglect, at least indifference to appearance, whilst not *actually* looking shabby. It was the eyes, however, that sparkled with sharp intelligence, and Harry immediately knew that this was a man not to be underestimated.

"Off the record, of course," interjected Fudge, as Percy tried to will himself a couple of extra inches in height to fully look the part.

Stark looked vaguely disappointed, as the quill traced back over its previous scribing, and new text flowed. It was she who posed the next question, "so Minister, Mr Weasley, our readers will obviously be heartened to see that the Ministry responds to the *Prophet's* concerns so promptly..."

"I beg your pardon?" exclaimed Percy, affecting a shocked tone.

"Well, it's all here, isn't it?" responded Stark, lifting up a copy of the paper, and quoting, "*we - that's the staff at the Prophet - can only begin to wonder why the Ministry has yet to act on this case, aside, of course,*" Stark looked up and smiled sweetly at the Minister, "*from the usual reasons of poor leadership and misguided priorities that seem to afflict the Ministry*"

Percy appeared to stammer for a moment, but was rescued by Fudge, an old hand at this game, who didn't seem in the least perturbed by Stark's allegations, "my dear Irene," he countered, "obviously you understand that the Ministry has protocols, regulations. Form has to be adhered to, we can't very well go waltzing into situations like this without preparation; no, quite the contrary - we've been working hard on building the case against Potter all week, and, well, what can I say, it's just an amazing *coincidence* that your *personal opinion* was published on the day we had scheduled for Potter's capture."

"Coincidence. Of course, Minister; just like the coincidence with the redeployment of Bagman after the Triwizard Cup fiasco, and that coincide...."

"I understand that as a journalist you have your own agenda to peddle," said Fudge, cutting off Stark's simpering sarcasm, "but I assure you, this Office does *not* take its lead from petty, narrow-minded, slanderous journalism. If you want to take issues with character," he continued, jabbing a finger at Harry, "*there's* the real story!"

"The whiter-than-white Boy-Who-Lived turns out to be a deceitful, duplicitous murderer, masquerading as a wizard as it seemed fit, only to fall victim to his own folly, and his disguise be recognised for the evil charade that it was." Fudge could really do the tone of righteous conviction well.

"Ah, excellent!" noted Cassell, his eyes locking onto Harry with a distinctly predatory interest, "perhaps an exclusive interview for the *Prophet*? Character study, you know, last regrets, reconsidering life choices when facing life in prison... could make quite a piece, Cornelius..."

"Sorry Darius," replied Fudge, hands outstretched in apology, "but, obviously, it's simply not safe to risk exposing anyone to the Mage... still, you're welcome to interview Weasley here, who can fully explain the case and so on. The Ministry in action, and all that..."

"Yes, quite," agreed Cassell, "I'm sure our readers will be... *thrilled*."

"Well, I think that concludes our interview," announced Fudge, pointedly, looking at the two reporters, "as you can see, we have the Mage in our custody, and I assure you he will be taken to Blackrock, and processed, within the day." Fudge beamed a magnificent, polished smile, "it's triumphs like this," he continued, "that make you realise the job is worthwhile - that the Ministry really does make a positive contribution to life, and that, when all is said and done, it's the public's interest we keep at heart."

"Oh, absolutely, Minister," simpered Stark, as she stood, having gathered her scrolls and quill during his closing remarks. "We all see the Ministry did the right thing in capturing this... Mage, but our readers were simply *concerned* that you hadn't acted sooner."

Fudge smiled in return, "well, I'm sure we can rely on you to put the record straight in that regard, can't we?"

"Of course, Minister, of course," promised Stark, and then she and her editor left the huge office by the second set of doors, where, Harry noted with relief, Dumbledore was already standing, ready to march in.

"Albus! Do come in," cried Fudge cordially, oblivious to the flinty look he was receiving in return.

"Good morning, Cornelius," responded Dumbledore, in carefully articulated tones, his blue eyes lacking their usual sparkle, before nodding in Harry's direction, "Harry."

"Hel..." Harry started to respond, but was cut off.

"You'll keep your mouth *shut*, if you know what's good for you," advised the hit-wizard at Harry's back, menacingly, digging the wand tip a little further into Harry's neck.

"Mr Lambton, is such behaviour *really* necessary?" asked Dumbledore, presumably of the advice-giving hit-wizard.

That, reflected Harry, was the truly great thing about having Dumbledore on your side. Firstly, he knew *everyone*, and secondly, he could convey with words what most could fail to achieve with all-out conflict. In this case, Dumbledore's palpable disappointment in Lambton seemed to sap the wizard's resolve, and Harry felt the wand's pressure removed from his neck. Shifting uncomfortably, his two guardians also released their grip, being careful not to meet Dumbledore's eyes.

"Well, Albus, it was awfully good of you to join us," continued Fudge, in a particularly maddening tone of voice. "Now," he paused, a flicked through a stack of scrolls on his desk, "ah yes... Portkey." He looked meaningfully at Dumbledore, "we understand that you made a Portkey for the Mage..."

"For Harry," corrected Dumbledore, clearly not having much time for the unwritten agreement that seemed to be in operation, whereby Harry had become 'the Mage'.

"Yes, quite," snapped Fudge, the affable tone evaporating fast, "well, if you could remove the device from... him, I would be most grateful."

It was as close to a request for assistance as Fudge was ever likely to make. Nonetheless, this admission that the Minister wasn't all powerful wasn't enough to overcome the disappointment Harry felt that his captors hadn't forgotten about the Portkey. Ideas of jumping from the Ministry to Azkaban to Hogwarts to... well, *somewhere* were shelved.

Dumbledore took a deep, reluctant breath, and Harry felt the venerable wizard's fingers take hold of the pendant's cord as he muttered seemingly half a novel's worth of Latin to remove the Portkey. The familiar weight at his throat now absent, Harry felt strangely incomplete - almost under-dressed, in fact. Vulnerable.

"You realise, of course, Cornelius, that you are making a grave mistake here, do you not?" prompted Dumbledore, as he paced the short distance from Harry to the Minister's sofa, handing the Portkey over.

Fudge bristled slightly, "now look here, Albus, we simply can't allow that... that *Mage* to remain at Hogwarts... you *saw* what they're writing about it." Fudge gestured at the *Daily Prophet*, lying on top of the other papers spread before him, the headline still screaming *Boy-Who-Lived is a Dark Mage: Hogwarts Gripped By Terror*.

The disappointment in Dumbledore's tone was evident to all in the room, "I would have hoped, Cornelius, that you would have been secure enough in your own judgement not to be prompted into rash action by tabloid journalism. And as for Harry, I do believe you would find the whole matter much clearer if you looked *beyond* these emotive labels, and saw the fifteen year old boy standing prisoner before you."

"Albus," returned Fudge, urgently, desperately, "the boy's a *Mage*, what am I supposed to do? You know what they're like... savages. Immoral. Ruthless. Vengeful. I simply couldn't... my *conscience* wouldn't allow me to let this Mage remain free. *The public* wouldn't stand for it."

"Clearly, Cornelius, you have a different conscience to me," noted Dumbledore, his voice laced with regret.

The rest of the meeting consisted of a heavy dose of legal jargon which sailed completely over Harry's head, as Dumbledore and Fudge argued over the finer points of his impending incarceration.

They were going to blind him. He was going to live the rest of his life locked up in a tiny cell, apparently on a desolate island somewhere off the coast of Cornwall. Fifteen years old, maybe only one tenth of the way through his expected lifespan as a wizard. His life virtually over, almost as soon as it had begun.

But none of this occupied Harry's mind quite so much as the horrified realisation that he was going to be spending the rest of his life surrounded by Dementors.

Chapter 49

Who was the oldest wizard to die in custody?

In all the time he'd been in the Minister's Office, Fudge had barely glanced at Harry. Dumbledore had left now, squeezing Harry's shoulder tightly in farewell, and promising to keep a close eye on his treatment. He strongly suspected that Dumbledore had actually aimed that last promise more as a threat to the Minister than as a personal assurance to Harry.

Once again, the sheer power Dumbledore wielded could almost be tasted in those parting words, and Harry had felt, as much as seen, the hit-wizards flinch at the prospect of being on the receiving end of Dumbledore's wrath. And yet beneath the power was a weariness, a resignation. A sense of fatigue.

As soon as Dumbledore's deep blue robes had disappeared from sight, however, the tone in the office changed. Strong arms once more gripped Harry's arms, *exactly* where they'd held him before, and it was only pride that stopped Harry yelling out loud in pain.

He was not going to let them get to him, no matter how much they tried.

He was Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived; Harry Potter, the Last of the Magi.

But first and foremost, he was Harry Potter, *Gryffindor*. He wasn't going to let the Sorting Hat down now.

"Take him away," Fudge had commanded, and it was then that Harry realised how much Percy had modelled himself on the Minister. The tone of voice, the mannerisms... not to mention the short-sightedness, the prejudice and the same love of power for power's sake.

Power corrupts. Harry understood now, though, that it corrupted in different ways. Voldemort, for example, had turned completely to evil, to Darkness, and had seemingly lost all sense of humanity, all traces of the boy who had been Tom Riddle. Fudge, on the other hand, seemed seduced by the trappings of power; the money, the splendour, the luxury. The *prestige*.

None of this really mattered now, however, as Harry was marched through the corridors of the Ministry, Lambton's wand once more digging a hole in the back of his neck. "Take a good look around," he urged, "since these are the last things you'll ever see."

That was enough for Harry to pretty much know for certain what House Lambton had been in at Hogwarts; *nothing* gloated like a Slytherin.

Wizards and witches in the corridors stepped quickly out of the procession's way - Percy had stayed behind with Fudge ("urgent policies to discuss," Percy had offered, apologetically), so it was just Harry and the three hit-wizards. First they'd taken him to Records, where an elderly, bumbling wizard had taken Harry's details.

Much to his captors' seeming annoyance, the Administrator seemed to love his work, and chattered inanely about the specific patterns of Harry's finger and palm prints ("*interesting* Fate Line you have there, *very* interesting... and Dark struggles in your life, too,"). In addition to finger-prints, palm prints, height, weight, age, eye-colour ("any distinguishing marks?" the official had asked, with a completely straight face), a lock of Harry's hair was also taken for the record. This last component gave Harry troubling thoughts connected to Polyjuice Potion, but, he reasoned, he was being paranoid: after all, why would the Ministry possibly want to impersonate *him*?

The Administrator had concluding his notes, entered as they were on the record. His record. He, Harry Potter, had a criminal record. He could see the crowing delight on Uncle Vernon's face in his mind: "always knew that boy was no good! Didn't I tell you Petunia? Ever since we took that reprobate in..."

Practiced as he was at ignoring the Dursleys, it didn't take too long for him to filter out his inner-Vernon's rants, together with the sycophantic counterpoint of his Aunt's simpering agreements. Oddly enough, Dudley never featured in his mind's conversations. Then again, Harry reminded himself, Dudley didn't possess the wit to hold a conversation with a cheeseburger.

Next had been the Treasury, where arrangements were made for Harry's fine to be paid. This was somewhat problematical, since Harry wasn't actually certain he had enough funds to cover the fine, and the wording of the contract promised *dire* penalties should the contract of payment bounce. Finally, exasperated at Harry's shocking ignorance of his financial accounts, the Ministry had sent an Owl to Gringotts, which returned barely five minutes later.

Harry didn't get to see the reply itself, which he thought distinctly unfair, since it was *his* money, but given the lack of consternation, or malevolence, on receipt of the reply, he assumed that he had to have had at least 17,000 Galleons in there. Of course, there were 17,000 Galleons less now, but it wasn't likely that prison would offer him chances for extended shopping trips anyway.

If he didn't know that they wouldn't accept it, Harry would have given all the money to the Weasleys, every last Knut. Percy or no, the Weasleys were still the first thing Harry thought of in connection with the word 'family'.

With each stop in the Ministry (they were, he noted, slowly working their way down through the seven storeys), prison got closer. He kept on wondering whether he should attempt to escape, but dismissed the notion (with increasing frequency as the uneasiness started to rise); attempting to battle his way out of the Ministry would surely lead to innocent people being hurt - and besides, where would he go?

But as the prison marched ever nearer in his mind's eye, so too did the Dementors.

There were fireplaces and there were fireplaces. The one the quartet stood before now, however, in what seemed to be the main entrance to the building (Harry wasn't entirely sure, and Lambton had long since dropped his tour-guide act "see there? That's where we issue the

execution permits... and *that* is where we interrogate hostiles...), needed more than the word 'fireplace' to do it justice.

The entire wall seemed to be taken up with the hearth, ornate stone carvings forming the surround, depicting dragons, wizards, giants and other figures, all, Harry assumed, acting out scenes from a legend of some sort. The stone frieze extended from floor to ceiling, a height of a least twenty feet, and continued across the top of the fire itself, twice as broad as it was high.

Now that they were closer, Harry could see that every single detail in the carving - the people, the animals, the plants, the clouds - every single detail was animated, and knights on horseback staged jousting contests across the top as unicorns galloped through the gently swaying trees. Every now and again one of the dragons would swoop across the carving, before disappearing... it was the sort of thing you could watch for *hours*, yet nobody else seemed remotely interested in it.

A constant stream of witches and wizards were appearing from, and disappearing into, the vast orange flames, all this activity being monitored by a rather bored looking pair of security wizards. Obviously these were seasoned Floo travellers - distinguished looking wizards in professional robes emerged from the flames without breaking stride, their boots clicking across the highly polished floor, tiled in alternate squares of black and white.

Now that he thought about it, the floor reminded Harry of the entrapments guarding the Philosopher's Stone in their First Year. No Ron here to help him cross the board safely this time, though. Not, he reminded himself, that the beckoning flames offered him safety of any kind on this occasion.

Lambton, who seemed to be getting all the good parts on this trip, stepped forward as they reached the left hand side of the fireplace, where the frieze appeared to be telling the tale of a dragon's battle with a serpent, all bared fangs and slashing talons. Harry saw that the flames at this point were a slightly different colour, and set slightly further back than the main fire.

Picking up a large, silver jug that had been resting on a small table tucked just inside the edge of the fireplace, Lambton poured a stream of white liquid onto the flames, commanding 'Blackrock'; the flames parted, giving Harry his first site of the prison to which he was being transported.

If the view through the portal was any kind of guide, Blackrock seemed just like Gringotts.

And, as Harry found out once the quartet emerged from the fireplace in the prison's reception hall, there was a reason for that.

The first thing that struck Harry as he emerged from the portal, Lambton's wand once more digging a hole in his neck, was that the metallic coldness of despair he'd been anticipating wasn't there.

The Dementors he'd been fearing weren't there; perhaps Blackrock never had them in the first place, Harry mused, as he absorbed the surroundings. Just as with the portal to Beauxbatons,

the portal in the Ministry's fireplace had only shown the destination building, and not its inhabitants.

Blackrock's entrance chamber, for want of a better description, was a vast marble hall, the predominantly white floor criss-crossed with various black tiles laid in geometrically precise patterns. Twin rows of huge columns, again apparently made from marble, polished to a mirror-like sheen, supported the roof, where bird-like creatures swooped and dived between nests in the chandeliers and burrows at the top of the columns.

It seemed odd to have birds *inside* the building, but other things were pressing for attention.

The columns divided the entrance hall into three - the central, massive section of the room, perhaps as large as the Great Hall at Hogwarts, was completely empty except for the intricate floor. Harry's sense, however, told him that the entire floor was saturated in magic, patterns and auras swirling in displays that mimicked the floor's tiling design.

Harry was being marched to the left hand side of the chamber, and it was here that he realised that the resemblance to Gringotts was more than coincidental. A goblin, perhaps a head shorter than Harry, approached the group, his pointed nose wrinkling in apparent distaste at the new prisoner, whilst the watery blue eyes scanned Harry up and down, as though frisking him for dangers.

"Clawhand," greeted Lambton, "here's the Mage; I believe the Minister has spoken to Tolrus about the special arrangements needed."

Clawhand, if that indeed was the goblin's name, levelled a look at Lambton that silently rebuked him for daring to suggest that Blackrock was in any need of guidance from the Ministry as to how prisoners should be accommodated. "The exchange?" he requested, curtly, holding out a long, bony hand.

"It's all here," promised Lambton, finally releasing his wand's pressure on Harry's neck, and passing a rolled parchment, sealed with the purple mark of the Minister's Office, over to the goblin's out-stretched hand.

With a deft flick of the wrist, Clawhand sliced through the sealing wax as though his fingers were knives, and perused the document carefully, before looking back to Lambton, and giving the briefest, tiniest nod. "Follow me," he ordered, and the goblin set off down the left hand channel of the entrance hall. "Do not step on the black squares," he advised, as he took up a zig-zag path to stick to the white sections of floor.

As if dodging the black tiles wasn't hard enough when being marched three abreast, Harry was alarmed to notice that the tiles' colours *changed* as they walked, the floor flicking black after Clawhand had passed, whilst other sections faded to white.

Although most of his attention was fixed on the floor, Harry was able to note that, they were passing huge, bronze doors at regular intervals. He'd counted eight, and they were almost at the halfway point of the chamber, when they reached what had to be Clawhand's office.

Harry wasn't certain what he'd been expecting, but he really hadn't expected Clawhand's office to be triangular.

The huge bronze door, seemingly indistinguishable from the rest, opened onto a triangular room, the walls, the floor and ceiling all constructed from dark marble, with light veins of white and silver running through them. In the middle of the room small fire burned at the top of a short marble column, the column again being hewn from the same marble as the walls. The right hand wall was completely lined with tiny brass hooks, from some of which hung tiny, glowing gems, dangling off small, silver chains.

Some of the gems, looking for all the world like glowing marbles, were red, some blue and a few were an amber colour. Only one of them was green, and it was this one that Clawhand selected, the light illuminating the goblin's leathery palm as he offered it to Lambton.

Lambton held the gem up to the light (the office was illuminated by a collection of hovering candles), and appeared to consider it for a second or so. Even Harry could tell that this was just for show, however, and Clawhand made no attempt to hide his derisive sniff.

"Seems in order," noted the hit-wizard, unabashed, and Clawhand then turned to the opposing wall, which contained a lattice of pigeon-holes, mirroring the brass hooks. Although it was impossible to tell for sure - there were so many hooks, and so many parchments, it seemed to Harry that Clawhand had filed the parchment into the cubbyhole that matched the gem. Near the top right hand corner of the gem wall, and the top left hand corner of the parchment wall.

This done, Clawhand turned to face the central column, "Pendharg, Lioklet; the new prisoner is here for *processing*."

Clawhand had said 'processing' in a rather unpleasant tone of voice (which was saying something for a goblin), and, not for the first time in recent months, Harry was starting to have a bad feeling about what was coming next.

Clawhand had turned to address Lambton once more, "the exchange is complete - we can handle the prisoner from here." It was very clear that this was a non-negotiable statement, and Harry allowed his shoulders to slump with relief as the two remaining hit-wizards finally released the pincer-like grip they'd maintained on Harry's arms ever since Dumbledore had bid farewell.

Before the three hit-wizards could leave the office, however, two thick-set goblins had muscled their way into Clawhand's office, and with military precision grasped Harry's arms once more, the sharp fingers digging into the already bruised skin.

And this time Harry did cry out in pain.

Goblins may very well have had a reputation for fierce intelligence (literally), but that didn't seem to stop them asking exactly the same questions the Ministry had done, taking Harry's details - name, age, hair colour, eye colour, distinguishing features and so on. All this was recorded by a fourth goblin, perched on a high stool, entering the details in a thick leather bound book, the pages yellowed with age, and the quill's nib scratching across the surface as he (or she) wrote.

From the record keeping office, finished as the rest of the place had been in polished, dark marble, Harry's captors took him through a heavy door, and into a much less genteel environment.

The walls were now rough-hewn rock, the floor an uneven path in what seemed to be a huge chamber, light seeping in through a hole in the tip of the ceiling. For some reason Harry was inexplicably reminded of St Paul's Cathedral - not that he'd ever visited the place - the chamber was, he assumed, cathedrals-sized, and, if you *really* squinted, you could possibly call the ceiling domed.

Taking the St Paul's comparison further, there seemed to be an upper gallery just before the ceiling started to curve, and figures walked briskly about in the semi-darkness.

One thing that St Paul's almost certainly didn't have, however, was the huge, cylindrical iron bars, maybe four inches thick, with perhaps twice that distance between them. This ring of steel completely encircled the central area of the cavern, the rocky floor giving way to rock-pools, and then presumably the sea proper on the far side.

It was something like a huge bird cage to look at - the iron bars were actually hooped into semi-circles, intersecting directly beneath the hole in the roof, at the same level as the gallery. In the darkness, glistening shapes lay on the rock, or lazed about in the water. Their patterns were a jumble of different colours, far too numerous to count.

"Arm," announced the left-hand goblin, which Harry assumed was the one named Lioklet.

Unthinkingly, Harry raised his left forearm up, and was rewarded by a sharp, scouring pain - three lines of blood welled up on the skin where the goblin's claws had sliced him. The cut wasn't deep, but the blood seemed to flow readily enough, and Clawhand was collecting the drops in a small silver dish.

"Enough," noted Clawhand, and seemingly out of nowhere he produced a bandage, which was then roughly wrapped over the wound.

Again Harry winced at the pain, but, he reasoned, he'd had worse, and it seemed to be over now. The patterns in the cage, however, had suddenly started to look interested in things, and a few were started to move. The shapes moved slowly, but with a malevolent stalk to their carriage, as Clawhand drew a pointed finger vertically up and down in the air, pointing directly at one of the iron bars.

Noiselessly, the bar slid to the side, allowing enough space for the bowl to pass through. Clawhand placed it on the floor, and then, taking a step back, closed the cage with a further hand gesture.

"Blood trackers," was all the explanation Harry was going to get from his captors concerning the bizarre scene, and by that time he was on the move once more, being frogmarched along the rough path at the side of the cage, his sense the only thing telling him that a collection of patterns were congregating about the bowl Clawhand had left.

Extending his sense further forward, Harry sensed a series of interconnected rooms at the far end of the cavern, and a pattern waiting.

A familiar pattern.

He tried balling his hands, pushing his nails as deep as they would go into his palms, but that wasn't really working. So he tried biting his lip, discreetly, of course. And then he tried reliving every second of Ron's funeral.

Anything, anything to force the smile that was beginning to form back underneath the surface once more. The metallic taste of blood on his lips, Harry tried to relive the Dementor's effect on his mind, as the bronze door at the end of the cavern was pushed open, to reveal the room inside.

Look everywhere, look at everything, but do *not* look at him, Harry urged himself, knowing that it would take every ounce of self-control to make this work.

It was a room. Unfortunately for Harry, there really wasn't much more to it than that, and, despite his best efforts, the person sitting at the desk before him commanded the attention. Well, that's what you got when you wore your bright red hair in a pony-tail, and had a fang dangling from your ear.

"Where's Gellar?" asked Clawhand, suspiciously, "what are you doing here?"

"Gellar's ill," replied Bill Weasley, "so I was called in from Gringotts; said you had an important charms job." Bill's voice was different when he dealt with goblins - harder, more commanding. He glared at Clawhand, "I *have* been cleared..."

Clawhand returned the glare with interest, "Not. By. Me... Key?"

Shaking his head, as though he was far too important to deal with such trivialities, Bill extracted a silver pendant from a pocket in his robes, and held it out to Clawhand, the twisted strips of metal dangling from their chain. "I'm. Cleared," repeated Bill, clearly used to dealing with obstinate goblins, and, equally clearly, not taking a great amount of delight in constant challenges of his credentials.

Clawhand looked at the proffered pendant with dark suspicion, before turning his attention back to Bill. "One moment," he instructed, and pointing his finger at the curse-breaker, laced it through the air in a zig-zagging motion, ignoring the somewhat patronising 'I told you so' expression on Bill's face.

"Very well," conceded Clawhand, with obvious reluctance, "are the entries complete?"

Bill spun a large book around on the desk, its covers made of some kind of dull metal, the pages a brilliant white, fresh ink, presumably from Bill's quill, depicting a baffling series of signs and symbols.

Clawhand looked up at Bill once more, "you may begin."

Slowly Bill rose to his full height as he stood up behind the desk, and drew his wand. "Well, well, well," he gloated, "if it isn't the famous, heroic Harry Potter... All this time, and we never knew, you conniving, duplicitous piece of scheming filth.

"So you're a Mage - I wouldn't try anything; firstly, goblins are a damned sight harder to kill than humans; secondly you'd never make it past the wards and guards alive; and thirdly, you do *not* want to cross a pissed off Weasley."

Harry would have laughed at point three, except that Bill's tone didn't sound remotely light-hearted, and he suddenly wondered if he'd completely misjudged the situation.

"Now, this is going to hurt, I'm afraid... well, I'm not actually afraid at all, but I just thought I'd tell you that," continued Bill, a malevolent gloat to his tone, an expressive twirl of his wand accompanying the words...

*And just keep playing it as you have, Harry - as far as the goblins know, you betrayed my family, and I hate you for it. Yes, I **am** going to have to blind you - it's temporary, but there's no way you'd be able to mimic blindness well enough to fool them. And if they're not fooled, then we're **both** dead.*

Bill's voice had started playing inside Harry's head immediately after Bill had concluded the somewhat flashy wand twirling. Bill himself was still talking, although he'd moved into Latin now, so Harry assumed they were now in charms territory. Even though this was Bill, he started to tremble.

The goblins will keep their eye on you for a couple of months, Harry. Enough to establish your routine... don't try anything whilst you're blind. Seriously, you'll never get out of here alive.

A dull pain was starting to build behind Harry's eyes now, and he let out an uncertain moan as he felt the edges of the room soften. It was almost like the light was being pulled *out* of his brain, he could almost *feel* the colours, the shapes and the textures being sucked into Bill's wand.

And it wasn't nice.

I'm sorry mate - the Ministry weren't going to move on you as of Friday, Merlin knows what changed their mind; if we'd known about this yesterday, we'd have pulled you out then. But as it is, we have to play as best we can with the cards we've got.

Harry phased in his sense as the vision receded - although sense was useful for discerning his environment in a general sense - people, and rooms, at a detail level it was almost useless. He couldn't tell which way a person was facing, nor could he examine in detail what was on Bill's desk. All he knew was that he was in a medium-sized office, which contained precisely one desk, one chair, one curse-breaker for Gringotts and three goblin guards from Blackrock.

Oh yeah, and one blind Mage.

*Eight weeks, Harry, eight weeks to the second, and you'll be able to see again. This is the best I can do for you right now, but the second you **can** see, **run... like... hell**. Obviously, don't tell a soul. When the time comes, the means of escape should present itself... do not cross the Blood Trackers if you can possibly help it... knuckle down, and we'll do our best on the outside.*

"He's done," announced Bill, in a self-satisfied tone of voice.

Everywhere was white. It was odd - he'd expected blindness to be black, not white, but Harry decided not to question the situation in case it drew attention to the slightly non-standard charms that, *he trusted*, had been inflicted upon him.

Take care, mate - you'll be alright, I know that much, and we'll get you out. Don't acclimatise too readily - the goblins will expect you to be difficult. Make it too easy and they'll suspect. But don't try too hard either... The mental Bill-voice snorted, *really helpful, I know; 'act natural'. The trick is to settle into some sort of pattern after a couple of weeks - make the goblins think that you've been broken... and do **not** tell a soul abou...*

Bill's mentally delivered monologue was cut off suddenly by a cold, bony hand slapping his cheek. Not having seen the goblin's attack, Harry reeled, stumbling on the uneven floor. "Good," noted Clawhand's voice in the whiteness, satisfied. "Take him to his cell."

Chapter 50

In which year was the 1637 Werewolf Code of Conduct first revised?

The Away Team stood on the entrance steps, breath clouding in the still December morning, arms hugged tight against the chill, as Harry was marched off to his doom. To Hermione's left, Ginny was muttering darkly about pompous elder brothers, Dean's arms enveloping her from behind - partly, no doubt, for warmth, she supposed, but mainly to prevent Ginny from sprinting after the Ministry delegation and hexing Percy to pieces.

"So *now* what?" asked Seamus, gloomily, as the figures reached the gates and paused.

"Shhh!" urged Cho, which was, thought Hermione, a little pointless, even as she held her breath herself. It wasn't as if they'd hear anything. First Percy disappeared, then Harry and his three captors, and that was it. All gone. The gates, having framed the prisoner and his captors just seconds earlier, were now empty, showing only a bare strip of road and the thick hedge beyond.

"Well," started Dean, "he's still got the Portkey, right? I mean, he could still get out of this."

"Harry told them about the Portkey," responded Cho, listlessly, "I doubt they'll let him keep it."

Ravenclaw win the House Cup for Understatement, noted Hermione.

"Well, surely he could..." Seamus shrugged, "well, y'know, use some of that Mage stuff to escape from prison." He looked imploringly at the others, "I mean, c'mon, it's *Harry*, he'll find a way..."

Padma looked at him pityingly, "Seamus, they're taking him to *Blackrock*. No-one's ever successfully escaped from Blackrock.... Ever."

"They used to say that about Azkaban," protested Ginny, "and, well, look at Sirius." She paused, evidently replaying Padma's words through her head, "what do you mean, 'escaped successfully'?"

"Well, the records show that people have, in the past, broken free from their cells, but no-one's ever made it to the mainland... they're either recaptured, or they die in the escape. 's the goblins, see - they've got all these charms and curses, and then they have these other... things, too."

"And since when did *you* become the expert, sis?" asked Parvati, a little tartly.

"History of Magic project; I decided to consider crime and punishment in the wizarding world. Thought, y'know, it'd be interesting; one of those subjects that we all talk about, but don't really *know* much about... plus it'd be useful if I wanted to work in the Ministry..."

Part of Hermione was reluctantly impressed by Padma's selection of a topic for her History of Magic project that was both substantial, and secretive, *and* useful. The other part was slightly

miffed that *anyone* would even *consider* working for the Ministry. But then she remembered that Arthur Weasley worked there too, and conceded that they couldn't all be bad.

"It's not fair!" complained a distressed Cho, eyes still rooted to the spot where Harry had disappeared. "And he doesn't even get a trial... and... well none of those charges were true! It was all made up..."

"Well, being fair," interrupted Parvati, "he *was* a Mage. Not exactly by choice - but even if they drop all the other charges, he's still got life, blinded. So much for Durmstrang, then..."

"*What?*" snapped Padma, glaring at her twin with an expression that just *dared* her sister to repeat her previous statement.

Hermione watched as Parvati, uncertain, under the force of Padma's glare, attempted to explain, "well, it's just that, without Harry... well, there's no need to go to Durmstrang, is there? I mean, *we* can't drain that Key thing... and, well, you all remember Vellum's lesson where we tried to destroy it. Can't be done. So, well..." Parvati shrugged, with a 'hah-got-you!' smirk at her sister. Evidently it wasn't often she out-thought her twin.

"We can't abandon Harry!" protested Cho, finally wresting her eyes from the distance, and turning to the Away Team. "There *has* to be something..."

"It's *cold* out here - can't we go back in?" pleaded Neville, rather letting down the show of solidarity somewhat.

Still, mused Hermione, he did have a point. It *was* cold on the steps - none of them had their cloaks, and no amount of staring into the distance was going to replay time and bring Harry back. Replay time - if *only* she still had the Time Turner. "Alright Neville," she agreed, downcast, "I don't s'pose there's much else to see outside... but I'm not going back into the Great Hall."

"Too right," muttered Dean, darkly, his words somewhat obscured by Ginny's hair, "Gryffindor?"

"As good a place as any," agreed Padma, charitably, before adding, "I suppose," resurrecting the traditional inter-house rivalry to the conversation.

"Know-it-all Ravenclaws," sniped Lavender, with half a smile.

"Gormless Gryffindors," countered Padma, grinning. Hermione felt a smile finally force its way onto her face; Lavender was on a hiding to nothing if she thought she could out-wit a Ravenclaw in wordplay.

"Well," interrupted Seamus, somewhat warily, "we've got Charms in 10 minutes - probably best off meeting up later, right?"

They agreed that a later meeting was, indeed, the best plan of action, and the Away Team dispersed to their respective lessons, and Hermione was suddenly, forcibly reminded that of the Trio that had started lessons together in September, she was now the only member left at Hogwarts.

Charms had passed without too much unpleasantness, although Hermione vowed anew that she was *not* going to become Neville's partner by default for the remainder of the year. The eight Gryffindors who'd started their fifth year in September were now whittled down to six, and what with Dean and Seamus on the one hand, and Lavender and Parvati on the other, it did make Neville the obvious partner.

Not that she disliked Neville. On the contrary, he could be quite sweet, and he'd even forgiven her for putting the full-body bind on him in First Year. Nonetheless, practicing charms with Neville was not conducive to effective study, and even though she'd *promised* herself not to lose her temper, it had been exasperating. And Professor Flitwick's irrepressible cheeriness only served to heighten her fears that she was losing valuable development time trying to perfect Neville's diction.

So that was it. She was *not* going to be landed with Neville as her partner in Potions.

Draco, then.

It wasn't as if she had a choice, after all, she reminded herself.

There were many good things to appreciate about having Draco as your partner in Potions. For one, he was actually capable of maintaining sensible academic conversation at her level; if he wasn't quite so stubborn about things, she thought, they might even agree a little more often too. Typical male.

For another, he seemed immune to Fleur's charm, which still reduced Neville to a drooling heap of slack-jawed hormones whenever she flashed that brilliant white smile, and flicked her platinum hair in that irritating *twitch* of hers. Not to mention the dreadful accent.

All in all, it was something of a disappointment to learn the Fleur really did know her subject... still, Hermione was perfectly capable of appreciating Fleur's scholarly qualities whilst deriding her physical attributes. Pretty was one thing; Hermione had no problems, well, not many, with Cho, or Padma or Parvati. But blatant use of magic in that regard just seemed... tacky.

So, feeling nicely superior, Hermione settled into the chair next to Draco's, and picked up naturally the 'I'm not looking at you' game that they both played whilst waiting for the habitually late Fleur to make her entrance. Discreetly stealing a glance at Draco as she carefully wrote the day's date at the top of her parchment, Hermione thought she saw a flicker of a smile play across the Slytherin's lips.

Enraged, she'd actually turned to face him, but had been met by the familiar, blank Malfoy mask, and decided she must have imagined it. He hadn't broached the subject of Harry yet, and he wouldn't. Nor would she. Harry was one of the big unspoken things they had - no discussion of him, ever, since the two would never see eye to eye on her best friend, and his arch rival.

Although, as she put it in those terms, Hermione couldn't quite put her finger on exactly what it was that Harry and Draco would be rivals over. There was Quidditch, she supposed, but sorry, no contest. *Cho* could fly rings around Draco, not to mention Harry. And there used to be that whole Dark Magic thing, but ever since Snape had thrown Lucius Malfoy's heart down on the desk in front of them, Draco seemed to have woken up.

Changed.

Yes, she mused - that had really wrought a change in Malfoy, who was no longer quite as self-centred, ends-justify-the-means and well, not to borrow Ron's phrase or anything, but he was just less *Malfoy* about things these days.

Although, she reminded herself, he still hadn't *totally* redeemed himself; quite how he could manage to lounge in his chair with such calculated insolence was baffling. He had that *poise* that years of easy-won privilege brought to the few. And he knew it, she reminded herself, wondering how long it had taken him to train his hair to fall just so (she had to fight the urge to instinctively attempt to flatten down her own bushy locks as this thought flitted across her mind).

"allo everyone, I'm zorry I'm late," gushed Fleur as she made her entrance.

As far as Hermione was concerned, Fleur's entire carriage just defined the word 'flounce'. Looking about her, Neville had once again been reduced to jelly by Fleur's arrival, as had Crabbe and Goyle. Those three were still grouped together - Snape's pairings had ended with Snape's reign itself, but no-one had thought to mention it to Crabbe and Goyle, who, predictably enough, hadn't worked this out yet.

Judging by the completely rapt expressions of adoration on all three boys' faces at the large corner desk, Hermione seriously doubted that they'd actually increased their Potions knowledge one iota since Fleur's arrival, the lessons obviously passing by in a haze of brilliant smiles, swirling locks of platinum hair and the overdone, sympathetic commentary in that toe-curling accent.

She returned her attention back to Draco, to discover, to her surprise, the grey eyes locked directly on her, "yes?" he enquired, lightly.

Hermione was unnerved - after all, *he'd* been looking at *her* first, "nothing," she said, a little too hurriedly, and fixed her gaze on Fleur, whilst at the same time trying to concentrate on the left hand field of vision, to see Draco's reaction.

After looking at her fractionally too long, he seemed to allow himself something that might have qualified as a smirk, before he, too, turned to face Fleur's introduction to the day's lesson. Hermione allowed her eyes to flick to the left to consider the blonde Slytherin more fully, as her mind tried to work out why she was doing so.

"...so you knew Potter was a Mage?" it wasn't quite a question, nor quite a statement.

Pausing from dicing the Dewberry seeds, Hermione tried to marshal her thoughts to deliver the correct answer, "well, yes... I mean, well... of *course* I knew. What, did you think I wouldn't?"

"Just surprised that you hadn't turned him in already, Granger," observed Draco, peering intently into their cauldron, which was turning exactly the correct shade of blue at exactly the right point. "I mean, what with your pedigree in fighting the Dark Arts and all that..."

"Harry's not Dark!" protested Hermione, defensively; how on Earth had she got embroiled in this? Defending Harry from accusations of Darkness from Malfoy, of all people.

"He's a Mage. He's Dark. Q... E.. D," stated the Slytherin.

"Don't be preposterous," Hermione had long since discovered that Draco didn't get nearly so riled if you insulted him with longer words, rather than shorter ones, "you can't be Dark just by what you are, it's what you *do* that matters." Triumphant, Hermione returned to the Dewberry seeds.

"Indeed," agreed Draco, mildly, "you might like to note the same goes for Slytherins."

Hermione paused mid-cut, before remembering to continue the game of non-reaction to each other's barbs. Unfortunately, from the smile that she caught flash across his face out of the corner of her eye (she did *not* look at him. Absolutely not), he knew that he'd won that exchange.

Hands once more focused on ingredient preparation, Hermione's mind wandered to Draco's assertion. Yes, she admitted, she, Ron and Harry had been somewhat quick, at times, to leap onto the 'all Slytherins are evil' bandwagon. Pansy's shock of blonde hair at the next table reassured her that such deductions hadn't been entirely baseless.

Sensing Hermione's glare, Pansy had suddenly covered her eyes with one hand, and mimed groping blindly for her quill with the other. Blaise, her partner now in the absence of both Harry and Ron, worked on regardless.

At first Hermione thought Draco had half snorted in amusement at his House-mate's wit, but then she realised he'd just been trying to suppress a cough. She turned her gaze back upon her *real* adversary, letting the Slytherin know that she wasn't impressed.

Hermione wasn't worried about Pansy. Not in the slightest. Although, she reflected, Pansy would be *well* advised to be worried about one Hermione Granger. Well advised indeed.

Bring it on.

History of Magic was, if it were possible, even more boring without Harry *or* Ron to needle during Binns' toneless monologues. Normally Ron would be passing notes to Harry about Quidditch, or he'd be discreetly jogging her arm every now and again, which would make her glare back, reproachfully. Ron would then stick his tongue out at her, and she'd flick her head back to face Binns, such juvenile behaviour being beneath her, of course.

Then she'd kick him in the shins, which would start a new round off, whilst, on his other side, Harry would roll his eyes at them in mock-exasperation. It had been fun.

She missed that. Missed the fun. Missed Harry. Missed Ron.

She definitely missed Ron, but at least she was on track to redress the balance on their last exchange... she didn't want to let go with that argument being their last words. It wasn't fair that he'd been able to relay his 'Hi' via Harry; how was she supposed to reply to that?

It was just so *Ron* to get the last word in.

As Binns' soporific voice continued to read from Appendix III of *The Concise History of Goblin Rebellions in the Latter Part of the Late Seventeenth Century in Upper Lower-Saxony During Full-Moons*, Hermione's attention once more drifted to the list of ingredients she needed:

- Mandrake Leaves, Yarrow Root, Asphodel (Neville)
- Candles x 7 (Lavender?)
- Dragons' Blood (Potions)
- Silver - use bracelet
- Marking chalk - ???
- Personal Component (Cannons Scarf)...

Well, she still had a little way to go yet, but things were starting to fall into place. And a small sense of pride started to build inside her. No-one had ever done anything like this before, but all her research told her that this was going to work; she was going to be the first.

Quidditch. No matter how hard she tried, for reasons that seemed entirely beyond her, Hermione always seemed to find herself playing second best to Quidditch. Harry and Ron had both been demented, obsessive, even, about the game. And now, just when she wanted to convene the Away Team, and discuss *important* things, like, for example, how they were supposed to help Harry escape from Blackrock, Ginny and the Wolves had all zoomed off to Quidditch practice.

Neville was off in the Greenhouses, tending to his personal plot. This was, in fact, perfectly fine with Hermione. For one, she admired people pursuing academic endeavours in their free time, even more so when they so obviously enjoyed it. But secondly, and she allowed herself to feel a tiny bit guilty on this point, she needed Neville's help with some of the Summoning components.

Cho and Padma were about, she knew, but, by and large, Hermione didn't associate with the Ravenclaws by choice. They were perfectly fine, really, she supposed, but... well, they'd all be meeting at the North Tower after supper anyway. Seemed pointless to go through explanations twice over.

"So how long before he escapes, then?"

Hermione looked across the desk, and the small mountain of open books, into the steely eyes of her study partner. In years gone by, she'd have immediately assumed that Draco was

digging for information, storing it all somewhere for use later. Now, however, she knew that he wasn't really digging for information, this was just his somewhat clumsy manner of starting conversations. Still, no need to guess who 'he' was; "No idea, Draco."

"C'mon, with all those fancy powers of his, he must be able to blast his way out of just about anywhere," persisted the Slytherin, who was evidently giving his eyes a rest from Arithmancy.

"Well it's not that easy," countered Hermione, welcoming the cue to take some respite from Grubbly-Plank's Herbology assignment; it wasn't due until Wednesday, but the stand in had only given her 17/20 for the last one, and Hermione was absolutely determined not to slip up again.

"Really?" enquired Draco.

It almost looked as though his eyes lit up with that, but it was gone as soon as she looked for it, and Hermione mentally chided herself for superimposing the way she *expected* Draco to act upon the way he actually *was*. He was, she realised, a shining example of the way that, if you tried hard enough, you could see bad things in everyone. And once you got past that reflex assessment, Draco was actually... well, actually, he was quite *interesting*.

"So why is it not that easy?" he prompted, causing Hermione to realise that she'd not actually replied to his question.

"Oh, well," she explained in a hushed whisper, noticing the vulture like Librarian fix their table with a suspicious stare, "you know... you're sort of right. Harry's powers *are* kind of Dark... obviously he could simply blast his way out of anywhere, but, well, he wouldn't want to hurt innocent people..."

There! That Malfoy smirk again... except no it wasn't... he was just interested in the concept of the restrictions to a Mage's power, that was all, and again she reminded herself that she was guilty of lapsing into the easy habit of assuming that everything the Slytherin did was evil.

"I can see that'd make life difficult for him," conceded Draco, "although, you've got to admit, when faced with, what was it, six life sentences..."

"Seven," she corrected, absently.

"Seven, then," he agreed (and the old Draco, the imaginary one that kept clouding her perceptions now had a gloat in his voice), "well, I think that would constitute consideration of some pretty heavy duty self-defence, wouldn't you?"

The conversation had drifted on to Arithmancy at that point, but half of Hermione's mind was pondering Draco's belief that Harry's quandary would have justified a more active resistance. But that was just it - the only way for Harry to have escaped his sentence for the crimes he *didn't* commit would have been to commit a whole slew of transgressions of equal severity.

How about that for a Catch-22? The only way the innocent man could escape would immediately make him guilty.

The North Tower, and once again Cho had cast her Protection Charm to stave off the wind; Hermione made a mental note to ask Cho to teach her that some time. She knew that Professor Flitwick would be covering it after Easter, but, well, it was one of those really useful charms that she really ought to know already.

The group were gathered about one of Hermione's bluebell flames - not as dramatic as Harry's constantly swirling Mage fires, but just as effective, and *much* more practical. *She* didn't have to maintain her concentration to keep them all warm, one incantation and that was it: one toasty Away Team.

Actually, there was a bit to discuss, Lupin having summoned Hermione to his office after Supper, ostensibly to discuss her recent DADA assignment, but in reality to allow Sirius to hear Hermione's assessment of events that morning.

Predictably enough, Sirius had been all set for mad rescue missions there and then, but, as Lupin had calmly pointed out, attempting to storm Blackrock to free his godson was not, as plans went, one of Sirius' better ideas. A freshly re-incarcerated Sirius did no-one any favours, Lupin had observed, and, though she didn't mention it to the Away Team, Hermione had sensed a bigger picture evolving.

For one, Lupin didn't seem anywhere near as stressed by the episode as he should have been, and Dumbledore, for his part, had seemed oddly content to watch Harry get dragged off to prison. And even Sirius, who, if she knew anything at all about him, would have been going insane at the thought of having let down Harry's parents *again*, seemed oddly resigned to Harry's fate.

There was something in all this, Hermione could sense it (and, she knew, she was pretty good at reading people, not, mind, that she got much credit for it), but it remained just slightly out of reach.

Still, dealing in the much more solid world of fact and educated guesses, Hermione filled the Away Team in on developments as best as she could.

"Well, like I said before," continued Parvati, "I don't see what point there is in doing anything now... I mean, without Harry there's nothing we can do about the Key at Durmstrang..."

"Harry's going to be back," stated Cho, with deep conviction. "He will, really," she added, in response to the doubtful looks sent her way, "and so I think we should continue with the Portkey stuff, so we're ready..."

"If you build it, he will come," murmured Dean, softly, although only Hermione and Ginny were close enough to hear, and Hermione had no doubt that Ginny wouldn't have a clue what Dean was talking about.

"Don't get your hopes up," advised Padma, gently, "I mean, we all *hope* that Harry gets out of there somehow, but..." she trailed off, leaving her own assessment of the hopelessness of Harry's position unstated. "But yes," she continued, "I think you're right, we *should* continue with the Portkey project. After all, Hermione's carving's too good an opportunity to miss..."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably, and heartily wished she'd never mentioned the damned thing. It had been embarrassing enough when Viktor had presented it to her, and she just *knew*

what Seamus was going to say as soon as he saw it. Still, she reflected, with a mental sigh, needs must and all that. And eventually they'd stop teasing her about it... probably. It was just too much to expect them to be... *mature* about it.

Parvati was still in defeatist mode, "well it all seems like a waste of effort to me. Can't we just alert the Minist... oh, well, how about we tell McGon... ah, well..."

"It will not have escaped your attention," noted Dean, somewhat formally, as he laced his fingers through Ginny's hair, "that our allies are somewhat thin on the ground these days."

"Well, yes," conceded Parvati, "but..."

Her sister cut her off, "we can't drain the Key at Durmstrang, and we can't damage it. But," and her eyes sparkled in the light of the blue flames, "we could put its surroundings beyond reach, couldn't we?"

Everyone looked at Padma, dumbly, but it was Seamus who eloquently put the collective reaction into words, "you what?"

Padma seemed invigorated by her idea, and her whole body became more animated as she explained further, "we could set up a perimeter field around the Key... sort of repel people trying to approach it..."

But now Hermione's own 'light reading' suggested a further refinement, "we could do even better than that," she suggested, Padma's enthusiasm catching, "we could put the Key *completely beyond reach*. We could create a portal, and put the Key in *another plane!*"

"But that'd be portals and stuff," protested Cho, "we haven't covered that in sixth year yet, so, well, we don't even know if it can be done at all. Let alone by us..."

"Oh," assured Hermione with absolute confidence, "it can be done." In response to the questioning looks, she added, "I read up on it the other day, actually... little light reading."

Hermione hardly dared breathe, but, fortunately, her reputation for possessing an insane appetite for study was legendary, and no-one questioned her peculiar taste in diversionary literature. Instead, the Away Team hared down the Portkey and Portal route, devising what Dean had immediately called 'Plan B'.

Harry or no, they were going to ensure that Voldemort would not be able to take the powers of the Third Key for himself.

Of course, this was all based on the assumption that Tempus hadn't already put a claim on the Key's powers for themselves.

Chapter 51

What colour is the blood of a manticore?

Dark outside, of course.

The room was illuminated by flickering torches - enough to see the stone floor, and the wooden panelling to the lower parts of the walls. A fire flickered in the stone hearth but, strangely, gave no sense of warmth.

But this wasn't right.

Words and voices were echoing off the walls. Laughing, mocking, screaming, crying, but it was impossible to make out what they were saying - there was only the tone to carry the vague meaning.

"L'arretez ca!" came an urgent voice, from the room, and yet not the room. He heard it, and yet it was as though it came from within.

A snake slithered into view, gliding by the fire. Thick bodied, he knew this snake. And he didn't. Conflicting assessments assaulted the senses, panic building in a multitude of voices.

The snake hissed, and he understood the words: "It's happening again," the reptile noted. Was that displeasure in its tone? Warning in the black, lifeless eyes?

Nagini. From nowhere, the name had sprung, triggered by his understanding of the snake's language. Its words, spoken in a language he now remembered was called Parseltongue.

The protesting chorus of alien voices was getting shriller, and yet also more distant as the authority of a cold, dark power once again took possession of the senses. "Yes, Nagini," and with those words, spoken out loud, the unseen crowd was finally swept away, the room empty, yet now more familiar.

Nagini continued to emanate extreme suspicion and wariness. The eyes carried a forceful rebuke, before the hissing resumed, "it is as I warned..."

"I need Snape... get me Snape."

"The traitor did not return; perhaps for the best - it was unwise to place such trust in one seen to succumb to weakness before. Were it not for his proximity to the Boy..."

The snake's words had become unintelligible hissing, and a cold dread fear was building. A woman's scream, in moonlight, he remembered the scream in moonlight; the woman's scream filled the room. Yet as the walls whirled about his head, no other person could be seen.

The snake, undoubtedly evil, whatever else it might be, was approaching, threatening. Mesmerising eyes, and even though he knew it didn't belong in the castle, that this reptile was alien, it seemed to... know him.

Desperate to escape the attack - was it poisonous? Or did it constrict its prey? - the chair toppled backwards, and real pain filled the senses as the stone hit. Real pain, contrasting with the internal anguish of the mind, where once more voices were wailing in unintelligible tongues.

The snake was talking once more, "...and gets worse..."

He knew who he was once more, and knew who he was not. He banished the ghosts from his mind, revelling in the spirits crushed before the wall of force at his command. They would try again... they always tried, but he was more than ready to stand and fight.

*His mind was his own, and the ghosts, they **would** submit. "Lestranger!" the shock of the force in the voice seemed to make the whole room reverberate. It was the tone of command, the tone of the absolutely assured, of one to whom everything was delivered, at the price of his choosing.*

Nagini turned away to gather warmth by the fire, as an absent flick of the wand righted the armchair. A curt knock at the door, and then a thin, gaunt witch, with thick, dark hair and dark, half-hidden eyes entered. The usual hesitancy others had in his presence was notably absent - the witch's carriage was assured; confident and yet respectful.

"Yes, Master?"

The chill metallic tone was back, reinforced with a strength bought from the spilling of innocent blood that laced the voice with malice: "Get. Me. Snape."

Those last words had sent Harry from the threshold of nightmare and into the land of awoken terror. Even though the whiteness of the void that assaulted his senses told him it was pointless, he opened his eyes, only to be rewarded with the distinctly unpleasant sensation that the floor had suddenly been pulled from beneath him.

With no visual cues to guide him, he almost felt as though he were suspended above an infinite precipice, his breath ragged, his heart hammering, and the soles of his feet tingling as they protested at the perceived lack of substance beneath them.

The rough-made bed, hardly welcoming upon arrival, was now, his touch confirmed, a complete wreck. His sense told him that two goblins still remained on watch over him by the cell door, though the difference in patterns suggested it was a different shift.

He had no idea what the time was, although the visions usually tended to hit hardest in the dark hours - between two and four in the morning. The warmth of the fever that had accompanied the vision, together with the burning rage of Voldemort's last words, had dissipated, and as the sweat cooled, he started to shiver once more in what he assumed had to be the night-time chill.

And so, as his physical systems cooled down, and his mental systems warmed up, the gravity of his plight hit full force.

Alone, blind in an unseen cell, assaulted by violent, painful visions in sleepless nights, surrounded by armed guards, protection wards and curses, and his best friend dead. Voldemort, risen anew that summer courtesy of *his* blood, had taken France, and was actively building up his strength through the repeated use of Subsumatum, leaving a trail of innocent bodies in the wake of his rise to power.

It was all his fault, and, in a way, he could see now that he deserved this, and had no right to expect anything better. Ron certainly didn't get a better deal, nor did Cedric. He might not have been directly guilty of the crimes levied at him from Percy's charge-list, but there was guilt on the unseen hands he stretched before his face, and this was no less than he deserved.

And yet, all the guilt and suffering in the world wouldn't bring Ron back. Or Cedric. Or any of the unnamed witches and wizards who'd had their very life sucked out of their bodies during the blood sacrifice routines at the Beauxbatons Key.

Lost and alone, Harry wrapped the driest part of the blanket around his body, trying to control the shivering as he attempted to sleep, hoping that the visions would not return to haunt him in what remained of the night.

Instead, the two patterns outside the cell door remained motionless as Harry's choked sobs filled the dark, cold air.

Morning was announced by the terrific *thwack* of metal on metal - a pattern next to what his sense told him was the entrance to his cell suggested to Harry that the goblin must have hit the bars with a sword to wake him up.

Sensing Blackrock was going to take time; Harry had realised that almost as soon as Bill had finished cursing him; the place was simply *infested* with patterns. Charms, curses, wards and guards. Prisoners, birds, the Blood Tracker things, the rock was simply teeming with magical energy, and sorting the wheat from the chaff, or, more pertinently, trying to locate any familiar patterns, was almost impossible.

There was one specific pattern he needed to find, and he'd been looking for it ever since the goblins had marched him out of Bill's temporary office, taking him further around the Blood Trackers' cage, deeper into the rock.

Standing in the room, with Bill and his captors, having been blinded hadn't, really, been all that bad. This was, of course, a relative comparison, being made with the full knowledge of how ghastly the subsequent trip had been.

It had not struck Harry, until that moment, just how much of his perception relied upon his sight. Obviously, being short-sighted, and lost without his glasses (now stored on a ledge in his cell, the goblins having let him keep them because of their 'sentimental value', but probably more because they couldn't see how a pair of glasses could constitute a threat), he'd always known that vision was a crucial thing. But the previous day had reinforced for him that to stand in a room and close your eyes was a wholly different experience to being thrust into an unseen world, completely blind.

When Bill had blinded him, Harry had known that the pony-tailed Curse Breaker had been standing in front of him. He'd known that the room's bare walls had been a creamy colour (a shade Aunt Petunia would probably have called 'Magnolia'), that the big, wooden desk had a large book with metal covers, and a blue-feathered quill. He'd known where the door was, and what his captors looked like. And with that knowledge, the blindness hadn't been quite so intimidating, especially when he'd had his Mage sense to fall back on.

Once out of the office, however, and being frogmarched along an unseen path to an unknown destination, his sense turned out to be a lot less use than he'd hoped. His feet had tripped and stumbled on the unseen, ragged floor, each jolt causing one goblin or the other to tighten their grip on his arms, and further pain to ensue.

They'd turned corners, went up and down stairs, and, at one point Harry was *certain* that they'd looped around in a complete circle. His Mage sense had been feeding him information about boundaries and patterns; other guards, protection charms and the like, but without a visual key for scale, it had been impossible to put the information into perspective reliably.

Disorientated, nervous and filled with a sense of trepidation, Harry had finally been brought to a stop by what appeared to be a rough, narrow canal. It was only when he'd heard the screech of metal wheels on rails that he'd realised they were waiting for a cart to take them on the next stage of the journey.

Shoved roughly into the cart, Harry had retained enough presence of mind to find something to hold on to as it had lurched into motion. He'd flicked outwards with his sense, but the cart had been hurtling forward faster than he'd been able to process the incoming patterns, and once it started plummeting downwards, twisting and rattling as though possessed, Harry had given up all thought of discerning where they were headed, and applied full concentration to simply staying alive.

Each fresh turn of the cart, be it left, right, up or down was as unexpected as the last, causing Harry's body to be flung about the flimsy vehicle, adding new bruises, grazes and cuts to his already battered frame. The all-pervading whiteness that took the place of his vision also seemed to have the effect of clouding all sense of time, and Harry had absolutely no clue how far they'd travelled when the cart suddenly slammed to a stop, causing him to lurch forward, narrowly missing staving his head in on the grab handle.

As his captors had applied their long, bony hands to his bruised arms *again*, Harry had realised that he'd been moaning and whimpering the entire journey. However, such had been his discomfort at the time that he'd not even bothered to try and reign in his obvious uncertainty. His Mage sense had been assaulted from all sides by patterns of furious energy, some flicking through ranges of colours, some meandering seemingly randomly about the chambers in the rock.

The floor had been even more uneven than by the Blood Trackers, yet still not sufficiently disjointed for his sense to give him any clues as to where to place his feet. It had, however, been a shorter journey at that end, and within a few short corridors, left, left, right, left, second right, he'd been thrust into his cell, the barred door being slammed shut behind him.

His cell. The absolute best case scenario was that this would be his home for the next eight weeks. Harry was starting to treat best case scenarios with extreme scepticism, however, and part of him was already convinced that he would die within the rough-hewn walls.

As far as he could tell, there was no window. It didn't seem as though there was a window outside the cell's door, either, and Harry therefore supposed that any illumination, which would, of course, have been solely for his captors' benefit, would have been provided by torchlight or similar.

There was a small wash-area in one corner of the cell - cautious feeling of the various surfaces, overlaid with his mage sense, had eventually worked out the basics. There was even a shower, although the discovery was dampened somewhat by the almost immediate realisation that hot water was not a concept goblins appeared to be familiar with.

Not that *that* was a problem to a Mage, of course. A discreet fire heated the water up nicely, although Harry was careful to ensure that it wasn't made too obvious. Almost as soon as the door had shut, and his captors had wandered a little way down the corridor, Harry had swept the entire room with a blast of Mage fire, hoping to eliminate any unpleasant residents that had been looking forward to Harry-sized snacks in the night.

Breakfast turned out to be a stale crust of bread and a mug of lukewarm water. Nonetheless, it was all there was, and Harry forced himself to eat slowly, spinning out the meal and pretending it was something substantial.

Although he would have quite readily settled for something tasty, instead.

As Bill had warned, his guards, although they wandered up and down the corridor that ran outside the cell, never left the vicinity, and it was immediately obvious that he was being kept under close, and tight, supervision.

Remembering Bill urging him to adopt a routine as quickly as possible, Harry sat, cross-legged in the middle of the floor, and allowed his sense to envelope the prison, attempting to sift through the thousands of patterns he could detect.

Even as he started on this task, he knew it would probably be days before he could even distinguish the guards, let alone attempt to classify patterns into charms, curses, prisoners and animals. But if there was one thing he did have plenty of at that moment, it was time.

The initial burst of enthusiasm, as he'd started sweeping the immediate vicinity with sense soon gave way to first frustration, and then despair. There was just *too* much out there for him to even begin to comprehend his environment.

His cell was in a corridor with six other cells, none of them occupied. That much had been straightforward. Solid rock all around, and then he'd found another cell-block, some distance above his, but at a slightly crazy angle, the corridor dog-legging madly before trailing off into a maelstrom of patterns and energies. None of them remotely tempting.

Trying even to locate the track the cart had brought him along yesterday had been enough to give him a headache. Eventually he'd found the canal-like channel, but by then he'd lost the mental map he'd made of its location relative to his cell, and he'd had to start again.

There *were* other prisoners - at least, that's what he assumed the other patterns he'd indentified within similar rooms to his had to be - but he hadn't found Lucas yet. He didn't know for sure that Lucas would have been transferred here, but it seemed the most likely option. Fred and George had *said* that the prisoners Voldemort had left at Azkaban had all been transferred to 'some rock of Cornwall'.

And this certainly was 'some rock'.

So, giving up on the sensing for a while, Harry's thoughts turned to Hogwarts, to Cho, Hermione and the rest of the Away Team. He wondered whether they'd be expecting him to make a break for it, or whether they'd... Well, he knew they wouldn't give up, as such, but this was *his* battle, and there was something of an unspoken agreement that, when it came down to it, he'd face the crunch on his own.

And it wasn't as if they didn't have their own lives to worry about as well. They still had to break Neville's loyalty tattoo, and he hoped that they'd still continue with the Portkey project - he'd love to be able to hint to them that he'd need it, but, as Bill had stressed, he had to keep all references to possible escapes buried deep. One word out of place from anyone, and it could all go horribly, horribly wrong.

And then there was Snape... he shivered at the recollection of Voldemort's voice, the command to the woman he assumed had been LeStrange. So Snape hadn't gone running off to Voldemort's side that night. Or at least, if he had, he'd since disappeared.

And what did Voldemort want him for anyway?

Come to think of it, it had been a pretty weird vision the previous night, anyway, almost as though he'd been connected not just to Voldemort, but to a whole collection of people.

Alarmed, Harry suddenly wondered whether the freed Death Eaters were also able to inspire some kind of mental connection to him; that would be all he needed - more insane, murderous witches and wizards running loose around his mind in the small hours.

And no more Dreamless Sleep or Solveig's Potion from Madam Pomfrey to take the edge off the dreams.

Replaying the previous night's vision reminded Harry that he had, indeed, got very little sleep that night, and fatigue and boredom combined strongly to suggest that he take a nap.

When he awoke again, it was to find things much as they had been before; his whole world was white, and he was the sole prisoner in his block of six cells. Another two goblins stood guard, with yet *another* distinct set of patterns - that made six different goblins guarding him that he'd counted so far, and Harry doubted he'd been imprisoned for even 24 hours.

He fervently hoped that Bill was right in his expectation that the goblins would soon get bored of keeping watch over him, and would step down the scrutiny once they were satisfied that they'd got a handle on his routine.

Not bothering to rise from the bed (he was starting to appreciate why Lucas tended to remain so immobile in his cell in Azkaban), Harry let his mind roam the corridors and cells of the prison once, more, again trying to imprint the structure into his mind.

If he was going to make a break for it, he had to know where to aim for, and how to get there. He had to be able to sort guards from prisoners, charms from guards, and beasts from charms.

And as he again became embroiled in the quagmire of patterns in the next level up, Harry realised that this was going to take some time.

Chapter 52

How many cards are there in a standard deck of Green-Rules Exploding Snap Cards?

Breakfast just wasn't the same. Not without Harry, and not without Ron.

Padma and Cho were back at their own House table this time - not that Hermione minded them joining the Gryffindors on occasion, but, well, they were sorted into Houses for a reason, and it was good, from time to time, to remember that.

The rest of the Away Team were, however, seated around her - well, technically they were all grouped to her left, since she'd taken the absolute top of the table, nearest the high table that was reserved for the staff.

Dean, Ginny, Seamus, Lavender and Parvati were all engaged in some obviously ridiculous game that seemed to require frequent giggles from the girls, and snorts of laughter from the boys. Neville was opposite, frantically trying to read the chapter Professor McGonagall had set for the next lesson - it was difficult, at times, not to take pity on Neville; he really, really tried so hard.

But without Ron, and without Harry, the Great Hall seemed empty, and the sense of wonderment had vanished with them. Now she was no longer embarking on a collective adventure with her two best friends. Yes, they'd faced dangers, and shared horrors. Yes, they'd taken outrageous risks, had flagrantly disregarded rules, and, genuinely *lived* their school-lives at Hogwarts.

But it hadn't all been danger, and threat and menace.

The three of them, virtually inseparable since Halloween in the First Year, give or take the odd falling out or two, the three of them had had more than their fair share of fun at Hogwarts. And with Harry and Ron both banished, Hermione somehow felt that the joyful memories of her schooldays had been wrested from her too.

Gone was the feeling that her entire time at Hogwarts would be a genuinely magical voyage of discovery; the Trio naturally sharing triumphs together, rushing headlong towards Seventh Year, eighteen and the Real World. Hogwarts without the Trio wasn't *her* Hogwarts anymore. It had become something else - something impersonal, something cold, and, certainly, something less fun.

The morning's post had not brought good news: *Captured!* screamed the headline, in violently flickering script, desperate to grab the reader's attention. Hermione read the first couple of breathless sentences: *In a bold and daring move, Ministry Officials risked their lives in the dramatic capture of the Dark Mage Harry Potter, best known as The Boy Who Lived. Describing the operation as a complete success, Ministry Official Percival Theodore Weasel explained, during an exclusive interview with the Prophet, how the Ministry managed to convince the most dangerous criminal of modern times to surrender....*

With a snarl, she ripped the paper in half. And then she ripped the halves into halves themselves, and continued subdividing the worthless rag until her toast was covered in newsprint confetti.

Ginny looked at her with understanding, "don't worry, Hermione," she urged, laying a hand on her forearm, "no-one believes the rubbish they write anyway..."

They both knew, however, that Ginny's optimism was not particularly well founded, and, judging by the laughs and jeers from the other tables, there were at least a few students taking delight from the Prophet's scoop.

"Oh this is *impossible!*" protested Neville, slumping back in his chair, the Transfiguration textbook in front of him.

"It's not impossible," responded Dean, reassuringly, winning a smile of relief from Neville, until he added, with wide-eyed sincerity, "I used to bullseye womp rats in my T-16 back home, and they can't have been much more than two metres..."

Taking pity on the look of sheer horror that had now painted itself upon Neville's face, Hermione took the opportunity to set the record straight, "don't worry, Neville, it's just a film..."

Dean opened his mouth as if to protest, but before he could get any words out, the dreadlocked wizard appeared to succumb to massive cardiac arrest. Hermione weathered the theatrics with an arch look, and rather wished that Ginny wouldn't look quite so proud of her boyfriend at moments like these.

Eventually recovering, Dean managed to stammer, weakly, tone knee-deep in disbelief, "*just* a film?" He turned to address the Hufflepuffs, "Oi, Justin!" miraculously, Dean's full vocal power had returned by this point, "*Hermione* here," Dean flicked his dreadlocks in her direction, "says that Star Wars is, and I quote, '*just* a film.'"

Justin, seemingly equally scandalised, slowly rose from the Hufflepuff table, and, with measured paces, approached the Gryffindors to address the skeleton Away Team, or, more accurately, Hermione; "do not," he advised, in a deep tone suffused with gravitas, jabbing his index finger warningly, "underestimate... the power... of the *Force*."

By this time, Seamus, who was sitting next to Neville, had urgently grabbed him by the shoulders, locking eyes; "mind what you have learned, Neville. Help you, it can."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione took her turn to address the now completely terrified Neville, "as you can see," she observed, smugly, "the Force can have a powerful effect on the *weak-minded*."

All eyes fell expectantly upon Dean, who had paused, mouth open, evidently trying to come up with a suitable retort. Feeling nicely superior, Hermione arched her eyebrows inviting the resident film-buff to top *that*.

"Ah," stated Dean, before closing his mouth, firmly, and frowning. "I mean, uh..." he started again, before once again clamping his lips shut, shooting a genuinely perplexed look in Hermione's direction.

Sensing his defeat, Ginny elbowed him playfully, as Seamus acknowledged Hermione's victory, "she got you there, mate," he observed, gleefully.

Ginny sympathetically ran her fingers through Dean's hair as he asserted, in a defensive undertone, exactly how much *more* than 'just a film' Star Wars was. Hermione pitied Ginny the inevitable day to come when Dean would get her within six feet of a video-recorder.

To Hermione's surprise, Parvati had chosen to sit with Neville in Transfiguration, obviously deciding to leave Seamus and Lavender to their couply things. Which meant that Hermione's partner for the lesson would be Dean (cross-House partnerships were rare, even in lessons with the Hufflepuffs).

Dean. Dean as in the Animagus.

Schoolwork had got to the point where neither she nor Draco had been able to put much effort into their Animagus research. Well, certainly, she'd had other things occupying her mind, and Draco hadn't *mentioned* that he'd found anything of note. For a brief moment, Hermione considered the possibility that Draco might have found out something useful, but dismissed the notion.

The old Draco, certainly, might have kept such knowledge to himself, but the new, post-Potions Draco wouldn't. She was pretty sure of that.

Still, here she was, in Transfiguration, sitting next to Dean. And not that it had really bothered her, but there was still something slightly irksome about Dean, of all people, having beaten her to transforming. Although, she reminded herself, he had had special instruction from McGonagall.

Hermione's previously sky-high opinion of her Head of House had taken something of a knock in the fifth year to date - obviously the whole business with Harry hadn't exactly endeared her to the Away Team. But it had hardly escaped Hermione's attention that McGonagall had chosen to tutor Dean, who, previously, hadn't exactly had a track record of academic brilliance, rather than selecting the top student in her year for every class bar Potions.

And *everyone* knew that the only reason she wasn't top in Potions was because she wasn't a Slytherin.

Looking about the class, Hermione noticed Neville look across from the desk he was sharing with Parvati. He'd been like that at breakfast too - as though constantly on the verge of telling her something. Remembering what had happened the last time Neville had failed to mention what he'd assumed was an idle observation, Hermione made a mental note to ask him what was up.

As was customary, McGonagall was peppering the class with questions based on the reading assignment set from the previous lesson. Having answered the first couple of questions to prove that she had read the chapters, Hermione let her mind wander; McGonagall wouldn't bother her again until the lesson strayed into the practical stuff once more. "Dean?"

"Mmm?" replied her partner, who was busy drawing an over-elaborate representation of a demented Thresher mauling some poor unfortunate in the margin of his parchment.

"Being an Animage... y'know, I was wondering..." Hermione kept her tone deliberately light. Casual even. "How's it, um, *different* to ordinary Transfiguration?"

Dean's attention seemed entirely focused on his sketch as he absently responded, "well it's all in the focus, y'know? With wand transfiguration, you're aiming the Will at the object," Dean paused to spin the parchment around so that he could apparently draw the severed limb's arc a little better (the struggle had clearly broken beyond the confines of the margin), "whereas with the transformation, um, well, you kind of don't aim the Will at all..."

Pausing from his sketch, Dean looked at her, "you just... *do*," he explained, with a shrug.

Ding! A light bulb had lit up inside Hermione's head - *that* had been the thing she'd been doing wrong! Of course, none of the books had been much help, but, now that she thought about it, nothing she'd read had mentioned focusing the Will at all. It had become so ingrained, that they'd both simply assumed that you had to focus. Dean's rough explanation might well have been the final piece of the jigsaw. "Oh," replied Hermione, before adopting her scholarly pout, "but in *Rewman*, didn't he say in, oh, was it Chapter 13? Didn't he say that..."

"Hermione," interrupted Dean, "I have *no* idea who, or what you're talking about..."

Hermione allowed herself an inner-smile. One of the more useful weapons in her armoury was to change the subject by actually talking about the subject in a greater depth than the other person could comprehend... Invariably they switched off, putting it all down to her simply being an incurable bookworm.

Making sure that Dean was still engrossed in his sketch, Hermione casually rested her left hand on her lap, and scanned the class. Neville had glanced her way, half anxiously; he *kept* on doing that, she noticed, but his attention was back upon McGonagall once more.

It was painful - rather like peeling skin away from her fingers, but, as she carefully spread the feathers apart under the cover of the desk, Hermione allowed herself a small smile of triumph, and brought her fingers back.

Got it.

"Right, you can put away your textbooks," announced Professor Lupin to the assembled Gryffindors and Ravenclaws as he entered the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. He still wore the heavily worn robes that he'd had in the Third Year - or, Hermione mused, he'd somehow managed to acquire an equally threadbare set, it being entirely conceivable that the originals had expired in the intervening years.

Whether they were new 'old' robes, or the original ones, however, really didn't matter; none of Lupin's engaging teaching style had left him, and his reputation as everyone's favourite teacher was soon established following his return to Hogwarts.

Well, Slytherins excepted, of course, but then, they didn't count. Most of them didn't, anyway.

Lupin perched himself on the edge of the desk, and ran his fingers through his long hair, light streaks of grey flickering here and there betraying the wolf within. Perhaps. Looking at the former Marauder, in his threadbare robes, his eyes bright with knowledge, and his poise somehow managing to be both approachable and yet respectable, it was hard to believe that, for three nights a month, he turned into a crazed, bloodthirsty animal.

All because of a bite when he was a child. And now, Hermione reminded herself, the same fate afflicted Seamus, too; it was interesting to see how much more *attentive* Seamus was in DADA these days. Everyone respected Lupin, but Seamus, having been through the werewolf transformation himself now, seemed to regard their teacher with an ever deeper respect. Those two had an understanding that the others couldn't grasp - nor, suspected Hermione, would they ever want to.

"This," announced Lupin, lightly, almost conversationally, "is war."

He paused, as the reaction to the incongruous presentation kicked in. *What* was war? *Where*? *How*? The puzzlement remained subvocal, yet tangible, and everyone waited for the explanation. As Hermione scanned her classmates, Neville caught her eye once more, but quickly looked away again.

"Now, I realise it doesn't seem much like war from where we sit," continued Lupin, "but let's take a moment to reflect on what's happened in the world since the summer." Back on his feet, Lupin unravelled the large scroll he'd brought in, which turned out to be a large map of Europe, big enough to completely cover the blackboard.

With a casual flick of his wand, the map was mounted on the wall, and Lupin continued, "as we all know - though some choose to dispute - but, as we all know, Voldemort has risen again."

Most of the class still flinched at Voldemort's name. Coming from a Muggle background, this reaction had initially seemed a tad overblown to Hermione, but, as she acclimatised herself to a world where words conveyed real, actual power, the fear actually started to look rational.

Inscribing a glowing circle, deep red, on the map with his wand tip, Lupin indicated Beauxbaton's location, somewhere in the Loire Valley. He then drew another circle, Tempus Blue, about Durmstrang.

"There have been attacks... territorial gains, in the jargon," continued Lupin, as he started adding further red and blue circles across the map, indicating the two sides' respective gains. Paris was red, and most of Northern France along with it. About Durmstrang, the blue was creeping across Eastern and Central Europe, and Lupin provided a running commentary on the attacks as he worked.

"It all looks so simple, doesn't it?," he enquired, having finished marking the latest known gains for the two powers, and turning from his map to face the class once more. "It's just a map, with pretty colours on..."

Lupin shrugged lightly, and twirled his wand about his fingers, "but it's more than that. For every red mark on that map, someone died. For every section of blue territory, people are

enslaved under the Mark of Tempus. That's not a map, it's a *story* - a history, even, of battles fought, and lives lost."

When viewed from that perspective, the map suddenly took on a much more sinister air. Hermione could almost sense the red and the blue, seeping across the pastel colours of the different countries. She could almost see the masked Death Eaters sending up Dark Marks, with the cry of *Mosmordre!* And people, dead.

"So," continued Lupin, running his hand through his hair once more as he perched himself on the desk, "what do we do?"

Lisa Turpin was first to speak, "well, in the case of... of You-Know-Who, given that the French Ministry has been dissolved, doesn't governance now devolve to the Warlocks' Council? So, in a sense, don't we follow their lead?"

"Well, yes we do," conceded Lupin, before adding, "although the Warlocks' Council's ability to effectively intercede in these matters was undermined during the rise of Grindlewald. It's become more a perk of office to meet in the Council's chambers rather than an actual role of responsibility. No, I was thinking of something more direct, that *we*, here, now could, and can do..." Lupin raised his bushy eyebrows invitingly, waiting for response. "Yes, Neville?"

Neville had raised his hand, somewhat doubtfully, but nevertheless spoke up, "well, shouldn't we make a stand? A stand for what's right?"

Lupin pursed his lips, "yyyyeesssss.... Neville, but... well, you have to be careful in situations like these. People can be too eager, as the saying goes, to fight fire with fire. Step back from the battle," he urged, "and consider the war. What is this *about?*"

A sea of puzzled frowns greeted the professor, not that he seemed daunted; "I teach Defence Against the Dark Arts," he announced, somewhat redundantly, "but there's more to that defence than simply learning that Spell A blocks Spell B, and that Curse C has this effect on Creature A, but that on Creature B. That knowledge, those spells, that information - they're just the tools... the whole Defence Against the Dark Arts is *bigger* than that. It's bigger, and yet it's simpler..."

The class held their breath, waiting.

"People fall in love with it. They lust after it. People fight and die for it. It blinds the intelligent with stupidity, and inflicts madness upon the brilliant. It promises much, but deceives with trickery and lies. It flatters vanity, and seduces the noble. But beyond all that, remember these two words: *power corrupts.*"

In the silence that followed this speech, Lisa slowly rose her hand once more, "but surely there must be something more to this than just power," she protested, "there must be a *reason*, there must be some kind of goal..."

"That is an excellent point, Lisa," agreed Lupin, "although what kind of task would warrant such colossal power? I'm not saying that *any* power is evil - after all, you, I, all of us in this room, we all command incredible power, in the eyes of Muggles. These things are relative.

"No, I'm not saying all power is evil, although history will back me up when I say that it doesn't seem to have been the best judge of character through the ages. No, what I am saying, however, is this; both Voldemort and Tempus, whatever vision they are in pursuit of, that lust for power has corrupted what once was human. Defence Against the Dark Arts is in the curriculum wholly as a bid to prevent that same affliction corrupting you... it's not just here so that Hogwarts can inflict professors upon you who bore you to death." Lupin flashed a warm smile at the self-deprecating statement, but Hermione could tell that he *knew* that he wasn't boring anyone.

"Absolute power," he mused out loud, "would you trust yourself with it? Because I know I wouldn't."

It was as they were walking to Potions, after lunch, that he finally approached her.

"Um, Hermione?" asked Neville, as he struggled to close his bag whilst keeping pace with Hermione's customarily brisk pace.

"Yes, Neville?" Inwardly she groaned; she'd managed to avoid being partnered with Neville in either Transfiguration *or* Defence Against the Dark Arts that day, and knew that, by rights, she really ought to take her turn in Potions... but that would mean not partnering Draco. And, well, not that that would be the end of the world, really, but... but what if... Well, once they'd broken the rather odd Slytherin-Gryffindor partnership, it would definitely look *deliberate* if they reinstated it later. At least, for the time being, they had the excuse (not, she reminded herself, that she needed one) that they were simply partners through momentum.

As her mind raced through these thoughts, she suddenly remembered that Neville was talking.

"...has asked you already," Neville paused, uncertainly, peering at Hermione's face, as though trying to read her expression. Evidently not seeing anything to dissuade him, he ploughed on, "and well, I was wondering if... if... if you'd like... like to go to the Yule Ball. Like to go to the Yule Ball. With me."

Red faced, and frozen as though in terror, Neville waited for Hermione's response, anxiety pouring off him; "but it's OK if you're already going with someone... or, y'know, if you'd rather go with someone else. Not me...".

Hermione's heart fell. Not that she didn't like Neville, and not that she'd thought about being asked by anyone else... She'd have gone with Ron; should have gone with Ron. He *should* have been there to do the asking (not that he had a good track record in that regard, but Hermione was pretty sure that, with a little judicious prompting, he'd have managed to ask her somehow).

"Oh, Neville," stalled Hermione, as her mind whirled furiously, and her toes sent panic messages to her brain (Neville did have *awfully* large feet, she noted, absently). And then, in her mind's eye, she saw the list she'd been drafting during History of Magic:

- *Mandrake Leaves, Yarrow Root, Asphodel (Neville...*

It was time, she decided, to embrace her Inner Slytherin; "Neville," she repeated, warmly, "I'd be delighted..."

She was sure that her toes were sending warnings of imminent mutiny, but they simply didn't appreciate the bigger picture.

Another evening, and another congregation of the Away Team in the North Tower. For once it was a still night, so Cho hadn't been called upon to cast the protection bubble (Hermione reminded herself that she still had to ask the Ravenclaw Seeker how to cast that one). Nonetheless, it was approaching the winter solstice, so Hermione's familiar bluebell flame kept the group warm.

"I think it makes most sense to make some test Portkeys first," observed Padma, closing the volume from which she'd just finished summarising the construction process. "We don't want to waste Hermione's carving on a failed attempt, after all."

Internally, Hermione winced, as she always did at the recollection of the... thing Viktor had given her, "Herm-own-ninny, I haff made this for you," he'd said, handing the object over to her, towards the end of her visit.

Hermione Granger was, of course, a mature, level-headed and scholarly girl. Not prone to fits of giggles, or bouts of immature sniggering. Even so, she still remembered quite clearly even now the fierce burning sensation in her face as she'd thanked Viktor for the kind thought. Still, he'd meant well (although a small voice in the back of her mind insisted that perhaps the whole thing had been an elaborate practical joke, and that somewhere in a tavern deep in Bulgaria, Viktor Krum was regaling delirious team-mates with yet another account of how the straight-laced English student had *thanked* him for his *carving*). And besides, it was the only way they were going to get to Durmstrang.

Yes, Hermione reminded herself, needs must and all that. Still, if Seamus said so much as one *word*, she'd... well, she'd kill him.

"What?" asked Seamus, defensively, evidently having sensed Hermione's accusatory glare.

"Oh, nothing," she replied, chiding herself for being obvious.

Seamus shrugged, before replying, "hey Hermione, anyway. Your Durmstrang carving thing. How big is it?"

Hermione glared at him suspiciously. He couldn't *possibly* know - she hadn't even told Harry or Ron. But...

"Hermione?" prompted Seamus, "it's just that, y'know, is it portable? Pocketable, even? Or is it too large for that?"

Breathing a small, discreet sigh of relief, Hermione started to explain the rough dimensions of Viktor's handiwork, thankful that the flickering flames wouldn't give away the embarrassment simply visualising the thing caused in her. It was no use, she thought, resignedly; Seamus was going to have a field day.

"So, we all going to Hogsmeade at the weekend, then?" asked Ginny, from her customary position just short of being completely wrapped in Dean.

It would be the last Hogsmeade weekend of the year, and, with the forthcoming Yule Ball so recently announced, just about everyone in the Third Year and above would be going to the village to either pick up new robes, or accessories. And of course, noted Hermione, the male of the species would suddenly realise that they ought to do some Christmas shopping.

"Well," started Cho, "I was thinking about going to see Harry..."

Hermione actually felt sorry for Cho - sitting as she was with her knees pressed against her chest, and her Ravenclaw cloak wrapped tightly around against the cold. She looked lonely, lost and, well, *sad*. And as if the whole Harry thing wasn't bad enough, she reminded herself, Cho had gone through the Cedric thing barely six months earlier.

Not a good year, then.

"Do you think they'd let you?" asked Padma, gently, "I mean, isn't he in, er, solitary?"

"But he's there for *life!*" protested Cho, "they can't stop people seeing him... they can't... It's not *fair*." The sixth year witch closed her eyes tightly, and even in the firelight Hermione could see the knuckles whiten.

Lavender rested a hand on the Ravenclaw's arm, "it's OK," she urged, "really... we could ask Lupin... I'm sure he'd know, um, something... he'll be fine..."

The others all looked warily at each other. The truth was that none of them knew how Harry would be at all, but 'fine' was certainly not top of the list of adjectives they'd have looked to. No, thought Hermione, Harry James Potter would almost certainly *not* be 'fine' at that moment in time.

Chapter 53

After Ireland, which country has the highest density of Leprechauns?

It had been another bad night.

For all Harry knew, it could still *be* another bad night, since his vision remained completely white, and his sense gave away nothing as to the time of day. Still, his skin didn't have the tightness he associated with the small hours of the night, there wasn't the graininess to the eyelids that urged him back to sleep, so he assumed it must at least be after six.

Whatever the specific hour, however, the fact remained that the Beauxbatons Key draining ceremonies had resumed, seemingly under the leadership of the Lestranges, and, if his visions were anything to go by, seemingly more cruel than Lucius Malfoy had ever been.

With no visual distractions, the images replayed again and again in his mind, the Lestranges delighting in every detail of the macabre ritual. He saw the victims' arms slashed open again and again - a deep cut on the left forearm (oddly enough, exactly where the Dark Mark would be), heard the strangled, broken cries, the words unintelligible, yet the sentiment conveyed by the deep-seated primal language of terror.

Disturbingly, the mental connections in the image flickered and shifted, and Harry's mind was constantly assaulted by different interpretations of the sight being played out before him. For the most part, the same chill, dispassionate observation was to the fore, but there would be flashes of torment, and anguish - brief moments of terror, horrified shock. These sensations reached Harry through the connection, with thought processes in foreign tongues, and he could *sense* the internal energy as battles were fought between wills. Always, however, the darkness won, and the draining would finish to callous acknowledgement that the victim had served their purpose.

Morning no longer offered the cleansing light of day to banish the visions to the darkness of night, where they belonged. Instead, deprived of sight, Harry's mind constantly replayed its last visual input - the goading Death Eaters, ranged in a circle about the broken captive, the gravel in the courtyard slowly turning black in the spilt blood of the sacrificed wizard.

Taking his cue from Dean's hugely enthusiastic review of *Reservoir Dogs* (which really didn't sound all that pleasant), Harry had labelled his guards after the colours of their patterns. It was odd that, whilst humans tended to have patterns of several colours, swirling cloud-like, much as in pictures of Jupiter, the goblins tended to be predominantly single-coloured.

So it was that Mr Green and Mr Pink were currently pacing the corridor in his cell block. As far as he'd been able to ascertain, there were eight goblins detailed to keep watch, operating in four shifts. It was possible, he'd decided, that the goblins worked in 6 hour shifts, which would mean that today would be four days after his initial arrival at Blackrock.

Which should make the day Friday, but of this he was far from certain.

With his nights broken by the Key draining visions (these always took place during the night at Beauxbatons, although whether this was crucial or simply an aesthetic nicety he knew not), Harry had taken to sleeping during what he assumed had to be the day, but there was really no way of knowing.

Even his meals - stale bread, tepid water and a liquid that he hoped was soup - even these came at seemingly odd intervals, further heightening Harry's disorientation, adding fuel to the growing sense of helplessness.

Part of him, however, realised that this was part of a game-plan, part of a strategy. His captors were evidently doing their best to keep him in the dark (almost literally), reasoning, unfortunately soundly, that he would pose less of a threat in uncertain surroundings.

And it was this part of Harry, spurred on by the sense of guilt he felt on watching, again, as the wizard's body lit up with the power from the Beauxbatons Key, that drove him to persist with the sense map of his surroundings. Every time the horrified scream echoed within his skull, Harry heard the underlying accusation: he'd allowed Voldemort to return; it was his blood running through those Dark veins, his life that allowed this cruelty to be inflicted upon others.

It was his duty to bring Voldemort to account.

Patience was the key.

Unfortunately, this wasn't exactly playing to Harry's strengths, but stretching himself out fully on the rough bed, Harry pressed his fingertips flat to his temples, and let his sense sweep outwards, committing the surroundings to memory.

The six cells and their corridor were easy. Mr Pink and Mr Green would walk up and down the corridor, their steps neatly dodging the embedded, brooding patterns in the floor, and weaving about sinister columns of energy that drooped from the ceiling. It went without saying that anything the goblins made an effort to dodge had to be a Bad Thing, and Harry had mentally filed the different pattern types under 'trap/ward'.

There were still a whole host of unexplained energies present in the prison, however, and these just in his own corridor. The walls all glowed with a soft energy, static, but present, as though waiting, biding its time. Even though the pattern was soft, Harry gained the impression that this was through restraint, not weakness.

Sweeping down the now familiar corridor, which, apart from the goblins' movement, seemed exactly as it had on all previous occasions, Harry reached the crossroads, actually a five way junction, leading to a further three cell blocks similar to his own, and a corridor onward, deeper into the rock, yet also seeming to be the route through to the main Entrance Hall. Certainly, it was down this corridor that the relief shift arrived and the retiring shift exited.

As a working hypothesis, then, Harry assumed that escape would also take that path.

Sensing his environment in this fashion was such an assault on his mind, bombarded as it was with shapes, patterns, contours and movement, that he couldn't maintain concentration for too

long. The effort was draining, and the process of sorting the wheat from the chaff - static wards from mobile life - seemed to mock him with the huge scale of the concept.

Nonetheless, corridor by corridor, cell-block by cell-block, Harry was building an image of the prison in his mind. He knew that with true sight the place would doubtless look different, but the mental map he was conjuring would form a central foundation to his plan of escape.

There were moments when the multitude of paths, the shimmering confusion of patterns, and the simple vastness of the labyrinth threatened to overwhelm him. All that he had to do at these times was recall the latest Beauxbatons' victim's frenzied death, however, for his resolve to be stiffened.

It was ironic that the single person doing the most to keep Harry motivated in the exercise was Voldemort. Harry was determined to ensure that the irony would not be lost on the Dark Lord himself - that it was his cruel, inhuman reign that had sown the seeds of his ruin.

For no doubt about it, although Harry still possessed the vivid, burning line in his conscience that separated Good from Evil, prison was developing a dark edge to his power. It was concentrating, honing and sharpening a sense of focus in the Last of the Magi, solidifying a sense of purpose.

Voldemort would fall.

Awaking from a nap some time later, Harry's thoughts wandered in the whiteness of the void to consider Hogwarts, and the friends he'd left behind. Or, more correctly, the friends he'd been taken from by the Ministry's misguided fear, and Fudge's terror of public opinion.

Blindness was particularly cruel on the imprisoned - he couldn't even write to Cho, or Hermione, or any of the Away Team, and, equally obviously, they couldn't write to him. Prison was no place for a fifteen-year old; he was supposed to be at school, passing notes in Divination, catching up on sleep in History of Magic.

Harry allowed himself a small smile as he recalled shared wariness of the subjects of Hagrid's lessons, and the seeming inevitability of detentions in Potions. A school where people thought nothing of Professors entering the classroom by walking through the blackboard, or being taught by a werewolf (Harry actually resented the fact that he was missing lessons from the best teacher at the school, bar none).

His thoughts turned to Quidditch - after all, he was Captain, and flying, recalling the exhilaration of his practice against Cho, the two of them both flying on the edge, swooping, spinning, diving, throwing themselves about the sky, revelling in the joy of the free. He wondered if Ginny had reclaimed the Firebolt for herself once more - they needed a good Seeker if they were to recapture the Quidditch Cup.

It was a little while later that Harry suddenly realised that he'd probably spent the best part of an hour analysing the Houses' Quidditch teams and likely strategies, determined to find a way to put Gryffindor's name on the Cup. Captaincy was a disease - even if they had nominated someone else by now. Thinking about it, it would probably be Angelina, he mused, since the

only non-seventh year in the first team would now be Ginny, and she'd not played in a competitive match...

Harry grinned again as he realised he was taking this all *way* too seriously. He could visualise Hermione rolling her eyes in a mixture of exasperation and boredom. Cho, on the other hand, well she'd sympathise... he'd seen that in her eyes that time in the library, when he'd tried to explain that he wouldn't be able to fly anymore...

Cho. The grin faded: it just wasn't fair - almost the very second that they'd finally been open about being together, and just when she'd agreed to go with him to the Yule Ball... just at that moment, Percy had arrived with his jumped up hit-wizards and his mad list of charges, and taken it all away.

That - he and Cho - that had been *good*, he reflected; alright, they weren't an overt couple like, say Seamus and Lavender, or even Dean and Ginny. No, their connection was more subdued, but there was *meaning* to it all. She'd loved and lost before, and the ghost of Cedric was still there, not as a detraction from what they had, but... Harry wasn't quite sure how to define the role Cedric's memory played. It gave them a common bond, something about which they both focused, and through which they could touch and connect.

And just when it was getting good, just when it was becoming *right*, it had all been taken from him. Brutally, sharply, publicly... and he'd never even had a chance to say goodbye.

He didn't hold any malice against Percy - it wasn't in his nature to hate a Weasley, but he did begrudge the Ministry official the fact that he'd not even given Harry time to say goodbye to his friends, to the few people who truly mattered in his life. Percy, Harry thought bitterly, might at least have allowed him that.

But then, he'd not had a chance to say goodbye to Ron either. He'd sent him off to meet his fate at Sprout's wand, and Wormtail's bidding, that night in Beauxbatons, with no thought to the danger. No thought - he'd just assumed that Ron had got back to safety... and that assumption had ended up with him watching Ron's coffin lowered slowly into its grave in the December rain.

As Harry cast his mind back further, he remembered his last conversation with Cedric - *Wands out, d'ya reckon?*. And then, *zam!*, dead. *Kill the spare.* Wormtail again.

It was as though you never got to say goodbye, like walking through life with the constant threat that the world would be pulled from beneath your feet at any moment. Sinister forces pulling the strings of puppetry about Harry's friends, simply because they were that - friends of the Boy Who Lived. Simply because Voldemort, the great, dark, powerful He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, simply because he was scared of a fifteen year-old with a lightning bolt scar on his forehead.

And for the first time in his life, Harry was no longer afraid of Voldemort; the Dark Wizard was right to fear him, because as soon as his sight was back, he, Harry Potter, would be getting out of Blackrock, and he would be going after Voldemort.

And no matter what the Dark Lord tried to put in his way; creatures, servants, traps, hostages... no matter *what*, Harry would fight his way through to the end, through to the final confrontation, and through to Voldemort's defeat.

"Visitor," announced Mr Red as the goblins changed shift.

This was hardly news to Harry, since he'd tracked the two goblins - Mr Red and Mr Yellow - as they accompanied Dumbledore's pattern along the corridors from the cart-track.

The heavy key clunked in the lock as the barred door swung open, and Dumbledore's pattern entered the room. Although Harry had initially sat bolt upright in his bed as soon as he processed the incoming signal, he'd determined that, for the sake of minimising his captors' knowledge of his abilities, he'd better not indicate that he knew who his visitor was until greetings had been exchanged.

Shortly after coming to this decision, he also realised that Dumbledore might have been using Polyjuice Potion, and Harry could have jeopardised everything with an inopportune display of his sensing prowess. So he waited.

"Good evening, Harry," announced Professor Dumbledore, in tones that could only ever be associated with the Headmaster.

"Hello Professor Dumbledore," responded Harry, "so it's evening then?"

"Indeed, a little after five o'clock, to be precise," a paper bag rustled before Harry's face, "sherbet lemon?"

"Thanks," accepted Harry, as he blindly extended a hand, and accepted the proffered sweet - it certainly made a change from stale bread, and, as the sugar hit, Harry started to feel, well, pretty alright, actually.

The goblins remained on guard - one was standing inside the cell, the door still open, whilst the other remained on the other side of the bars. Clearly, Harry deduced, they weren't about to let him discuss matters of secrecy with Dumbledore. But then, given the goblins' general levels of paranoia, they probably had the room bugged anyway...

"They've been treating you well, I trust?" enquired Dumbledore, with a warming hint of 'or else' behind the tone that made Harry feel greatly relieved that at least someone, somewhere was looking out for him.

"Well, I s'pose," said Harry, about the sweet, as he shrugged his shoulders "I mean, I can't see, and, well... I never know what the time is, or anything..."

He could almost *hear* Dumbledore frown, and had the distinct impression that the entire cell was coming under the intense, and displeased gaze of the great wizard.

"A horrible, inhuman thing to do, the blindness charm," noted Dumbledore, with tangible distaste, "however the Ministry insists that such precautions are necessary. Understand, Harry, I tried my best, but in circumstances such as these..."

Harry had to stop himself from saying 'it's OK,', reminding himself that he had to maintain the illusion that his blindness was permanent - the merest hint to his captors that he didn't feel his plight was as serious as it should be and the game was all over. "But I can't *see*," protested

Harry, getting into character, "and I can't write... I can't contact my friends; y'know, Hermione, Cho... Cho Chang, I mean, and the other Gryffindors."

"Well," offered Dumbledore, "I'd be happy to pass word to..."

"No. Messages," interrupted Mr Red from his position next to the cell door, in an uncompromising tone.

Harry turned to face the direction of the goblin's voice, not attempting to hide the sheer surprise that anyone, *anything*, even, would dare to try and tell Dumbledore what he could and could not do.

"I understand your security concerns," advised Dumbledore, patiently, although obviously without any trace of sympathy for the security regime, "but it is simply *inhumane* to cut this boy off completely from his friends. You heard our exchange - if there was anything at all hidden in what we've said already, I'm sure you would have picked up on..."

"We have our Orders from the Ministry," persisted Mr Red, undaunted, "and from the Minister himself..."

"And," continued Dumbledore, cutting the guard short, "I shall be speaking with Cornelius about this matter immediately. I know that the Ministry like to delude themselves that this boy, somehow, is something less than human, but they would be well advised to note that the fastest way to dehumanise the mind is to treat the person like an animal. It would be ironic would it not, if the Ministry's regime of solitary confinement actually precipitated the change in this boy from what he is to what they fear?"

Mr Red, clearly not used to dealing with rhetorical statements, shuffled his feet, muttering darkly, but obviously ceding to Dumbledore's lead. Harry was quite impressed with Dumbledore's logic, and hope clung to the possibility that his Headmaster might persuade the Ministry to let some of his friends visit.

Harry felt Dumbledore turn to face him once more. How he felt it he couldn't explain, but there was a sensation, there was a feeling, there was just *something* that told you when Dumbledore's eyes were upon you. There was power, a weight of comforting reassurance, the promise of absolute trust.

"So, Harry, I take it you'd like me to pass on greetings to Miss Granger, Miss Chang, and your other friends from the North Tower?"

"Ye..., the North Tower? You knew?" No sooner had he asked the question than he realised that probably there was *nothing* that went on at Hogwarts that Dumbledore wasn't aware of at some level or other... "I mean, yes, please. Just say, erm, well, just tell them I'm fine... and, I hope they're OK, and everything."

"Most certainly," agreed Dumbledore, in the tone that made you know that everything was fine.

"Oh," Harry remembered, "and could you say Hi to Hagrid for me, and Professor Lupin, and.... and his dog." Harry caught himself just in time on the last request - it certainly would

not have done to have given away Sirius' location at Hogwarts to whatever wards might have been eavesdropping.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure all the staff will be relieved to hear that you are well," continued Dumbledore (Harry wondered whether this extended to *all* the staff - no doubt, though, that Trelawney would be delighted that her long campaign of predicting doom had finally paid off), before his tone darkened somewhat, "although I am somewhat dismayed to say that your relations did not seem, ah, *unduly perturbed* by your confinement."

"What? The Dursleys?" scoffed Harry, "hardly; they used to lock me in the cupboard under the stairs - actually, that was my bedroom - until I got my Hogwarts letter, that is, but they used to lock me up. Punishment..." aware that he was babbling slightly now, Harry stopped, and shrugged, lightly. He didn't think of the Dursleys as his family - he didn't really think of them as having any connection whatsoever with him any more - they belonged to a different Harry, in a different place.

It was funny how life turned full circle like that - that he could grow up and break free from imprisonment in an intolerant Muggle world, only to be thrown into fresh incarceration in the world he'd thought had been his truthful home.

Chapter 54

What, famously, were Grindlewald's last words?

The weather wasn't playing.

The last Hogsmeade weekend of the year, the last chance to buy Christmas presents, and generally stock up on things, and it was raining.

Correction. It wasn't raining. It was *pouring*. Sheets of rain were hammering into the ground, the paths about Hogwarts crossed with miniature streams, deceptively deep puddles and the persistent drum as the rain hit stone and glass and ground and tile.

Drawing her cloak tighter, Hermione stood on the school steps, watching the procession of umbrellas file miserably towards the gates, vainly hoping that it would ease off. She'd already cast an *Impervio* on the cloak, *and* she'd charmed the umbrella to always maintain the optimum angle against the rain, but there was still the whole 'going out in the dreary December rain' thing to get over.

There was also the small matter that this would be the first time she'd visited Hogsmeade without Harry *or* Ron. Ron would be wrinkling his nose at the rain, and would only be cajoled into braving the elements with elaborate descriptions of warm Butterbeers and exotic-flavours of Sugar Quill. Harry would plough on regardless, not even bothering to consider being put off by mere weather (she still remembered the Quidditch match in the Third Year, all the players looking like drowned rats).

Dean, Ginny, Seamus and Lavender were a little way down the path now, Dean having charmed the two immense umbrellas (Gryffindor colours, naturally) to spin constantly. Parvati, surprisingly, wasn't with them; probably gone in with her sister, then, mused Hermione, beginning to think that a walk through the rain would be a lot less unpleasant if she had some company of her own.

As students continued to file past, Hermione wondered if anyone would notice if she slipped past the statue of the one-eyed witch, and took the tunnel in instead. After all, it wasn't as if anyone would know...

"Hermione..."

"...sweetheart..."

"What?" asked Hermione warily, but sharply, as Fred and George materialised at her elbows. She was pretty certain it was Fred holding the umbrella, whilst George was peering into the gloom with evident distaste.

The one she thought was Fred affected mortal hurt at Hermione's tone, "D'ya hear that, brother? Did you hear the suspicion?"

"The insinuation?" enquired George (probably).

"The very *allegation* in that tone of voice," agreed the first Twin, "oh Hermione, may the perils of being but poor misunderstood..."

"...and innocent," chimed the second.

"Yes, yes," agreed the first, "poor, misunderstood *and* innocent er, um..."

"...*artistes*..." supplied his brother, helpfully.

"Yes, that's right, that's right... may such perils never be visited upon one so lovely as your kind self."

"What do you want?" asked Hermione, eyes narrowing. Flattery, it was said, got you anywhere. Flattery from the Twins, however, tended to be a direct prelude to trouble.

"Ah," said George (she was pretty certain it was George - he was always the slightly more reserved one... relatively speaking), "well, dearest Hermione, we have a, erm..."

"...a plan," supplied Fred.

"A plan, indeed. As it happens, a most *excellent*..."

"...inventive..."

"...original..."

"*Get* on with it," commanded Hermione, tersely, although she was quite enjoying the return of the Twins' prankster selves.

"Never, *ever* rush a Weasley," cautioned Fred, warningly.

George made a coughing noise that sounded remarkably like 'Angelina', and Hermione cheered up noticeably at the sight of Fred's ears going pink as she raised her eyebrows enquiringly.

"Most sweet Hermione," explained George, seemingly oblivious to the scowls being sent his way by his twin, "we have a new Wheeze..."

"...a really, really *good* Wheeze..."

"I sense a 'but' somewhere," observed Hermione, astutely, wondering if she was about to be dragged into something she would regret at a later date.

"Well," hedged Fred, shuffling slightly, "not *exactly* a 'but', as such..."

"More... more a sort of a... small... bijoux... problemette," extemporised George flapping his hand in a circular motion as he tried to come up with a phrase appropriately trifling to convey the tiny size of the favour they were about to request.

Hermione waited, patiently, having decided that if they were going to ask for her help, then they'd better go through the full 'walking-across-hot-coals' and 'Hermione-we-are-forever-in-your-debt' routines first.

"You see," stated Fred, determining that the time for blunt speaking was upon them, "the thing is that, McGonagall..."

"...for some strange, deluded reason..."

"Yeah, McGonagall has started to keep tabs on our Hogsmeade trips..."

"Paranoid," observed George, pityingly, shaking his head at how the mighty had fallen.

"Obviously," continued Fred, "we *have* to go to Zonkos..."

"...and buy most of it."

"But we need some, er..."

"...components..."

"...ingredients, yes, ingredients, for the new Wheeze, and, well, it would be..."

"...advantageous..."

"...not to mention *instrumental* in prolonging our very attendance at this hallowed institution..."

"...if we were to acquire said *ingredients*, er, *discreetly*..."

"If, for example," observed George, in a wholly hypothetical manner, "perhaps a third party were to procure them on our behalf?"

"Of course," mused Fred, thoughtfully, "it would need to be someone of... impeccable character..."

"...and excellent academic standing..."

"...not to mention, of course, brave..."

"...daring..."

"...intelligent..."

"Keep going," supplied Hermione, helpfully.

Fred narrowed his eyes, "You drive a hard bargain, sis."

Hermione blinked. Sister? Unlike Harry, Hermione did of course have a family of her own, albeit one without siblings. Yet much like Harry, she sort of viewed herself as an extension of the Weasleys... quite how Molly Weasley could have seven children and *still* welcome more

into the fold was mind boggling, but completely heart-warming. Few places on the planet tasted as much of home as The Burrow.

Won over, Hermione handed her umbrella to George, and linked her arms with the Twins' respective free ones, "you both understand, of course, that I had *nothing* to do with this, don't you?" she asserted, as the trio stepped out from the protective arch of the school entrance, and followed the slow crocodile of umbrellas towards Hogsmeade.

Sweeney's was slightly different from the usual shops in Hogsmeade, and although Hermione, Ron and Harry had often passed the street it was on (named, for some undoubtedly obscure reason, The Rack) on their way to the far end of the village, they had never actually had cause to wander past.

The Rack was a quiet street, off the High Street, and near the edge of the village. It was something of a surprise that there were any shops at all, but Fred's whispered instructions had been precise, and Hermione found herself standing outside a small shop, with darkened, square paned windows, and a grimy, dust-covered door was almost entirely hidden in the shadow of the porch.

The door creaked open (somehow, she'd known it would), and a dry rattle of wooden chimes announced to the owner that a customer had entered. Looking up, Hermione realised that the chimes were actually made of bone, and shivered slightly. Whoever had made the chime had obviously chosen bones that looked just like human ribs, she noted, with a growing sense of unease.

The three walls of the shop (the other wall to the room comprising the window and the door) were lined with shelves, which, in turn were crammed full of boxes and jars and storage pots and books and plants and a whole host of other things not immediately identifiable. Much of the place was covered in a reasonably thick layer of dust - shelf life clearly wasn't an issue dear to the owner's heart, she deduced.

"Oh hello, dear," cried a gentle, elderly voice, and Hermione's attention was drawn to the proprietor, who'd entered via a small doorway in the back wall, behind the counter.

The shop was so dark, unkempt and vaguely sinister, that Hermione had been expecting someone more, well, Slytherin than the short, round-faced old witch who greeted her now, smiling kindly. "Now," she enquired, "what can I get for you?"

Wilfully forcing her eyebrows to maintain their normal altitude, Hermione started to work through the somewhat extensive list the Twins had imparted upon her: "Ah, well, have you got any Moroccan Yarrow Root? Red or green, doesn't matter..."

"Moroccan Yarrow?" enquired the witch, as she flicked her wand at the wall nearest the door, and a terracotta storage pot came floating through the air, bringing with it its own cloud of dust and cobwebs, "well let's see... it's been a while since anyone's asked me for *that*..."

As Hermione continued working her way through the ingredient list, it was starting to become something of a challenge to find an item that Sweeney's *didn't* stock. "Um," she enquired,

lightly, having completed the Twins' shopping, "I don't suppose you have any summoning chalk, do you?"

"My, we *are* on something of a mission today, aren't we, dear? Would that be calcite or silver based? The calcite's the one for basic communication, but you need the silver for transferrance."

Hermione tried to act as though the distinction wasn't news to her, "Oh, well some of both, actually - if you've got it, that is."

After a brief rummage through a large wooden box that had been hidden underneath the counter, two small, cloth wrapped bundles were added to the small stockpile of ingredients, and Hermione was starting to wonder how she was going to get everything back to Gryffindor Tower without arousing suspicion.

Still, whilst the iron was hot; "Um, also, I need some Filament Candles... er, seven, actually..."

Hermione didn't really believe in Destiny, but, on the other hand, when the various items she needed were practically being thrust into her hands, it was hard not to feel that she was going to be successful...

The Three Broomsticks was busy, the air tinged with the thick taste of wet cloaks and the tavern's warmth. Hermione caught sight of Cho, seated with her fellow sixth years, next to an ominously large pile of Gladrag's carrier bags; clearly, the Ravenclaws were going to do the Ball thing properly this year.

Moving deeper into the building, Hermione eventually found the quartet of Dean, Lavender, Seamus and Ginny, occupying one of the booths at the back wall. Juggling the two bags of supplies into a more comfortable position, Hermione headed towards the space Ginny was making for her.

"...no way, Dean. Don't. Even. Think. About. It," warned Ginny, sternly, who then looked imploringly at Lavender, "They can't can they?"

"Absolutely not," confirmed Lavender, fixing Dean with a piercing glare, unmoved by the wizard's wide-eyed expression of complete innocence.

Hermione flicked her eyes between the four faces, "Um, what did I miss?"

"*Dean*," explained Ginny, gratingly, "has just asked my brothers for some more Exploding Hair..."

"Oh, the pink hair thing?" asked Hermione, bemused.

"They *thought* it would be *amusing*," continued Ginny, glaring at Seamus (Hermione noticed that Lavender and Ginny had chosen to direct their ire towards their opposite Wolf, as it were), "to go to the Ball with pink hair."

"We would have shared it," offered Dean, in a futile attempt at placating Ginny.

"Dean," urged Seamus. "Earth to Dean: when in hole, stop digging." Evidently desperate to change the subject, his eyes alighted upon Hermione's shopping, "Sweeney's, Hermione? What were you over there for?"

"Oh, this?" queried Hermione, trying not to sound flustered, "oh, well, just a few bits and pieces, for the project, you know..." She neglected to say which project the 'the' referred to; after all, it was hardly her fault if they leapt to the wrong conclusion, was it?

Dean frowned, "I thought Padma was in charge of getting that stuff together," he mused, and then shrugged, "oh well - have we got everything?"

Choosing to ignore the first half of Dean's contribution (which was a far safer option than lying and saying that Padma had asked her to pick the things up), Hermione answered as evasively as she possibly could, "Well, pretty much... there are still things we need, but Neville should be able to get us the Herbology stuff, and... hey, where *is* Neville, anyway?"

Lavender and Ginny exchanged a look, "Er, he said he was going to walk in with you," replied Lavender, "didn't he meet you at the school entrance?"

"Oh no," said Hermione, recalling with a sinking feeling that ever since agreeing to accompany him to the ball, Neville had become quite... attached to her during the past week. "I must've missed him; I walked in with the Twins... Oh, you don't think... he wouldn't *still* be waiting for me, would he?" As Hermione asked this question, she also noted that she was in grave danger of playing gooseberry to the two couples; an escape route was presenting itself to her, complete with opportunity to stash the Sweeney's shopping discreetly before the others got back.

"Oh, he's a big boy," assured Lavender, "I'm sure he'll have worked out that he must have missed you by now..."

"Well..." observed Hermione, dubiously, "you know how he is... I'd better go back, to see if he's OK... *as a friend!*" she asserted, with what she hoped was something that could be mistaken for unconvincing denial, at Lavender's 'oooh'.

Much better, Hermione reasoned, to let them think *that* than allow them to start wondering exactly what exactly she *had* bought that morning. Besides, it was barely eleven - if Neville *was* there, she could drag him back out to Hogsmeade in time for lunch anyway. "I'll see you later," she promised, as she gathered the various bags together once more, and headed for the door.

Having a reputation for being slightly manic *did* have its uses.

The following Tuesday night saw the Away Team once again congregating in the North Tower. With Padma and Cho involved in the Portkey and Portal research, and no Harry present to drive things along, the meetings seemed to have less of a purpose these days. They all knew what they had to do, after all.

Some good news had been relayed earlier by Professor Dumbledore, who'd explained that Cornelius Fudge had relented to allow Harry visits at Blackrock. No more than two visits per week, and all visitors had to go through the goblins' security procedures, but still, at least it was something.

They agreed that Hermione would arrange to visit him on the coming Saturday, and thereafter they'd work out some kind of rota to make sure that he wasn't left alone for too long. Prison would be bad enough. Prison and solitary confinement would be worse. But prison, for life, in solitary, blind and only fifteen years old was almost beyond comprehension.

They all knew Harry was strong - but Hermione's assertion that the rumours of Harry's treatment by the Dursleys didn't relay the half of it didn't lessen the whole Team's belief that he would need all the support he could get from them. They were the Away Team - that they would do everything they could to help him was a given, and Hermione derived no small amount of pride from that knowledge.

The Portkey business was going slowly, Padma explained - although they had a reasonable supply of the basic components (Hermione heaved a sigh of relief at this, as it then tied with the story she'd spun at The Three Broomsticks at the weekend), attempts to construct a Portkey primed to the Astronomy Tower had not gone well.

Padma held up a piece of shattered, charred masonry, "You see, if you don't get the timing *and* the ratios exactly right, it just sort of explodes..."

"Well hey, flambé!" noted Dean, quietly impressed.

Padma ignored him, "Still, we're getting closer, I think, and once we've got a Portkey working, I think we should go for it with Hermione's carving."

"Wouldn't it make sense to break the carving into several pieces, so we're not restricted to one chance?" suggested Seamus, "no offence, mind," he added, towards Padma, lest she think he was belittling her abilities.

"And not *too* much taken," returned Padma, sweetly, "but no; the greater the presence of the destination in the Portkey, the more likely you are to be able to construct it. So our best chance is with using the carving as a whole... Hermione, you said you'd bring it tonight?"

"Well, um, yes... but if we're not ready to run with it just yet," hedged Hermione, wishing that she could somehow skip the inevitability of the reaction she was about to provoke.

"C'mon, let's see it," urged Parvati, "I mean, I can't *believe* you didn't tell us about it at the start of term!"

Hermione knew that Parvati would believe soon enough, as she delved into her bag to fish out Viktor's carving, finally presenting it to the group. "It's an example of traditional Bulgarian folk-art," she asserted, eyes blazing defiantly at anyone who might dare to suggest otherwise.

Jaws dropped collectively in the halfflight, stunned disbelief evident in the eyes of all around her, as if saying 'is that *really*...?'

Lavender was first to recover, letting out a scandalised shriek; "Hermione!" she gasped, "that's... that's *rude!*"

To Lavender's left, Parvati raised her eyebrows enquiringly, indicating that she suspected there was a great deal more to the story behind the carving than Hermione had divulged to date, and promising further interrogation to come, once they'd returned to the safety of their dorm.

Seamus was obviously struggling to find breath, open-mouthed in incredulity, and looking desperately as though he was going to say something... just as soon as he regained his power of speech.

"It's *culture*," persisted Hermione, "art," she added through gritted teeth, surveying the rest of the Away Team, just *daring* them to mock (poor Neville appeared to be in severe shock).

Ginny, eyes sparkling with mischief, corrected her, "No, no, that's... *that*... that 'thing', it's... it's *obscene*," before succumbing to a wicked giggling fit. It was Hermione's considered opinion that Ginny's eyes appeared far more knowing than any self-respecting fourteen-year old's ought to be in the matter.

At least Cho was being marginally sympathetic, "Oh Hermione, I'd have *died*," she confessed, trying, unsuccessfully to contain her laughter.

Absently, Hermione passed the carving across to Padma, who had held out her hand to request further inspection; after all, Padma was in charge of the Portkeys, *and* she was a Ravenclaw. It was nice to have at least a couple of mature people to hand. Her thoughts were cut short by a scandalised shriek from Padma, however, and she realised that her Ravenclaw counterpart had probably just discovered that...

"It *moves!*" exclaimed Padma, conflicting expressions of surprise, wicked delight and scandal crossing her face, as she demonstrated Viktor's handiwork's animation.

This was the news that finished Seamus off, who now collapsed completely into Lavender, tears streaming down his face as he beat his fists against his legs, trying to control himself, "You... thing... Viktor," he wheezed, wiping tears from his eyes. "Classic..." he managed, before further speech was rendered impossible by continued fits of hysterics.

Dean was faring little better, "Wh... wh... where the *smeg* di... no, no, *what* the... *how?*" Words, for once, had clearly failed him, and he and Ginny clutched each other as they convulsed silently in delirious mirth.

Hermione trained a practised, withering glare upon them, her lips tightened into a razor thin line, but to no avail. The dark suspicion that the whole thing had been an elaborate practical joke at her expense was starting to grow once more.

Hermione glared at her recalcitrant hair in the mirror, hoping that Parvati would eventually sense her distress and offer to help, rather than she be forced to admit that she didn't actually know any hairdressing charms.

Parvati and Lavender were sifting through accessories at the other mirror, Lavender vetoing anything silver (which was unfortunate, since she really wasn't keen on gold). Both girls had similar cuts of robe, a little more daring than Hermione's, but she'd never really been that interested in clothes. Things like saving the world always seemed to get in the way.

Hmphing once more into the mirror, and gathering her rebellious hair up in a very loose bunch, Hermione flicked her eyes hopefully to Parvati's reflection.

"Oh, Hermione," called Parvati, "would you like me to do your hair for you? There were some really good charms in October's *Charmed Life*...."

Finally. "Oh, are you sure?" asked Hermione, sounding as though she didn't want to impose, "I mean, I wouldn't want to be any trouble, but..." she took her hands away from her head, and the bushy hair once more fell back into its customary frizziness. She *could* have drowned it all in Sleekeazy, but she'd learnt that the Sleekeazy factory used, not employed, but used, *exploited* even, House-Elves in production, and she'd vowed never to touch their stuff again.

Which was, of course, all very well, but it did rather leave her in a fix for the Yule Ball.

"Here," commanded Parvati, who'd materialised behind her, wand clenched between her teeth, as she gathered her hair up, "now, what did you want? We could put it up," she mused, "or how about a French plait?"

Hermione almost forgot to voice opinions on the various styles Parvati was suggesting, as she watched her friend's fingers flick about her head, mystifyingly taming her hair with ease. Of course, she reminded herself, Parvati had probably grown up with her sister's hair to experiment on (just as slick, black and obedient as Parvati's own), and then, at Hogwarts, she and Lavender had always been swapping style tips.

But then, they didn't have hair that looked as though it had been grafted from a Care Bear.

At some point, and she was never quite sure when, Lavender and Parvati had taken control of Hermione's transformation completely, and she resigned herself to being a passenger along for the ride... and loathe though she was to admit it, they *were* actually doing a rather good job.

Even if it did sound a *little* bit like being in theatre: "Lipstick," requested Lavender, "mascara... "

"It's eight already!" fretted Hermione, "it's started... and Neville'll think I'm not coming..."

"Don't move," commanded Parvati, as she continued sticking alarmingly long pins into Hermione's hair, tiny ivory ribbons flickering from their heads.

"It's good for them to wait," advised Lavender, knowingly, her hair sparkling with the non-precious metal glitter she'd sprinkled through it. Hermione had never seen anyone actually *wear* blue lipstick before, but Lavender managed to carry it off, somehow.

Parvati frowned at Hermione's reflection, "Not bad... not bad at all. Lavender?"

"Oh, *definitely*," concurred the third fifth year, "although... well, Hermione, the watch *has* to go... maybe a bracelet, Parvati?"

Desperate not to be any later than she already was, Hermione complied instantly to the other girls' suggestions, and, finally, five minutes *late*, the trio exited the dorm, and descended the staircase down to the common room.

It was alright for boys - all they had to do was wear black robes, and that was it. Sorted. No-one complained if *they* wore the same thing two years running (well, except Ron, who'd managed to complain about his attire from the start, but, she remembered, he'd had just cause, even without the lace frills).

Neville and Seamus were waiting for them, Seamus a resigned, look upon his face, although he did seem genuinely pleased to see Lavender. Neville looked as though he'd just been put through triple detention in Potions, and Hermione immediately felt terrible for making him wait... Parvati and Lavender were *mean* at times.

"No Dean?" asked Hermione, as they filed through the portrait hole.

"Ginny was on time," observed Seamus, in a tone that stopped fractionally short of accusatory, "and they decided not to *wait* for us..."

"Oh, but we didn't make you wait for *long*, did we?" asked Lavender, linking her arm with Seamus, as Parvati took his other arm (since her date wasn't a Gryffindor, Seamus, noble soul that he was, had risen to the daunting task of escort).

Seamus, clearly, was in forgiving mood, "No, no, not at all... and you look fantastic. You don't scrub up too badly, either, Parvati..." he added, with a straight face, but earning himself a sharp jab in the ribs for his troubles.

Neville had hesitantly offered his own arm to Hermione, which she'd taken with equal trepidation. Not that she didn't like Neville, of course, but he wouldn't have been her first choice. Not that *he'd* have asked her, anyway.

She wondered, slightly troubled, where that thought had come from.

Reaching the double doors that led to the Great Hall, Parvati disengaged her arm from Seamus', and was immediately wrapped up in the arms of her date. All Hermione knew about him was that his name was Joshua, and he was a sixth year.

So she noted with idle curiosity that he was tall (taller than Ron, even), with spiky black hair and piercing blue eyes... in fact, she mused, if you were the type, he was quite handsome, and was a little surprised that she hadn't noticed him before. But then, she didn't know the Hufflepuff sixths that well - as opposed to the Ravenclaws, who'd formed their own study group, commandeering one of the big tables in the library ever since Hermione had first attended Hogwarts.

"Not bad for a Slytherin," observed Lavender, appraisingly.

Hermione was aghast, "Parvati's date's a *Slytherin*?" she asked, incredulously, "but... but... but we're *Gryffindors*."

"I think Parvati's put house issues to one side for the night," confided Lavender in whispered tones, as her best friend wrapped her arms around Joshua's neck in the somewhat *over-intimate* welcoming hug.

"Well," observed Hermione, somewhat haughtily. Honestly, she'd expected better of Parvati, she really had, she reflected, as they made their way through the doors, and into the Great Hall itself.

The usual Christmas decorations had been supplemented by scores of charmed points of light, that bobbed and weaved between the floating candles, almost like self-propelled fairy lights, glowing fluffily in soft pastel colours. Above their heads, the ceiling displayed the stormy heavens, torrential rain lashing down, yet never actually *falling* on the students below.

The five house tables had of course been swept away, and a small stage had replaced the staff's high table, where a band was running through a series of warm-up tunes as the students milled about, drinks in hand, trying to find a table.

They located Dean and Ginny, who'd commandeered a table with Padma and her date, Terry Boot. Where Parvati had worn striking red, Padma was wearing an ivory and turquoise combination that, inevitably, looked equally stunning... it was somewhat mystifying to note, then, that Terry seemed to have his eyes fixed on the opposite side of the room, oblivious to the sharp glances sent his way every five seconds from Padma.

Hermione followed Terry's line of sight, as she squeezed in next to Ginny, "Who's that with Colin?" she asked, the Founder of the Hogwarts Chapter of the Official Harry Potter Fan Club holding his camera in one hand, and the hand of a *very* pretty blonde in the other.

"Oh, that's Lilia," explained Ginny, "Hufflepuff - my year... honestly, he's supposed to be a Gryffindor... you wouldn't *believe* how much cajoling it took to get him to actually ask her..."

"Oh, trust me," contradicted Hermione, "I would." As Colin and Lilia headed for a table, Hermione watched Terry's eyes follow their progress across the Hall - so much for Ravenclaw subtlety.

Continuing to scan the Hall (people watching was much more fun when everyone was dressed up), Hermione noted that Parvati and Joshua were seated with a group of predominantly sixth year Slytherins, although, frankly, the way those two were behaving, Hermione strongly suspected they could have been seated with a table of Flobberworms for all the notice they'd have taken.

And then there was Draco, other side of the Hall (of course), with Crabbe and Goyle in attendance; they were seated with three fourth year girls, presumably Slytherins judging by the green and silver theme running through their collective attire, one noticeably prettier than the other two.

Just as she was trying to place Draco's date's name, he looked across the Hall, directly at her, and, instinctively she averted her eyes. *Damn.*

"Well," invited Dean, as he stood up and extended his hand to Ginny, "shall we?"

The dancing proper had begun two numbers ago, and although the majority of students had taken to the floor, the Away Team hadn't yet taken the plunge. At Dean and Ginny's lead, however, Seamus and Lavender also rose, leaving Hermione with Neville, Padma and Terry.

Neville rose, managing to knock the table, but, fortunately, not severely enough to spill any of the drinks, "Um, Hermione? Would you?" he asked.

"Certainly," she confirmed, looking pointedly at Terry as she rose, in the hope that he might take the hint and ask Padma to dance. Unfortunately, however, Terry's eyes continued to be locked firmly on Colin and Lilia, so drastic action was called for; "Terry, Padma - you two joining us?" she enquired forcibly.

"Wha?" asked Terry, startled, and turning to face Hermione, evidently having only belatedly picked up that she'd been talking to him.

"Dance, Terry... Neville and I are joining the others, and we were wondering whether you two would be joining us?"

"Oh, well, er...." stammered Terry, as his eyes once more flitted past Hermione.

"Thanks Hermione," interrupted Padma, warmly, before her tone turned icy, "but we'll sit this one out. You two *enjoy yourselves.*"

This was all completely lost on Terry, however, and Hermione sent Padma an apologetic shrug; if last year was anything to go by, it wouldn't take her long to find someone who *would* pay her some attention. Still, if Gred and Forge needed a 'volunteer' to test whatever Wheeze it was they were developing, Hermione now knew just the bloke.

An extra year had done nothing to improve Neville's dancing skills (nor had it done anything to restrain Fred and Angelina's *unique* brand of hyperactive frenzy), and Hermione struggled to keep her face wince-free as the music progressed.

It wasn't just that Neville's feet were large - it was the supreme confidence with which they landed in the wrong place that was the killer. Focus, Hermione, she admonished herself, asphodel, yarrow root... As long as she kept her eyes on the prize, she knew she'd make it through the evening in one piece.

Or mostly in one piece apart from her toes, anyway.

"Hey Neville, Hermione," called Fred, "you up for another square dance like last year?"

Hermione would have protested, but Neville had leapt in with both feet (she couldn't help the metaphor - for some reason it had just sprung to mind), agreeing enthusiastically. Remembering that she needed him, Hermione conjured an agreeable smile from somewhere, and waited for further instruction, as Fred and Angelina set about the dance floor, corralling further victims into their scheme.

"Two words," confessed Dean, as he welcomed Hermione as his latest partner in Fred's mystifyingly complex choreography, "completely lost."

Hermione knew what he meant - Angelina and Fred obviously both knew what they wanted to achieve with the dance; it would have been helpful, if, perhaps, the two had been pursuing a shared vision, but instead it was left to the rest of them to follow first Fred calling "OK, swap partners two to your left", and then Angelina shouting, "opposites!" and everyone staggering about the floor, trying to keep up *and* keep time.

And to make matters worse, the two would-be-choreographers seemed intent on outdoing each other in terms of who could call the most flamboyant move: "And spin your partner clockwise!" cried Fred eagerly, literally picking Ginny up and spinning on his heels.

"Let's just say we did, OK?" suggested Hermione, nervously, as she tried to envision the carnage that would ensue if they were all to follow Fred's lead.

"Inconceivable!" cried Dean, as he scooped Hermione off her feet, and span round once.

Deep in her heart Hermione just knew it: the floor would be knee deep in body parts if Fred and Angelina weren't stopped soon.

As luck would have it, the band struck a long, closing chord to bring the number to a close, and everyone set about trying to find their original partner.

"OK, could you all line up in a big circle, ladies on the inside, facing anti-clockwise?" prompted the bandleader, "make two circles, one inside the other if there's not enough room... c'mon, plenty of space up at this end..."

Hermione had intended to sit the next dance out, but Neville had already steered her into position in the circle, and so she resigned herself to at least seeing this one through, and *then* giving her feet a break.

The band struck up a moderate waltz-type number, and the two circles slowly started moving around the room.

"Right, ladies stay where you are," commanded the band-leader, as the chorus died, "and fellas move forward three places, and greet your new partner..."

As Neville headed off to accost Lisa Turpin, Hermione found herself being partnered by Lee, who, it just so happened, was an *excellent* dancer, all natural rhythm and fluid, graceful steps.

Hermione was actually starting to enjoy the dance, with a new partner to lead her every verse. And then, on the fifth verse, she found herself looking into Draco Malfoy's eyes.

"Granger," nodded Draco, as he took hold of his new partner, his face an absolutely unreadable mask.

"Draco," returned Hermione, slightly narked that he *still* called her by surname, "how's your evening been, then?"

"Tolerable," opined Draco, non-comittally, "yours? Longbottom not pulverised your feet completely yet?"

Normally she would have leapt to Neville's defence, but, well, Draco did have a point there, "Oh, fine... really good. Good, yes..." asserted Hermione, somewhat less than convincingly.

The music had come to a close, with Draco as her final partner, before the band launched into another, slowish waltz, starting so quickly that no-one had had a chance to disengage from their partner.

Draco *was* quite a dancer, she had to confess. He was no Lee, mind, but he still knew how to lead, and how to hold, and he could keep time. And he didn't step on your toes every five seconds...

Actually, thought Hermione, he seemed to be holding her an awful lot closer than she remembered starting off, in fact, she was close enough to rest her head against his shoulder now. Just for a little bit, anyway.

"It's a bit warm in here, isn't it?" he asked.

With anyone else, she'd have known it was just a corny line, a barely disguised invitation to slip out of the Great Hall for a quiet moment or two of togetherness, but... well *anyway*, he was right. It *was* hot in the Hall, and what with all the throwing herself around at Fred and Angelina's behest, it would be quite nice to sneak off somewhere a little cooler, just for a....

"Malfoy!" cried Dean, in wholly fake camaradie, "do you mind if I take Hermione for the rest of the dance?"

Hermione saw the flash of anger in Draco's eyes, even as he politely ceded to Dean muscling in on his partner. It was almost flattering, she mused, to think that Draco would resent Dean preventing him from dancing with a Mudblood.

"Be my guest," invited Draco, in a voice that somehow sounded cordial, yet was also cold, before he stalked off to rejoin Crabbe and Goyle at their table.

"Sorry it took me so long," apologised Dean, "you OK? He didn't say, or do anything did he?"

Over Dean's shoulder, Hermione saw Ginny lock eyes with her whilst dancing with George (on the dance floor, no-one could ever confuse the Twins), and immediately deduced that Dean had been sent to 'rescue' her from the evil clutches of a Malfoy by his girlfriend.

"No, no," sighed Hermione, secretly wishing that Ginny hadn't taken it upon herself to be her protector, "he was fine."

"Well, if you're sure," returned Dean, dubiously, "but, well, you know what a git he is... we were worried he was up to something. You know, the way he has that smirk..."

Smirk? Hermione didn't have the heart to tell Dean he'd got Draco all wrong that evening, and deep down, it was nice to know that she had friends looking out for her.

It was as they made their way towards Gryffindor Tower that it suddenly struck Hermione, "hey, did anyone see Cho tonight?"

Chapter 55

Quidditch: by what name is Technical Foul 612(b) more commonly known?

Harry thought for a moment, pondering the various strategies open to him, and noting his adversary's poorly concealed ambush a few steps ahead. Honours were about even so far, but things were approaching the crunch now, and he knew that one false move, and that would be it, Game Over.

The opening skirmishes had been predictably brutal before the contest had transformed into a game of cat-and-mouse. Strike and counter-strike in pursuit of advantage, and ultimately, victory.

He swept his sense across the area once more, trying to divine how his opponent would respond, and then, with a fresh resolve of determination, he went for the counter-intuitive: Knight takes Queen.

Check.

Somewhat depressingly, Lucas had obviously anticipated the attack, and instantly one of the Bishop patterns swept across the chequered patterns of the board itself, and Harry was *another* piece down.

Bugger.

It had, pretty much, been the highlight of recent days... sweeping his sense outwards, through layer upon layer of cells, most corridors fully occupied, until, finally, he'd come across another prisoner, captive alone in a block of six, much as Harry himself.

Lucas' pattern had shone like a beacon, and, much as those optical illusions, where once the Dalmation had been pointed out in the page of seemingly random ink blots, you couldn't see anything *but* the dog, so it was with Lucas' pattern. Now that he knew it was there, it seemed incredible that he hadn't found his mentor earlier.

It seemed clear, however, that Lucas had long detected Harry's presence; the chess board had been set up, all pieces in place apart from a white pawn, which had been moved forward one square, starting play.

And, evidently, waiting for Harry to respond.

Discerning patterns at that detail, at such a distance, had initially been extremely tiring, but, nonetheless, Harry had managed to answer Lucas' opening with a counter by a red pawn, and from then on the games had progressed.

Either Harry's body clock was completely skewed, or Lucas' was. Or, more probable still, both captives sense of time had been warped by their incarceration. The result was that sometimes Lucas would respond immediately with a move of his own, and other times the board would remain static for hours at a time.

During these periods of inactivity, Harry pursued his mapping of Blackrock with renewed vigour. For not only had his detection of Lucas given him at the very least the welcome intellectual distraction of chess, it had told him something else as well: Lucas did not have guards standing over him.

From this fact, Harry deduced that Bill had probably been correct in his assertion that the goblins would keep their eyes upon him only for as long as was necessary for them to believe that he posed little threat. And then, all being well, his captors would pull back the manned observation, trusting to the wards, curses and charms that had turned the very air thick with magic.

Unfortunately, however, the goblins didn't appear to have reached that point yet, and Mr Mauve and Mr Blue continued to pace his block, as Harry desperately wished time would just hurry up.

He wanted the goblins to relax their guard, he wanted the corridors to be unmanned. He wanted to escape.

But, most of all, he wanted his sight back; wanted to awake from the whiteness of the void, that afflicted all waking hours with a sense of near vertigo. All heights are feared when you can't see the ground, after all...

Just thinking about his lack of knowledge concerning his surroundings again caused the ticklish sensation to return to his feet, the lack of vision prompting doubt in his mind that the outside world really was built as his sense determined.

All sense of time had been lost, and Harry had no way of knowing whether two days or four had passed since Dumbledore's visit; he suspected that his body had settled down into a rhythm of sleeping in the morning and in the afternoon, recovering from the horrors of night, when the visions descended.

Harry noted that his connection to Voldemort was extending further before, and later after, the actual draining ritual. Whereas, previously, the connection had seemed to arise as the victim was submitted to the Key, and would cut off as their body burnt up under the power of the magical drain, Harry now seemed to be pulled into Voldemort's mind during the preparations. And, worse, was forced to linger afterwards, watching a world through eyes that weren't his own, yet gave him the only sights he could savour.

His conscience fought a conflict with his desire for visual input. A small part of Harry's mind welcomed the visions, welcomed the opportunity to process light and colour. To relive again light and darkness, colour and shade, and to observe how people moved, dressed and gesticulated in the greater world.

The greater part of Harry railed against the unspoken accusation that he welcomed the return of these sensations, no matter how transient. The greater part of Harry saw, and heard, and *felt* the suffering in the victims that made the connections possible at all.

It wasn't right to benefit from others' suffering. He knew that. But then, it wasn't right to spend the rest of his life in prison, and desperation forced him to cling to whatever straws were thrown his way.

Aside from the moral conundrums of whether or not he registered anything other than complete and utter moral repugnance at Voldemort's actions, however, something else drove Harry to dwell in the connection, to drink whatever the vision could provide.

Voldemort's mind was changing.

The nature of the connection was somewhat hazy at best. Sometimes Harry could best equate the visions to a form of alarming real television. Horrible, violent, brutal, and carrying a sense of actuality, the promise that this was *real*, but, somehow the experience remained two-dimensional. Remote. As though he was observing at a safe distance, insulated and detached, the promise remaining just that: a promise.

At other times, however, not only did he see with Voldemort's eyes, and hear with Voldemort's ears, but *all* of his senses were directly connected. Every horror was delivered to Harry with the absolute crystal clarity that reality alone could provide. There was no doubt, no suggestion of charade - he *knew* that he, whoever 'he' was at times like these, was seeing, was hearing, was *doing* these things.

And the very deepest connection of all was rooted in the very foundation of the mind. Harry didn't sense Voldemort's thoughts - or if he did, it was in a sense so alien that he didn't recognise thoughts as such. But what he *was* aware of was the prevailing sense of identity, of self.

There had been subsequent visions similar to the night where Nagini had appeared to chide Voldemort for an affliction - more unseen voices. Yet more than just disembodied voices - he, whether it was Harry or Voldemort he was unsure, he could *sense* these other peoples' presence. In the room, and yet not in the room; somehow both being correct.

Such periods would coincide with lightning flashes of wills within the darkness of the mind, as screams and cries railed against each other, fighting a darkness that grew more powerful, yet, at the same time, more fragmented.

In those darkest of the nightmares, Harry could feel the precipice of control along which the mind was walking, with he, Harry, captive also, powerless to intervene in the struggle as flashes of brilliance were swallowed within a void without pity or remorse. And always, always, the screams and cries and shouts could be named - Voldemort *knew* who these people were.

There was some justice, then, that their deaths did not appear to go unavenged.

If Voldemort's Death Eaters were unnerved by their leader's sudden mood swings, and frequent bouts of paranoia, they didn't show it. In those conscious moments, when he was aware of the dreams *as* dreams, Harry wished that he could somehow step outside his host, and explore Beauxbatons with someone else's eyes; he felt certain that further answers were

there. But, always, he remained captive to Voldemort's whim, seeing only what the Dark Lord saw.

Harry watched with resignation as Rook took Bishop.

Checkmate.

"Harry, Harry," Lupin's voice was, Harry decided, quite possibly the best thing he had *ever* heard. In. His. *Life*.

His former Defence Against the Dark Arts professor entered the cell, accompanied by Mr Green, whilst Mr Pink stood guard on the open door. Harry barely considered the entrance - he'd mapped all the corridors in his section of the rock, and had also traced the cart-track all the way back to the Blood Trackers' chamber. There were, of course, a dizzying number of junctions, crossings, diversions and distractions in his way, but he'd got there. As such, the lure of an open door to his cell held no interest.

He hoped that the goblins would hurry up and take the hint.

"Hi," returned Harry, "it's good to see y.. well, hear you, anyway," modified Harry, beginning to realise how many figures of speech were rooted in a visual culture. But first things first, "what day is it?"

"Hmm," observed Lupin, lightly, with what Harry suspected may almost have been a smile, "it's Wednesday evening - two days to go till the end of Term. Albus explained that you were allowed visitors now, and, well..."

"Visitors?!" exclaimed Harry, this being complete news to him.

"Yes... although, as I suppose we should have expected, Fudge attached conditions..."

"*Fudge* agreed to me having visitors?" asked Harry, impressed.

"Well, as I'm sure you can imagine, Albus can be quite persuasive..."

As grateful as Harry was for his Headmaster's intervention, he still couldn't help a little bitterness entering his voice, "not persuasive enough to stop me from getting slammed up in the first place, though..."

"Well..."

"...or stopping me being blinded," continued Harry, getting into character for the goblins' benefit. "I can't *see*! I don't know whether it's day or night... even what day of the week it is... and I can't even write to Hermione, or Cho, or anyone... it's not fair."

Being honest, Harry really didn't have to try to act too much at all... the chess matches, the methodical sensing of the prison, even the distractions of the visions, all these things kept his

mind occupied for parts of the day. But there was still plenty of time left for him to consider the injustice of his plight, and the mockery of justice that had seen Percy, *a Weasley*, arrest him, and literally tear his life's foundations away from him.

No Hermione, no Cho, no Hogwarts. No Gryffindor Tower, not even any petty schoolboy rivalries to pursue. A fifteen year old boy, cast into an adult punishment of almost total sensory deprivation, on charges that were either baseless or senseless (or, for the really special ones, both at the same time).

Really, Harry supposed, as he felt Lupin's hand grip his shoulder, tears should have come... but they wouldn't. There was a certain numbness to his situation that remained, no matter how bleak his periods of introspection became. He didn't try to prod too hard at the numbness since, somewhere near the back of his mind, he harboured a strong suspicion that it was all that was keeping him from going completely out of his mind with despair.

"You know," mused Lupin, "everyone says you look like James, and that you've got Lily's eyes..."

Harry held his breath - *any* news about his parents was always welcome, since even the most mundane piece of trivia helped consolidate the immediate family that existed only in his mind's eye.

"...but it's *uncanny*...."

"What is?"

"You could be James... you really could - the voice, the hair, the shoulders. And you're a fifth year now... the year that saw Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs arrive at Hogwarts. Those were great days, Harry... Lily was there too, of course, but there's something about *you*..."

Lupin paused, and exhaled, heavily, memories evidently replaying in his head.

"*What* about me?" asked Harry, strongly suspecting that he was engaged in one of those conversations where the other person was saying so much in between the words that were actually being spoken.

"Twelve years, Harry... twelve years before I saw you again... and, don't mistake this - you're not James, and you're not Lily... and you don't make me relive those years again... But what you *do* do, though, is remind me that that time isn't *lost*..."

"But..." Harry felt the question that had been burning inside him since the second year push itself to the surface, "but *why*, why did it take you twelve years before you met me? Why couldn't you have rescued me from the Dursleys? Why..."

"Harry," interrupted Lupin, softly, "as far as the Dursleys go, Albus explained, in no uncertain terms, that you were safe there. That you were safe there in that you were *not* safe anywhere else..."

"Didn't feel like it," grumbled Harry, sulkily, wrapped up in memories of being locked in his cupboard, or being used as a punchbag by Dudley, or of... no, there was too much. "Sorry, I didn't mean that..."

"No, no Harry, *I'm* the one who should apologise... after all, I'd heard all about your aunt from Lily. Believe me, we had to forcibly restrain Padfoot from hexing them to pieces after the summer in the sixth year..."

"Why?" asked Harry, eager to hear more stories to bolster his loathing of his only living blood relations.

Lupin sniffed with faint amusement, "*that* is a story for another day... but, as I was saying... twelve years. I would say 'you *have* to understand', but I suspect that you do only too well..."

The werewolf paused, "that night, that week, Harry, I felt like my entire world had been torn from beneath my feet. Lily and James had been killed, *you'd* only barely survived. But worse than that, they'd been betrayed by their best friend. *My* best friend..."

Harry was about to correct this account when he remembered that, firstly, the goblins were listening, and, secondly, Wormtail, as repulsive as it seemed, had been considered a best friend at the time, too.

"And then," continued Lupin, "then Peter was killed, Sirius was imprisoned in Azkaban, and my whole family, my whole *life* had been swept from beneath my feet. And with the knowledge of what I was, on top of that. They were not easy days for me Harry, far from it..."

Harry nodded his understanding, detecting parallels with his companion that he hadn't noticed before - they'd both been ostracised by the wizarding world for conditions entirely beyond their control. They had both, in the course of a single week, seen their entire worlds turned upside down.

"So you see, Harry, the thing is, it took me twelve years to realise that I couldn't undo things. Twelve years to realise that I couldn't change the past, and then Albus offered me the teaching post at Hogwarts, and I met you, and I met... and... and suddenly I realised - those days, those times; me, James, Sirius, Peter. Lily too, and the others... those days, they were *worth* it, and they still *are* worth it..."

"Worth what?" asked Harry, confused.

"Lily and James didn't die for nothing, Harry - they protected you, and *you*... you've lived up to that. James would've been proud, you know... he was always telling us how you were going to be great..."

"What?" asked Harry, sharply, feeling his blood run cold.

"Oh," recalled Lupin, the misty tone of pained recollection being replaced with one of fond memory, "when you were born, we were all at Godric's Hollow, and Prongs was showing you off. Anyway, he was holding you, by the fireplace, and we were all there, and he did this great big speech thing, about being a good dad, and at the end, he said 'you'll be great, you know.'"

At these words, Harry shivered, as though, in the fabled expression, someone had walked across his grave. They were virtually the same words the Sorting Hat had greeted him with, way back in First Year, and, he remembered with a start, even before then, meeting Ollivander in Diagon Alley.

If everybody *knew*, he thought bitterly, why had nobody warned him?

Lupin had obviously sensed Harry's unease, "are you alright Harry? I'm sorry - I should've thought that you might not want..."

"No, no," interrupted Harry, anxious to steer the conversation to warmer, softer waters, "so what was their house like? At Godric's Hollow, I mean?"

"You know, I forget that there's so much you *don't* know... well, I suppose the story *really* starts at the beginning of the Seventh Year, when James was trying to persuade Sirius not to singlehandedly depopulate 4 Privet Drive..."

"Depopulate?" queried Harry brightly, in a tone that he hoped wasn't *too* hopeful.

He could *feel* Lupin's disapproving glare, and tried to rearrange his features into one of benign curiosity.

"Hmm," continued Lupin, evidently not convinced, "well, not so much depopulate as, let's say irreversibly hex... You see, remember when I said about Lily...?"

Conflicting emotions played through Harry's mind as he tracked Lupin's pattern back along the tracks, past the Blood Trackers (he really had to find out more about those, he reminded himself), and through to the Entrance Hall. On the one hand, he was delighted to have learnt some more about his parents; their time during Hogwarts and afterwards.

On the other, however, Lupin's innocent memory of the 'you'll be great' line was disconcerting. Unfair. Everybody knew. They'd all known for *years* before Harry had found out from Hagrid that he was, literally, a living legend.

Everyone else had had practically ten years to come to terms with what this would mean for his life. *His* life - he was the one to whom it now all fell, and he was the one who'd had the least time to get ready. Not that he was sure what good time would have done him, but it just seemed unfair that he'd had this expectation riding upon him all those years he'd been living in ignorance at the Dursleys.

And it went wider than just himself - Ron had innocently befriended this legend, and it had cost him his life. Cedric had met his death at Harry's side. Hermione and Parvati had been kidnapped purely for their connection to him.

Greatness; not only was the title not appropriate, but people had died for that over-inflated assessment of his abilities. And had died because of his inability to live up to those very same expectations.

The visions that night resumed with a fierce darkness, causing Harry to wonder whether his own anger was intensifying the connection. Clinically detached, he absorbed the fractured state of Voldemort's mind, a cloudlike darkness, punctuated by brilliant flashes of... *otherness* that railed against the construct. There were forces at work in that mind, Harry sensed, but to what purpose he couldn't determine... the only thing that was certain was that the whole structure was unstable.

The only thing that was certain was that Voldemort's descent into madness was palpable.

Chess the next day passed in a blizzard of moves, Harry's anger being dissipated as he moved the tiny patterns with violent precision, sweeping across the board, but, ultimately ending up deflated as Lucas' smooth, calm moves once more cornered him into checkmate.

If yesterday had been Wednesday, as Lupin had said, then it was now the last Thursday before the end of term - the Yule Ball. Harry sighed, wearily - and Cho had said 'yes'. But no sooner had she agreed to go with him, than Percy showed up, and the world had been swept from beneath his feet.

Harry tortured himself mildly by imagining what a good time everyone would be having that night. Dean and Ginny, Seamus and Lavender, naturally. Fred and Angelina was a given, as was Lee and Katie. He wondered who Neville would go with, remembering that he'd asked Hermione last year (too late to beat Krum to it, though, not to mention Ron's woeful attempt).

He most decidedly was *not* going to imagine who Cho might be going with. Although, if he were to try and guess, he hoped that it wouldn't be someone like Roger Davies. Maybe she'd just go with the sixth-year crowd from Ravenclaw... Harry tried not to mentally glare at the picture in his mind of Cho being swept off her feet in successive dances by ever more strikingly handsome, and, more pertinently, non-imprisoned wizards.

Well, alright, he relented; just as long as none of them were Slytherins.

"Hey you," greeted the soft voice that was inseparable from the shimmering blue pattern. Instantly the dark, soft eyes, sweet red lips, jet black hair seared their image across Harry's mind, summoned from the thousand glances he'd caught of Cho since, well probably since the game against Ravenclaw in Third Year.

"Cho!" exclaimed Harry, equally softly, still stunned at her appearance in his cell, despite having tracked her arrival from the Entrance Hall. "I thought it was Thursday," he explained, "but... so, well how was it?"

"How was what?" asked Cho, as she closed the gap between them, standing, it seemed, slightly uncertainly before him.

"The Ball... I thought it was now... but I lose track of time."

"It *is* now," explained Cho, stepping closer still, so that their bodies touched, and they wrapped their arms around each other, swaying almost imperceptibly.

"But... but didn't you want to *go*?" asked Harry, aghast, yet wholly delighted that she'd forsaken *the* social event of the school year to visit him instead.

"Not without you," replied Cho, softly, and seeming on the verge of tears. "Dance with me..."

Several hundred miles south of the Hogwarts Yule Ball, Harry and Cho danced their own silent dance in the cell, ignoring the presence of the twin guards, as they moved softly to their own, unheard beat.

Chapter 56

What distinguishes wyverns from dragons?

Platform 9¾ was packed, as it always was. Gran had taken to putting him on the Knight Bus (which had been weird the first time; 'are you *sure* you're Neville Longbottom? *The* Neville Longbottom?', the conductor, Stan, or Dan, or Ham something had asked) to get to Kings Cross, and now he had to try and make his way across the concourse to the barrier between Platforms 9 and 10.

Neville had approached the barrier warily. Ever since that time in the second year, when he'd walked into the wrong wall, he'd viewed catching the Hogwarts Express with a certain amount of unhappiness. It was *always* good to be back at school, but having to work his way through the crowds of Muggles at the station was never a heartening prospect at the best of times, and matters were only compounded by his tendency to do, or say, the wrong thing at the wrong time.

But Muggles were so *strange*; they dressed weirdly, had their heads plugged into odd blob things, with wires dangling everywhere. Hermione was always explaining how Muggles managed to get by without magic, but it seemed awfully cumbersome. Still, she was undoubtedly right.

Hermione was *always* right. That was what made her special.

To his surprise, Hermione had invited him to sit in her compartment - Lavender, Ginny, the Patil Twins and the Wolves had commandeered a compartment to themselves, drawing the blinds shut as soon as they'd boarded.

Neville had been staring at the rather overt declaration of privacy before Hermione had grabbed his arm, "you don't want to know," she'd asserted, knowingly.

Although he wasn't totally sure he agreed with that statement, he was more than willing to be led off in search of another compartment to share with Hermione for the trip back to Hogwarts.

Back to Hogwarts: Christmas and New Year had been alright, he supposed. It was so hard trying to please Gran, who always seemed to have such high expectations of him. And then seeing his parents, too, laid up in their beds at St Mungos, eyes open, but expressions completely blank.

Neville wondered whether they had expectations of him or not, whether they were even aware that their son came to see them every weekend during holidays, and on Boxing Day too. There wasn't ever a question of *not* going to see them; no-one knew whether or not they had any awareness of the outside world, but Neville thought they probably did, and he tried his best to... well, he tried his best.

Initially, when he'd first started visiting his Mum and Dad, lying motionless in twin beds in a small, private room at St Mungos, initially he'd expected to see some sort of change in them. Maybe their eyelids might flicker, or they'd move a fingertip, or twitch a foot. Or something.

But none of that. As far back as he could remember, his parents had not moved so much as a muscle, eyes fixed straight ahead, unfocused, unseeing. It had taken years before he'd even had the nerve to say more than 'hello' to them, but these days he was able to tell them what school was like, how the plants were doing and that sort of thing.

Sometimes, though, he wasn't sure whether he was telling them all his news for their benefit or his. For the first four years at Hogwarts, he'd always felt like a spare part, the odd one out. The liability. Being able to put his side of the story to his parents, at least, had made him feel slightly less unworthy - he'd been able to remind himself that, actually, yes, he could do stuff.

This year, though, he'd explained to them, this year it had been different. He tried to explain what had happened to Harry, although, like everyone, he was fuzzy on the details... probably only Harry knew how he'd turned himself into a Mage. Probably Harry was the only person who *could* do that. But you couldn't begrudge him his abilities, because ever since he'd met the Boy Who Lived in his first year, and been awestruck that he was *in the same dorm*, Neville had realised that Harry really was alright. If anything, he actually seemed to *dislike* being brilliant at everything.

But all the Gryffindors had stuck together this year - even after the rocky patch between Harry and Parvati - and they'd included him in the group. And what's more, he'd been entrusted with a special task; Hermione'd asked him to get together some of the Herbology components they needed, and had pass him a rather complicated list on a scrap of paper, asking him to keep it quiet, as the train trundled northward.

There was, he had to admit, something to being involved in the gang's secret mission. Hermione knew that she could trust him, rely on him. She knew he was dependable... and she'd gone with him to the Yule Ball.

Although he tried not to get his hopes up too much on that front, he nevertheless had to admit that she'd spent the evening dancing with him, she'd deliberately chosen to sit with him on the train ride back up to Hogwarts, and now she was asking him to help with the secret Portkey stuff.

So she obviously thought he was OK. Perhaps more than OK, even.

The door to the compartment opened, and Seamus and Dean collapsed into opposite seats, next to the door.

"You two," commanded Dean, without preamble, "have *got* to see Toy Story!" he urged.

"Why?" asked Neville, fear suddenly gnawing his heart, "is it going to be in a test or something?"

"Isn't that a kiddy film?" asked Hermione, a little sniffily.

Neville relaxed a little - Dean was always going on about Muggle films, and Muggle games, and Muggle comics... sometimes he wondered whether Dean really wanted to be a wizard at all.

"Well," offered Seamus, "to the untrained eye..." he shrugged, "but you've *got* to see it; it's hilarious. Twelve Monkeys was cool, 'n all...."

Neville felt the conversation slipping away from him; they all joked that Dean was a language in itself, but there was an element of truth in that. Especially when he started going on about Trek Wars and Luke Bladerunner and everything.

"Did you two do anything *besides* watch videos over the holiday?" asked Hermione, somewhat archly.

Still, Neville reminded himself, she did have a point - they were supposed to have been revising for their O.W.Ls over the break, even if they were still pretty much six months away, Hermione seemed to think it was important to revise. So it must have been.

Seamus and Dean's cheerfulness had subsided, "there was a full-moon, Hermione," Dean reminded her, gently. It was true, thought Neville, he really *did* speak in riddles...

Hermione's eyes went round with shock, "Oh, Seamus! I'm sorry... I'd forgotten... Well, I *hadn't* forgotten, and I thought about you all at the time, really... but... but... well, was it OK? Harry told me that Professor Lupin had found someone to brew the Wolfsbane for you - did that go OK?"

Seamus grimaced, as he closed his eyes, and held out his hand as though to ward off the very words, "don't... *mention*... that... stuff," he pleaded, his whole body twitching at the recollection.

Dean raked his fingers through his dreadlocks as he leant back against the seat, "yeah, it went alright... Lupin and Padfoot were in one cell, we were in the other. I've been sleeping wolfed out most nights anyway - I can stay more alert that way, y'know, with the wolf awake. So *he*," Dean jabbed a finger at Seamus, he was listening to Dean's account virtually expressionless, "was sort of zonked out by the Wolfsbane, and Padfoot and I just dozed on the floor. Really, it wasn't very interesting..."

Something about Dean's voice suggested to Neville that he hadn't mentioned something, but, like with so many other things, whatever the omission was eluded him, remaining just out of sight. Anyway, Hermione seemed satisfied with the explanation, and had changed the subject, so it couldn't have been anything important.

"You've written a *schedule*?" asked Seamus, incredulously, taking the parchment from Hermione between the tips of his fingers, as though it was somehow unclean, or contaminated.

"Well," asserted Hermione, defensively, "I wanted to make sure that Harry got to see as many of us as possible. You know Harry, he won't admit that he's finding it hard, but *I* know Harry, and it means a lot to him to have people about who really care..."

Seamus, having scanned the visiting rota, had flicked it across the compartment to Dean, who looked up, enquiringly, "no Ginny? She's not going to like that..."

"I know," conceded Hermione, ducking her shoulders slightly in an apologetic gesture, "but, if we think rationally about this, if Harry's been imprisoned for supposedly murdering *his best friend*," Hermione paused, meaningfully, "well it's probably best if he doesn't get any visits from the Weasleys..."

"But, but..." stammered Neville, "surely if the Ministry see that the Weasleys don't blame Harry, then... then they'll know he's innocent?" It seemed pretty obvious to him, and he agreed with Dean that Ginny would almost certainly want to visit Harry. He might have a lousy memory, but even *he* remembered *that* Valentine in the second year.

"It doesn't really work like that, Nev," offered Seamus, reluctantly, "and I think Hermione's right, probably," he continued, looking towards Dean.

Well, reasoned Neville, Seamus had a point - it *was* Hermione's idea, so Ginny would have to live with that.

"OK," conceded Dean, "but *you* explain why you're cutting her out..."

"Dean," protested Hermione, "I'm not 'cutting her out' of anything; at least she won't have to go through the indignity of the identity checking, and she won't have to see the cell Harry's going to spend the rest of his life in... and... and... his *eyes*, Dean... they're gone. They're gone..." Hermione had become increasingly distressed through this outburst, and Seamus had wrapped his arm around her shoulder, comfortingly.

Looking on, Neville realised he should have thought of that... but then, he was on the wrong side of the compartment anyway. Still, doubtless the Wolves would get back to the girls eventually, and it'd just be him and Hermione again.

"I know it must be pretty bad," accepted Dean, "but you know Ginny, she'll imagine all kinds of terrible things..."

"Whereas I don't have to imagine," countered Hermione, dully.

Everyone went quiet after that, and Neville sat wondering how long it would take before Seamus took his arm away from Hermione's shoulders.

As it turned out, instead of the Wolves going in search of the girls, the girls came in search of them, just before the trolley-witch came along, and now the compartment was full of people and sweets.

Given that there were only six seats, Lavender was sitting on Seamus' lap, and Ginny had likewise cuddled up with Dean. So it was either Padma sitting next to Hermione or Parvati was. And whichever of the twins wasn't sitting next to Hermione was sitting next to Neville. He wished that they were in school robes, because then they'd be easy to distinguish.

And they also seemed to deliberately call each other 'sis' so as not to give him any clues as to who he was really sitting next to. Girls, Neville reflected, could be mean at times... even Hermione had made him wait ages before the Yule Ball, and he'd been stricken by the thought that she'd gone off without him, just like Hogsmeade (although she had come back for him that day, he reminded himself).

It was dark outside, and raining, "must be getting close, then," observed Seamus, it having been something of a damp Christmas rather than a white one. Neville rubbed the mist from the window to peer outside, but couldn't make out anything but the occasional flash of tree or fence. Still, it wouldn't be long now, and they'd be back at Hogwarts.

"Well, we'd better change into our robes," announced Hermione, after checking her watch for about the fifteenth time (Neville had lost count when Ginny's Chocolate Frog had leapt into his hair), "you three stay here, and I'll go and change with the girls."

"Well," observed Ginny, smiling, "you can take the Hermione out of the Prefects, but you can't take the Prefect out of the Hermione..."

Neville and the Wolves opened the door hesitantly, peering into the damp gloom of Hogsmeade station. "I don't suppose either of you has a broly?" enquired Dean, without much hope. The rain was pouring down; cold, January rain, whipped along the platform by a bitter wind, making the place seem even less inviting.

"Nope," replied Seamus, "c'mon, everyone's in the same position - if we make a move first, we'll get one of the nearest carriages..."

So saying, the three Gryffindors leapt onto the platform, and scurried towards the line of carriages waiting to carry them to Hogwarts itself. All three were running in the stiff-legged scuttle that was enforced upon them by the cloaks wrapped tightly against the wind. Although the station platform was lit, there were still pools of darkness where signs, and the footbridge cast shadows.

"Oof!" winced Neville, as he bumped into something hard and unyielding. Flinging out his arms to keep balance, his cloak billowed out in the wind, and icy rain pelted his clothes. Shivering, and squinting into the downpour, he suddenly realised he'd slammed into Goyle.

"Longbottom," drawled Malfoy, with a derisive tut, "can't you watch where you're going?"

It wasn't lost on Neville that Malfoy had an umbrella. *And* a raincoat. *And*, of course, Crabbe and Goyle as windbreaks. As a consequence, the Slytherin seemed in no hurry to get out of Neville's path, and allow him to catch up with the Wolves.

"Oi, Neville, c'mon on," called Seamus, from further up the platform. His two fellow Gryffindors had turned to see what had become of him, and, noting the three Slytherins blocking his path, were now headed back.

"C'mon Nev," urged Dean, as he reached the human roadblock, hair and cloak now completely soaked. Neville realised he probably looked the same. Malfoy, on the other hand, was virtually bone dry.

"In a hurry?" enquired Malfoy, in a smug tone, "honestly, I'd have thought it would have crossed at least *one* Gryffindor's mind that it would be prudent to anticipate the weather..."

"Drop it, Malfoy," urged Seamus, wearily, blinking the rain from his eyes, "let's just all get to our carriages, eh?"

Malfoy appeared to consider this proposal carefully, before, finally, he gave a brief, commanding nod of his head, and the Slytherins headed towards the waiting carriages. The three Gryffindors, now soaked to the bone, looked at each other with resignation.

He always knew when he'd missed something obvious. Not that it helped.

This year was better, though. All the Gryffindors were together, so he didn't feel like a spare part so much, and Herbology was going really well. Sprout had even given him a plot of his own to look after in Greenhouse 2, and Grubbly-Plank had been happy for him to continue tending it.

Which is why he was alone in the huge building, turning the soil with a few flicks of his wand (even Charms were easier in the confines of the Greenhouse) as the January night fell.

He liked the Greenhouse, but just every now and again he had the feeling that he was being watched.

He knew it was a silly thing; just childish paranoia, but still... when the hairs stood up on the back of your neck, and you knew you were the only person in the building, and it was dark outside...

Well, it could get unsettling.

A breath of wind kissed the back of his neck, and Neville straightened up, looking about him. It was January. All the windows were closed. So someone must have opened the door.

"Dean? Seamus? Is that you?" called Neville, his voice echoing in the silence.

There was no reply.

"A...A... Anyone?" he called, hesitantly, standing nervously. The moment passed, however, and relaxing his shoulders, Neville returned to the Herb wheat, kneeling down once more to run the soil through his fingers. It was a tad crumbly, he thought, but nothing too drastic... best not to over-water, though, he reasoned

Neville stood back from the plot to admire his handiwork. The texts had advocated preparing the broken soil with crushed egg-shells, but Neville had a theory that some shredded mandrake leaves might actually work better in this situation, and set about dividing his plot into quarters to test varying treatments.

Again that feeling. Eyes. Watching him.

Neville tried to ignore the sensation, as the hairs stood up on the back of his neck. He wilfully kept his gaze on the plot he was working, since to give in to the temptation to look behind him was to give in to fear.

And he knew he was alone in the Greenhouse.

Heart racing, Neville tried to hum a reassuring tune as he measured out the ground, despite the prickling sensation spreading across his skin.

Eventually, however, he could bear it no longer, and twisted sharply round, to face the direction he felt the gaze was coming from.

Nothing.

Just a wall of tropical vegetation. The night outside was black, and the windows had started to steam up with condensation. The Greenhouse itself was illuminated by at each end evenly placed illumination charms - it had the effect of creating pools of light, separated by a central band of almost complete darkness. It was a massive structure, nearly three hundred feet in length, and the central section was at least four storeys high, allowing the taller trees to create a leafy canopy high above Neville's head.

There were, of course, ample places for someone to hide in here, but, even if they were planning on spooking him, Neville was certain they'd have cried 'Boo!' by now.

Pretty certain, really.

Sorting through the crumpled scraps of paper (timetable, passwords, directions to classrooms), Neville retrieved Hermione's list, and carefully smoothed the crinkles out, as he admired her precise, looping hand. Circles over the i's, the tiny writing seeming friendly, and, oddly, comforting. Hermione had written this list. She'd written it for him... so she must have been thinking of him when she wrote it. So therefore she thought about *him*...

The last stuff for Hermione's list was over at the far end - it was pitch black between the two... Neville wondered if it could wait until it was light. Not that he was being cowardly or anything, but...

But well yes, he reprimanded himself crossly, visualising Hermione's disappointment in him should he fail to deliver *all* her ingredients as requested. He was a Gryffindor, and Hermione had entrusted, and had *trusted*, him to collect all the plants, roots, berries and herbs that she needed.

That *they* needed, really, but for Neville it was enough that Hermione needed them - the fact that it was all for the benefit of the Away Side... or Team, he could never remember which... anyway, the fact that it was for *their* benefit as a whole was simply a bonus.

And he was a Gryffindor. He winced inwardly at this - previous attempts to prove his worthiness as a Gryffindor had not gone well; attempting to stop Harry, Ron and Hermione in the first year, when *they'd* been the ones doing the right thing. Picking a fight with Malfoy - that hadn't exactly been a painless experience.

Then the Tempus Tattoo... how was he supposed to have known? Nobody else had known... well, except Harry, and Harry *had* said... He'd tried to explain to his parents about the Tempus thing at St Mungos on Boxing Day (Gran always took him to visit them on Boxing Day, no matter how near to the next scheduled visit it landed).

And they'd looked back, blankly. He thought they saw him, perhaps they even heard what he said... he wished that he could do something worthy of them. That they'd be proud, and one day they'd wake up, and not be disappointed in him.

And that was why he had to help Hermione. She was fighting Voldemort, and the ingredients from the Greenhouse were going to help in that. So he was helping... he was, finally, doing his bit, doing the right thing, and this time he *wasn't* going to regret having made his stand.

But the gap in between the herbs and the fruit-trees was *awfully* dark.

Neville scurried along the unlit path. It occurred to him that he should have cast *Lumos* before setting off, but his wand was in the pocket of his robes, and his hands were full. To get the wand out, he'd have to stop.

And he really, really, *really* didn't want to stop until he got to the safety of the dim lights that were illuminating the Priolet Trees.

Although he couldn't *hear* anything, Neville's mind was utterly convinced that something, or someone, was following him along the path. But stopping to turn around would certainly be a bad move. And it wouldn't be very *Gryffindor* of him, either.

The lights were drawing nearer now (the Greenhouse was absolutely huge), and he could make out the thin veins of light that crisscrossed the trees' trunks.

Suddenly, the Goosebumps stood up on his skin, and he felt the hair on the back of his neck stand upright. Out of nowhere, a breath of cold air skimmed across his skin, and, forgetting himself, and all resolutions of bravery, Neville whirled round.

Nothing.

He'd imagined it all.

Of *course* there was no-one there. He was the only person in the Greenhouse. Alone.

Again his body shivered involuntarily, as though at a primal level it could somehow sense unseen threat, but, again, there was nothing to be seen. Cursing himself for his overactive imagination, Neville fished out Hermione's list once more, and read the outstanding items out loud, trying to control the quaver in his voice.

Never let them know you're scared, he urged himself.

Not that there really was anyone there, of course. But if there was - he snapped his head to the left, peering hard into the darkness of the foliage - well, if there was, then they'd know they weren't getting to him.

Unsettled, and with the burning sensation of eyes constantly fixed upon the back of his neck, Neville worked his way through the final items on Hermione's list as quickly as he possibly could, taking solace from the look of gratitude he would be receiving when he delivered the entire collection into her hands that evening. That would show her, he thought. That would *prove* that he was worthy, that he meant something... She'd asked him to get this stuff for a reason. She'd asked *him* because she knew he was good, dependable, trustworthy.

And it wasn't such a great leap from there, was it?

"Wah!" exclaimed Neville, whirling round and dropping his secateurs. But the person whose arm he'd sensed about to close on his neck wasn't there. It was all plants and darkness, with the rain drumming on the panes overhead. The solitude was getting to him, though, and he was grateful that he only had a few bits and pieces left to get.

He briefly considered returning to Gryffindor Tower, and putting off the final cuttings until daylight. But he only had to visualise the crestfallen look on Hermione's face, her disappointment, his failure, to convince himself that he should finish the list that night.

After all, he reasoned, what was the worst that could happen?

That was it; the last of them. It had struck Neville as noticeably odd that some of the ingredients Hermione was requested didn't have strong reputations for involvement with Portkeys. Indeed, some of them were quite Dark components by reputation.

Still, he reminded himself, this was *Hermione*, and she knew what she was doing. In a fit of Gryffindor pride, Neville imagined that she'd probably come up with a wholly new approach to the Portkey business. She could do that sort of thing. She was a genius.

These thoughts were quickly banished from his mind, however, as he edged slowly to the limit of the pool of light that occupied his end of the Greenhouse. Away in the distance, near the doors, the lights took over once more, and he could see his destination clearly.

In between, however, it was pitch black, and his heart was hammering. The longer he stared at the route he had to tread, the more ghouls he imagined lying in wait. But, he reminded himself, it was just that, *his imagination*. There wasn't anything out there; he'd have heard it by now, or they'd have made their move. Or something. No, he was alone in the Greenhouse.

Just to prove that fact to himself, he called out, tentatively, "Hello?" His voice cracked a bit, which was unfortunate, since he'd been wanting to project casual indifference. As though he always wandered about deserted Greenhouses in the dark.

Nothing replied. So, obviously, Neville told himself, nothing was there.

He'd assembled all the cuttings, berries, roots, leaves and stems into separate pouches in his bag, which left his wand hand free. "*L... L... Lumos*," he commanded, somewhat tentatively, and stepped off the island of illuminated earth, into the blackness.

He was halfway across the divide - equidistant from the safety offered by either end of the Greenhouse, when he heard the rustling, as though someone had stepped into one of the bushes. Or brushed past one... or something.

Neville froze, and pointed the wand left into the darkness, peering intently to try and locate the source of the disturbance. It could have been a cat, perhaps, he thought.

But he only saw trees, shrubs, leaves; the potting desks, stools all lined up ready for the morning's lessons. No sign of anything untoward.

Suddenly, without warning, the hairs on the right side of his neck stood up, and Neville snapped his head round urgently, trying to locate in the darkness the burning eyes that his mind had detected watching him.

But again nothing. Another rustle of leaves unsettled Neville further, and forgetting all pretence at composure, he started to jog towards the lights at the entrance, all the time his heart racing, and his mind screaming panic messages at him. One message above all: *Get Out!*

It was with not inconsiderable relief that Neville finally faced Sir Cadogan at the portrait hole: "Halt!" commanded the painting, "stand and fight you mangy cur...."

"Um," stalled Neville, fishing the password list out of his pocket, "root canal!" he said, in a slightly bewildered tone ("it reminds me of my parents," Hermione had explained, but, he'd been too fearful of appearing ignorant to ask exactly why; maybe they lived on a boat or something). Anyway, his foolish imagination was firmly put to bed; he'd made it back to Gryffindor Tower, and he was safe.

He'd made it back to Gryffindor Tower, and Hermione would be waiting for him.

As the entrance to the common room started to open, Neville's steps were halted at Sir Cadogan's second greeting, "welcome bold knight! Your compatriot has given the password," he explained, cheerfully.

Wondering who had followed him up to the Tower, Neville turned to exchange greetings, but only got as far as his jaw dropping open in disbelief.

"Wh...?" gasped Neville, as his assailant ran him through.

The last thing he would remember, before the blackness claimed him, was the sight of Ron Weasley stepping through the portrait hole, bloodied sword in hand.

Chapter 57

Name three components of Veritaserum that are derived from the Yarrow family.

For now, at least, the warmth of Gryffindor Tower enveloped Dean, as he lounged in one of the armchairs (whoever did the decor obviously hadn't gone a bundle on multiple seating - the place was virtually *all* overstuffed armchairs, kind of like one of the gentlemen's clubs in the old Ealing Comedies). The place wasn't as full as usual - the sixth form had their New Year's Dinner in Hogsmeade, and that had accounted for all the sixth and seventh years; the rest of Gryffindor were scattered about the room in various huddles, catching up with each other after the Christmas break.

No TV until Easter. There were a lot of good things about Hogwarts. The place was mostly good things, really, but withdrawal from TV hit hard in the first weeks of term. Fortunately, the Devon Street gang back home had taken it upon themselves to diligently tape Red Dwarf, the X-Files, Star Trek (TNG, of course), Blackadder... Dean stopped listing before it got even more painful. Partly they kidded him that this was but a service they offered to 'DT', the impoverished boarding school prisoner, but Dean knew they all taped the stuff for their own collections anyway.

It had, however, allayed the accusations of wanton ponciness on his part, deserting East London to attend some 'exclusive' Boarding School 'up North' on (and here Dean cleared his mental throat before recalling the carefully rehearsed lines) 'a widening participation urban community initiative scholarship'. He and Mum had concocted an elaborate backstory to the cover, since it would be a little hard to explain how a Sainsbury's check-out girl and single mother could afford to send her only son to public boarding school. It was almost a disappointment that they hadn't been called to play out the act - Dean had worked in a huge number of references from various films - but mention of 'widening participation' and 'community' were normally sufficient for peoples' eyes to glaze over.

Still, as he prepared to immerse himself back into a world of magic, and werewolves, friends imprisoned and friends dead, Dean pondered the coming year with an uneasiness borne of one who suspects that they live in the very eye of the storm.

Seamus had spent the break with Dean, his own family having made it clear that whilst they still considered him as their son, in no way, shape or form was the werewolf welcome back to the Finnegan household.

Seamus was the closest thing Dean had to a brother, and it had cut him deeply to see his friend's distress at being virtually ostracised from his blood relations. Family had always been a big thing with them, and they'd always been nice to Dean whenever he'd gone across to stay, but now they'd simply turned their back on their son, for something that had been completely beyond his control.

Dean shivered inwardly as he recalled the horrific transformation. Before the transformation was fine, if a little nerve-wracking to watch the fear build in Seamus' eyes, and, unexpectedly, even in Lupin's. After the transformation, when the Wolfsbane potion had turned the werewolf into a fairly docile, lethargic shaggy beast was fine too, but to watch Seamus' body mutate, like some grotesque slow motion horror film, flesh tearing and re-forming, that had been horrific beyond words.

Not particularly because it had been gruesome - Dean was not what one might call squeamish. No, it had been horrific because he *knew* the person to whom it had all been happening, the wolf in him sensing the involuntary reversion to animal state in his best friend.

And then knowing that the whole cycle will then reverse at moonset, only to go through the whole the next night, and the next. And to live with the knowledge that he would have to face the transformation every full moon for the rest of his life.

You couldn't comprehend the horror. Dean knew that even he, as observer, would know nothing of the feeling: he'd instinctively known Seamus wouldn't talk about it, and deliberately didn't ask. He knew that Neville had meant well when he'd asked about it on the train, but not even the Away Team had a right to intrude into that aspect of Seamus' life.

The fifth year was turning into quite a dark year, from Dean's point of view. Notwithstanding Ron being dead, Seamus being a werewolf and Harry imprisoned, Lupin's lecture at the end of term had really got to him. There *was* a war going on... and for good or ill, the Away Team, having aligned itself with Harry, was going to be there when the crunch came. Dean didn't view this with fear or trepidation, however, more he was, alert, or, as Billy Connolly might have put it, Dean Thomas was 'being ware'.

Further horrors might well fall their way in the coming months, but the'd all been through the mill enough already to have determined that going back wasn't an option. Harry had that effect on people - kind of like Dumbledore... *so devoted* to their function, so absolutely *right* that to stand idly by would be unconscionable.

The teams were he and Ginny (obviously), Lavender and Seamus (equally obvious), the Patil twins (since they weren't in school uniform, few people could tell them apart, so no-one was creating too much fuss about the Ravenclaw's presence) and Hermione. Hermione's team was supposed to have included Neville as well, but he'd disappeared to the greenhouses or something.

And besides which, despite having her nose stuck in some impossibly heavy, ancient book (cobweb trails still dangled from the edges), Hermione was wiping the floor with them on anything but 'Entertainment', which was obviously the Patils' area of expertise. Wizards' Triv was a reasonably diverting way to pass the evening; Ginny was sitting on the floor, resting her back against his legs. Seamus' eyes seemed to have lost the haunted look that he'd carried since the last transformation, and yes, it really was good to be back, reflected Dean.

Besides which, it was Sunday night - nothing *good* on, anyway.

Wresting his mind away from television listings in the Muggle World, Dean tuned back into the conversation...

"...you're over-reacting," observed Hermione, sniffily, not taking her eyes from the crinkled pages

"'s cursed," replied Seamus, firmly, as he ticked off on his fingers, "Ron, then Harry, then Angelina..."

"But she was fine by the Yule Ball, wasn't she?" protested Hermione, finally looking up from the text (something about the book didn't strike Dean as being quite right, but a second book, underneath, was hiding the title).

"Two broken legs *and* concussion," interjected Ginny, soberly, "*plus* she's said she's never going to fly again..." She gave a shrug, "still, I s'pose that once you can Apparate..."

"...and," persisted Seamus, who hadn't yet finished his catalogue of woe, "Katie..."

"Freak accident," countered Hermione, dismissively.

Dean winced at the recollection of *that* one; she'd been hit in the back of the head by a Bludger, and fell fifty feet into the ground, George managing to break her fall marginally at the last second. Still, the crack of bone had been audible across the pitch.

"*Cursed*," corrected Seamus, darkly. "'s the Curse of Gryffindor," he elaborated, "become Quidditch Captain, Bad Things Happen."

"Well that's just superstition and co-incidence," declared Hermione, sniffily, "who's Captain now, anyway?"

"It went to Matty after that," explained Dean, indicating the third year with a flick of his head towards the table by the portrait hole.

"See?" enquired Hermione, triumphantly, "nothing bad's happened to..." her reply was cut off as a tall, red-headed figure emerged through the portrait hole..."Ron!" shrieked Hermione, open-mouthed in shock.

Dean saw it happen in slow-motion, the tall figure of Ron Weasley entering the common room, sword drawn.

His mind had picked up on several incongruities at this point. Firstly, it was Ron, and, not to put too fine a point on it, he was supposed to be dead. Secondly, he was carrying a sword, which, unless he was *very* mistaken, was not actually permitted within the school rules.

Thirdly, and it was at this point that shock was starting to turn into alarm, the sword had some red liquid on the blade... gloopish, sticky liquid that could only be...

Even as he processed these thoughts, his eyes were watching the backswing, and then with one sweep of his arm, Ron smashed the blade into Matty, Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team. The force of the impact carried the third year clear out of the chair, and he slammed into the panelled walls of the Common Room, turning to see his assailant just as Ron Weasley plunged the sword deep into his chest.

There was a moment of shocked silence, before Matty's tablemate, a thin, wiry kid called Alex, scabbled backwards in his chair, trying to get away from Ron, who'd extracted the sword from Matty's chest, and was starting to move towards *him*.

Before he could even think about what he was doing, Dean had already got to his feet, throwing himself forward in the air as he morphed into the wolf. A mixture of human and canine vision saw Seamus and Lavender disentangle themselves, Seamus' eyes fixed on Colette's table, on the portrait hole side of the room, but not yet directly in the line of attack.

He could feel the muscles mutate, his face elongate, the fur bristle as human receded and wolf came to the fore. His front paws hit the ground, quickly followed by his hind legs, and the wolf sprung into the air, hurling itself at the intruder.

Even as he was airborne, however, the wolf's hackles raised, and he felt the fur stand on end all the way down his spine. Because the wolf recognised that this was not safe prey for the hunt. There was an unhealthy tang to the intruder's scent - a deathly pallor, and an absence of the life-spirit the wolf used to distinguish the living from the dead.

Unbidden, the wolf cried a panicked yelp, detecting that this was something unknown, and something wrong. Deep primal instinct told him that the intruder was not edible.

Sometimes the wolf could share too much.

Front paws scrabbling in the air to attempt to ward off impact with the thing, panic rising in the face of the unknown, Dean thumped into what he no longer thought of as Ron, and the two crashed into the common room wall. A flash of pain burned across his right shoulder, but there had been no real force behind the blow, and the human interpreted the hit as having been made with the flat of the blade.

Rolling to his feet, snarling, Dean faced the intruder, who was regaining his feet, sword still drawn, eyes wholly vacant. The sword came scything through the air, cutting an arc that the human in Dean could interpret and anticipate, telling the wolf to dive left and roll.

"*Ron!*" cried Ginny's voice, causing his ears to prick up - even the wolf could detect the distress in her voice.

"*Expelleriamus!*" cried Hermione, before the same tones conveyed an exclamation of shock and surprise. The intruder still held the sword firmly in his grasp, causing Dean to surmise that Hermione's spell had failed to have an effect.

Worrying. The wolf dodged another thrust, before Ron's body turned and started to head towards a table of terrified first years.

Dean leapt onto their table, facing the attacker, growling fiercely, and as the sword arm went up, he launched himself at the forearm, jaws clamping tight in a bid to disarm his opponent.

It took superhuman resolve on Dean's part to resist the wolf's instinctive demand to release his jaws from the putrid flesh immediately, the bile rising in his throat. This thing was dead.

The weight of the wolf caused sufficient impediment to the sword's path that it succeeded only in slamming into the table, but once he'd hit the floor, Dean was forced to release his grip on the undead's arm, and trying to suppress the spasms of muscle contractions coursing through his body, he again tried to engage the intruder in combat.

The zombie, for want of a better term, appeared to consider the wolf to be no threat to it, and again advanced towards newer victims, although this time Seamus slammed into his body, causing them both to topple to the floor, "Ron! Ron! What the *hell* do you think you're doing?" cried Seamus, horrified.

The zombie, however, clearly thought little of Seamus' intervention, and with a casual sweep of the arm, hurled his body clear, and once more got to his feet. His next attack sliced into Seamus' right arm, even as he was slumped against the wall, and the Irish boy screamed in pain as he instinctively clamped his left hand over the wound, eyes widening in horror as the zombie raised its sword for the kill.

"*Ron!*" cried Ginny, in a voice thick with distress and pain, "stop it! *Please...*"

Dean morphed back into human form, and yelling, "that's *not* Ron!" hurled himself into the intruder, thereby deflecting the sword's plunge into the wall instead. A well aimed kick to the stomach seemed to have little effect, however, and the flat of the blade caught Dean full across the chest, sending him tumbling back to the floor.

Momentarily stunned, Dean shook his head to clear his vision in time to see steel plunging straight at his face.

They lied, reflected Dean, more resigned than afraid. You didn't see your life flash before your eyes, you simply saw the end of hope.

Ching!

The song-blade scythed through the air in front of Dean's nose, and intercepted the zombie's own long-sword, deflecting the blade's lunge into the floor.

Stunned, Dean looked to his side to see Padma (for whatever reason, he'd always been able to distinguish the Patils), eyes blazing, spin Harry's song-blade around, holding guard against her opponent.

Scrabbling to his feet, Dean yelled instructions whilst never taking his eyes off the zombie and Padma, both circling slowly, *en garde*; "someone get Seamus to Pomfrey! And get Dumbledore, or McGonagall.... or both... quick!"

Lavender and Parvati had rushed to Seamus' side, whilst Ginny looked on horrified, motionless and shocked. Hermione was still there, evidently having picked herself up from the floor after the disarming spell had reflected. Hermione looked... odd, to Dean.

But then, it wasn't every day that your dead, former best friend waltzed into the common room and started laying waste to people with a sodding great sword.

The song-blade danced its eerie, bone-chilling tune as Padma blocked the zombie's assault, but, Dean noted with dismay, she wasn't making any headway of her own in the duel.

"Padma," he urged, "you've got to kill it..."

Never taking her eyes off her opponent, Padma's voice was, nevertheless, uncertain, "but... but it's *Ron*..."

"No!" cried Dean, vehemently, his dreadlocks flicking, "that thing is *not* Ron. It's not even *alive*.... you've got to kill it." Dean reflected on this, before modifying his suggestion, "well, kill it some more, at least."

Wincing inwardly at how Ginny might be perceiving his seemingly cavalier attitude towards her recently departed youngest brother, Dean morphed back into the wolf, just as Lavender and Parvati's voices screamed, almost in unison, "Neville!"

Dean was about to race through the portrait hole to assist, when he saw that Hermione was already on her feet, and decided to leave the matter to her.

The wolf and the Ravenclaw faced off with the zombie, Dean lunging and growling as he tried to distract the undead from the song-blade, which Padma wielded with no little expertise.

As they fought, metal clashing against metal, and blades slicing through the air, the protagonists circled slowly, until Dean was watching both the fight, and, behind the undead, Ginny, sitting on the chair, knees hugged to her chest, and an expression of absolute pure horror on her face. The fourth year was shivering uncontrollably, with tears streaming down her face, and Dean vowed there and then that whoever had set this thing upon them would pay in full for the torment they'd visited upon her.

His eyes having been distracted from the fight momentarily, the wolf saw the blade flashing towards him fractionally too late to dodge completely. Twisting on adrenaline, Dean managed to take the hit with the flat of the blade, but the momentum carried him into Padma.

Her footing upset, Padma paused as she regained balance, by which time the zombie's sword was headed at her. Ducking as best she could, the sword still caught her a glancing blow to the arm, and Dean saw the blood well up against the white of her top.

Padma uttered a strangled cry of pain before a new fire lit up behind her dark brown eyes. Even the wolf could tell that Padma Patil was now *seriously* pissed off, and watched as the Ravenclaw went up a gear.

Steeling himself for the scent of stale blood once more, Dean lunged at the zombie's legs, and clamped his jaws around the decayed flesh, seeking to unbalance their assailant.

Meanwhile, Padma was *really* going for it, and the common room rang to the glass-like shriek of the sword's path. A heavy boot landed against his ribs, and the wolf was forced to relinquish its grip. Padma lunged triumphantly, and the sword ran through the beast's torso, causing its motion to pause momentarily, but even as she withdrew the blade, the battle was joined once more.

Evidently, this thing was going to take a lot of killing. Being dead, Dean reasoned within the wolf, they should have anticipated that; nothing short of amputation was going to stop this thing.

By this time, the fight had circled once more, and Dean had his back to the fireplace. Morphing back to human form, he plucked his sword from its home, and explained his plan to Padma, "It's not alive... we can't... kill it. You have... to... disarm it... literally," he shouted, between breaths, before joining the battle with his own steel.

Dean had enjoyed the fencing club, whilst it had lasted, but he'd never embraced the whole practicing idea like Harry and Parvati. He was therefore acutely aware that as a fencer, he was only marginally more of a hindrance to the zombie than he had been as a wolf. Still, anything to help Padma, who appeared to be working herself up into something of a complete frenzy, the red stain on her arm continuing to seep outwards.

While Dean lunged forward at random intervals, trying to land any kind of blow whatsoever, Padma's blade was dancing complicated patterns, blocks that were thrusts and thrusts that were parries. On one move, the blade sliced through the zombie's left forearm, and in the follow through Padma arced the sword tip round, carving a gash through the creature's chest.

The left hand fell to the floor with a dull thud, and Dean looked on with revulsion as black, tar-like blood slowly dripped like treacle from the zombie's stump.

Padma had gained the upper hand in the duel by now, and with Dean reverting to simply sweeping his sword left to right at the calves, trying to unsettle their opponent's balance, she lunged in on the attack, as though in some macabre dance, landing blow after blow as the song blade scored wounds into the zombie's body, pools of treacle-like blackness congealing where the creature's skin could be seen.

So this was death by a thousand cuts.

The wounds were obviously hindering the zombie, as Padma rained further hits, it slowed down further and further, until she finally sliced the sword arm through at the elbow in the upswing, and then flicked the blade across the intruder's exposed throat.

Highlander, noted Dean, instinctively, as he watched the creature's head flap atop the severed neck, before the whole thing crumpled to the ground, black, foul liquid seeping slowly into the Gryffindor floor.

Even as he took in the gruesome sight before him, Dean felt Padma's body slump into his as she hung onto him for support, the song-blade's tip now resting on the floor from her limp sword arm, and he remembered that she'd been hit herself.

Pulling her up to a more comfortable standing position, holding her close to his body, Dean flicked directions with his sword, "Alex!" he commanded, "go and find a teacher. *Any* teacher. *Run!*"

Alex took one startled look at Dean, before stumbling to his feet and fleeing through the portrait hole.

"Need... to.... sit... down..." gasped Padma, at Dean's side, and he realised that her arm must be in some pain.

Guiding her to one of the armchairs, Dean took the song-blade from her hand, and threw it *behind* the Gryffindor fire, where it landed with a clatter, handing Padma Seamus' sword instead. It was just a little thing, but Dean suspected that the weapons might well end up being confiscated. Might as well at least try to hang on to every advantage they had.

"Somebody get Pomfrey here," he urged, and was relieved when Kate, one of the fourth years, rushed towards the door. "Ginny?" he asked softly, but doubtfully, "um... Gin?"

Ginny remained sitting in her chair, eyes now fixed on the fire's flickering light, rocking backwards and forwards, crying, "*Ron!*".

No question about it, Dumbledore looked agitated, surprised, even. That thing of his where you just knew, even without him saying it, that things had gone exactly as he'd expected, wasn't there. The wise old Headmaster just looked impossibly *human* as the blanket was placed over Matty's face, and quiet, urgent words were exchanged between McGonagall, Pomfrey and Dumbledore.

The rest of the Common Room was almost deserted. Of the Away Team, Padma, Neville and Seamus were all in the Hospital Wing, being treated for their respective injuries - Neville was in a coma, but Pomfrey had explained that he'd be up and about within the next few days. Padma was in purely for observation, and Seamus' injuries were somewhere in between the two.

Hermione had, oddly, taken Neville's things up to the girls' dorm, but Dean had been too worried about Ginny's state of mind to spend too much time pondering why. So it was the five of them - he, Ginny, Lavender Parvati and Hermione who were left in the Gryffindor Common Room as the three staff moved reluctantly away from Matty's body, and considered the undead's crumpled body, lying in the middle of a pool of seeping black tar.

With the tip of her wand, McGonagall parted the dead body's outer cloak - presumably the one Ron had been buried in (it was, noted Dean, just Ron's luck to only get to wear new robes when he was dead) - whereupon a piece of parchment caught her eye.

To Ron's left, Hermione gasped, involuntarily, "the Map!"

Dumbledore spun on his heel to face Hermione, eyebrows raised enquiringly, "map?" he prompted.

Hermione bit her lip, before explaining, somewhat hesitantly, "the Marauder's Map - the one we told you about the night when... when I was... and Beauxbatons... anyway, that's it..."

"I see," observed McGonagall, extracting the parchment between a pair of long, slender fingers with almost medical precision, "and how does one activate it?"

Hermione hesitated, and Dean knew why - the thought of McGonagall solemnly swearing that she was up to no good was somewhat incongruous.

"Well," explained Hermione, "you have to tap it with your wand and say, er, um, say '*I solemnly declare that I am up to no good*'."

"I see," observed a tight-lipped Head of Gryffindor, "Albus?" she enquired, handing the parchment to her Headmaster, evidently unwilling to make such an incantation herself.

"Minerva," agreed Dumbledore, tapping the parchment with his wand, and incanting as directed. That was the thing with Dumbledore, even starting the Marauder's Map he *still* managed to sound incredibly grave and serious.

Whereas it *would* have been funny to hear McGonagall swear she was up to mischief, when Dumbledore spoke those words, it carried an altogether more tragic tone. Further reflection on what this might mean was cut short however, as Dean was almost blinded by the flash of green light, and a blood-curdling, chill metallic voice filled the room: "*Mosmordre!*".

Blinking, Dean's eyes now focused on the sight of the Dark Mark being projected in the Gryffindor common room, the hollow eyed skull grinning vacantly at them, leering, gloating. Revulsion welled up inside Dean's body, as the jigsaw started to fall into place.

Although McGonagall appeared shocked, a hand clutched to her chest, her face a ghostly pallor, Dumbledore appeared unmoved, "there is," he noted in his usual, unflappable tone, "a message for us."

The headmaster displayed the parchment to the remnants of the Away Team, red letters burning into the parchment itself, a real fire that was consuming the message even as Dean absorbed the words:

And by your friends' hands shall you all die.

'Oh no we won't, matey,' vowed Dean to himself, darkly, "cos Harry's coming to get you, and you won't stand a hope in hell.'

Dean and Ginny had the common room to themselves; the sixth and seventh years had been recalled from Hogsmeade early, and after a very brief resume of the evening's horrors, had trooped disconsolately to their dorms. Hermione, Lavender and Parvati had stayed a little while, the bond that was the Away Team linking them all with the unsaid purpose: they had to get Harry to Durmstrang first, to limit You Know Who's power.

That achieved, they would do whatever it was that Harry would ask of them. And they really would, Dean had realised, as the night had worn on... it seemed odd that as Dumbledore's frailties started to appear, their belief in Harry seemed to swell to take that place.

But the fifth year girls had eventually retreated to their dorm, and it was just Dean and Ginny in the common room, lying together on the commandeered sofa. She'd stopped shivering now, but Dean knew that the events of the night would have affected her deeply; after all, how many other people had seen their brother killed before their very eyes not once but twice?

"Dean, talk to me," pleaded Ginny's voice, exhausted, with an edge of desperation to it, "keep my mind off... off that... *Please?*"

He sought frantically for inspiration, "OK, sweetie," he whispered quietly, soothingly, lacing his fingers through her hair as he held her tightly to him, "a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..."

Lavender and Parvati were in the bathroom, getting ready for bed as Hermione carefully, but quickly, went through Neville's bag and retrieved the ingredients he'd collected for her. It had been a dreadful night all told, but to see Ron again, or, more correctly, Ron's image, had strengthened her resolve. She needed him, needed to talk to him, needed to hear his voice again... especially now, with Harry trapped in prison, and with You Know Who issuing wild threats and portents of doom.

Ron had always been the steady one - she knew, in an abstract sense, that he'd been the brake that ensured she didn't get too carried away with her ideas. Only Ron, and Ron alone, had the right to puncture her determination in that infuriating manner of his - half smug, half mocking, but it was thanks to him that she kept on an even keel. It had been hard work without him - Harry was equally a best friend, but it wasn't the same between her and Harry as it was between her and Ron.

Anyway, dreadful as the night had been, she reminded herself that it hadn't been without its compensations: she carefully stashed the lock of Ron's hair with the rest of the components. This would be even better...

Chapter 58

How many players were injured in the infamous 1876 Quidditch World Cup?

Lying on his back, Harry draped an arm to the floor, and turned the page with a flick of his finger, whereupon Hermione's voice picked up the narrative; "...although the Astronomy Tower was specifically designed for observations from the outset, during the latter part of the fourteenth century, the entire structure underwent substantial modifications under the direction of the renowned archiwizard, Julius James, who also designed..."

There was something undoubtedly soporific about the book, which even Hermione's breathless narrative could not quite allay (quite how the charm had mimicked her delivery *so* expertly was bewildering). As the voice continued on, wrapped up in the excitement of the chapter, *Construction and Revision: The Intermediate Years*, Harry allowed himself a smile once more. Of all the books in all the world Hermione Granger could have charmed to read aloud, why did she have to pick *Hogwarts: A History*?

She'd confided that she'd been worried that it might seem an insensitive gift, but had quickly assured him that it was such an *interesting* read (even if certain sections, such as how the domestic chores were handled, for example, were not quite as thorough as they might have been), that it seemed like the ideal choice.

Summoning resolve he had never known he'd possessed, Harry had manfully restrained from suggesting that *Quidditch Through the Ages* would have been just as good. If not better. But he knew that Hermione and Quidditch didn't exactly see eye to eye, and despite four and a half years having passed, she seemed no nearer enlightenment now than she had been at their first flying lesson.

Absently, and now treating the ongoing narration almost as background music, Harry flicked his sense outward through the stone walls of Blackrock, noting patterns and presences as they conformed to the daily routine, just as he himself was conforming to his own.

The goblins had relaxed their regime of constant surveillance some time after Christmas, and now satisfied themselves with periodic visits to his corridor. With his body clock still completely skewed, and no means of telling the time, Harry had no idea whether such visits were timetabled with military precision, or more ad hoc affairs. What *was* certain, however, was that the patterns checked up on Lucas still less (basically, it seemed, they only ventured into Lucas' block at mealtimes), so Harry continued to lead as dull and boring a life as it was possible to, in the hope that it would accelerate the goblins' loss of interest still further.

Since he was blind, and captive in solitary confinement, leading a boring life wasn't exactly a challenge. And for their part, the goblins seemed to be acclimatising themselves to the concept that their star prisoner really wasn't as dangerous as Fudge had warned.

Pawn baits Rook.

Christmas hadn't been too bad, all things considered. Obviously, spending the festive season 'inside' was not exactly an experience he longed to repeat, but he'd had visitors, and presents (Hagrid's cakes remained stashed under the bed, for use either to stave off *extreme* hunger, or, more probably, to be employed as projectile weapons).

In addition to Hermione's book, and Hagrid's noble attempts at baking, Cho had given him a scarf (apparently a mixture of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw colours), and the whole Away Team appeared to have bought up Honeydukes' entire supply of Chocolate Frogs.

And it was a fact, Harry could confirm as one such chocolate amphibian flew through the air into his outstretched hand; there was not a single problem in the world which couldn't be made at least a *little* better through the appropriate application of chocolate...

Not to mention the fact that they were probably his sole source of protein, given the meagre prison rations that made half-hearted attempts to resemble food.

He carefully filed the unread card with the stack that shared the rough shelf with his glasses... once, *if*, he got his sight back, he'd need to see whether or not he'd *finally* managed to get Agrippa. He and Ron had been after that one since the first year, and they'd both long since held the suspicion that it didn't really exist, the makers getting a kick out of watching people relentlessly buying their sweets in a desperate bid to complete their collections.

On the other hand, as Harry well knew, Merlin was in danger of perishing through over-exposure. Well, he would have been, if he'd not already been dead... still, it had been something of a relief to note that he'd not come across a Gilderoy Lockhart card.

Yet.

Rook takes pawn.

Waking up from what he assumed was an afternoon nap, given the lack of connections to Voldemort, Harry lay on the bed, considering the infinite void of whiteness as he replayed the latest set of visions. Instead of Key draining, he'd seen Voldemort smash through the front door of a house, and heard the terrified screams as the occupants realised something was amiss.

With a start, Harry realised that they'd been screaming in English. He'd become so used to the unintelligible frenzies of the Key draining victims that he'd almost become accustomed to tuning out the victims' pleas. He hoped this was not symptomatic of his mind acclimatising to these horrors; his conscience still registered moral outrage at the very concept of Voldemort's activities, and he clung on to the sliver of guilt that taunted the fact that he almost... *almost* looked forward to the connections, and the temporary restoration of sight that the visions offered.

It was that guilt, Harry felt, that separated him from the Darkness; it was that guilt that maintained the dividing line between Light and Dark, Good and Evil, Right and Wrong. He might not have known the wizards and witches whose death throes he observed every night,

and he might not have been able to comprehend exactly what their last words had been, but he always knew, with sick distaste, that what he was seeing was wrong, base and evil.

He wondered what it had taken for Tom Riddle to lose sight of that.

They'd screamed in English. The previous night, the victims had spoken English... this detail now took upon a new urgency in Harry's mind, as he tried to process the implications.

It was *possible*, he knew, that Voldemort had accosted an English family who had chosen to live in France, but, he reminded himself, he didn't even know for sure that Voldemort had even *been* in France at the time.

He attempted to cast his mind back, wishing that he'd paid more attention to the surroundings. It had been different to the Beauxbatons Key - *that* should have been warning enough, but in that dream-like state it was hard to consciously will more awareness...

There had been a whitewashed cottage, with a stone wall, and a small front garden. There had been a tree, the branches bare in the weak light... A narrow road, rolling hills in the distance, illuminated by the diffuse light of the moon, peeking through cloud.

There had been nothing conclusive, but as Harry replayed again and again the cries of *Help!* and the desperate screams, the gnawing suspicion became supposition, supposition became assumption, and assumption became knowledge. As the flash of green light once more engulfed the wizard, a middle-aged, short man in a scruffy, tartan dressing gown, Harry knew, with dread in his heart, that this had marked a new phase.

Voldemort had opened his campaign in Britain.

Knight retreats from Bishop's threat.

Despite the pointlessness of the gesture, Harry blinked. Of all the people who would be visiting him...

Nervously running his hand through his hair, and wondering exactly what he looked like with stubble, he sat upright on the bed, and then got to his feet. Mr Red and the accompanying, familiar pattern had passed the Blood Trackers' cage, and were about to embark on the cart journey that would eventually bring them a few corridors from his own cell.

Thinking better of standing, he sat back down again, wondering what on Earth he was going to say, and what had prompted the visit.

Puzzlement and awkwardness built as the two patterns, both equally familiar, finally reached the cell door.

"Visitor," announced Mr Red, in his customary tone of well practiced resentment.

As always, Harry waited for them to introduce themselves first, just in case Polyjuice was at work, or some other disguise had been employed.

Not on this occasion, though: "hey, Harry..."

"Um, hi, Parvati... er, I wasn't, y'know, *expecting* that you'd visit... after, well, y'know..." Harry trailed off uncertainly, before adding, hurriedly, "not that, I mean.... not that it *isn't* nice to s... nice that you're here..."

"Friends?" asked Parvati, as her pattern walked across the cell, and perched itself at the end of his bed, the only seating option in the place.

"Of *course* 'friends!'" exclaimed Harry, before apologising further, "it's just, well, I had to keep things from you before, and I'm... um... I'm sorry about that..."

The expected 'it's OK' wasn't immediately forthcoming, and Harry tensed his shoulders as the silence became more uncomfortable. Even Mr Red shuffled his feet as he stood guard at the cell door.

"You hurt me," accused Parvati, softly, "and I sort of *know* that you had your reasons... but you kept things from me..."

"I'm *sorry*..."

"...and then you and Cho... and it's like you never gave *us* a chance..."

Again, Harry's eyelids executed a wholly pointless blink, "but *you* broke up with me!" he protested, not, in his mind, unjustly.

"But that's not the *point*," countered Parvati, although she singularly failed to elaborate exactly what the point *was*.

Bidding to break the growing silence once more, Harry returned to the tried and trusted conversation starter, "I'm sorry, Parvati. *Really*. But, um, what day is it? I can't keep track of time very well... I thought it was Monday afternoon, but, um..."

"Not bad, Harry," noted Parvati, who's voice had now resumed its more normal conversational tone, "that's a Chocolate Frog Dean owes me..."

"What?" asked Harry, wholly perplexed.

"Oops," she confessed, unconvincingly, "well, as you yourself said, you're not that good at telling the time..."

"I'd like to see you do better," grumbled Harry, beginning to suspect that the Away Team was managing to entertain itself at his expense.

"So anyway, Seamus and Dean came up with this... idea, er, as to how far out you'd be on the date..."

"You place *bets* on whether or not I can tell the time?" asked Harry, hoping that his voice was striking the correct note of indignation crossed with moral outrage. Of all the dirty, rotten, low-down schemes...

"Hey! I'll have you know, Mr Potter, *I* was the one who said you'd be spot on..."

"Well that's something, I s'pose... Hey! If it *is* Monday afternoon, why aren't you in History of Magic?"

As if the question had reminded her of the purpose of her visit, Parvati suddenly took Harry's hand in hers, causing him to flinch backwards in surprise.

"Harry," began Parvati, uncertainly, "something dreadful's happened..."

"...so we were playing Wizards' Triv, you know, the whole team... well, not Cho and not Neville..."

"Why not Neville?" interrupted Harry. Cho, obviously, was a Ravenclaw, so her absence, though troubling slightly (he hoped that she didn't get left out of things too much), wasn't surprising. But Neville?

"Well, at the time, we thought he was in the Greenhouses, but..."

"What do you mean, 'at the time'?"

"Look, is this my story or not?"

"Well, yes, but I was just..."

"You were just patiently *listening* as I explained everything, OK?"

"Sorry," mumbled Harry, weakly, resolving not to interrupt further (a riled Patil was not a thing to trifle with).

"Anyway, *as I was saying*," continued Parvati, and Harry could feel the swish of hair as she flicked her head, "we were all in Gryffindor, when suddenly the portrait hole opened, and..."

"What?" asked Harry, alarmed, and forgetting his resolution of seconds earlier. Parvati's grip on his hand had tightened at whatever memory was about to recalled; all the signs were that it wasn't going to be pleasant.

"...and, and Harry, it was Ron. *Ron*. He came back... with a sword, and he..."

"*Ron!*" exclaimed Harry, in a mixture of surprise, suspicion and hope. Ron, back! He hadn't really died... he was OK, and maybe he'd visit... and... But, hadn't she said...? "Parvati? Why was that dreadful? I mean, it was Ron, right, he's OK? He didn't really die? Or he came back?"

The pause before she replied was enough to warn Harry that Ron's reappearance hadn't been universally welcomed.

"No, Harry... it *looked* like Ron... But... but it wasn't *him*. They'd... they'd dug up his body, and it was reanimated..."

"Re... *animated*? So it wasn't Ron?"

"No," continued Parvati, flinching once more. "The first thing it did, as soon as it came in, it stabbed Matty, y'know, the third year?"

"The Curse?" Dean had obligingly filled Harry in on the Curse of Gryffindor, and the mechanisms by which the Gryffindor Quidditch Captaincy had been handed to a third year.

"The Curse," confirmed Parvati, pausing slightly before adding, "he died."

There had been an element of Harry that had received Dean's tale of the Curse of Gryffindor with a sense of gallows humour - even if he'd been one of the afflicted... but now Matty was dead. He knew that Hermione would *undoubtedly* dismiss the chain of events as coincidence... but how could she be so sure? And how did you fight a curse, anyway?

"Did... anyone else... I mean, no-one else got hurt, did they?" enquired Harry, gingerly, breaking the reflective silence once more.

"Well, what happened then was that Dean..."

"Parvati..."

"*My* story, just listen..."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but thought better of it, and allowed his visitor to continue the tale.

"So, Dean changed into the wolf, and tried to fight the... thing, and Seamus and Padma helped..."

"Padma? She was in Gryffindor?" Harry was once more feeling slightly protective of Cho, worried that, however inadvertently, she was being alienated from the core group.

He could feel Parvati's shoulders shrug, "well, she's my twin... nobody was complaining..."

"Well no," agreed Harry, "but... anyway, Dean, Padma and Seamus..." he prompted, realising just in time that Parvati was definitely *not* the person to cajole into keeping Cho involved with things.

"Well yes, those three fought the thing - Seamus got hurt quite badly..."

"Is he OK now?" interrupted Harry.

"He had to spend the night in the Hospital Wing, but yeah, he's OK now. Anyway, when Seamus got hurt, Lavender and I went off to try and find help..."

"OK..."

"Which is when we found Neville... by the portrait hole... he'd been stabbed too..."

Something about the way Parvati had imparted this news told Harry that Neville's condition had been much more serious than Seamus', "and Neville's OK, right?"

Again, the telling pause, "Pomfrey... thinks he *should* be OK, but... but Harry, he lost *so* much blood... he was out there all that time, and we didn't know..."

Harry's mind was reeling; how could *anyone* attack Neville, of all people? Neville, who didn't have a malicious bone in his body, yet people like Malfoy could saunter about the world as if they owned it, luxuries falling into their lap at every turn. "But he *is* OK, isn't he?" he persisted.

"We don't know yet, Harry - he's still unconscious... *anyway*, Hermione came to help us then, and she stayed with Neville and Lavender and I split up to try and get help..."

"So what happened in Gryffindor? Dean and Padma; *they're* OK, at least, aren't they? I mean, it didn't get anyone else, did it?"

"Well Padma eventually chopped the thing to pieces with that fancy sword of yours..."

"You always said she was a good fencer," recalled Harry.

"...yeah, but she got hurt too..."

"Woah," breathed Harry, "this thing must have been *evil*. I mean, really evil... but Padma, she's OK. Right? And Dean?"

"Yeah," confirmed Parvati, "Padma's arm healed up overnight; Dean seemed more or less OK, I think, but Ginny was a bit... a lot... she was... very... emotional."

"I'll bet..." agreed Harry.

"'cos don't forget," reminded Parvati, "she was there in the Greenhouse after Beauxbatons, too..."

"Twice," Harry realised, "she saw him die twice. In front of her... Gin..."

"So that was it, then? You got Pomfrey, Padma killed the... whatever it was. Seamus is OK, Padma's OK, and we think Neville will be. Yes?"

"Almost," confirmed Parvati.

"What *else* happened?" pleaded Harry, feeling helpless, inconsequential and massively guilty for not being on hand to assist his friends in such a crisis.

"Well," sighed Parvati, "I got Pomfrey... she wasn't too impressed with being summoned from the ward but I... well, I sort of screamed at her..."

"You can't knock Gryffindor courage," observed Harry.

"Shut up, *ex*-boyfriend. I got Pomfrey, Lavender got McGonagall, and McGonagall called Dumbledore via Floo, and we all met back at Gryffindor, where everything had finished..."

"Right," prompted Harry, "so no-one else was hurt? Nobody else died?"

"No," agreed Parvati, "but then McGonagall found this parchment on Ron's body... and Hermione thought it was the map thing you used when we were... y'know, taken..."

"The Marauder's Map," Harry nodded - they'd never found out what had happened to the map after Beauxbatons - certainly Ron had been holding it last, but then he'd been killed. By Sprout, even if she was acting under Imperius. "Hang on; if Ron's body had the Map, and you can bet he wasn't *buried* with it, then someone put it there... but if someone put it there, they had to have picked it up from... well, the Greenhouse, or wherever Ron's body was taken after... It *can't* have been Sprout..."

"Unless she was under Imperius," interjected Parvati, "anyway, the point is that it wasn't the Map anyway... or if it was, it had been changed. It was a message."

"And the message was..." prompted Harry.

"Well, Dumbledore said the incantation thing, and then there was this voice summoning the Dark Mark, and the map burnt up..."

"It never used to do that," commented Harry, somewhat pointlessly.

"...but before it burnt up, there was writing? And Dumbledore showed it to us: *by your friends' hands shall you all die...* or words to that effect..."

"Voldemort," noted Harry.

Beside him, Parvati flinched, "do you *have* to s..."

"Yes," stated Harry, flatly. "Voldemort. Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort. It's just a name, Parvati," he continued in a softer tone, "you can't be frightened of a *name*."

In the whiteness of the void, Harry could feel Parvati's eyes swivel to fix upon him; "I forget, sometimes, that you were brought up with Muggles... it's not that it's a name, Harry. It's *language*; it's at the core of our power... the Wand, the Will and..."

"...the Word," continued Harry, "yes, I know that..."

"No," countered Parvati, "the thing is, for *us*, y'know, growing up as witches, we always knew that language had a special power. It's not that we're frightened of You Know..."

"Vol... sorry." He could *feel* the glare, and tried hard to arrange his features into an approximation of meekness.

"It's not that we're frightened of... of his name, Harry, it's that we associate his name with that power. More than associate..."

Harry nodded, even though he wasn't sure he completely understood what Parvati was driving at, he could see that it did sort of make sense. "So that must've been a pretty bad night for you all," he observed.

"Not just for us," explained Parvati, "there were hundreds of sightings of the Dark Mark last night."

"*Hundreds?*" asked Harry, incredulously.

"Well, OK, scores," modified Padma, before rustling some paper, "it was in the Prophet..."

"I can't believe you read that worthless rag," countered Harry, with feeling.

Parvati was unapologetic, "I had to read *something* in depressuri-thingy... besides, I thought you'd want to know what was going on out there..."

"Depressurisation," corrected Harry (Dean had, again, come up with an appropriate name for the holding area where the Goblins kept visitors for two hours to ensure they weren't under Polyjuice), "and thanks, as you can see, I am kind of cut-off from things... so what *is* going on in the world, then?"

Bishop stalks Rook.

So it was real, mused Harry to himself, as he flicked the stack of Chocolate Frog cards through his hands (still no Agrippa, Parvati had confirmed, but, yes, four more Merlins). Voldemort had swept into Britain the previous night, the Dark Mark illuminating the skies as victims fell.

According to Parvati, the Prophet's leading article had explained that the time had come to put aside the suspicion that had been attached to the Order of Tempus; the country didn't have the resources to fend for itself against the cold ruthlessness of the Death Eaters, and any ally in such situation was a valuable one.

Harry lay back against the rough bed, half fearing, half welcoming the fall of night, and the almost inevitable connection to Voldemort. Let the dark dreams come; the internal battles of disembodied wills fighting to survive against the crushing cold of the host. Lightning flashes of people now dead, who surfaced briefly in Voldemort's mind, tormented, tortured, traumatised.

A short struggle or a titanic one, but the outcome would always be the same; an enveloping black tide of coldness, sweeping through the mind, extinguishing everything that lay in its path.

Checkmate. Again.

Chapter 59

Whom did Aidan Lynch succeed as Seeker for the Irish Quidditch Team?

The remnants of the Away Team were once again congregated about one of Hermione's bluebell flames at the top of the North Tower that Monday night. Neville was still unconscious in the Hospital Wing, and though they'd all been to see him at various times throughout the day, there hadn't appeared to be any significant change in his condition.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for Madam Pomfrey's temper, the nurse becoming increasingly short with the stream of visitors, each enquiring of her in turn whether there'd been any improvement in their friend's condition.

Finally she'd snapped at Hermione, "Mr Longbottom is in a coma. He was in a coma this morning, he was in a coma at lunchtime, and he was in a coma throughout the afternoon. Mr Longbottom continues to remain in a coma, and, whilst I am certain that he will be most gratified to learn of your concern, might I remind you that this is a *medical* wing, and my patients *demand* complete rest?"

Reading between the lines, Hermione had quickly concluded that it was in fact the nurse who was demanding a rest from the seemingly ceaseless stream of visitors, and had warily retreated backwards under the patented Pomfrey stare.

No Ron and no Harry, obviously, but Ginny seemed very subdued in the halfflight, and although Dean had his arms wrapped around her, it was more in a protective fashion than their usual demonstrative hug. Ginny's pale skin seemed even more ghostly than usual, her eyes half focused on the flickering blue flames.

Hermione had missed most of the sword fight between Padma and the... undead thing that had invaded Gryffindor, although she'd obviously seen the aftermath. *That* had been bad enough, but Ginny had seen it all, before her very eyes...

"So," explained Parvati, "I was telling him how we're all to stay in the school buildings, except for getting to and from the Greenhouses, and do you know what he said?" She paused, although no guesses were proffered.

"He said, 'but what about Quidditch?! Honestly, he's serving a life sentence, he's blind, and all he thinks about is that stupid game!'"

"My man!" approved Dean, "and anyway, Quidditch is *still* going ahead. For the time being, at least... Hufflepuff next."

"And we've got Slytherin," added Cho, catching Padma's eye. Those two, at least, seemed to have patched up their differences since getting involved in the Portkey business.

"Well just make sure you grab that Snitch from underneath the slimy git's nose, then," urged Seamus, a sentiment echoed by most of the others present.

"And," added Dean, helpfully, "if he happens to fall from his broom, well... it's a rough game..."

"No-one's died in years, though," lamented Seamus, wistfully.

There was no need to spell out who the slimy git in question was, and although Hermione knew that he hadn't perhaps been as pleasant as he could have been in years past, it still seemed a bit unfair that the rest of the gang were so... adversarial about it. Sometimes it seemed as though Draco had the entire world ranged against him...

"...and," announced Cho, with not a small hint of pride, "we have success on the Portkey!"

This was most definitely good news: "really?" enquired Hermione, "to one of the Towers?"

"The Astronomy Tower," confirmed Padma, producing a chunk of masonry from her pocket.

"The Astronomy Tower?" giggled Lavender, "couldn't that, potentially, be a bit, er, *intrusive*?"

Honestly, thought Hermione, the girl had a one track mind. Opposite her, however, Cho and Padma exchanged a look that clearly said 'should we?'

"Sis," warned Parvati, "you *can't* leave us hanging like that... who?"

"Well," ventured Cho, doubtfully, "I don't know, it's not very... Ravenclaw to spread gossip..."

"And it's really not *all* that interesting," teased Padma, as Lavender virtually folded herself in half as she leant nearer to the Ravenclaws to tune in.

"Oh, but it wouldn't be gossiping if you only told *us*," encouraged Lavender, shamelessly. Behind her back, Seamus rolled his eyes with long-suffering resignation.

"Fred and Angelina," suggested Ginny, a small measure of her normal spark resurfacing as she engaged in the game.

"Nope," responded Cho, shaking her head slowly, "nowhere near..."

"Lisa and Olivier," tried Dean.

"Pitiful," turned out to be Padma's assessment of *that* possibility.

"Justin and Blaise," ventured Seamus, stirring it a bit.

"Yuk!" opined Parvati, wrinkling her nose with disgust, "and besides, I didn't think Blaise liked *boys*..."

"Really?" enquired her Twin, evidently pondering the concept, "because I'd heard the opposite..."

Hermione tuned out the various suggestions as best she could (Millicent and Ernie? *Honestly*, where did they get these ideas from?), as she let her mind wander back to the summoning process, and when best to start.

"Trixy and Roger!" dared Lavender, obviously plumbing the depths now.

"Roger? With a House-Elf?" gasped Cho, astonished.

Dean shrugged; "it's a sick, sick world..."

The ingredients from Sweeney's would be OK until the weekend, the little old witch had assured her, but Hermione was keen to make a start before then. And as it happened, with Runes, Scripts and Lore being, effectively a double-free on Wednesday afternoon (although she'd vehemently deny this if she was asked), that might present the perfect opportunity...

"So," Dean's voice interrupted Hermione's train of thought, "are you going to prime The Thing next?"

Hermione glared at the dreadlocked wizard - she could *hear* the capitalisation in the voice, and whilst 'The Thing' actually wasn't that bad a name for it, she still felt her face flush with the recollection of Viktor's carving.

Seamus was grinning wickedly, "I still can't believe you fell for that," he confessed, shaking his head in wonder.

Hermione bristled, as she always seemed to whenever the subject came up, "it's an example of traditional Bulgarian..."

"Folk Art," agreed Lavender, nodding her head eagerly, before adding, "which of course just *happens* to look exactly li..."

"It's a well documented fact," interrupted Hermione, before her dorm-mate could elaborate, "that traditional art often dealt with... *that* type of subject matter." She *hated* being on the defensive in these conversations, and had clearly been over-optimistic in anticipating that her compatriots would have got their immature reactions out of the way after the first viewing.

"Well actually," interjected Cho, and Hermione was thankful for the Ravenclaw's sober return to the subject at hand, "we'll need something of Harry's to prime the... *it*," not even Cho could keep a straight face where The Thing was concerned. "Y'know, 'cos he's a Mage, and not a wizard, we'll need to key the, um, The Thing, to him..."

"Oh," sighed Parvati in frustration, "if only you'd *said*, I could have got a lock of hair today..."

"Preferably without scalping him first, Sis, eh?" suggested Padma, sympathetically.

"Actually it was OK," conceded Parvati, "not great," she elaborated, deliberately not looking anywhere *near* Cho's side of the Tower (Hermione suspected it would be a long time before those two would ever be anything more than formally civil to one another), "but, y'know... OK..."

Dean rescued the Tower from the awkwardness of the ensuing silence, "and you two, you can *promise* that you're not going to damage The Thing, right?"

Padma seemed genuinely affronted, "Yes, Dean... well, pretty much, anyway... I know, I know, it's our only shot, but we're pretty confident, aren't we Cho?"

Cho nodded confirmation.

"No, no, that's not what I meant," explained Dean, "'s just that, y'know, after this is over, we've *got* to put Hermione's carving in the Trophy Room..."

"Yeah," agreed Seamus, "with," he stifled a giggle, "with a... a, thingy, um..."

"An inscription!" deduced Lavender, eyes glinting wickedly.

"Oh yes," concurred Parvati, catching on, eyes widening with delight, "something like 'this...'"

"fine example of Bulgarian folk..." supplied Dean.

"*Traditional* Bulgarian folk art," corrected Ginny, seemingly revelling in Hermione's discomfort.

"...was donated... Donated? Given?" Lavender pondered the appropriate wording.

"Handed?" proffered Cho with a poker-straight face.

"Th-*rust*... upon!" wheezed Seamus triumphantly, as he fought a losing battle against crippling silent laughter, "star pupil... H... H..."

"Star pupil Hermione Granger," Dean took up the thread with a wicked grin, "in the interests of improving..."

"Furthering," modified Parvati.

"International," Padma snorted in a most unladylike fashion, "*relations*..."

Hermione scowled witheringly at the gang's display of puerile humour. It was *definitely* art, she asserted to herself mentally. It was, perhaps, a little bit risqué, but, really, art was *supposed* to challenge cultural conventions, and, maybe her friends just weren't ready for that level of culture.

Getting back into Gryffindor Tower was a slow process. Sir Cadogan, for the second time in Hermione's years at Hogwarts, had been sacked, but now, instead of one password guardian, there were two. And they weren't paintings.

"Passsssss...word?" hissed Tweedledee, sibilantly, as the group approached. The gargoyle's real name was Anadracondariac, its partner having the only slightly less cumbersome appellation Llerthyryn, so, obviously, the entire clan of Gryffindor had labelled the two

guardians Tweedledum and Tweedledee - which ever one caught the eye first was Tweedledum, and its partner was Tweedledee.

There was the clank of stone on stone as Tweedledum drew a huge, chipped battleaxe and stood ready to intercede should things get nasty.

"Onomatopoeia," enunciated Hermione crisply (she had a suspicion that both gargoyles were slightly hard of hearing), and waited patiently as the hulking stone beasts clunked slowly aside to let her pass.

Behind her, she heard the swish of stone sword through air, as Dean's progress was blocked, "password," challenged the gargoyle once more.

And so it was under the new security regime. All the dormitories now had two animated gargoyles standing watch. No-one was allowed through without a password, and each student had their *own* password (Hermione wondered how they were going to break this news to Neville, although, on the plus side, they were allowed to choose the passwords themselves).

Inside the common room, things were much as before, with the exception of a silver hand-bell ('did it *have* to be silver?' Lavender had queried, on Seamus behalf, the answer being, 'apparently so'), which, when rung, would alert all staff in the school. Predictably enough, this had duly been christened 'the Batphone'. It seemed pretty appropriate, really, and even Hermione thought she could have come up with that. But Dean had come up with it first.

Most of the school had been shaken badly by the events of Sunday night. Not just the attack on Gryffindor Tower, but the rise of the Death Eaters across the land had realised most peoples' worst nightmares, and a return to the dark years seemed to be upon the world.

An obvious exception, of course, had been Pansy, who'd been almost giddy with delight in Potions, humming the 'Ten Green Bottles' song to herself happily. Hermione knew full well what version of the words Pansy was intending be associated with the ditty, but had resolved *not* to let the vapid blonde get to her.

She had other things to think about first, and then, yes, *then* Ms Parkinson would find out what it meant to cross wands with Hermione Granger.

The Death Eaters' attack had obviously been a surprise to everyone, but the Order of Tempus had mobilised incredibly quickly, and the Daily Prophet had breathlessly reported how, in true eye-for-an-eye style, the Sign of Tempus had been projected into the Monday night sky. The dead bodies had either carried the Dark Mark, or no mark at all. The unadorned victims had been found with a helpful explanatory note to reinforce the point, "you are either with us, or you are against us."

On Tuesday afternoon, the Ministry's owls came, declaring wizarding Britain to be under curfew, with no-one permitted to be out of doors after 9pm. Any persons detected breaking curfew were deemed to be a threat, and would be dealt with by the Ministry's agents accordingly.

Wednesday's paper, then, had been awash with tales of night-time skirmishes between Tempus, the Ministry and the Death Eaters, breathless eyewitness reports of shadows Apparating in and out of battles that were over almost before they'd begun, the night being lit up with the green flash of the Killing Curse.

Against this backdrop, Wednesday afternoon seemed to take an *age* to come, but come it eventually did.

Hermione paced around the chalk-lined heptagon, stooping to light each candle in turn with the tip of her wand. After the sixth candle was lit, the flames a deep, blood red against the bone-white of the wax, she paused. The seventh candle; once lit she would have created the portal field, the first step of the process would be complete.

Pausing at this point wasn't really necessary. Nothing she had done yet was irreversible, and even though she would have created the portal field, if her reading of the texts was correct, nothing was going to come to her unless it was specifically summoned. Nonetheless, it *was* a significant step - it would close the heptagon, and *that*, then would be the final point of possible return. As soon as she started the first incantation, she was obliged to follow through with the summoning.

"*Incendio*," she breathed, more than murmured, and her favoured bluebell spark lit the summoning candle's wick, and the seventh blood red flame was lit. There was an audible *crack!*, and although she couldn't *see* any difference, she could feel the magic in her bones, the flesh tingling.

The seven flames flickered and fluttered in the gentle draught of the dormitory, but as she watched, Hermione noticed a rhythm start to develop, a pulse, which slowly crept around the chalk lines from the North point, until each candle appeared as an exact replica of the others.

Mesmerised for a moment, Hermione watched the flames dance. This was a big thing. It was *huge*. Briefly she wondered whether she should back down now - although she knew, in a technical sense, what she was doing, the fact remained that this was bigger, darker and more dangerous than anything she'd attempted before.

It was then that she realised that the seven flames were pulsing in time to her own heartbeat; she was intimately connected to the process now. That the flames had taken to her was all the encouragement she needed; the construct had been successful, now on to the first incantation...

Gathering her robes about her, Hermione sat cross-legged on the floor, at a point broadly corresponding to 7'o'clock. There was, she knew, some latitude to her positioning in the scheme of things, but not one to skimp on detail, Hermione had dusted off all her Arithmancy skills, together with half-remembered Muggle geometry to set the marker down in *exactly* the right place.

Unfurling the first blank parchment from the secret pocket she'd made for her school bag, Hermione smoothed the crumpled paper more times than was strictly necessary, before taking a deep breath and uttering the visibility charm, "*Apparicium...*"

The seven flames began to pulse more quickly as the words appeared to write themselves across the parchment in her own, looping hand. Latin looked very odd with circles over the i's.

She ran through the list of components, ensuring that they were all assembled by her side; it would be disastrous if she only discovered half way through the calling that she was missing the Wryick Sap, for example.

The pulse of the flames increased, slightly as Hermione carefully ordered the various components in strictly regimented lines, double checking every last detail. Satisfied that she had everything in place, Hermione straightened her back, gripped her wand tightly, and stood on the precipice, contemplating the drop below.

Whether she sat there, contemplating what she was about to embark upon for a second or whether it had been ten minutes Hermione had no idea, but, finally she gathered up her resolve and launched into the first incantation, the pulse of the flames quickening as the implications of having passed the point of no return set in.

"It's in a *good* cause," asserted Hermione defiantly, not that there was anyone to listen; the dorm remained empty (Lavender and Parvati always spent Wednesdays hidden away in one of Trelawney's classrooms (she had several, most unused, all filled with useless trinkets and worthless junk), pretending to hone their Inner Eyes), but Hermione still felt that an apology was necessary.

The scarf, a Cannons scarf she'd taken from Ron's bedroom at the Burrow expressly for this purpose, had nearly all burnt now, all that remained being a snaking ribbon of grey ash. For the Calling to work, the Summoner had to send a component the Summoned would have had a strong attachment to, and as soon as she'd crept, undetected, into Ron's bedroom before the funeral, the visual assault of orange had told her all she needed to know about what the best thing to use would be.

And that marked the end of the third phase. She'd established the portal field with the summoning candles, and she'd opened a connection with the first incantation. The Calling was now complete - she'd indicated the entity she wished to contact, and now came the process of summoning.

This is where endless nights of study in the library had paid off, not just in her fifth year, but throughout her time at Hogwarts. After all, if she'd never brewed Polyjuice Potion in the second year, the next step would never have occurred to her.

Hermione's initial plan had been to simply summon Ron's spirit, so that she could have a proper conversation, to allay the guilt that ate away at her every time she replayed their last conversation. Well, argument, really. However, having a lock of Ron's hair virtually given to her on a plate (if one were so moved as to consider a reanimated decomposing corpse as a plate), the leap had seemed obvious.

The hair was to magic what DNA was to Muggles; from a single lock of hair an entire person could be conjured - it had all the relevant information right there, although, obviously, all it could do was conjure the body, the shell, as it were. You couldn't reproduce a person's mind... however, from the Summoning, she would have Ron's mind... she *had* to; the Summoned had no choice but to answer the call.

Hermione's great leap, then, had been to combine the two disciplines, merging the transference communication and the Polyjuice replication to reproduce Ron, alive and well.

So, against that backdrop, what was one Cannons scarf? "It's all for a good cause," asserted Hermione once more, although she still maintained a sneaking suspicion that Ron might not necessarily agree. Sometimes he got a bit carried away with the Quidditch sentimentality.

This was it, then, the moment of truth; the point at which all the disciplines converged, and Hermione Granger marshalled every force at her disposal. The pivotal moment on which everything hinged, and she would find out, truly, whether her plan would be successful.

Uttering the final syllable, and flicking to point at the exact centre of the heptagon, Hermione sensed, more than anything, a sudden absence. As though where previously the heptagon's interior had been a column of intense magical activity, there was now nothing. Emptiness.

A void.

Shoulders slumping, Hermione looked disconsolately at the flames, whose pulse slowed as her disappointment took hold of her heart beat.

It hadn't worked.

She was about to utter a half-choked sob of despair, when suddenly she felt her entire *soul* pulled out of her body with immense force, feeling the air expelled from her lungs as the magic hit. Her eyes widened in shock as she was acquainted with absolute terror.

Two summers previously, the Grangers had taken their holiday in France, at St Jean de Luz, nestling in the Bay of Biscay, next to the Spanish border, with the Atlantic crashing in. The place was a favoured haunt of surfers and windsurfers, and for those who didn't have a board, there was a thrill to be gained from allowing the waves to break on top of you, carrying you shoreward in the surf.

Whether she'd got her positioning wrong that one time, or whether she'd had the misfortune to line herself up under a particularly large wave Hermione couldn't remember, but what she *could* recall, vividly, was tumbling uncontrollably under the water's surface, not knowing which way was up and which down, nor where her next breath of air would be coming from. It had only been at that point that she'd appreciated the sheer *power* of the ocean, and realised that, actually, drowning was a *distinct* possibility.

Although it can only have been a handful of seconds at most, the memory of the eternal tumbling, the ocean's roar in her ears, limbs flailing at the currents' mercies had stayed with

her. A deep sense of human futility when confronted with the primal forces of nature had been imposed in those brief moments, and she'd been hugely relieved, and not a little shaken, when the surf finally released her to the sand, and she'd been able to stagger groggily to her knees, lungs burning, heart hammering, limbs trembling.

But that had just been water. *This* was magic.

Unable to breathe, and paralysed by the tinge of magic in the air, currents of energy passing over, under, around, *through* her, Hermione watched as the stone floor of the dorm slowly started to move within the heptagon, as though it were an elastic membrane. Shapes passed across the stone's surface, sending ripples that would vanish at the chalk-line's mark, as a thick, cold mist started to build from nowhere.

Transfixed and shaking involuntarily, realising too late that she was hopelessly out of her depth, Hermione's eyes saw two distinct balls of light rise, carried by the growing mist, converging towards one another, all the time their distinction sharpening, solidifying as indeed the mist started to congeal into a form.

The unfolding spectacle seemed to envelope Hermione, assaulting every sense, communicating with her through her very bones. The air was alive with energy and Darkness, the process being swept along as though on the crest of a wave, Hermione captive, powerless to intervene.

She couldn't take her eyes off the two points of light, which had now seemingly settled into position, about two inches apart, directly level with her face. Mist swirled and raced within the perimeter of the heptagon, as though caught in a terrible maelstrom, whilst Hermione became acutely aware that the magic in place had such a hold on her body that she was unable to breathe.

The points of light developed a tiny circle of black at their centre, which was then surrounded by a darker disk of grey, even as the mist built a prominent ridge between them. And then the grey started to slowly adopt its own colour, slowly being tinged with blue that crept outward from the central darkness, within which she now saw her reflection.

Eyes. She was looking directly into Ron's eyes.

The candles' flames, synchronised as they were with her heartbeat, were now flickering in frenzied fashion as the mist continued to solidify, giving form to Ron's body as it grew within the portal. The face rose higher and higher over Hermione's paralysed, and still cross-legged form, yet she could not take her eyes away from his.

The silence of the initial summoning was now giving way to a low murmur. A whine. She could feel the temperature in the room dropping as the volume rose, and the whines became shrieks, and then howling, tortured screams. The cloud-like form of Ron's arms scrabbled ineffectually at his face as his half-built features writhed in agony.

One part mesmerised to three parts horrified, Hermione remained powerless to move, all her energy - physical, emotional, mental and magical- everything she was had been taken by the summoning, and was invested in the process of restoring Ron from the dead.

The storm within the heptagon had now reached a piercing shriek as Ron's form was almost fully defined, writhing in obvious agony she was powerless to stop, when everything went terribly, terribly wrong.

With a crash, the door to the dorm burst open, and Ginny and Parvati rushed in, "Hermione! Hermione!" cried Ginny, eagerly, "Neville's awa..."

Hermione watched in despair, powerless to intervene as two flames flickered out in the ensuing draught. "Nooooooooooooooooo," she wailed, distraught as the portal field crumbled about the still developing form of Ron, "no, no, no, *noooooooooo...*" She hurled herself towards the freshly extinguished flames, as though by sheer willpower she could re-ignite them before everything was lost.

The mist-like image of Ron tumbled to the floor as Ginny screamed, a dry, broken, scraping sound, as though the final support had been taken from her mind.

Hermione stretched out her hand miserably to touch one of the guilty candles, the blackened wick still smouldering, but the blood red flame seemingly long gone.

"Hermione!" wheezed Ron's voice, desperate, panicked, but above all, *hurt*, "what have you *done* to me?" The plea, which had really been more of an accusation was followed by a sustained bout of coughing and dry retches, as Ron struggled to find the energy to lift himself from the floor.

Gulping, Hermione looked at the prostrate form, the face lined with scratches from where he'd been clawing at his face in pain and desperation. She was about to reach out and touch him when she noticed that the floor about him was developing a hard frost, and she could *feel* the absolute coldness of his presence in the room. Everything had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

She looked behind her to Ginny and Parvati for help, but Parvati was regarding her coldly, no sense of any recognition of her dorm-mate of the last four and half years evident in her eyes. And if Parvati simply looked cold, Ginny was absolutely livid... but not with anger, livid with *pain*.

Hermione felt the blood in her veins turn to ice as realisation hit in. Parvati's reaction alone had been enough to tell her, wordlessly, that what she'd done was beyond the pale. And *that* was nothing compared to the waves of hostility that were radiating from Ginny.

"*How could you?*" she asked, accusingly, stabbing a shaking finger at Hermione, voice scratchy with pain and betrayal, "how could you?" she repeated in hissed tones, conveying an absolute loathing for Hermione's very presence.

And Hermione realised that she didn't have an answer. She'd been wrapped up in the entire project, and had lost sight of the fact that she wasn't the only person with a connection to Ron.

He had a family, a sister, brothers... and now they were all going to hate her, for having put Ron's soul, or his spirit... well, put *Ron* through this.

Too late, she realised that she'd ruined *everything*...

"Erm," ventured Ron between racking coughs, drool dripping from his slackened jaw, causing Hermione to turn back to him, "I don't suppose, er, anyone's got some, uh, *clothes* I could borrow?"

"Get out," hissed Ginny, malevolently, eyes narrowed to slits, speech quavering with barely suppressed rage. "Get *out*!" she repeated, in a shriek so piercing it would probably have been better classified as a scream.

Hermione was about to object that, actually, this was *her* dorm, and Ginny was the guest, but she sensed that she didn't actually have much claim to the moral high ground, "Ginny... I'm... I'm so *sorry*," she protested, "I didn't..."

"Get out!" screamed Ginny, tears welling in her eyes, "leave! I don't *ever* want to see your face again! Get *away* from my brother! I can't believe..."

Hermione looked to Parvati for support, but Parvati, if her expression was anything to go by, was fully behind the fourth year. At her back, Ron's presence was like a massive block of... *cold*, absolute and total cold, sending an icy chill down her spine; "I'm sorry..." Hermione tried again, "I didn't th..."

"Don't give me that," countered Ginny slowly, drawing her wand and crossing the floor threateningly. "Don't give me *that*... you *betrayed* us. Betrayed us all..." Ginny's voice dropped to a whisper, all the more intimidating for its tenuous control, "we took you in... we brought you into our family, and *this* is how you repay us? Treating my brother's life as though it's some toy to be played with?"

Hermione took a pace backwards, although the nearer she got to Ron, the more unbearable the cold became, "I'm sor..."

"Spare me the apologies," whispered Ginny, at the very threshold of hearing, "until you *understand* exactly what you did. You were *family*... how could you do this to us?"

Parvati took Ginny's arm, and drew her away from what looked as though it had been about to evolve into a full on, extremely one-sided duel, and turned to look at Hermione, as though she were a complete and total stranger, "I think it would be best if you were to leave."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but was unable to formulate words, her conscience instead suddenly railing into her full on. She hadn't thought that anyone would be anything less than wholly pleased to see Ron brought back to... well, if not brought back to life, exactly (nothing that cold could be alive), then at least brought back from the dead. She hadn't seen it from the other side... hadn't seen until it had been pointed out to her too late.

Eyes welling and lip trembling, Hermione staggered blindly towards the door, her sole aim to hide from the entire world.

Arriving, distraught, in the library, the immediate sanctuary that had sprung to mind, Hermione suddenly realised that she'd fled Gryffindor without so much as a quill, let alone her usual armoury of study materials. But there was no way she could go back to her dorm just yet, so, making the best of the situation, she headed deep into the stacks, and slumped brokenly into her favoured chair.

Coincidentally, directly opposite the one person who *would* understand. The one person who knew what it was like to have the hate of everyone focused upon them: "Oh Draco," she started, miserably, not bothering to hide the tears, "I've been *so* stupid... and... and everyone *hates* me..."

Across the table, the Slytherin's eyes lit up: Hermione consoled herself with the fact that at least *someone* was pleased to see her...

Chapter 60

Can you Apparate into the grounds at Hogwarts?

Hermione felt possessed by a *need* to unburden the weight she was carrying; this thing, it was so huge... even as she started to explain what had happened in Gryffindor Tower, she was aware of her body trembling uncontrollably. The magnitude of events was still settling in, her mind still rushing frantically forward on the wave of adrenaline that had kicked in at the moment she'd felt herself sucked into the spell's power.

On top of this, there was a tangible pressure, compressing her inwards, constricting her lungs, stifling her movement. Even though her mind was almost entirely devoted to the *now* - her, Draco and the library - seemingly on another level her whole body was alive with fear; actions had consequences. Disastrous actions disastrously so...

She had to *explain*; compelled by a desperate need for Draco to *understand*, not just comprehend, but truly *understand* the afternoon. And yet, she couldn't think of vocabulary *big* enough to relay the scale, the power, the whole... *thing*. It was just too much.

To her relief, Draco had been in one of his closer moods; she knew, ever since their time together in the Astronomy Tower, she knew that Draco actually had a decent, human side, and that, really, he was a genuine human being. He had weaknesses and needs just like everyone else, but, having grown up without ever knowing love, true family love, he'd learnt to suppress feelings, cutting the world off with an artificially constructed wall of hostility and arrogance.

The weeks since their... since their *togetherness* skipping Potions had been difficult. Sometimes Draco had been his old, cruel, disdainful self, and she'd wondered whether she really *had* connected to him, but then they'd meet in the library, or they'd share a conversation during Potions and everything would be back as it was. He *understood* her, and she understood him. Not all of him... much of Draco was, if not a closed book, one written in an alien language; cold, formal and impersonal. Slightly damaged, in its way... and if only Draco could learn that people *did* truly care for him, then he might be able to free himself even more from the vicious circle of cruel aloofness that had driven him during their first years at Hogwarts.

Sensing that Hermione's pent up energy was not best housed in the library, Draco had suggested that they take a walk round the lake; of course, she'd not had her cloak on her, but he'd graciously wrapped her in his, seemingly indifferent to the January chill himself. As they walked, arms linked, through the gathering gloom, his attentiveness evident in the careful questions, some of Hermione's fears were allayed.

She'd been fearful that the brief moment of connection they'd shared in the Astronomy Tower had been a one-off, his guard lowered by grief and shock. But now, with that deep connection to each other restored, Hermione relaxed; if not content, at least reassured.

He really *did* care.

They had ended up sitting on the stone steps at the school's main entrance; everyone else was eating dinner in the Great Hall, but Hermione had no appetite, and Draco had obviously sensed that she needed his support. So there they sat, Draco one step up and to her left, so that she was leaning against his legs, the oddness of wearing a Slytherin cloak long since forgotten.

It was the Slytherin who broke the reflective silence, "so where did you get all the stuff from, anyway? It's hardly standard student cupboard fare, is it?"

"Sweeney's," replied Hermione, reflexively, "oh, and Neville got me the Herbology bits."

"*Longbottom?*" asked Draco, incredulously, making no attempt to hide his disdain... well, it *was* Draco, after all; "and he agreed to help?"

"Well," admitted Hermione, her mind still mulling over the disaster, "he thought it was for Padma's Portkey..."

She froze, but it was already too late as she felt Draco start in surprise, "*Patil?* Padma Patil is making a *Portkey?*" he whispered incredulously.

A fresh wave of guilt crashed over Hermione; "please don't say anything, Draco," she pleaded, desperately, twisting around to look up into Draco's face, even though it was mainly in shadow, the only light being cast from the school's entrance behind him. "*Please...*"

The Slytherin didn't answer immediately, instead Hermione watched as his brow knit in deep concentration, his lips moving soundlessly as he tried to make sense of this latest nugget of information.

"Please," she repeated, softly, taking his right hand pleadingly in hers, "please don't..."

No! No, no, no, no.....

"You're going to Portkey him out, aren't you?" he deduced, fixing Hermione with a piercing gaze. "You lot are going to try and rescue glorious sodding Potter from prison..."

Inwardly Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, as, mind racing frantically on damage-limitation, she tried to concoct a story that would match Draco's deduction. Non-rebuttal seemed the safest option, "don't," she pleaded, wide-eyed, "don't say anything... Don't..."

"He's not worth it," the voice was flat, almost disappointed.

"He's my *friend*," countered Hermione, softly, and hurt. Yet, in a bizarre way, Draco's hostility to Harry was reassuring; it *proved* it wasn't an act, this friendship - he felt he could be honest with her, and she was grateful for that.

"A friend," repeated Draco, "a friend like, oh, I don't know, a friend like Ginny Weasley? Or Parvati Patil?" He paused, meaningfully, letting the knife of her friends' response to betrayal

twist in her conscience before another thought struck him, "does Potter know about Ron Weasley?"

"No," mumbled Hermione, softly; surely, though, *Harry* would, if not *understand*, exactly, surely he'd... But then she remembered Ron's tormented voice, *what have you done to me?*, and Ginny's eyes... And Harry was just as much a Weasley as she had ever been.

"*Potter*," muttered Draco, under his breath; "you can't be serious." His backlit blonde hair shook in the evening's murk, and she could *hear* the disappointment in the tone.

Well honestly, what did he expect? She was hardly going to abandon Harry, Draco or no Draco. But, on the other hand, it *was* rather flattering to think that the Slytherin might be... *jealous* that thoughts of Harry still occupied her mind.

They had always avoided talking about Harry during their study evenings. She knew it was too much to ask that Draco be civil about her best friend, and, indeed, not much quarter would have been given the other way, either. Harry always saw the *bad* side to everything Draco did, and Draco just resented the way that Harry seemed to attract attention. She could argue until she was blue in the face about how Harry *hated* all the attention he received, but, looking at it from Draco's side, she could see how it must *hurt* him, never having been loved - in *any* sense - too see affection and admiration so freely given to another.

Hermione shuffled herself up a step, so that she was sitting shoulder to shoulder with the Slytherin as she grasped both his hands, earnestly. "Please," she begged, "don't say... *please*..." She leant in, closer, lips parting slightly, eyes closed, breath frozen in the hope that he might respond.

She'd kissed boys before, of course. Well, *technically*, she'd kissed Harry on the cheek the previous summer, and Viktor... well, he wasn't *really* a boy, as such. Draco tasted different to Viktor, *that* much was certain, and Hermione willed every ounce of emotion in her body through that embrace, *imploring* Draco to trust her, opening herself up completely.

As the kiss faded from her lips, Hermione opened her eyes to see Draco hold her gaze for a second before rising to his feet to head back into the school, "I have to go."

And even though it seemed an *odd* response to their first kiss, to Hermione it made sense. She understood Draco, and he knew she understood him; this was just how he was. Her shoulders relaxed as her need had finally been recognised, sated even, by her Slytherin counterpart; everything was going to be OK.

Everything was going to be fine.

But as he reached the doorway, a sliver of doubt forced its way to the surface; "Draco," she called, "please don't say anything..."

The Slytherin paused, and turned to face her, "Granger," he warned, "I don't take orders from *anybody*." He paused for maybe a couple of seconds, holding her gaze with a look that... before turning away once more and heading deeper into the school.

On the front steps, Hermione tightened the Slytherin cloak about her as she tried to make sense of the day. The pressure, the anticipation of repercussions, was building once more, now that the *rightness* of her time with Draco was turning into memory.

Gryffindor: she really ought to get back.

It was Seamus who found her, still sitting on the steps, some time later. "Hermione," he announced, gently, as he settled onto the same step Draco had occupied previously.

It wasn't the same, though. *He* wasn't the same, anyway.

Hermione gave no indication that she was aware of Seamus' presence, but he seemed in no hurry to force conversation either, until, eventually, a hand rested lightly on her shoulder. "'s nearly curfew, Hermione... we'd better get back to Gryffindor..."

At the recollection of what awaited her in the Tower, Hermione's shoulders slumped, "I can't go back..." she whispered to the night air, before the chill seemed to bite at her, and her whole body tensed as she shivered.

"Yes you can," countered Seamus, rising to his feet and stepping down the steps to face her, hand outstretched, "c'mon..."

Hermione remained motionless on the step, looking at, but not *seeing* Seamus in front of her, hand outstretched patiently. Seamus was a nice guy, she observed, and he wasn't as confusing as Draco.

Would Draco say anything, or would he not? He didn't take orders from anyone, that much was certain... but did that also mean that he wasn't anybody's spy? Draco would do what Draco would do with the information about the Portkey. She had no choice but to trust him, and, well, she wasn't sure, but she just had this hunch that...

"You can't stay out here for ever," Seamus' observation interrupted her thoughts on the likelihood of Draco's discretion, bringing her sharply back to the deeper mire she was immersed in.

"But they all *hate* me..." she didn't even *know* for sure that he would know what she was talking about.

But he did; "they don't..." Seamus bit his lip, and started again, "it's not that they *hate* you, Hermione... but you *did* hurt them... Ginny was upset, y'know? That was hard for her..."

Tears welled in her eyes at the recollection of Ginny's distress, cruelly heightened by the fact that she'd actually been the bearer of that rare commodity these days, some genuinely good news - Neville was awake. But even that silver lining soon dissipated when Hermione remembered how she'd deliberately used him to get the Herbology ingredients for her summoning.

"C'mon," repeated Seamus, gently pulling her to her feet, "we've been looking everywhere for you..."

"Seamus," Hermione's voice trembled, as her composure started to crumble, "oh Seamus... I'm so, so *sorry*...."

"It's alright, it's alright," breathed Seamus, reassuringly, lightly patting her back, "it's going to be OK..." He stood back from her, looking into her eyes, as if to verify that she was, indeed, of sound body and mind, when his gaze locked onto the Slytherin crest on her cloak. "Who's cloak is *that*?" he asked, bewildered.

Hermione opened her mouth, and then froze; this was going to be *complicated*.

Having followed Seamus past Tweedledum and Tweedledee, Hermione stepped into an absolutely silent common room, every eye in Gryffindor fixed upon her. No-one was so much as *breathing* as they regarded Hermione with expressions ranging from disbelief, through incomprehension all the way to thinly guarded hostility. And yet only a few months previously the very same people had thrown that beach party by the lake purely for her benefit.

They'd shown her kindness, love, genuine affection and the closeness of true family, and she'd repaid this by invoking the darkest powers she could find, attempting to raise the dead, *raise the dead*, inside the very walls of Gryffindor Tower.

And now, here she was, her betrayal unmasked, standing before her housemates, wearing a Slytherin cloak.

"I'm... I'm so, *so* sorry... sorry... I..." she willed every ounce of her being into investing every scrap of sincerity into her apology. If they could only *understand* that she hadn't meant... hadn't meant for it to go horribly wrong. She hadn't meant to betray people, use people, live on mistruths and half-lies... "sorry," she whispered, frozen to the spot next to the portrait hole, her audience equally unmoving.

Dean came to the rescue, shepherding her to one of the small tables in the alcove that had used to house the Wolves' swords (predictably enough, those *had* been confiscated). Lavender and Seamus joined them, but the rest of the Gryffindor Away Team were absent.

"Hermione... *Hermione*," whispered Lavender, grasping both hands imploringly, "*how*," she shook her head, slowly, "how did it get so far...?"

It was a situation where none of them had the vocabulary to adequately express their feelings; as though every word carried its own subtext, every gesture communicated a deeper nuance. Hermione replied in the only manner she was able, voice broken and trembling, eyes bright with unshed tears, "I'm sorry... sorry.... so sorry..."

"Hermione," repeated Lavender, who was about to continue when a crisp, Scottish accent gave a horrendously complicated Latin password to the twin guardians, and Professor McGonagall entered the common room.

"Miss Granger," she intoned, flatly; no preamble, no enquiry as to Hermione's whereabouts, just a straight, direct summons, "come with me."

"I'm so sorry," whispered Hermione in farewell, as, almost involuntarily, she rose and followed the already departing figure of the Transfiguration teacher.

No matter how quickly she scurried, the somewhat imposing figure of her Head of House seemed to be perpetually three paces ahead of her as the corridors echoed with impossibly precise footsteps. The few students they passed all watched silently, but obviously, as the pair swept onwards, and Hermione could *feel* the accusations being projected at her.

It wasn't a pleasant feeling; *she's the one*, the looks said, *that's her*.

Of course, Hermione wasn't exactly a stranger to the odd double-take - her association with Harry had assured her of a certain almost mythic status, by virtue of their collective track records in the previous four years. But this was the first time when the attention hadn't been in semi-awe.

With its corridors half lit in the darkness of the January evening, and malevolent, foreboding shadows lurking in the corners, the castle had an air of hostility to it.

They'd swept past Professor McGonagall's office, surprisingly, but Hermione's next guess had been right; her Head of House paused in front of the stone gargoyle, and whispered a password that didn't carry beyond the stone creature's ears. Not that Hermione would have tried to catch it anyway; she knew she was in enough trouble already without having charges of eavesdropping being landed on her as well.

Nonetheless, a small amount of fascination observed the spiral staircase as it rose from the floor, carrying them both upwards to the Headmaster's office. Harry had told her often enough about the stairs, and, naturally, about Dumbledore's office; in years past she'd been slightly envious that *he* had been invited (or just plain barged in), whereas she hadn't.

At that moment, however, Hermione would have much preferred not to have finally reached such a milestone. Professor McGonagall hadn't said a *word* to her after the cold, clipped summons in Gryffindor, but it didn't take a genius to work out that she was unlikely to be presented with an award for Special Services to the School.

Just as Harry had described, Dumbledore's office was circular, and impossibly chaotic. The Headmaster obviously had a soft spot for trinkets; a collection of silver instruments (French, Hermione knew from *The Diversity of European Magical Cultures*) were nestled next to each other on one of the shelves. A Snitch, of all things, was next to them, its wings beating lazily, gently, as though incredibly tired.

The shelves themselves were lined with books, but Hermione's previously unquenchable thirst for knowledge was well and truly subdued; indeed, she considered the secrets the tomes might contain with near fear. All that power... all that responsibility. Knowledge, truly, could be an awful thing.

The portraits of previous Heads past were almost all awake (only Fourier L'Estrange remained deep in slumber, but this was hardly a surprise to anyone who was familiar with *Hogwarts: A*

History. Quite brilliant, in his time, L'Estrange had been, but such times had been brief flashes of genius interrupting morning naps and afternoon siestas of legendary proportions), and all of them seemed to be eyeing Hermione with keen interest.

One ancient witch in particular, wearing robes trimmed with the blue and bronze of Ravenclaw was eyeing her with open hostility. Even the paintings knew.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," Dumbledore's soft, measured tones interrupted further study of her environment. The cordial geniality was absent in the greeting, the words instead carrying a certain heaviness, and a certain severity.

Dumbledore was seated behind his desk, the blue eyes alight with a flame somehow different to his normal visage. "Please," he prompted, "do sit down. Tea?"

Hermione shook her head, not trusting herself to speak, as she cautiously lowered herself into one of the chairs facing the Headmaster. There were two further chairs in the room, but it seemed evident that Professor McGonagall intended to remain standing. She wondered who the other chair was for.

"Ah, yes," explained the Headmaster, noting the direction of her puzzled glance, "Professor Lupin should be joining us shortly, I'm sure he won't be a moment..." and then the room fell into silence once more.

Professor Dumbledore returned his attention to the paperwork before him, scribbling urgently with his quill, the nib's scratching the loudest noise in the office by far. Professor McGonagall was standing behind Hermione's chair; she didn't dare turn around to look at her Head of House, so instead she resumed her analysis of Dumbledore's environment as discreetly as she could, reasoning that it was quite conceivable that this would be the last time she ever saw the place.

She'd hoped that she'd get to see Fawkes, but his perch was empty. This depressed her even further; the phoenix had long been associated in the magical world with the forces of Good, and it was hard not to see the bird's absence as a further rebuke to Hermione for engaging in Dark practice.

Dumbledore, for his part, didn't look up once as they waited, but he was powerless to prevent the weight of accusatory stares from all corners (if a circular room could be said to have corners) of the office. The hostility of the paintings made sense, of course; these were all former Heads of Hogwarts, all, in Harry's words, former champions of everything the school stood for. And now they were being presented with the girl who deliberately invoked terrible forces *within the castle's own walls*; the person who had looked into the abyss and decided that she'd quite liked what she'd seen.

She'd betrayed them. Betrayed Dumbledore, and McGonagall. Betrayed Ginny, Parvati... the whole Away Team. Betrayed Hogwarts. But, most of all, she'd betrayed Ron, and, worse, there was nothing she could do to fix things. No counter-curse, no reverse summoning. Ron's spirit was now caught not dead, and yet not alive... a shadow in the world of light, condemned to see, touch and feel a world that he could not actually live in.

A low rumbling sound announced the imminent arrival of the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor; Dumbledore layed his quill down on the parchment, and nodded almost

imperceptibly at Hermione. No half smile, no secret joke sparkling in those blue eyes. She'd taken things *way* too far for that.

"Thank you for joining us, Remus," greeted the Headmaster as Remus Lupin entered, indicating the seat next to Hermione's with a wave of his hand. "Minerva?" he prompted, encouraging the Head of Gryffindor to also take a seat.

The wait, however small it had been, had done nothing to calm Hermione's nerves as she wrung her hands together more tightly still, palms clammy, limbs trembling slightly, although whether that was in shock or trepidation would have been hard to say.

In her mind's eye, she could see herself in the third person, a lost, scared fifth year girl sitting rigidly in her chair as Lupin availed himself of the proffered tea, and McGonagall lowered herself into the final chair, perching on the edge of the cushion with a precise exactness that did nothing to allay any fears that things were not going to go well.

The 'E' word had been foremost in Hermione's mind since the moment McGonagall had called her name from the portrait hole. They'd snapped Hagrid's wand, hadn't they? But they couldn't... this was what she had been *made* for... she was a witch, not a Muggle... the thought of life without Magic was almost unbearable.

To her left, Lupin sipped his tea carefully; she was grateful for his presence. Even in tattered, threadbare robes, the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher had a presence, a reassuring quality. As long as Lupin was there, she thought, things would at least be fair.

And, she knew, that was probably more than what she had a right to expect. Defence Against the Dark Arts; Defence Against *her*.

"Miss Granger," started Dumbledore, his hands clasped before him, his tone severe and formal, yet also soft, "I suspect I do not need to impress upon you the gravity of the situation you now find yourself in?"

"No," she replied in a faltering whisper, "I... I know... I'm *so* sorry..."

Dumbledore's soft tones gently cut her off, "forgive me, Miss Granger," he continued, sadly, "but I'm sorry to say that I'm not certain you *do*, as you put it, 'know'."

The Headmaster paused, fixing her with those blue eyes, the mood impossible to place; not anger, not sympathy, *certainly* not pride... ah, that was it, *disappointment*. It was all she could do not to burst into tears with the realisation; she'd let them down. He *felt* let down.

"In many ways, the fault for today's events lies with the school, Miss Granger," he explained, sombrely.

This somewhat bizarre admission startled Hermione into response, "but... no, no, it was *me*... I... by myself..."

In his trademark gesture, Dumbledore raised his hand gently, and Hermione resumed her silence, as she puzzled to make sense of his previous assertion.

"Miss Granger, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has a long history. Evil has, as you know, on occasion found refuge within these walls, but, in general, Hogwarts has prided itself on its ethos.

"Students of Hogwarts begin their education at the very dawn of their powers, struggling to tame the fantastical energies they have at their disposal. As these talents develop, through their schooling, we at Hogwarts do our best to impart upon our students the ability to distinguish right from wrong, Light from Dark, Good... from Evil..."

Hermione sank a little lower in her seat; there was no need for anyone present to tell her exactly which side of those divisions she was currently sitting.

"These are important considerations for a witch, or wizard," continued the Headmaster, "and the ability to distinguish what is right from, for example, what is *easy* is the precious thing that holds our society together. We live a tenuous existence, Miss Granger; a single curse can end a human's life in two words, yet that barely touches the surface of the darkness of the void.

"Can you *imagine* a world where we do exactly as we pleased - invoking ancient and terrible powers to our bidding at our every whim? As Remus is fond of saying, *power corrupts*, and, I am sorry to say, Miss Granger, that such power appears to have... *clouded* your own judgement."

Hermione murmured a brief acknowledgement that was, in fact, more an admission. Her judgement was, of course, virtually crystal clear in hindsight, but this was hardly consolation.

"Nonetheless, I do maintain that Hogwarts should shoulder some of the burden in this case. To put it quite simply, Miss Granger, we had failed in our duty as a school the *second* you saw fit to attempt your summoning of Mr Weasley. By any civilised measure, such a concept should have been unconscionable, *abhorrent* to you... such happenings as took place this afternoon should *never* have come to pass in a school such as Hogwarts."

These weren't just words, Hermione realised. Dumbledore actually meant it; he genuinely felt that *he* had failed, and that, by some bizarre, convoluted and twisted logic, he somehow carried responsibility for her misdemeanour. Dumbledore's disappointment had been hard enough to take when she'd thought that he'd been disappointed in *her*. To realise that the venerable wizard had been disappointed *in himself* was almost too much to bear; "but... but it *wasn't* the school's fault!" she began to protest.

This time it was Lupin who took over the narrative, "Hermione," he opened, gently, pausing as he chewed his lip, "you are, quite probably, one of the most intelligent students I have ever come across. And Albus has a point, that I concede - we have let you down badly to have allowed you to even entertain the *notion* that you could do this..."

Hermione started to relax slightly - were they really going to apportion all the blame on to themselves? Of course, she knew where the *real* fault lay, and though it would be no consolation to the Weasleys, she would be carrying that burden of guilt for the rest of her life.

Still, expulsion appeared to be receding... she dared to hope that, maybe, just maybe, it'd be an almost inhumane stretch of detention, and then...

Beside her, Lupin sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, "nonetheless, I think it is clear to all present that Hogwarts is not *solely* responsible, is it?" Lupin's tone was reluctant, but, of course wholly reasonable.

The werewolf turned to face Hermione directly, spreading his hands to invite explanation, "Please, Hermione," he invited, "if you didn't *know* that this was wrong... then why did you keep it a secret?"

And suddenly, things like House Points and detentions seemed trifling and petty. With that single question Lupin had cut right to the heart of the matter, demonstrating, simply and succinctly, that Hermione *had* known what she had planned was wrong, and that she *was* responsible for her actions. It was also abundantly clear that Lupin took no pleasure from this fact, and regarded the fifth year with quite open sympathy next to Dumbledore's evident disappointment and sadness.

It was the final straw, and Hermione's composure finally gave way.

Tears fell unchecked as Hermione repeatedly mumbled, "sorry... sorry... so sorry..." between heaving sobs and choked sighs. She'd betrayed everyone, she'd *hurt* the very people who were supposed to be her friends, more than friends, she reminded herself, recalling Ginny's words, her *family*.

And all because she'd been so wrapped up in all her cleverness that she hadn't seen the oncoming train until too late. How *could* she have been so stupid? And how *could* she have jeopardised everything that they'd all worked for?

Lupin was watching her, seemingly caught between an avuncular impulse to proffer a physical shoulder to cry on and the professional need to maintain his distance. Dumbledore's eyes just seemed to plumb new depths of sadness, and so it was Professor McGonagall who rested a surprisingly gentle hand on Hermione's arm, "perhaps, Albus," she suggested sympathetically, "I should ask Poppy to keep an eye on her tonight?"

Poppy... Hermione's mind whirled... Poppy, Poppy... Madam Pomfrey! Madam Pomfrey; she was going to spend the night in the Hospital Wing. Well, better there than Gryffindor... she didn't know if she would be able to face Parvati and Lavender ever again, let alone Ginny.

And as for Ron.... *Ron...*

"Yes, Minerva, I think that would be... best, all things considered." Dumbledore's approval sounded hesitant, as though basically he felt that whatever accommodation they would be able to make would be insufficient under the circumstances.

Sniffing, the tears having subsided somewhat, Hermione allowed herself to be guided to her feet by her Head of House. Well, she consoled herself miserably, she hadn't been expelled yet.

"Ah, Miss Granger," the Headmaster's voice caught her just as she was turning to leave, reluctance very much evident in his tone.

She turned to face him, meeting a face lined with regret, "y..y.. yes.. I'm so *sorry*..." It would be a long while before she stopped apologising for everything. A long while indeed.

The Headmaster took a deep breath, "Miss Granger, I'm afraid that I must ask you for your wand." The blue eyes were sad, disappointed, *reluctant*. But resolute.

Her wand. Hadn't Hagrid said that he'd snapped the half-giant's wand before his eyes? She wasn't certain she could take that kind of pain - the sole symbol of her belonging to the magical world, destroyed. "Bu... bu..." Hermione tried to protest, but even in her distraught state she knew she had absolutely no grounds upon which to argue her case. Reluctantly, and slowly, Hermione withdrew the wand from her robes, and passed it to the Headmaster, trembling.

"You may let go," he suggested, softly, sympathetically, carefully resting the wand on the table next to his parchment as she finally relinquished her hold on the thing that symbolised everything she was.

Hermione stood there for a few seconds, staring at the eleven and half inches of yew, unicorn hair at its core, looking so alone, and so vulnerable without her. And her so alone and vulnerable without it. She hardly dared voice her fear, but she *had* to know, "am... are... are you going to break it?"

"*That*," replied the Headmaster, "is something you and I shall discuss in the morning, but, for now, I would suggest that you accompany Professor McGonagall to the Hospital Wing. All things considered, I think it would be for the best if you did not return to Gryffindor this evening."

Hermione nodded her assent weakly, never taking her eyes off her wand. Four and a half years of never letting it out of her sight, and now she was being forced to leave it behind. It was her *life*, it was *soul*. Magic was everything to her - she was a witch, not a Muggle.

She was a witch. She couldn't *be* a Muggle. She just *couldn't*.

Chapter 61

What is the Acromantula's preferred prey?

Hermione Granger. On a plate.

Draco smirked in the darkness of the Slytherin stairwell. And then, seeing no reason not to, he allowed himself a brief half-chuckle.

Pitiful. Star pupil, loyal friend to glorious Potter and the disgrace that went by the name of Weasley, putty in his hand. He'd had to leave her, though; it was proving a struggle to maintain a straight face, let alone one of appropriate concern, and, even Draco had to concede that his show of support would have been let down had he laughed in her face.

And that wouldn't have done at all. He was going to take a lot more from Granger before she *ever* found out the magnitude of her mistake. For such a sharp witch, she could be *incredibly* stupid.

But, on the other hand, he had to admit that he'd played his own hand rather well. The joint studying had been an accident, but rather than burn his bridges, he'd kept his side of that deal, which, it had turned out, hadn't been without its own advantages.

And then, thank you Lucius. It would be a cold son that took advantage from his father's grisly death, but he made no apology for what he was. If Granger took it upon herself to believe that he'd become all touchy-feely and reformed since the *devastating* trauma of seeing his father's heart beating on that desk in Potions, well, that was her look out.

In the world of Draco Malfoy, one rule stood head and shoulders above all other matters; look out for yourself. No-one else was going to do it for you.

"Vortigern," he commanded, in a somewhat bored, dismissive tone; the increased security was pretty laughable, really. As if a couple of Dumbledore's toys would be able to stop the Dark Lord's minions, should he choose to strike at Hogwarts.

Lucius had never given any indication that such plans were on the Dark Lord's agenda. But there again, Draco reminded himself, he'd not known about Beauxbatons, either. He shivered slightly at the thought, as the stone beasts slowly lumbered away from the doorway, before comforting himself with the thought that the French school had been taken. What would *anyone* need more than one wizarding school for?

As always, Draco scanned the common room as soon as he entered, searching out the key players. A pair of first years looked up, startled, and immediately vacated the table they'd been working at. *His* table. Draco kept his eye on the pair as they edged uneasily back to their dorm, making sure they were fully aware of the scrutiny.

Let them worry.

So Granger had... He shook his head once more in disbelief; frankly, he'd been stunned. Raised the bloody dead. Oh no, Granger, *not* the sort of thing one did in polite company. Not the sort of thing one did at all, to be brutally honest.

Ironically enough, Granger had ably demonstrated exactly *why* magic should be kept to the strictly magical. Mudbloods, and, in the case of Granger, long-lost Mixedbloods, simply didn't have the cultural background, the *grooming*, to use one of Lucius' pet phrases (another being *breeding*, but that carried too many bestial connotations for Draco's liking), to understand the power they held.

In summoning Weasley (and of all the lame, stupid and *pointless* people to bring back, why in Merlin's name had she chosen *him*? It was doubtful whether the world at large had even noticed it was a Weasley down, there were that many of them), Granger had amply demonstrated her complete ignorance of... not etiquette... more basic, more fundamental than that. She'd broken the Code.

It wasn't written down. It wasn't even spoken aloud. The Code was a system of conduct that just *was*; it governed the actions of the magical, it *told* you what was right, what was wrong and what was, frankly, beyond *unthinkable*. The Purebloods had long recognised that the persistent erosion of magical culture by the influx of Mixedbloods and Purebloods would have dangerous consequences. But not even Lucius, in his wildest dreams, could have imagined a windfall of this magnitude.

Granger, star Muggle-raised pupil of Hogwarts, best friend of the Boy Who Lived; she engages in a spot of necromancy. And, *better still*, screws it up. So not only had the campaign for eroding magical society with lesser-bloods taken a blow because their poster-child had performed the unspeakable, she'd gone and made it about ten times worse by stranding Weasley in between the shadow and the light.

Well, if you were going to put anyone through that hell, might as well make it a Weasley.

If the school had any sense of standards, they'd have her wand for this. And that, Draco surmised, would have been that: Potter in prison, Weasley dead and Granger expelled. All things considered, it would've been a pretty good year.

But for two things. Firstly, it went without saying that Dumbledore's Gryffindor favouritism would keep Granger at Hogwarts. In actual fact, this played into his hands... the longer Granger was around, the more use he could make of her.

More disturbing, though - or, perhaps more correctly, more irritating - was the business about Padma Patil and her sodding Portkey.

He didn't know much about Blackrock. It was a wizarding prison, that much was certain. In an ideal world, it would be thick with Dementors, although he conceded that perhaps he was being optimistic on that point, given that the creatures had abandoned Azkaban the previous year. Still, prison anywhere was hardly a picnic, *and* Potter had been blinded.

Regretfully, he pushed away an image of a comatose Potter, surrounded by the black-robed things as they sucked every happy thought out of him. Generally speaking, Draco didn't have that kind of luck.

Although Potter, interestingly enough, had unintentionally provided further proof of the unsuitability of the Muggle-raised to be admitted to the magical world. Draco remembered their first year, and Potter absolutely clueless about the world. No respect, no *culture*, just blindly rushing into things without giving them a second thought. This was *magic*, Potter - show it some respect.

And respect those to whom respect is due.

Still, the spectacled one had been blinded. Some Seeker now, then. He'd heard a rumour that the Weasley girl had replaced him as Gryffindor Seeker. Not surprising, given that the Weasley offspring seemed to account for half the Gryffindor population. Rough game, Quidditch, though; she'd need to watch out for herself...

Reluctantly he drew his mind back from imagining gruesome Quidditch 'accidents', to return to the issue of the Portkey.

What was it for? Scratch that, he knew the answer; quite how it was 'noble' Gryffindor behaviour to help people escape from Blackrock eluded Draco, but then Gryffindors had always been quick to take the moral high ground when it suited, and vacate it with equal expedience. How they thought they were going to get it to Potter undetected was a complete mystery, but one that wasn't worth expending effort solving. If they got the Portkey to Potter, he'd escape, in which case he had to be dealt with. If they didn't, however, then the Boy Wonder would remain stuck in prison. Win-win situations didn't come along that often, but when they did, you made the most of them.

Draco reasoned that if they were constructing the Portkey at Hogwarts, then it was highly probable that he'd be transported *to* Hogwarts - or as far as they could conveniently get and still get a source - when it was activated.

Portkeying into Hogwarts would be risky; obviously, Dumbledore, blind, biased and doddering old fool that he was, would shelter Potter without question, but they could hardly count on everyone being so accommodating. All it would take is a quiet word with the right person; or someone to be in the right place at the right time.

Step one, then, had to be to find out how far along Patil had got with the Portkey.

Step two would probably entail finding whatever hiding place they'd sorted out for their boy wonder. Assuming that they'd thought that far ahead, of course. After all, if Granger was an example of what they called 'brains', well...

Nonetheless, with those two details known, all he'd have to do was wait; not even Fudge could cover up a Mage calmly Portkeying out of a maximum security prison. And then, it'd either be a Dementor's Kiss or execution for the freshly recaptured Mage, courtesy of one Draco Malfoy.

As a basic plan, it had some merit, but Draco pursed his lips as he shuttled the implications back and forth, trying to see if there were any further advantage that could be wrung from the situation.

Certainly, he fully intended to make the most of Granger's accommodating nature whilst it lasted. With any luck, she'd completely burnt her bridges with the pathetic, noble Gryffindors... not to mention Patil and Chang. At the recollection of Chang's name, Draco furrowed his brow; there *had* to be a way to bring Diggory back into all of this as well.

He was going to destroy Potter; better yet, he was going to make absolutely certain that, at the moment of truth, the point when he finally broke, and the entire world caved in, that would be the point when the Boy Who Lived would see that it was Granger who'd betrayed him. Betrayed him in favour of a Slytherin; oh yes, Draco knew Potter well enough to know that House rivalry ran deep.

"You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort," gloated Draco to himself; Potter was going to regret snubbing him on the Hogwarts Express in their first year. Blood *always* won through in the end.

"Draco, *darling*," Pansy's voice simpered with menace, a false smile clamped to her face as she came up the girls' staircase, his eyes drawn, as they were supposed to be, to the exaggerated swing of her hips.

Keeping his face absolutely neutral, Draco returned the greeting with a *very* curt nod, and the briefest, tightest of smiles, "Pansy."

Looking far too pleased with herself, Pansy collapsed herself across Draco's lap, one arm draped across his shoulders, the fingernails digging into his skin sharply, "Draco," she whispered conspirationally, eyes alight, "post."

With a flourish, her free hand flicked a bone white parchment into view, the scroll tied with a single, jet black ribbon. Draco's insides turned to ice; he'd known it was coming... he'd known all year. But now here it was; he had to make his choice.

"It's for you," relayed Pansy, needlessly, her breathless excitement ill-contained.

Ignoring Pansy's theatrics, he extracted the scroll from her grip, and turned to look levelly at the girl who was currently using him as an armchair, "well, *if you don't mind*," he commented, "I'd like to read my post in private..."

"Draco," whispered Pansy in a tone that would cut steel, "*surely* you don't have secrets from *me*?" She paused, before adding, as though it were an afterthought, "after all, you have no secrets from *him*, do you? None of us do... And what he knows, *I* know."

She grinned with irritating superiority, and not a little vindictiveness.

"Don't delude yourself, Pansy," cautioned Draco, more weary than concerned, "*he* won't tell you anything he doesn't want you to know... it doesn't *work* that way..."

"Perhaps not," conceded Pansy, with complete indifference, "but *I'm* the one in favour at the moment... you'd be wise not to upset me... So go on, read it! I'll bet you can't wait to see what it says..."

Draco knew perfectly well *exactly* what the summons would say. Lucius had told him often enough of the Great Day to come, when the Malfoy Dynasty's loyalty to the Dark Lord would be repaid, and when the balance of power would shift, finally, to the name of Malfoy. Finally, after three centuries of slights, jeers, suspicion and abuse, *finally* Malfoy would be restored as a name amongst the oldest, and greatest of families.

Lucius used to get a bit batty round about that point, and go on about debts of honour, days of account and so on. Draco, valuing keeping his body in more or less one piece, had memorised the speech, and knew when to nod, when to shake his head, and when it was safe to retreat. Pathetic, Lucius, pathetic; what good was power if you weren't holding the reins?

What kind of ambition was it to be a more important servant than everyone else? A life of servitude held no appeal to Draco. On that he'd told Granger the truth; he didn't take orders from *anyone*.

Unrolling the parchment, and acutely aware that Pansy had made herself *incredibly* comfortable on him, Draco scanned the lines. All standard stuff, *the Dark Lord invites you to join forces with him...* pretty one-sided invite, though. The sort of offer you couldn't survive. *Rise with your fellow brethren, to restore pride, and power and value to the world. Cleanse our society of this polluted blood...* He'd heard it all before; many, many times.

Right up until the final line, *Your initiation will take place during the full-moon in February. You are advised to do as your Guide bids.*

Alarmed, he looked sharply at Pansy, "*February?*".

"Yes, darling, February," confirmed Pansy, as she leant in to nibble at his ear, "and guess what? *I'm* your Guide..."

This was not the sort of situation that appealed to Draco. Well, blonde bimbos draped across his body didn't exactly constitute hardship, and he'd endure the ordeal as best he could, but being initiated into the Death Eaters within the month was certainly *not* something he had planned on.

But now, as well as getting his revenge on Granger, his plan suddenly expanded to give him the wholly unimagined, not to mention entirely positive, benefit of remaining his own person for at least a little while longer.

"Pansy," he murmured, responding to her overtures, "I can't do this. Not yet..."

Abruptly the girl froze, and her talon like nails dug into his flesh once more, "perhaps," she suggested with artificial helpfulness, "I wasn't entirely clear. You have been summoned, darling. And when you're summoned, you come; that's how it works..."

"Pansy," Draco lowered his voice to an almost inaudible whisper, "I can get him Potter."

The blue eyes widened in surprise and disbelief, "don't be pathetic, Draco... it's so... demeaning to see you crawl..." She licked the side of his face with her tongue, flicking the tip up with a flourish to end up looking disdainfully down at him. "I'm your *Guide*, darling... you have to do as I say..."

Whilst such an invitation might have proved a fun game to play on another day, Draco was more concerned with maintaining his partisan status; "I'm serious, Pansy. I can get Potter... but I *can't* do it with the sodding Dark Mark on my arm... kind of damages my credibility in certain quarters, *if* you follow."

Pansy's entire demeanour changed. "You're lying," she accused, stiffly, although there was a hint of doubt just under the surface.

"Think about it, Pansy," he purred, "*your* Initiate would be the one who delivered his mortal enemy to him...Just think how *grateful* he'd be..."

Pansy's face was a mixture of fear and temptation. On the one hand, Draco knew that *nothing* would please Pansy more than to earn the Dark Lord's gratitude. On the other hand, nothing would *displease* him more than failing to deliver the recruit she'd been assigned.

Lucius had been the same; constantly trying to win more favour from the Dark Lord, pathetic, demeaning, servile. They were all the same, the Death Eaters. Even in the dark years, before the World Cup they'd stuck to their secret meetings, each trying to prove their loyalty, their servitude, was greater than their peers'. And right now, he could *see* Pansy trying to work out what she should do. On the one hand, she'd been charged with recruiting Draco - a task she must not fail.

But if by recruiting Draco, she then denied the Dark Lord the opportunity to capture Potter... would he be angered by that? It didn't matter whether you supported him or not, didn't matter whether you agreed with the politics of the whole thing or not; no-one deliberately provoked *his* wrath.

"You're bluffing," persisted Pansy, although now there was a worried edge to the assertion; she was scared.

Finally the balance of power in the exchange was shifting; "no I'm not," he assured her, "I *can* get you Potter. But to do it, I *can't* have the Dark Mark." Remembering a little belatedly that he was supposed to be doing this properly, he quickly added a suffix; "I can't take it *yet*," he amended.

Still Pansy looked uncertain.

"Merlin's teeth, Pansy!" hissed Draco, "would I promise the Dark Lord something I couldn't deliver? Do I look that stupid?"

"The Dark Lord is not a patient man," the nerves were clearly getting to her now, "you can't let me down, Draco..."

"I won't," he assured her, as he started to kiss her neck, sliding his hands underneath her robes. Well, whilst in Rome...

It really was true, Draco reflected as he stepped past the gargoyles and into the cold night of the corridor; the best things came to those who waited. Four years, *four years*, of being upstaged by Potter, Granger and, well, he should lump Weasley in there too, not that the carrot topped lump had ever got one over on him.

But now all that was about to change. Granger was eating out of the palm of his hand; having alienated herself from, well, the whole *world*, she was going to learn to rue the expression 'any port in a storm'.

Potter was going to escape from prison, *right* into his hands. Part of him wondered just how much Potter would *beg* him not to be handed over to the Dark Lord. The other part thought, regretfully, that the arrogant, self-righteous ponce would *want* to face the Dark Lord. Some jumped up idea that he'd actually have a fair chance; that would be fun to watch. Slow, lingering and *extremely* painful; Lucius had told him often enough that the Dark Lord wasn't interested in killing his victims; he wanted them to *break*.

Nonetheless Draco was now in the rather odd position of needing the Gryffindors' plan to work... his escape from the Dark Mark would be good only for as long as there was a realistic probability that he genuinely could deliver Potter as he'd promised. And unfortunately, patience wasn't one of *his* strong points.

Still, he could afford to stall for at least a little while. It couldn't take Patil too long to construct a device, after all; she had a brain in her head, that one. Pureblood, pretty, too; shame, really.

And then, after that... suffice to say that Draco Malfoy was *not* one to lay all his cards on the table. Part of him hoped that Pansy hadn't made any rash promises to her superiors. Mostly, however, he really couldn't care less.

The floor rose up to meet him as his front legs fell, and the grey-eyed mackerel tabby made its way towards the Ravenclaw dormitory. First things first: he had to find out how far Patil had got with the Portkey.

Chapter 62

Of the three, which was the last Unforgivable to be classed as such?

Red eyed and puffy-faced, having cried herself to sleep the night before, Hermione sat up in bed and surveyed her surroundings. Even though it was the day after, her ears still rung as though she'd been slapped, and concentrating on even the slightest detail was virtually impossible.

No sign of Madam Pomfrey, although she knew that the nurse couldn't be far away. Still, it looked cold in the ward, so she gathered the blankets a little higher about herself, and tried to calm down.

There was the sound of shaking fur, and a large, black dog emerged from underneath the bed, turning its deep, sad eyes to consider her.

"Snuffles!" she gasped, before adding, involuntarily, "I'm so sorry... I'm sorry..." tears clouded her vision once more as she wrung the blankets in her hands. Not, of course, that she'd wronged Sirius *specifically*, but the compulsion to apologise to everyone, for everything, was overwhelming. It was going to be so hard... and she hadn't even *thought* about returning to Gryffindor yet.

If she was to be allowed back.

The dog rested its chin on the bed, and allowed her to scratch between its ears. There was something therapeutic about petting the animal, even though, on another level, it was distinctly weird to think she was actually petting Harry's godfather.

She was glad Sirius was there... nothing could hide the sadness in the dog's eyes, but at least he was there. Although her guilty conscience suggested that maybe he'd been posted there not so much to keep watch *for* her as *on* her.

The sound of Madam Pomfrey's feet entered the ward, and Hermione looked up from Snuffles expectantly, unsurprised to see an expression of distaste flicker across the nurse's countenance. She'd never been a fan of Snuffles; it didn't look like she ever would be; "I thought that... that dog was Potter's," she observed, suspiciously.

The nurse's tone changed, then, to one much more gentle and sympathetic, "good morning, dear... did you sleep well?"

It was, frankly, an alarming departure from Madam Pomfrey's normal, somewhat brusque manner, and only served to heighten Hermione's anxiety that she really *was* in trouble. "I'm... I'm so sorry," she whispered in response, voice trembling, "so, so sorry... I didn't mean... I..."

"Shhh, dear," whispered the nurse, laying her hand gently on Hermione's forearm, "shhh.... just get some rest..."

The trouble was, rest was the last thing Hermione could imagine in her anguished state. Everything had gone horrifically wrong, and it had all been her fault. Giving up on trying to maintain composure, she finally let the trembling lip drop as deep, wracking sobs shook her body.

Her face tight from the dried tears, Hermione strained to catch the conversation taking place at the entrance to the Hospital Wing. Snuffles had slithered back under the bed, still keeping watch, but discreetly so, and she was glad for the knowledge of his presence, even if she knew she wasn't worthy of it.

The voices were low, but strained... could it, was it really...?

"Very well," agreed Madam Pomfrey's voice, reluctance evident, "ten minutes, mind, and then she *must* be allowed to rest."

Visitors. Hermione barely had time to straighten the blankets as she brought herself back into a sitting position, slightly fearful as to who it might be that had come to see her, yet, catching sight of the cloak on the chair, slightly hopeful too. Perhaps it would be him?

Such thoughts were quickly dispelled, however, as Dean entered, looking slightly uncertain, hesitant even. But her analysis of Dean's demeanour was forgotten as she registered the second visitor: Ginny Weasley.

"Hi," ventured Dean, softly, as Snuffles glided from his resting place to adopt a sitting position at Hermione's bedside.

Dean and Ginny were standing some six feet away from the bed, Ginny gripping her boyfriend's hand tightly, red eyed, puffy faced, trembling slightly.

"I'm so... so... *sorry*," offered Hermione. She *knew* she was repeating herself. She *knew* that being sorry after the event didn't materially change things, but she was so desperate that her friends, if they still believed in her, so *desperate* that they understand how sorry she was. "I didn't... I didn't mean... I really didn't... so, so sorry..."

Ginny's eyes were heartbreakingly sad; the girl within crushed by Hermione's betrayal. It was just too much to bear.

"Ginny," she pleaded, "I'm... I..." but then she ran out of words, and just sat there helplessly, eyes glued to Ginny's, the blankets gathered so tightly in her fingers that she could feel her nails digging into her palms.

"Dean," Ginny turned her head to whisper, although the sound carried clearly in the silence of the ward, "girl-talk... can... can you leave us alone?"

Gathering Ginny in his arms, he brushed her fringe away and kissed her forehead lightly, "I'll be by the door," he promised her, before flicking his dreadlocks towards the door; "Snuffles..."

Snuffles looked at Hermione, and she nodded back; slightly fearfully, but in the full knowledge that whatever Ginny had to say, she had to hear it alone. It was nobody else's responsibility to share that burden for her.

Snuffles blinked slowly in farewell, and then padded across to Dean, the two then leaving the ward with Ginny and Hermione facing each other, both equally motionless.

It seemed an eternity before Ginny moved closer, but eventually she did cross the floor, holding her hands in front of her as though she didn't quite know what to do with them. "Hermione," she started, "Hermione..." tears had started to trickle down her cheeks, but Ginny seemed determined to get through whatever it was she was going to say, "I tried.... I've tried so hard...."

"I'm sorry, Ginny... I'm *sorry*," interrupted Hermione, before being cut off as her visitor waved her hand impatiently.

"No.... No, no, *no*.... I've tried so hard to hate you... for what you did... but I *can't*... It's so *hard*, Hermione... you *hurt* me... you really.... But... and you *are*... you *are* family, and I just can't..."

Incoherent as it was, Ginny's speech was enough to render Hermione speechless with yet more guilt. Just when she thought she couldn't feel any worse, she'd been reminded just how deeply she'd cut her friends, her family, and it was mortifying.

Body trembling with tears she was desperately trying not to shed, Hermione slid out from underneath the blankets to hug Ginny, who promptly dissolved into tears, "it's not fair... you shouldn't have... you should *never*... Hermione, how...?"

Ginny wasn't forgiving her. Hermione understood that. Instead she was being forcibly reminded that her connection to the Weasleys had been, and still was, so intimate that, as horrific and dreadful as her crime had been, they couldn't, or wouldn't disown her.

And that realisation was more terrible than any stream of vitriol anyone could direct at her.

Snuffles slunk back in after Ginny had left, and had nudged Hermione back into bed, where, emotionally exhausted, she'd slumped against the pillow in that state halfway between sleep and wakefulness. The dog had allowed her to briefly scratch between his ears before resuming watch from underneath the bed.

For her part, Hermione's glazed eyes barely registered Madam Pomfrey's bustle of routine as she clipped about the ward, drawing curtains, opening windows and directing seemingly endless bottles of potions and ointments from cupboard to shelf with a few wand flicks.

Wand flicks. Flicks of the wand. Wand. Her wand; Dumbledore still had it. Hadn't he said that they'd discuss what would happen 'in the morning'? In her exhausted state, Hermione tried to keep her mind fixed on the possibility that she'd get her wand back, and that she could start trying to make amends from that point onward.

But there was still so much to do: Cho and Padma were preparing to make the Portkey using Viktor's carving, The Thing. She should have helped them. Shouldn't have become so obsessed with the summoning...

And then there was still the temporal field to construct about the Beauxbatons Key; if Harry couldn't drain it, they had to safeguard it. Now, more than ever, she wanted Harry. And Ron.

Ron, according to Ginny, had been set up in a spare room in Gryffindor Tower, all the windows blocked, of course. She still wasn't entirely sure exactly *what* it was that she'd done to her best friend... exactly what, beyond the unforgivable, that was. She had to speak to him... at least now she could, although whether he'd listen to *her*, after what she'd done to him...

Everything had gone so horribly wrong.

And it had all been going to work out so perfectly... everything brought crashing down to Earth because of her own folly and stupidity. It wasn't that she'd forgotten to lock the door... her basic mistake had been much more fundamental. She should never have even *tried* to interfere with Ron's life. Ron's death.

She understood that now; or, more correctly, she was beginning to understand that. Beginning to understand that death was not just another place that you could summon someone from. She remembered Harry recalling Dumbledore's words; that people never truly died whilst the living carried memories of them. You could turn that around; that to bring Ron back destroyed the memories of his life, replacing them with this new horror.

That was what she had done; to Ginny, the Twins, the Away Team... she'd reopened what should have remained a closed, fondly remembered book, and carved a new, dark, terrifying postscript that burnt its own stark image in the mind. The old Ron, *her* Ron, had been subsumed by his summoning, and now all that was left of him was the thing she had brought back in his place.

It had been a terrible thing to do.

No sign of Draco.

Adjusting his half-moon glasses, silver beard seeming to shimmer in the January daylight, Professor Dumbledore considered Hermione as she sat upright in the bed. Snuffles had once more announced his presence, resuming his sitting position by the headboard, receiving a brief nod of recognition from the Headmaster, who then sighed deeply; "Miss Granger...."

"I'm *so* sorry..." she couldn't help it; it was instinctive. Compulsive. They simply had to know that she really, really was.

Dumbledore had this uncanny air of being able to see right to the heart of your soul. She knew that her Headmaster would be able to see how much she was suffering, but guilt didn't solve things.

"Miss Granger," never had his voice sounded so tired, so resigned, so regretful, and yet still compassionate, "how are you feeling today?"

Her lips mouthed 'I'm sorry', although her halted breath meant no sound was uttered.

Nonetheless, Dumbledore evidently got the gist; "yes, my dear, yes," he agreed, gently warding off further mouthed apologies with a wave of his hand, "I'm certain you are." He paused, seemingly lost in thought.

Feeling compelled to break the silence, Hermione actually managed a sentence, "please don't expel me. Please don't," before she once again lapsed into apologies, "I'm so, so, sorry... I didn't mean... I didn't."

"And yet," he countered, "you did. Grief is hard. Hard, but a necessary process of life, and, as you have discovered, difficult to thwart." The Headmaster paused, lifting both hands in an apologetic gesture, "of course, this year has been difficult; difficult for *all* of us, in its ways, and you, perhaps, have borne heavier burdens than some..."

She nodded mutely; she'd lost Harry, she'd lost Ron. As an only child, a Muggleborn in a boarding school full of wizards and witches, her isolation in the world had been amplified. She had Draco, now, of course, but... well he wasn't Harry, and he most certainly wasn't Ron.

He was Draco, though; she had *hoped* that the Slytherin might take a moment to come and see her, but she also knew he wasn't like that. That was the thing about him - you had to take him as he was, no concessions. But, in a way, it made sense; he wouldn't be Draco if he stooped to accommodate.

Dumbledore interrupted her chain of thought by producing eleven and a half inches of willow from his pocket, unicorn hair at its core, "your wand," he announced, "I promised you last night that we would discuss its return, and so we shall."

Hermione's eyes were riveted to Ollivander's handiwork; she knew *exactly* how it felt in the hand, could *sense* its connection to her, a oneness that had been absent throughout her childhood as a Muggle. That day in Diagon Alley, being fitted for her first wand; that day, everything had made sense, and she'd felt, for the first time in her life, she'd felt complete.

Her headmaster, having drawn the wand, however, made no attempt to offer it to her, instead holding it in plain view, a forcible reminder that it had been taken from her care. "The wand, Miss Granger, is a most powerful tool. Those charged with possession of such a source have imposed upon them the most severe of responsibilities, as, I know, you are now only too well aware."

Hermione nodded, sensing that her duty in the conversation was to listen to the lecture... although Dumbledore didn't really lecture. He reminded you of what you already knew, but hadn't realised. Or had chosen to forget.

"You have lived these past four years living a life filled with temptation; power awaiting your bidding, sitting in the grasp of your hand. This is the duty all witches and wizards must live with; the duty to resist temptation, to think before acting, and to use magic with both wisdom, and caution."

He sighed before continuing, "it saddens me greatly that you were found wanting in this regard, Miss Granger."

That was it. She'd failed. Gripping the blankets more tightly still, to prevent the onset of the world collapsing about her, Hermione blinked frantically, desperate to prevent the traitorous tears that were threatening to spill down her cheeks.

Dumbledore held up his free hand, "however..."

Time stood still, and a flash of hope almost overwhelmed Hermione. Her jaw open, eyes widening, she tensed rigid, lest any unwanted movement obscure Dumbledore's next words.

"However," he repeated, "it is a dangerous fool who attests that their judgement has always been sound. All of us make mistakes... some, it is true, more grave than others, but that is what it means to be human."

She was going to get a second chance.

"So, in answer to your initial question, no, Miss Granger, you are not going to be expelled; not today. However, your continued attendance at Hogwarts will be subject to a number of conditions, which I *must* ask you to respect..."

Finally Hermione allowed herself to breathe, "yes... yes, of course," she agreed, "I'm so, so sorry... but *please*, I'm a witch... I *belong* here..."

"Indeed, Miss Granger, indeed. Nonetheless, I must inform you of the conditions to which you are bound, should you wish to remain here.

"Firstly, I understand from Professor McGonagall that you turn seventeen in September. Until that date, your wand must be collected from, and returned to your Head of House at the beginning and end of lessons each school day. Your wand will remain in the care of the school during weekends, and, of course, across all holidays in that time.

"Secondly, you are to remain within the castle grounds at all times, and, I am sorry to say, you are not permitted to visit Hogsmeade for the remainder of the year.

"Thirdly, *all* borrowing rights to the library are revoked, along with access to the Restricted Section..."

Hermione started guiltily under the weight of Dumbledore's level gaze at this latest condition. She'd brought *that* one upon herself; and how was she going to do her homework now? Madam Pince closed the library at 9.

"And finally, I take it that I do not need to impress upon you the need for you to maintain an *exemplary* record in your remaining years at Hogwarts?"

"No, Professor," confirmed Hermione, "I'm really... I'm sorry..."

"So am I," returned the Headmaster, "so am I". He returned her wand to his pocket; evidently she was to collect it before lessons began on the Friday. "It is only when we are faced with the truly difficult questions that we truly discover who we are, Miss Granger."

She nodded, mutely... no need to work out what that said about *her* then.

"And that is an *encouraging* thought, is it not?"

Hermione looked at her Headmaster, bewildered. "But... but I was wrong..."

"Yes, Miss Granger, you were... but you have not yet been challenged to answer tomorrow's question, have you? And perhaps, now, you might supply a different answer..."

Dumbledore inclined his head ever so gently in her direction as a parting gesture, "it would be a terrible world were a single action to label a person for life, would it not?"

And with those words, the Headmaster left the ward, leaving Hermione frowning, lost in thought.

The next visitor wasn't Draco either. Still, the good news that Dumbledore had imparted during his visit had had the effect of calming her down somewhat, so that her greeting was a little more conventional that lunchtime; "Hello Professor Lupin," she called, timidly.

It wasn't that she was scared of the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, more that she almost felt as though she didn't have the *right* to enter into a conversation with someone who she'd obviously let down. Defence Against the Dark Arts was *his* subject, and, next to Arithmancy, her favourite lesson. And yet she'd so completely missed the *point* that a large part of her wanted to hide underneath the blankets in shame.

It wasn't that she hadn't understood Lupin's lessons; the warnings about the dangers of power, the recurring histories of darkness heralded only by the noblest of intentions. Of *course* she'd listened; she'd read the chapters, written her assignments, engaged in Lupin's classroom debates. But the one thing she had failed to pick up had been the most important; these mistakes, these falls - they could belong to you.

Lupin smiled a warm, understanding and sympathetic smile in return, "good afternoon, Hermione; how're you feeling?"

"Fine," she replied, unconvincingly, and then, at the sight of Lupin's raised eyebrows, she found herself elaborating somewhat, "well, no... not fine, really. But... but OK... I think. And I'm so *sorry*... I didn't mean to... I wasn't thinking..."

Lupin had perched himself on the next bed, "I think we've *all* been guilty of that at some time or other, Hermione. We catch sight of the rabbit, and chase after it blindly, forgetting to look around us as we do so... It's not a lesson that's easily taught, unfortunately... worse still, it's only those who were compelled to chase in the first place who are in danger of stumbling..."

"I'm sorry," she apologised, in a tiny voice. But she saw what Lupin was saying; that, blind to everything but her thirst for knowledge, her hunger for the *answer*, she'd rushed headlong into the project, the excitement, the *thrill* of discovery overwhelming the faint accusations of her conscience.

"That much is evident," agreed Lupin, "have you spoken to Ron yet?"

"No... not real... no." Ginny and Parvati had burst upon the scene, and she'd been talking... well, apologising, really, to them. And they'd been talking - screaming - at her... and Ron... she'd fled before she'd have a chance to say anything to him. A thought occurred, "Have you?"

"Yes; we spoke, briefly, last night, although he was still recovering from the trauma... from the process."

Hermione wasn't stupid - she could see that Lupin had failed to catch 'trauma' in that statement, "was it that bad for him?" she asked, fearfully.

Lupin sighed, wincing as he ran his hand through his hair, "you *summoned* him, Hermione; it's not a pleasant thing..."

"Oh dear," she sighed, nervously. Somewhere, deep in the dim and distant past, the whole root of the exercise had been an attempt to smooth over the argument that had been their final words to one another.

Lupin and Snuffles had left shortly thereafter, and, really, she was starting to feel quite a bit better. Still hugely guilty, of course, and it *hurt* just thinking about Ginny... and Fred, and George, Molly, Arthur...

Ron.

Madam Pomfrey declared her well enough to return to Gryffindor Tower in the afternoon, plying her with two vials of potion to be taken before bed. Hermione was somewhat dubious about this last detail - she wasn't entirely convinced that Parvati and Lavender would necessarily be overly welcoming of her return to their dorm, and, really, who could blame them.

But she'd learnt her lesson now... she *really* had. It was just that... everyone else seemed to have been able to learn it without bringing the entire world crashing about their ears.

It was the last lesson of the day - he had Transfiguration, she knew that, but since that would obviously be with Professor McGonagall, engineering a chance meeting outside her Head of House's classroom didn't seem hugely appealing.

Besides, Fridays kicked off with Astronomy *with* the Slytherins, and then they had a revise and study period (she vowed to no longer fall into Harry and Ron's bad habit of calling it a 'free') followed by Care of Magical Creatures. Surely they'd get a chance to talk at some point, then.

Plus, she reminded herself, she had to return his cloak; so she had a legitimate reason to talk to him...

Returning to the common room before Herbology had ended, Hermione hadn't expected to find anyone there. It was something of a shock, then, to find Ginny staring at the flames, seemingly lost in another world.

Hermione approached the fourth year nervously, "Ginny?"

Ginny turned her head slowly to regard Hermione, her expression wide eyed with sadness, her tears run dry. With equal slowness, the fourth year returned to staring at the flickering flames.

Hermione wasn't sure what to make of such silent treatment... and where was Ron? Was he still in Gryffindor? "Ginny," she tried again, "are you... OK? Can I get you anything?"

Still the redhead stared at the flames, giving no indication that she could hear Hermione's attempts at conversation.

"Well, I'll," Hermione took a nervous pace backwards, deciding it was better not to intrude, "I'll just... I'll..."

"Please stay," the voice was a dry, broken whisper. Hoarse and pained, it cut Hermione like a knife.

Kneeling at the side of Ginny's chair, Hermione took hold of one of her hands, "I'm so sorry, Ginny... I'm so sorry... and..."

"I did terrible things..." interrupted Ginny, her voice barely audible over the gentle rustle of the fire, "Tom... his diary... the Chamber. I didn't want it to come back... I didn't...."

"That wasn't you, Ginny," corrected Hermione, softly. None of them had really thought much about how the whole Chamber of Secrets episode would have affected Ginny after her first year - she'd certainly seemed OK in the years since... It had been three years, after all.

"My hands... my wand... my voice. *I* did those things..."

"You were *possessed!*" asserted Hermione, aghast that Ginny could blame herself for that episode, "by You Know Who... it wasn't you... None of us ever... no-one blamed you... How can you say that?"

"And... and," continued Ginny, seemingly not to have heard her, "and I, y'know, I'm sorry for... yesterday, and... y'know. Because you were all *so* nice to me... and I even petrified *you*..."

"You didn't... it was the Basilisk... it *wasn't* you..."

"...and so, I shouldn't have..." finished Ginny, lapsing once more into her brooding silence.

Hermione felt crushed, "Ginny! You were eleven... you were *possessed*. I'm sixteen, and... and I was stupid. And it *was* my fault..."

They stayed watching the fire for a while. For her part, Hermione was aghast at the horrors Ginny had seen in her life, at the age of fourteen. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right. Slytherin's

basilisk and Riddle's diary... well, if they'd made more of an effort to get to *know* Ginny that first year, maybe they could have helped.

But Ron - his death, her fault, Hermione reminded herself. If she'd not been so stupid as to fall for the fake note from Sprout. It all stemmed from that - one fake note, she and Parvati kidnapped, and then Harry, Ron and the others coming after her. As *everyone* had known they would.

Ron dead, Seamus a werewolf. Harry found out and blinded, holed up in prison. Dean nearly killed himself, and Ginny had lost her brother practically in front of her very eyes. And then *she'd* been the one who sent Neville to the greenhouse, so that the reanimated Ron could follow him back into Gryffindor.

Matty - he'd been killed. Seamus and Padma both injured. And all she'd cared about had been getting her ingredients together for contacting Ron. But Ginny had seen that battle unfold before her eyes. And it had looked *just like Ron*.

And then the last, Ginny rushing into the dorm with Parvati, to break the news that Neville was OK, only to see the tortured image of Ron as the summons had nearly completed.

And here Ginny was, *apologising* because she'd done terrible things when she'd once been possessed by the most terrible Dark Wizard in history at the age of eleven. Apologising to someone who'd deliberately set out to deceive, lie and manipulate her friends, of her own volition.

Her fellow fifth years had returned from Herbology a little later, their greetings conveying a complex mixture of relief, suspicion, hurt and concern.

Except Neville, who'd just looked *betrayed*, "but... but I thought that stuff was... I thought it was for the *right* thing..." he protested, crestfallen. It obviously hadn't taken him long to put two and two together with regard to her shopping list of Herbology components for the summoning.

"Oh Neville," she replied, "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to... I... I..."

"And I was trying to *help*," maintained Neville, brokenly. "I thought, y'know... as long as... I just thought, if it was *you* asking..."

It was so sad... even more so since her conscience was conducting a full-on assault, reminding her that she'd wilfully set out to exploit Neville's soft spot for her. Manipulative, conniving, underhand... none of the adjectives she could apportion to her behaviour were positive.

But there wasn't any *malice* detectable in the reunion. Certainly there was a loss of... respect seemed the best word, and it went without saying that no-one considered her punishment unduly harsh. She'd been lucky, and she knew it.

Still, the Away Team had a slightly fragile air to it that evening, as the common room filled up, other year students executing surreptitious double-takes as they recognised her trademark

bushy hair. But the open hostility had receded, and maybe, just maybe, things would be alright from now on.

They were all gathered around one of the window tables when Seamus rejoined them (Hermione hadn't really processed his absence until he returned), "well," he reported, "he's awake..."

All eyes fell to Hermione; "who?"

"Ron," answered Seamus, flatly; "thought you'd want to have a word with him..."

"Yes! Yes... oh," she looked at Seamus, "is he coming down here?"

There was something odd about the way that everyone looked at her as she asked that question.

"No," replied Seamus, cautiously, frowning at her, "boys' staircase," he indicated with a flick of his head, "new staircase, second on the right..."

"Oh... thanks," returned Hermione, slightly off-balance; they all seemed a bit... weird about it. "I'll, I'll just... just go and knock?"

"Yeah? C'm in," called the voice that she'd worked so *hard* to restore, in response to her timid knock. And as that voice reached her through the thick wood panelling, for the brief, most fractional of moments, she felt as though it had been worth it.

And then she remembered that it could *never* be worth it. Twisting the handle, she pushed the door open.

A new staircase had materialised in Gryffindor Tower during her absence. Magical architecture certainly had 'flexibility' nailed down as an attribute. Off the boys' staircase, this new flight of steps twisted out of the tower, to a small wooden door that appeared to be set into the very walls of the castle itself.

"Ron!" she cried, overwhelmed to see her best friend's physical presence once more, but even as she did so, the sheer orangeness of the room caused her to survey his quarters in mounting disbelief, "what have you *done*?"

The room was evidently cut directly into the stone of the tower, the inner and outer walls matching the curvature of the building. At one end of the room was a bed - the standard, Gryffindor four-poster, and at the opposite end was a fireplace, lit, with three armchairs clustered around. In between these two extremes was a single, large desk, with bookshelves above.

But the thing that grabbed the eye was that every single square inch of wall appeared to be orange. "The Chudleigh *Cannons*?" she exclaimed, turning her gaze back to Ron, who was standing awkwardly by the desk.

"Hermione... well..., um, are you OK now? Gin said you... were a bit, y'know," Ron winced as he said the next word, "upset."

He almost looked OK, but his eyes... Deep, deep pain. Not like Harry's eyes, which were all about resolve and determination... Or at least, they had been until he'd been blinded at Blackrock. Now Harry's eyes were just vacant; white... she felt queasy just thinking about it. Ron's eyes, now, were wells of pain. Torment. Everything he'd been through in the summoning was right there, painfully clear even in the dim light of the windowless room.

Her fault.

"Oh Ron," cried Hermione, rushing to meet him. He was back, and everyth....

She stopped in her tracks, as Ron had flung himself out of her reach, crashing into the armchair, wobbling slightly before regaining his composure. One hand outstretched, in the universal sign that indicated that she was not to get any closer, Ron ran his other hand through the familiar crop of red hair.

As he did so, the ends became tinged with white; frost. And she herself, having rushed closer to him, started to feel the cold as the Goosebumps rose on her arms.

"Ron?" she questioned, nervously.

For his part, he sounded terrified, "Hermione! Don't... you can't *touch* me... I'm... I'm a cold-wraith; it'd kill you!"

Her expression must have said it all, as Ron shook his head, slowly, "you really didn't know, did you?" he breathed, sadly, and, it had to be said, slightly wondrously.

"I'm *sorry*, Ron... I'm sorry... but I missed you *so* much... and then Harry... and..." but apologies could only maintain momentum for so long in such a bizarre situation, "how did you get this place?"

"Oh, McGonagall - last night," he replied dismissively, indicating the expanse of his domain with a sweep of his arm, "I couldn't stay in the boys' dorm... too cold for them, you see. Plus they've got the windows, of course..."

"Windows?"

"Please tell me you know what a cold-wraith is," he invited.

She shook her head, baffled, as she took a couple of steps deeper into Ron's room. A cold-wraith? It certainly wasn't in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to find Them*, nor had it been mentioned, as far as she could recall, in *Manifestations and Spectres: A Field Guide*.

Ron looked surprised, "Muggles *do* have fairy-tales, don't they? Y'know, with the castle and the prince... falls in love with this beautiful peasant girl? Then he's killed by her evil brother, she grieves, brings him back... but he's a cold-wraith, so as soon as they embrace, *she* dies..."

"Um, nope... Muggle fairy-tales are, uh, *nicer* than that... generally speaking."

"But they're still, um, they're still... *warnings* right?"

"Well, I s'pose so... wait. Are you saying you're something from a *fairy tale*? Because, isn't that a bit... whimsical?"

"You're the one who pointed out that legends have some basis in fact, Hermione. The point being that we're all told that fairy tale when we're kids, others too, and it sort of keys into this 'what you can do', 'what you can't' thing..."

"Just from fairy-tales?"

"No," Ron shook his head, "no... no... it's, y'know, just part of how everything falls together. Werewolves, giants, cold-wraiths, the Flay..."

"The *what*?"

"Flay... um, it's.... never mind, it's *really* sick," elaborated Ron, helpfully, shuddering slightly for emphasis.

Feeling awkward standing more or less where she'd entered the room, Hermione made her way to the left-hand armchair. The chair was actually facing into the room, rather than pointing at the fire, which meant that she could feel the warmth of the flames whilst watching Ron, who'd perched himself on his desk, keeping his distance.

"Cold-wraith," she prompted, still puzzled. Why weren't there any windows? Why was he so cold?

"Yeah," he confirmed, "it's... *I'm*," he corrected himself, "a legendary thing... well, obviously, not legendary any more..."

"I'm so, so sorry..."

"Summoned from the dead... you *know* that much, but not alive. Solid form, but can't go out in daylight..."

"Why not?"

"I burn... kind of like a vampire... sort of cool, if it wasn't happening to me, actually..."

"So that's why the windows..."

"Yup... Three known ways to kill a cold-wraith: direct daylight, decapitation, and removal from the source-site."

"Source-site? You mean where I summoned you? But I summoned you in our dorm!"

Ron smirked, "there's a *little* flexibility, Hermione. Lupin reckons I'm probably safe just about anywhere in the grounds, but the further I get from Gryffindor Tower, the weaker I become. And, obviously, if I try and go outside during the day..."

"And... and I can't... can't touch you?"

Ron sighed, "nope. No-one can... not unless they want frostbite, or worse."

"Ron! I'm so... so... sorry... What have I done to you?"

Ron obviously took the question literally; "I just *told* you."

"No, no..." Hermione shook her head, "I never meant it to turn out like this... so do you eat? Sleep? Drink?"

"I sleep; well, I have done since I was summoned... although whether it really was sleep, who knows? I don't eat or drink, no... I can't perform magic..."

"Oh Ron..." having faced the prospect of being without magic herself, Hermione had some idea of how painful that must be.

"But, on the bright side, magic doesn't affect me either... spells just sort of go straight through me..."

"Ron," breathed Hermione, wishing, just *wishing* that she could step up and hug him, "I'm so *so* sorry..."

His eyes darkened with that pain she'd first seen in his face, before he raised his hands to ward off the apologies, "'s OK, Hermione... you didn't know. You *really* didn't know..."

Somehow, Ron's statement only served to make her feel even *more* responsible. 'You didn't know', he'd said, which she interpreted as meaning, 'but you *should* have done.'

"Anyway," Ron sighed, his hair tipped with white after running his fingers through it once more. He paused, briefly, and in that moment the pain that she'd seen in those familiar eyes had resurfaced once more, "what happened?" he asked, shaking his head slightly.

"Oh," swallowed Hermione, guilt welling up once more, "I'm so sorry, Ron... I never meant to hurt you... or Ginny... or anyone. I was just *so* stupid... and, and I thought I could bring you back..."

Ron held out a hand to stave off Hermione's explanation, "no, no, no," he corrected, "Beauxbatons... that night - you and Parvati. I mean, Seamus and Lavender told me some things... and I think Ginny was trying to but... *what* happened that night? And afterwards?"

"Oh," Hermione's eyes widened in realisation. Of course he wouldn't know.... "Well, remember, I wasn't awake at Beauxbatons, but the way everyone tells it, what happened was this; Parvati and I got notes from what we thought was Sprout..."

Recounting everything that had happened since that night - she'd almost forgotten that she'd even *been* kidnapped, the events seeming to belong to another world - had a strange, almost unburdening effect on her. Not necessarily that it all made sense or anything, but there was, at least, a whole picture now. Albeit it one with pieces missing - Snape and Vellum, for starters.

Ron finally broke the reflective silence he'd been seemingly lost in ever since Hermione had finished her tale, relating Dumbledore's conditions for her continued presence at Hogwarts; "Mental," he breathed, "so, let me get this straight: I'm dead. Dean's an Animage, Seamus is a werewolf..."

"They call themselves The Wolves," interjected Hermione, with a 'don't-ask-me' shrug.

"...and I'm dead. I'm. Dead. and Harry's in prison?"

"For life. And he's blind. The Ministry, remember? And Harry told us what the punishment was for a Mage."

"Right. But *Harry*! They arrested *Harry*? I'll kill 'em... I really, really will. He didn't *do* anything..."

"Percy arrested him," supplied Hermione, reluctantly. But he would have found out eventually.

"Percy," noted Ron, darkly. Hermione was slightly concerned at the lack of incredulity, or shock, or outrage. Just flat acceptance. It didn't bode well. "And what happened to Sprout? She's in Azkaban, yeah?"

"No... no, she... she's gone..."

"She *escaped*? From Hogwarts?"

"No.. It was Imperius... Wormtail. She left Hogwarts, though... couldn't face teaching any more... not after, you know... *you*."

"Harry should've let Sirius kill him... I mean, Dumbledore, and all that 'there's a debt of honour between you and Pettigrew now, Harry'... *what was he on?* Sodding *hell!* It was *Wormtail* he did that resurrection thing on... on... You Know Who last summer! Great bit of honour there for Harry... and then he kidnaps *you*, and he puts Sprout under Imperius..." his voice grew louder and more violent as he worked his way through the growing catalogue. Having cared for Pettigrew at the Burrow and Hogwarts, whilst the former Marauder was hiding in his Animagus rat-form, Ron had always taken Wormtail's betrayal hard.

"Ron," Hermione tried to placate her increasingly irate friend, "no-one knew... we didn't *know* it would turn out like... this. How could we have known?"

He calmed down almost instantly, the broken slump of his shoulders telling Hermione everything she needed to know, "but Hermione... it's all stemmed from him! And look what they did to Harry..."

Ron picked up the summary of the year's events, "so Neville's signed the Order of Tempus, and that's bad because..." he raised his eyebrows invitingly.

"Because it's a loyalty curse, and anyone wearing the curse can't then attack another member... of the same level. Sort of governance by submission... Tempus have, at a stroke, neutralised their potential opposition."

"...and I'm dead."

Frankly, Hermione thought they'd covered that detail, "but I brought you back..."

"...and you and Malfoy?" enquired Ron, hesitantly.

Hermione drew her lips into a thin line, aware that she was echoing her Head of House's mannerisms, but not wanting to reignite the argument that had preceded the whole mess in the first place, "we're friends..."

Well, she thought they were. Unless she'd ruined everything with that kiss. Maybe she'd not done it right? After all, he hadn't exactly hung around afterwards... but he was Draco... he wouldn't have done. Would he?

"Hermione," pleaded Ron, "no-one is 'friends' with Malfoy... he's a double-crossing, slimy, Slytherin git. I mean, c'mon... *Mudblood*; remember that? And... and Buckbeak, in the third year? And when he dressed up as a Dementor to put Harry off against Ravenclaw... and that time with your teeth, outside Potions. *Malfoy!*"

"But he's *changed*, Ron," Hermione ignored her better instincts that were screaming at her to let the matter drop, "ever since Snape gave him his dad's heart..."

"He's a Malfoy, Hermione. They don't change. They don't... and, he *wouldn't*... not with... with someone like you..."

"And *what* is that supposed to mean?" Hermione's eyes flashed dangerously.

Ron, being Ron, carried on regardless, "Hermione, you're a Muggleborn, he's a poncy pureblooded, self-interested, scheming, lying, two-faced, Slytherin *Malfoy!* He's all about *image*... Nothing less than 100% pure-blood is going to be good enough for him..."

"Excuse me, Ronald Weasley, but this is *not* a cattle-market we're talking about..."

"It *is* for a Malfoy!"

"You're not giving him a chance!"

Ron stared at Hermione, open-mouthed and wide-eyed in disbelief, "a *chance*? A chance? Hermione! Tell me one good reason why that... just tell me what makes you think he deserves a chance?"

Hermione sensed that telling Ron that Draco actually understood her wasn't going to be the winning argument on this occasion. "Well it's *my* chance to give."

The flashpoint had passed, although Ron wasn't going to let her get the last word in, "he's using you. And I reserve the complete right to say 'I told you so'. And you know I will, don't you?"

"He's not using me," countered Hermione, with false conviction (the Portkey slip, recovered though it had been, gnawed at her conscience slightly), "and besides... well, he *isn't*..."

Ron shook his head, pityingly, "fine; have it your way. But if he hurts you, you can tell him from me, I *will* kill him."

She was slightly alarmed to realise that Ron actually meant it. Alarmed, but, in a strange way, flattered, too.

Ron spoke again, "and let me get this straight: you burnt my Cannons scarf?"

"But I brought you back!" countered Hermione, defensively.

"You burnt... you really burnt my Cannons scarf?"

"But it was for a good cause..."

"You're not just winding me up? You... you *burnt* it?"

She'd just *known* that he'd take it badly...

Chapter 63

Who made the Goblet of Fire, as used to determine school champions for the Triwizard Cup?

Hermione's voice filled the cell with its breathless description of how, in 1763, the Hogwarts governing body had been radically restructured, the former regime of senior governors responsible for each of the Houses being replaced by...

Harry's mind glazed over, and *Hogwarts: A History* returned to the far more comforting role of supplying ambient noise. *Who read this stuff? Apart from Hermione?*

On the other side of the prison, the chess board remained frozen as it had been for the past day or so. It wasn't that Harry didn't like playing, just that, well, it would be less dispiriting if he got to win, occasionally. Every now and again.

Once, even.

So the pieces remained, mid-game, although he'd lost both knights, the white bishop and a rook (not to mention a clutch of pawns) for the rather measly return of Lucas' black bishop, two pawns and a knight (which, frankly, Harry now suspected had been an intentional sacrifice).

Harry consoled himself with the knowledge that strategy had never been his department; it was Ron's. Had been Ron's, he corrected himself, before...

Beauxbatons... it had completely changed the world, that single night. Far from putting an end to an episode (rescuing Hermione and Parvati from kidnap), it had actually been the prelude to a stupefyingly bad chain of events, which had ended up like this.

That one event could have repercussions that went so deep was mind boggling; as though he were still tumbling uncontrollably through the air, waiting for his feet to finally hit the floor; the moment when he could start to claw his way back up out of this mess.

Because that was the thing; every time he thought the situation had finally played out, something else happened. Like Parvati's visit, telling him that someone, or something, had reanimated Ron, and set it loose in Gryffindor.

With a message.

It will be your friends who will kill you. Well, the language had been a little more showy in the original, but he'd got the gist.

Anyway, Parvati had been Monday, so, if he'd managed to keep track of time correctly, it was the Thursday of his fifth week of incarceration. Three more weeks. Just three more weeks.

Assuming that Bill could be trusted.

And he had to trust Bill, because the alternative was unthinkable.

Cho and Mr Orange. He tracked the patterns as they took the cart track, noting with a small sense of pride that he'd not even needed to actively look for movement - his sense automatically picked up on patterns moving in unexpected places.

Blackrock was certainly big; there were fourteen distinct layers of cells, although that was a generalisation - within each layer, the corridors were set a slightly different levels to one another, which, when combined with the goblins' love of decidedly haphazard architecture, made the place somewhat difficult to map in the mind.

But Harry was into his fifth week of sensing the place, now, with almost nothing else to occupy him apart from games of chess and *Hogwarts: A History*. And the latter hadn't yet managed to exert a fantastic grip on his attention.

Surrounded by sea, all of Blackrock's traffic appeared to arrive via the same fireplace that the Ministry Agents had used. No sign of any boats, broomsticks or patterns materialising out of thin air. It went without saying that Blackrock probably had the same anti-Apparation wards in place as Hogwarts.

Still, that hadn't prevented the Triwizard-cup working as a Portkey from the middle of the Quidditch pitch, had it?

Kill the spare.

"Harry!"

There was something about her; what it was he couldn't quite place, but Cho's voice appeared to fill the room with warmth; a light, perhaps, that he couldn't see. Although there was an undertone this time, "Cho? Everything OK?"

Although he normally remained prone on the bed when receiving visitors, Lucas style, Parvati and Cho had both broken this routine. Parvati because, quite simply, he didn't know how he was supposed to *be* around his ex, and Cho because... because, well, she was Cho. So he'd been standing to greet her, and had barely time to open his arms before she'd wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tightly.

"Harry," she whispered, "something terrible's happened..."

Even as he gathered Cho up in his arms, his shoulders slumped; not *more*. He returned her hug, kissing her forehead lightly, not caring that Mr Orange was still by the door. "What now?" he asked, tentatively.

"Harry... it's terrible... it's Ron..."

Harry allowed himself to exhale, relaxing slightly, "Oh, no, no Cho... that's OK, Parvati told me about it," he explained gently, one hand rubbing her back. A little surprised that Parvati hadn't mentioned that she'd visited, but... well, it *was* Parvati.

Then a cold thought gripped his mind; "and everyone was OK after that, weren't they? I mean," he dug up the names from his memory of the injured, "I knew about Matty... but Padma, Seamus, Neville; they're OK, aren't they? Neville... he's alright, yes?"

There was a pause.

"Harry... this time was... different."

Without sight, so many gestures and mannerisms were pointless. Yet they'd been so ingrained, he did them reflexively. Relaxing his hold on her, Harry took a step back, as though to consider Cho from a slightly further distance, as though he could see her face in the whiteness. "This... *time*?" he ventured weakly.

"It was Hermione..."

"Hermione?!" Harry's hands gripped Cho's arms, as his mind whirled frantically, "she's not... she's OK, right? It didn't get... hurt her, did it? No... not Hermione too... Cho, please... not Hermione..."

It was too much... he'd lost one third of their perfect triangle, that night at Beauxbatons. That Hermione was... had been... had... "Cho... what *happened*? You have to tell me..." he pleaded, a little of the urgency sapping from his voice as he tried to remind himself just how out of the picture he was these days.

But Voldemort's message: *your friends will do my killing for me.*

"Oh Harry," a cool, soft hand swept through his hair, the fingertips brushing his scar, "it wasn't like that... it *isn't* like that... Hermione's OK..."

"So she wasn't hurt!" exclaimed Harry, with relief, and releasing a breath he hadn't even realised he'd been holding.

"Well..." hedged Cho, as she guided them both to sit on his bed, taking one hand in his as she tucked herself in against his shoulder, "she's... sort of OK, yes. But... Harry, after Beauxbatons, did you ever think she'd been a bit... well, sort of distant with us all?"

"Um," now he came to think about it, she had seemed *preoccupied*... but who knew, for sure? How were you supposed to act when your best friend had been killed? Killed whilst trying to rescue you from being kidnapped?

"You know," continued Cho, "I'd have thought she'd be more... involved in... in things... with the gang, you know... Not that I'm complaining; Padma and I managed pretty well, actually, but.. well, it was the sort of thing that you'd have thought Hermione would've... liked, really."

"Yeah," agreed Harry, "I sort of thought that too... but, well, Ron, y'know... I think it hit her hard..."

Neither of them were mentioning the Portkey project by name. For starters, Mr Orange was still standing by the door, and Harry was fully convinced that the cell had its own listening wards in place. The Away Team had obviously given some thought to the matter - not one of

them had so much as mentioned anything significant about what was going on, yet they'd also managed to convey, subtly, that things were proceeding.

To what purpose Harry had never been able to divine; as far as he knew, *they* didn't know that he was going to break out in a little under three weeks' time, and he was the only person who could do something with the Third Key. But a cell in Blackrock was not the place to engage in strategy meetings.

Cho flexed her fingers, intertwined as they were with Harry's own, "it *definitely* hit her hard, Harry. Harder than any of us suspected... she tried to bring him back herself..."

"Hermione? *Hermione*? You can't think Hermione was trying to... um, she wasn't trying necro.... necromancy... you can't think she'd do that?"

"No... I don't think... we *know*, Harry... she tried, and... but, well, it didn't quite work out."

"Didn't quite work *out*?"

"I wasn't there, Harry, but from what Padma told me, and she got her story from Parvati, who *was*, it went something like this..."

For a short while after Cho had finished her explanation, they both sat there in silence. Cho presumably staring off into space, Harry numbly registering the void.

"And... I can't *blame* her," confessed Cho, "not really... after Cedric..." She paused, sniffing, and moved in closer to Harry, "you don't want to hear this, do you?"

"s OK... go on," he couldn't take Cedric away from Cho. He couldn't take Cedric away from himself, either; *Kill the spare!* and, even worse, *We'll take it at the same time. It's still a Hogwarts victory.* He nudged her slightly, encouraging elaboration.

"Well, you know... I missed him so much... after the third task. And I so *needed* to tell him things that I'd never had a chance to tell him... and suddenly I couldn't. Not ever... And at times like then, it was, y'know, tempting... to try and make contact, somehow... or to bring him back. But..."

"I never knew my parents," supplied Harry, tonelessly. He ran his free hand through his hair before continuing, "Voldemort - sorry - anyway, in first year... *my* first year, when I... well, you probably heard about that... But he offered to bring my parents back..."

"Oh, Harry..."

"...but I *knew* he couldn't... and I knew it wasn't right. Things that good can't be, can they? *Hermione!*"

"...but it *is* hard, isn't it?" asked Cho, "I mean... it's not neat and tidy, with everything sorted... one moment he was there, and I was hoping he'd win... and the next time I saw him... there was so much... I even wrote it all down, so that I'd be able to say it all to him and not forget anything... actually, I've still got that. You don't mind, do you?"

"I don't know what I'd say to them... writing it down seems like a good idea. No, I don't mind... I always said I wasn't trying to *replace*... him."

"I added bits," continued Cho, "I told him... about you... about us. It felt right that I should tell him, y'know? So I write all these things to him, but... but to try and summon him would be...."

"Too much?" supplied Harry. "Like my parents... Hagrid gave me a photo album with their pictures in... and I see, well, used to see, them there, and I know that, y'know, they're my *parents* and everything. But I don't know them... I s'pose that makes it different to you and Cedric... and Hermione and Ron. Maybe if I *had* known them, then maybe I'd have..."

He could feel Cho shake her head slightly against his shoulder, "no," she countered, softly, "you'd still have known. It's like you said; too good to be true."

Somewhat reluctantly, Harry nodded his head. He suspected Cho was right; it *had* been too good to be true. "Hermione... *Ron*... what did you say he was, again?"

"A cold-wraith... it's kind of a spirit manifestation, with physical presence. Sort of straddles shadow and light, which is why daylight will kill it... him, I mean. I haven't seen him... Parvati has, and - all this is by way of Padma - and she says that the summoning was really hard on him. It was lucky Hermione had the curtains drawn in their dorm, anyway..."

"But she never said a word," reflected Harry, "not even to *me*... what was she thinking?"

Beside him, Cho sighed, "I dunno, but... I've never told anyone how I thought about summoning Cedric, either... It's one of those things... you just *know* not to talk about it... not to *do* it, really. But Hermione... well, she must've been fixated on it, or something..."

"She *can* get carried away," conceded Harry, recalling the Time Turner episode, and what it had taken for her to realise that she'd bitten off more than she could chew that time. "But she's alright?"

"She'll be OK... we think. Dumbledore took her wand..."

"She's not going to be expelled?!" exclaimed Harry, "I mean..." the only other expulsion he'd know of was Hagrid's, and that was because they thought he'd been at the centre of Myrtle's death, "I mean, it's not like she killed someo... Oh, well it's not like he wasn't, er, dead to begin with..."

"It *is* pretty serious, Harry," contested Cho, "but no, she's not been expelled. Not yet, anyway. I was going to see her before I came here, but Madam Pomfrey had let her go back to Gryffindor, so I couldn't..."

"Oh, well thanks for trying," responded Harry; Cho and Hermione didn't really get on too well (he wasn't blind... well, he *hadn't* been blind), so it was nice that she'd made the effort.

"Anyway, hopefully she'll come and see me soon, and then we can talk..."

"From what I hear, Harry, Hermione's not allowed to leave Hogwarts grounds except during the holidays... so maybe she'll be able to visit at Easter, but I doubt you'll see her before then."

"But... but," protested Harry, unable to find the words; Hermione *needed* him. He knew that, and that weird mental tumbling thing, where he had the impression that he was still falling through the seemingly endless repercussions of Beauxbatons, continued apace. He seriously hoped it bottomed out soon; that the world would stop changing with every new revelation, and that he'd be able to square his shoulders, set his mind, and start making a difference once more.

Reluctantly, Harry tracked Mr Orange escorting Cho back to the Entrance Hall, and watched the shimmering blue vanish from Blackrock. She'd travel first to the Ministry's main fireplace, and then from there she'd return to Hogwarts, courtesy of Lupin's office. It had, the Marauder had explained, been the least he could do for James' son; ensure that his friends had the means to visit him.

Part of Harry desperately wanted to see Sirius, but he knew that was not only fanciful, but dangerous. For one thing, the Goblins were probably perfectly capable of detecting an Animagus presence. For another, the absolute last place on Earth that Sirius should get anywhere near would be a wizards' prison.

No - as much as he wanted to talk to his godfather (who, after all, would be one of the few people in Harry's life who could share his current perspective), he would have to make do without his company. It was odd that their roles should have been reversed; Harry free, godfather (at that point unknown, but still innocent) in prison, and now it was Sirius free (well, technically, 'escaped'), and Harry in prison. And he liked to think that he, too, was innocent. Innocent, at least, of the charges that made sense.

How could you imprison someone for something they just *were*? He'd not used his powers for anything resembling Darkness; Percy had, at one point, uttered some superior gibberish about 'preventative justice', and 'pro-active threat neutralisation'.

Percy, in Harry's considered opinion, was a five star pillock.

Still, he missed Cho's presence. Each of them brought something different with their visits; Lupin had that understanding of the tainted, the labelled. Dean had the wry humour, the *endless* quotes, and yet a seriousness, and a resolution; Harry could sense that, internally, Dean had made a decision about something fundamental, and though he didn't speak about it directly, it was evident in everything he did or said.

Seamus was quieter, these days; more focused, yet more reflective. And he had this *concern* for Harry's state, even with all of his own issues that he undoubtedly had to deal with as a werewolf. And still, not once had Harry heard Seamus complain that 'it wasn't fair.' And if Seamus couldn't complain about a thing like *that*, then he wasn't going to complain about being The Boy Who Lived.

Parvati had brought hurt with her; in a way, Harry supposed that they had to deal with the whole breaking up thing properly, and once they'd moved on from that, they'd been sort of OK. He understood that he'd hurt her - he just hoped that she'd understood that he hadn't set out to do that.

Hermione was just Hermione; no-one else could play the role she played, in much the same way that Ron had been irreplaceable. Misguided though she had been, Harry wondered if the new Ron was, if not the same, at least similar to the old one. He wondered if they'd ever meet; there was so much to say, to understand.

Still, Harry thought to himself, reassuringly, if Ron *was* really Ron, then at least he didn't have to worry too much about Malfoy.

Two and a half weeks to go.

The whole Beauxbatons thing had happened on the night of a full moon - as Seamus, Harry reminded himself, knew only too well. Which meant that he'd been imprisoned exactly a week after the full moon.

Therefore (and he was quite proud of his deductive reasoning), Seamus and Lupin would start taking the Wolfsbane potion next week, in anticipation of transforming the week after. If only the Finnigans had met Lupin, Harry thought, then they'd perhaps be slightly less harsh on Seamus; Parvati, obviously being close to Lavender, had relayed news of Seamus' treatment over the Christmas period.

Obviously, it could've been worse; Seamus might not have been able to spend virtually the entire festive period with Dean, overdosing on Blackadder and Red Dwarf, but that still didn't really measure up to having a true family about you. Not that Harry knew, exactly, what that would feel like, but he saw it in the Weasleys.

To think that Colette, who he'd met in Diagon Alley back in August, to think that she was now *afraid* of her brother, or, even worse, found the thought of him somehow *repulsive* was terrible enough. That the sole reason was that Harry had been happy to drag the Wolves (not that they'd gone by that name then) along with him on that ridiculous campaign in Beauxbatons simply added another layer of guilt to Harry's somewhat overburdened conscience.

Moody had been right. He wasn't about to let the embittered, sour ex-Auror know that, of course, but he wasn't going to make the same mistake again. This was *his* battle; his fight to take to Voldemort, and his alone.

Deep down, Harry understood that he and Voldemort were connected. By their shared blood, by the curse scar; by that Halloween night so many years ago, and by the wizards' duel in the graveyard. They were connected, and only they could end this duality.

To drag innocent people along for the ride just put their lives at risk, and served no real purpose. *Run like hell*, Bill had urged him, when inflicting the whiteness upon his sight.

Oh, he intended to; he was quick, he was fast, and he had powers that a wizard could not begin to comprehend, honed as they would be with eight weeks of nothing to do but practice restraint, develop focus and exercise control.

Yes, when the time came, he would run, and he would end it.

Harry knew that Voldemort's mind was railing under the constant attack of new personalities - his greed for ever more power creating a mind that was dangerous; frighteningly unstable. Harry could see it in the Death Eaters' eyes in his visions; an uncertainty as to who they were speaking to, or how their master might respond to their presence.

During the connections, the sensation was almost that of walking a tightrope - the thin line of control suspended infinitely high over the abyss of madness. Just one false step, and Voldemort was in danger of falling, succumbing to the hordes of aggressors trapped within his own mind.

And yet the Dark Lord's greed seemed to blind him to this possibility. There were nights of Key draining, and nights of raids. His Death Eaters reported of skirmishes with the Ministry, and with Tempus; reported of deaths, boasted of conversions.

But throughout all these developments, night after night, week in, week out, one thing remained constant: they couldn't find Snape.

Chapter 64

In terms of non-captive numbers, which breed of Dragon is rarest?

Seeing the Weasleys had been worst: Molly and Arthur, both entering Gryffindor Tower as though in shock. It had been heartbreaking to see Molly in tears, not being able to touch her son - who was still dead, when all was said and done - yet evidently wanting to hug her boy. It was a situation so beyond anything, really.

Arthur had just looked... not so much uncomprehending as defeated. A kind of 'how do we deal with *this*' question hovering just behind his eyes. It had been an utterly miserable experience - no one could offer absolution for what she'd brought upon them, and no-one tried to.

Ron, for his part, just looked more and more awkward as the reunion went on, but he'd stood up for her - explained that she'd not known. He'd kept on saying that, actually, "Mum, Dad; you have to understand, she really didn't *know*... Muggle-raised... she just didn't..."

They'd left Gryffindor eventually, Arthur nodding curtly at her, whilst Molly appeared to undergo some colossal internal struggle before finally giving Hermione a quick, tight hug and then leaving before she could even catch her breath.

Ron had just shrugged at her, "barking," was all the comment he'd offered on his parents' visit. She suspected that the observation had been directed more at Molly than Arthur, but hadn't pressed the point.

Astronomy on Friday morning was her first lesson back after... well, it was her first lesson back, anyway. And, as luck would have it, they were with the Slytherins, and Draco had *definitely* caught her eye early on. She had his cloak in her bag, but it looked like she wouldn't even need that excuse to talk to him.

So at least not *everything* had gone horrible.

"Hi," she murmured, as they headed towards the library during the 'revise and study period' (not 'a free') that followed Astronomy, "I've still got your cloak from... you know, the other night when..."

"Not a problem," grey eyes locked onto hers, "are you OK?"

That was the thing with Draco, even when he *was* concerned about you, it never actually showed up in his eyes. You just had to learn how to read him, and stop ascribing ulterior motives to everything he did. If nothing else, it was a relief that he was still talking to her (the kiss can't have been that bad, then), and didn't appear to view her with the hostility that had been apparent in so many other students' faces.

If anything, he actually looked *satisfied*, no, that wasn't fair, *pleased*, he actually looked *pleased* to see her.

Wincing under Madam Pince's severe stare, Hermione took her place opposite Draco at their usual study table. Care of Magical Creatures was next, and love Hagrid though she did, preparatory reading was never a major requirement of that particular part of the curriculum. Instead they both dug out Arithmancy texts, and spent the next few minutes reading, taking notes and just... studying.

Pausing for a moment, to give her eyes a rest from the text of *Advanced Geomancy Made a Little Bit Less Impenetrable*, Hermione watched Draco's slender hand work through a Governance Derivation. She'd not really noticed he was left-handed before; long, delicate fingers, smooth, pale...

"Yes?" Amusement flickered behind the pale grey eyes, and Hermione desperately fought the blood rushing to her face.

"Uh... I was... just..." Hermione busied herself with flicking over a new page, and looking for all the world as though she had been *deeply* immersed in her studies except for that exact split-second when he'd chanced to look up.

For his part, Draco made a show of closing his books, "do you want to go for a walk? Get some fresh air?"

Despite the fact that the next lesson was Care of Magical Creatures, which would no doubt supply all the fresh air they were likely to need that day, Hermione immediately accepted the invitation. Well, not immediately... she didn't want to seem too keen, after all. It was just a shame that she'd already half got to her feet before she'd said 'OK', because that sort of spoiled the air of indifference she was trying to project.

The new regime was horrible. She felt so vulnerable, not having her wand in the evenings, or at the weekend. And it was even worse having to collect it from Professor McGonagall in the morning; always, it seemed, in front of a whole collection of students, all of whom knew exactly *why* Hermione Granger couldn't be trusted with her own wand.

Returning the wand in the evenings was no better; although there were fewer students around, her Head of House seemed to feel it necessary to remind her just how sorry she was supposed to be about the whole affair. So far she'd had 'I trust you've learnt your lesson now?' and 'I am sure you can imagine how very disappointed in your conduct I have been' and 'this is, of course, entirely of your own doing.'

Those plus a million others of similar sentiment. Well, not *quite* a million - it just felt like it. She'd *said* sorry. And she was, truly, but all the apologies in the world couldn't fix things, and she was ready to move on. It was, frankly, hard to see how taking her wand from her, and restricting access to the library actually made things better.

If only they'd trust her, a little bit. Just give her another chance. She wouldn't let them down again... but it was just *unnatural* not to have her wand with her in the evenings. And not being able to borrow books from the library meant that she couldn't even keep up with her reading.

Lavender and Parvati had borrowed a couple of books on her behalf, but when they'd returned them, Madam Pince, who evidently didn't miss a trick, had given them such a grilling on the contents they'd refused point blank to borrow anything else for her ever again.

Still, they were at least talking to her these days. As was Ginny... and Ron. In fact, she spent most evenings up in Ron's room... unless he was in one of his anti-Draco moods, in which case she returned back to the common room. Let him deal with it; was it *so* hard to accept that Draco was actually... well, no, he wasn't *nice*, not really.

But he *was* interesting. And he did seem *interested* in her too. It was nice to feel at least a little bit wanted, rather than the spare part she seemed to be these days... like the meetings at the North Tower.

Of course, she understood why the others might, perhaps, be careful not to take everything she said at face value, but, if she was honest, it was a little hurtful that *every* suggestion she made was either checked against Cho or Padma's opinion, or those two volunteered approval before being asked.

Almost as though they were *expected* to double check Hermione's ideas. She knew that she'd made a mistake, but that was it, it was done, she'd learnt her lesson now. Surely they knew she wasn't trying to double-cross them, or extract some petty advantage for herself out of the situation?

In a rare moment, she'd confided her... not resentment, so much as... hurt, to Ginny, but Ginny had just looked at her and said 'that's what we *thought* you were like before, Hermione.' And she'd said it so *sadly*, Hermione had had no choice but to accept her new order in the scheme of things.

Although most of Gryffindor had started to get worked up about the forthcoming match against Hufflepuff, which signalled the renewal of the Quidditch season after the Christmas break, the Away Team were more concerned about the imminent arrival of the full moon. Seamus and Professor Lupin had both been taking the Wolfsbane potion, and would shortly be locking themselves in the dungeons.

Ron had taken a little while to get used to the idea that Seamus was a werewolf. She remembered well his reaction to her revelation back in their third year about Professor Lupin, and although Ron had done his best, she could see that he wasn't exactly comfortable with the concept.

"Weird, isn't it?" he asked, perched on his desk as she sat in the left hand armchair, as close to the fire as she dared.

"What?"

"Y'know - my old dorm - me, Harry, Dean, Seamus, Neville. Think about it; Harry's a Mage, Dean's an Animagus, Seamus is a *werewolf*, I'm... me... it's only Nev who's normal..."

"Don't say it like that!" corrected Hermione, crossly, "Dean and Seamus are *both*, as you put it, 'normal'. You shouldn't label people like that, Ron. You just shouldn't..."

Ron appeared unabashed by the correction, "c'mon, Hermione," he implored, his legs kicking against the desk as he gestured expansively with his arms, "not even *you* can claim that a werewolf's *normal*..."

"Well, no... but, but don't *ever* let Seamus hear you say that... you know what his own family were like to him, after all, don't you? Even his sister won't talk to him, and she's in Gryffindor."

"But you don't understand, Hermione," protested Ron, vainly, "you didn't grown up as a witch..."

"Thank you for pointing that out. Again."

"...so you don't know what it *means*..."

"I know perfectly well what it means, Ronald Weasley," she snapped, eyes welling with tears as she once again felt herself being reminded of her ignorant background, "since you never tire of telling me how *ignorant* I am... all this patronising 'it's not your fault, Hermione, 'cos you don't know'... I'm a witch. I've always *been* a witch, and I always will be. So don't you try and pretend that just because you weren't born to Muggle parents, don't you pretend that you know *everything*..."

And with that, she stormed out of Ron's room, out of Gryffindor, and in search of someone who she could talk sensibly to.

Strangely, however, even though she looked in all their usual haunts, she couldn't find Draco anywhere in the castle. Resigning herself to the fact that he had to be in the Slytherin common room (and she wasn't quite so desperate to go and knock on their door), she stared out at the lake, February's full-moon reflected in the black, glassy surface.

"Draco! You look terrible," exclaimed Hermione, half in shock, half in fear for his well-being, "are you alright?"

It was Potions on the Tuesday; Fleur, of course, was late. Fleur was *always* late to her lessons, although quite why, Hermione had never been able to work out. But that wasn't of immediate concern. Draco's health clearly was. He looked pale, drawn... his hair, well, for Draco it was positively unkempt, although Hermione suspected that most of her classmates wouldn't have noticed.

"Bad night," muttered the Slytherin, wincing as he slid onto the stool next to her. Every motion seemed to speak of pain, and he looked as though he hadn't slept at all last night. Even Seamus, who'd been transformed into a werewolf and back again in that time, looked in better shape than Draco.

Not caring how public she was being, Hermione pressed her palm against Draco's forehead, to check his temperature. Almost disappointingly, it seemed perfectly normal - so he *looked* feverish, but...

"I'm fine," he protested, although without any overwhelming conviction, and it was rather nice to notice that he hadn't fended off her attentions.

For her part, Hermione knew that Lavender had a triumphant, knowing smirk upon her face, even with her back turned, but she was more interested in seeing Pansy's reaction to her and Draco's... togetherness.

It had been Pansy, surprisingly, who'd first picked up on *something* happening between them, and she'd cornered Hermione by Hagrid's the previous Friday, warning her to stay away from Draco. The usual Slytherin 'he's too good for you, Mudblood,' speech, so it would have been nice to have the satisfaction of Pansy seeing that Draco certainly didn't seem to think he was too good for her attentions.

But the stool next to Blaise was empty.

"Where's Pansy?" enquired Hermione, surprised.

"Same thing," coughed Draco, "must be a bug going around Slytherin or something..."

For a brief moment, Hermione's suspicions were raised; Draco and Pansy *both* coming down with the same thing? When all the other Slytherins seemed unaffected? It didn't take much of a paranoid mind to wonder exactly *how* those two might manage to catch the same infection.

But, she consoled herself, if they *had* been doing that, then she'd have caught it too, more than likely, given that she and Draco had... well, the fact was that she hadn't, so it really must be coincidence. Besides, there was a certain honour to Draco; she couldn't actually swear that he *wouldn't* cheat on her... but if he did, he wouldn't try and hide it. That's how he was; take it or leave it.

Sitting to his right, she was able to squeeze his hand supportively under the desk as Fleur took command of the class. Typical Fleur, thought Hermione, bitterly; she hadn't even *noticed* Pansy was absent. Or, at any rate, she certainly didn't seem surprised.

The Threshers had been released into the lake - one of the last things Hermione had found out before... before Ron had been a Restricting Charm. The class had therefore been required to Charm collars for their Threshers, which would then limit them to the first ten metres of lake, and the first five metres of shore.

Neville had been far too nervous of his Thresher to apply the charm himself, and secretly Hermione had agreed that it seemed to be placing an awful lot of faith in the students to trust that they could correctly restrain Hagrid's insane pets. So she'd charmed his Thresher for him, but had then had to suffer anew his hero-worship.

That, in itself, hadn't been too bad - after all, Neville could be quite sweet - but the consequence of Neville sticking to her side, leech-like, all lesson had been that Draco, who wouldn't be seen dead standing near Neville, had been forced to avoid her all lesson.

"Er, Hagrid," called Lavender, reluctantly, "er, I think this one... um, died..."

Hagrid stomped over to the pen in question, cutting short his castigation of Crabbe and Goyle, who'd been attempting to feed Flobberworms to their Thresher (they hadn't been trusted with one each), named Fudge.

On the mention of names, Hermione reminded herself that she was still cross with Draco for calling his Thresher Buckbeak. Not that it wasn't without a sort of irony, but still, it wasn't really becoming of him to relive that episode. She *knew* him now, and he was *better* than that.

Dean, surprisingly, had gone all literary for his; Cujo. None of the purebloods got it, a fact for which Hermione was grateful - if Ron pitied her lack of a magical upbringing one more time that week, she swore she was going to slap him. Well, she would have done if it wouldn't have resulted in certain frostbite and possible death. It was about time that someone reinforced that other lifestyles had their own positives.

"Ah dear," sighed Hagrid, mournfully, "poor fella; looks like 'e jus' died," he added, an elaborate diagnosis by Hagrid standards. "Ah'll jus' go 'n get the barrow fer 'im, then... 's not much else yer c'n do," he shrugged, before trudging off behind his hut.

Dean, seizing his moment, approached the beast, "that's not dead!" he asserted, "plenty o' life left in 'im yet."

The Slytherins, who didn't know what was coming, looked aghast.

Seamus, quickly leaping into character, seemed, to all intents and purposes to agree, "look matey, I know a dead Thresher when I see one, and I'm looking at one right now!"

"No, no," protested Dean, "'e's not dead, 'e's resting! Remarkable beastie... Beautiful scales..."

"The scales don't enter it," countered Seamus, "it's stone dead."

"Nonsense!" cried Dean, nudging the beast with his foot, "see? 'e moved! 'e's just asleep..."

The purebloods were slowly backing away from the re-enactment, whilst Hermione tried to adopt a face conveying the correct moral outrage. But it was a struggle...

"No, no," Dean was protesting, "'e's just stunned..."

"Stunned?!" cried Seamus, aghast, "'e's *not* stunned! 'e's passed on. This Thresher is no more! 'e 'as ceased to be! 'e's expired an' gone to meet 'is maker... THIS IS AN EX-THRESHER!"

Saturday dawned bright, clear and sunny, with a bitter easterly wind that made the eyes sting. Wrapped tightly in Gryffindor cloaks, Hermione, Lavender and Parvati had made their way to the Gryffindor stand. Hermione had intended to spend the time with Ron, in his room in Gryffindor, but he'd insisted that she capture as much of the match as possible with Omnoculars, so that he could, in his words 'relive the victory'.

So, having given fair warning to Neville and the Wolves, Hermione had searched through Harry and Ron's belongings in their trunks to recover the World Cup Omnoculars, so that they

had one each (the Omniculars weren't all that she'd found, and Hermione was going to have a word with Ron about *that* later).

She was still getting used to life without a wand - a well-placed Warming Charm would have been most welcome as they settled into the freezing terraced seats, but she didn't want to draw Lavender or Parvati's attention to the fact that she *couldn't* cast a spell, and instead resigned herself to spending the game frozen. It wasn't pride, she reminded herself; it was just... that she didn't want to draw overt attention to her wandless state. She didn't want them to feel bad on her behalf.

Anyway, with any luck Ginny would catch the Snitch in ten minutes, and they could all get back inside and warm up. Jaw clenched, and arms pressed tight against her body, Hermione tried to suppress her shivers as she watched the two teams march onto the pitch; the red and gold of Gryffindor versus the yellow and black of Hufflepuff.

As she scanned each of the faces, whilst Madam Hooch brought the trunk out, Hermione wrestled mentally over whether or not she should zoom in on Samantha's face... after all, he *had* liked her, hadn't he? But then again, he wasn't exactly in her good books at the moment, she reminded herself, and he ought to be thankful she was recording anything at all.

Playwizard, indeed... Hmph. And the pictures *moved*, too... not that she'd looked, of course. Honestly, though...

"And welcome," boomed Lee's voice, "to the first Quidditch match after the break on this bright, clear and *absolutely freezing* afternoon. Today's match sees a..." Lee paused, as he seemed to search for the correct phrase, "heavily restructured Gryffindor team take on Hufflepuff - the teams are third and fourth respectively," there were muffled cries of 'you're *last*' from the Slytherins, "so they're both looking to get points on the board in today's game..."

Madam Hooch had released the Snitch, and Hermione had zoomed in on Ginny's slightly nervous face as her eyes followed the tiny, winged prize before her expression gave away the fact that it had disappeared from sight.

"The Captains... uh, I mean, Deputy Captain in Gryffindor's case," this had been their method of defeating the Curse... to make Ron Captain (nothing worse could happen to Ron), and Dean was now Deputy Captain.

Dean because he'd lost the coin toss that had decided the office. Gryffindor courage had been thin on the ground when it came to the Curse, noted Hermione, with mild exasperation; honestly, it was just coincidence and superstition, the mix aggravated by excitable and suggestible minds.

Dean and Rohan nodded briefly to each other before mounting their respective brooms and kicking off. Madam Hooch set the Quaffle into play, and the match began.

"Well, Hufflepuff immediately take possession of the Quaffle... but Chaser Bones immediately runs into Gryffindor Chaser Miller and... no! She's dropped the Quaffle, and Hufflepuff Chaser Lustin *just* makes the intercept - she nearly lost her broom there..."

There were howls of derision from the Slytherins as the match unfolded in an unforced comedy of errors. It didn't help much that the Wolves, who were supposed to be Beaters, were playing as Chasers with Sophie. Sophie knew what she was supposed to be doing, but Seamus and Dean seemed completely lost, and whenever Dean had the Quaffle, the whole of Gryffindor could be heard muttering 'give it to Sophie, give it to Sophie,' under their breath.

They were probably doing the same whenever Seamus had the Quaffle, but it was hard to tell, since the Slytherins immediately started bellowing wolf-howls whenever he had possession. As if the whole school didn't know what he was already.

Fred and George had their work cut out, trying to protect the novice team, who were unused to match-level Bludger hostilities. The Hufflepuff beaters, David Smith and David Jones - that's Mr Smith and Mr Jones to you - had evidently recognised this early on, and immediately set about targeting the Wolves with merry abandon. Twice now Dean had seen a Bludger heading towards him, and tried swinging an imaginary bat at it before realising that he was flying unarmed.

Even Hermione could tell that it was an *embarrassing* display. But just in case she needed reminding, Lee's voice was plumbing new depths of despair with each successive fumble; "I *don't* believe it... Thomas drops the Quaffle *again*, and Lustin intercepts... oh, *good* robust challenge there from Miller..."

Laura, the Hufflepuff Chaser, just managed to recover her broomstick's spin after Sophie's decidedly vicious bodycheck before fixing her opponent with an evil glare. The Slytherins were loving it; "what a load of rubbish!" chorused the stands of green and silver, as all houses willed a quick end to the match, so that they could all be put out of their misery.

Hermione trained her Omnoculars back onto Ginny, who was flying higher and higher above the pitch, and evidently none too comfortable with the Firebolt. Ron had suggested that she might be better off using his Nimbus, rather than the Firebolt... but with his usual, Ron-level tact, which had only succeeded in riling his sister sufficiently to ensure that, come hell or high water, there would be no way she would fly anything other than Harry's Firebolt in the match.

Watching Ginny struggle with the high performance racing broom, Hermione cursed the Weasley stubbornness... and not for the first time.

"... and Hufflepuff score *again*," reported a crestfallen Lee, who was doing his best not to sound too incredulous, although the pain was evident in the next words, "so Hufflepuff *lead*... Hufflepuff *lead* by 110 points to 20."

Hermione glanced across the pitch at Lee, who had chosen that moment to bury his head in his hands, sitting next to a quite aghast looking McGonagall, and a somewhat superior looking Professor Trelawney, who had taken over the Head of House role from Professor Sprout. Trelawney appeared to be saying something to McGonagall, and Hermione trained her Omnoculars on the pair, doing her best to lip read.

As she span the focus dial, she saw Lee, between the two professors, peer out between his fingertips just in time to allow his shoulders to slump once more, "and *another* ten points to

Hufflepuff," wailed his voice, miserably, as Hermione *finally* caught some of Trelawney's words. She should've guessed; of *course* Trelawney's Inner Eye would have foreseen victory.

"Ginny!" yelled Hermione, although the fourth year was so far up above play now it would be impossible for her to hear, "you've *got* to get that Snitch... *now!*"

Getting beaten by a superior team was fine. Admitting that the mighty Gryffindor had been reduced to a completely directionless shambles of a side was, whilst disappointing, at least acceptable. But Hermione Granger was *not* going to allow *her* team to lose because that... fraud claimed to have foreseen victory.

At that moment, Ginny suddenly plummeted towards the ground in a near vertical dive, right hand outstretched; "Go Ginny! Go, go, go, go *go!*" screamed Hermione, who couldn't wait to see Trelawney's face as Hufflepuff once more wrung one last, glorious defeat from the very jaws of victory.

It all happened so fast, in the end, which, it had to be said, was the way of Quidditch. Ginny had plummeted nearly 50 feet before grabbing the Snitch (Hermione had captured the exact moment of the catch), but then the entire stadium started screaming; "pull up! Pull *up!*"

"Ground, Ginny," whispered Hermione, fearfully, but pointlessly. Ginny was almost certainly aware of the Quidditch pitch rushing to meet her, and though she was evidently trying to pull out of the dive, even a Firebolt took some turning after plunging vertically at top speed.

"Oof!" went the collective groan from the stands as Ginny couldn't avoid slamming into the frozen pitch, a crumpled heap of red and gold Quidditch robes, clashing oddly with her hair. The form moved slightly, and the Snitch rose up from her gloved hand.

"Well," ventured Lavender, in optimistic mode, "she's... well, she's moving. I think..."

Dean, Fred and George had immediately plummeted to Earth beside her, as Madam Hooch levitated the Seeker's stricken form up off the pitch.

"And Gryffindor win," announced Lee, morosely, "by 170 points to 120."

Hermione understood the sentiment - this hadn't been the high-scoring decimation of Hufflepuff that Gryffindor had been looking for to overcome their defeat to Ravenclaw earlier in the year, but did Lee have to be so transparent? The Hufflepuffs could take offence.

Hermione didn't quite know what it was about Quidditch, and playing Seeker in particular, but it clearly played havoc with a person's sense of self-preservation.

Thankfully, in Madam Pomfrey's language, there had been 'no lasting damage', and Ginny was sitting up in bed, still sore and bruised, but her arm, shoulder, hip, leg and ankle had all been healed, and she wore the smile of someone who'd single-handedly rescued her team from certain defeat.

"Great catch," complimented one of the Twins (as if she *needed* encouragement, thought Hermione, crossly).

"Better than one of Harry's," interjected the other, which was, perhaps, taking things a bit far. *Harry* wouldn't have deliberately flown into the ground, after all.

Dean was somewhat subdued, "we were rubbish, weren't we?" It was something of a rhetorical question. Gryffindor had been *dire*.

"Yes, well," interjected Sophie, "the point is that we didn't lose... and... well, we're still third..."

"After two matches," interjected Karen, "and Ravenclaw have a game in hand. They need to *lose* by, uh, 230 points for us to get *level*..."

"And if they did that," supplied Dean, with the resigned tone of a West Ham fan used to working out 'mathematical chances', "then Slytherin will be virtually uncatchable."

It had fallen to Seamus to Floo to Blackrock to break the not-too-good-news about Gryffindor's performance (or lack thereof) in the previous day's match. Even cooped up as he was, Harry had taken an active interest in the forthcoming match, grilling each of his visitors in turn as to Gryffindor's training regime.

The rest of the gang had assembled at the top of the North Tower once more, where Cho and Padma were about to present the fruits of the labours. They were looking decidedly shiftily. "Now the thing is," stressed Cho, "it worked... well we think it worked, but maybe we shouldn't have used an animated carving..."

"Not, of course, that we had a choice," supplied Padma, taking over the narrative, "unless, of course, Viktor gave Hermione some more *traditional Bulgarian folk art* that she decided she didn't want to share with us?"

All eyes swivelled to Hermione, who was doing her best to will the ground to swallow her up hole. Did they have to milk it so much? *Every* time? And she was *never* going to forgive Seamus for having told Ron - not even *Playwizard* compared to The Thing, so her moral high ground had evaporated almost instantly. Although Ron had still squirmed, predictably enough; it just would've been so much better if he hadn't then been able to turn the tables.

"Anyway," Cho took up the thread once more, "the thing is, well, er, when we made it into the Portkey, it, um..." she trailed off, and looked to her fellow Ravenclaw for support.

"Got, er, *excited*," explained Padma, with an extremely forced straight face, as she produced The Thing from her bag.

It was *writhing* in her hand.

Chapter 65

Who was the longest serving Auror for the Ministry of Magic?

"You've *got* to be kidding me," begged Harry, bordering on the desperate.

He could *sense* Seamus' hesitant shrug, "well," and now Harry knew that his visitor would be lifting both hands, palms outward, "erm... no, it *really* was that bad... Another ten minutes and it wouldn't have made any difference who caught the Snitch."

"Beaten by Hufflepuff," conceded Harry, dejectedly, "that makes it twice they've got one over on us, you realise?"

"Um..."

"Cedric. Third year..."

"But there *were*, y'know, extenuating circumstances 'n all, that time; you never lost a Snitch again until Ravenclaw this year."

"That," Harry pointed out, as he ran his hand distractedly through his hair, "is mainly thanks to the Triwizard Tournament having cancelled Quidditch last year."

"Well, yeah, but c'mon Harry, we can't win 'em all," protested Seamus, obviously trying to kill that particular topic of conversation.

Harry, however, was not one to be dissuaded easily: "So Ravenclaw play Slytherin next weekend, right?"

"Mmm," confirmed Seamus.

"Cho'll beat Malfoy to the Snitch, we can be sure of that," continued Harry, "but we're...?"

"Third."

"Right, we're third, and Ravenclaw are how many points?"

Seamus sighed deeply; it was evident that this analysis had taken place on many occasions since the calamitous Gryffindor performance of the previous day, but he resignedly trotted out the statistics again, "our net total is minus 90..."

"Negative figures," moaned a disconsolate Harry.

"...and Ravenclaw currently have 140 to Slytherin's 420," completed Seamus.

Harry was almost certain Seamus would be able to hear the gears whirring in his mind as he thought through the implications. On a wild impulse, he provocatively launched his Knight on

Lucas' remaining Bishop, before returning to Quidditch analysis. "So if Ravenclaw *beat* Slytherin - and we can be pretty sure of that..."

Seamus made an indistinct noise that *might* have been dissent.

Harry was settling for none of that; "they *will* beat Slytherin," he attested, with steely conviction, "Cho's a brilliant flier - Malfoy won't stand a chance..."

"It might not come down to the Snitch, mate," cautioned Seamus, "you saw them against Hufflepuff..."

"Er, not really..." admitted Harry - his mind had been elsewhere that day, and the match had unfolded before unseeing eyes.

"Well, basically they don't take prisoners. Ron's best guess..."

Harry had almost forgotten of Ron's appointment as Captain. It had, initially, seemed more like an office of convenience more than anything else; as had been unanimously agreed (not least by Ron himself), there was absolutely nothing worse that could happen to him, which, in theory at least, made him invincible as far as the Curse went.

However, Hermione, Harry had been unsurprised to learn, had been quite quick to point out that since Ron couldn't actually go out in daylight, his appointment was hardly practical. This had been brushed aside as a 'minor detail', though, and, sure enough, Ron seemed more than capable of working out tactics and anticipating strategies from the comfort of his dark chamber in Gryffindor Tower.

Seamus was still explaining Ron's deductions, however, "...So what Ron reckons'll happen is that Malfoy will spend as much time as possible blocking Cho, so that their Chasers can rack up an unassailable lead..."

"One hundred and sixty points," noted Harry, glumly. And the Slytherins would do that, too, he thought. "Have you warned Cho?"

"It's nothing they hadn't worked out for themselves, mate. The best case scenario would be a Ravenclaw winning margin of more than 510 points, because that would then move us to second..."

"Oh yeah," observed Harry, "and that's *really* going to happen..."

The difference between company and isolation was stark and unpleasant. As he watched Seamus being 'escorted' out of Blackrock (Mr Orange, again, seemed to have drawn ushering duties), the cold loneliness flooded back in.

Opening *Hogwarts: A History* at least reduced the oppressive silence, but his mind had long since grown tired of such an obvious psychological ruse. At least when the Dursleys had shut him inside his cupboard, in that distant lifetime that had, in fact, been only four and half years ago, at least they'd at least taken the trouble to shout at him.

Or stomp up and down the stairs with calculated inelegance. Or they'd had the grace to enjoy themselves loudly, just so that he knew there was a world out there. In all his time at Blackrock, although he'd been able to track a certain amount of traffic as prisoners were allocated to different cells, not once had anyone been allocated into his cell block.

When the Ministry said isolation, they clearly meant it. So Harry was even more indebted to Dumbledore for the Headmaster's intervention on the grounds of visitors; quite simply, he didn't know how he'd have survived without his friends.

And he had *no* idea how Sirius had coped with his imprisonment at Blackrock. Twelve years, Dementors, and the knowledge that the entire world assumed you were guilty. Those twelve years had clearly taken their toll on Harry's godfather - worse, they still *were*; Sirius was anything but a free man, even now, and Harry kept on having to remind himself that, apart from a select few (Dumbledore, Lupin, the Away Team and a few others), the entire world remained convinced of Sirius' guilt.

And what, Harry wondered, did the world make of his own imprisonment? The Daily Prophet, predictably, had played up the 'dramatic' capture, and the gang had brought him brief snippets of news as they saw fit. The sheer lack of a 'Free the Gryffindor One' campaign, however, told Harry that the world hadn't yet decided to right this particular wrong.

And it *was* wrong. Most of Percy's charges hadn't stood up to even half-hearted scrutiny; the one thing he was truly 'guilty' of, that he was a living, breathing Mage, was the most outrageous charge of them all. He hadn't *asked* to suffer *Subsumatum*; he hadn't *known*, when he'd built his defence against Vellum's attack, that he was stepping into the illegal. All he'd tried to do was protect himself from attack - and yet Vellum had been exonerated, Dumbledore had been sacked, and he, Harry, had been left with the task of leading a life of subterfuge, lest he be detected.

He ground his teeth, deliberately; subterfuge hadn't really worked that well.

Thinking back to Vellum, however, Harry was reminded of the fact that no-one had heard of her. More crucially, apart from the ensuing staffing difficulties at Hogwarts (she got replaced by Lupin! How *unlucky* could you get? Whisked away from Hogwarts just as the best teacher *ever* turns up to claim his old post...), no-one had seemed to *miss* the tall, sinister witch.

Harry's initial assumption, that she was a Death Eater, seemed now to be ill-founded. But surely it couldn't have been coincidence that she and Lucius Malfoy had discovered the Subsumption Curse that summer? And she and Snape had both disappeared *that* night; the night when it all started, and the whole world changed.

Grinning to himself, Harry remembered his and Ron's enthusiastic hopes when they'd watched Lockhart and Snape demonstrate how to duel (a particularly one-sided demonstration, as it happened); "wouldn't it be good if they finished each other off?" Ron had whispered.

Harry doubted that Snape and Vellum would have killed each other; at the same time, however, he also doubted that their simultaneous disappearance had been coincidental. Voldemort kept on asking for news of Snape, but had never mentioned the Dark Arts professor; indeed, *none* of the Death Eaters had so much as even hinted that they'd *heard* of her.

But if she wasn't a Death Eater, then why throw *Subsumatum* at him?

All in all, a series of mysteries were building up; and with nothing else to occupy his mind, Harry kept on juggling the various facts, suppositions, rumours and hopes about in his mind, trying to make sense of the whole picture:

- Where was Snape? Why was Voldemort looking for him?
- Where was Vellum? Who was she working for, and why?
- Where was Pettigrew? Why had he kidnapped Hermione and Parvati?
- How was he going to find Voldemort? What was he going to do when he did?
- What happened to Sprout?
- Who reanimated Ron's body the first time, and set it loose in Gryffindor?
- What did the message on the Marauder's Map really mean?
- How were Gryffindor supposed to win the Quidditch Cup *now*?

He couldn't have said anything to Seamus of course, but part of the reason Harry had been *so* fixated on the Quidditch was to take his mind off the tantalising prospect of freedom that was less than twenty four hours away.

Eight weeks, Bill had promised him, *eight weeks to the second*.

It was just about all Harry could do to stop himself from bouncing off the walls in sheer desperation. Certainly, he'd had his share of solitary confinement with the Dursleys; long evenings locked under the stairs, for such heinous crimes as questioning whether Dudley really *needed* a second television, or venturing too favourable an opinion on nextdoor's new car.

Sort of training, in a way, for his incarceration now. He smiled grimly at the awkward prospect of having to actually be *thankful* to the Dursleys for their treatment of him, but soon convinced himself that that would have been considerably above and beyond, as the phrase went.

And, previous positive (or not-quite-so-usually-negative) thoughts about the Dursleys notwithstanding, it certainly was *ironic* that the largest room he had ever been able to call his own had turned out to be a prison cell.

He had to be careful, though; *if*, as he strongly inspected, and Bill had inferred, there *were* watching wards set up on the cells, he shouldn't appear too restless, since otherwise the goblins would be sure to notice the difference.

It was a long established truth of human nature that nothing was worse than an itch you couldn't scratch. Lying prone on the bed in his cell was proving to be a difficult task when nothing seemed more appealing at that moment in time than sprinting around the walls in a human variant of the Wall of Death.

Eight weeks. So close, so close... only another few hours...

"Argh...." Harry shook his arms in the air, desperately trying to dissipate the increasing tension in his bones, and truly understanding, for the first time in his life, the origin of the phrase 'tearing your hair out'. There was so much he had to do. First, and most obviously, he had to escape.

Escape from prison. Mad thought though it was, that was what he was going to do - and sod the noise; Harry had a strong feeling that slipping out undetected was going to be difficult to say the least. Whilst he knew he couldn't bring himself to hurt, well, *permanently* hurt, his captors, he held no such scruples about whatever creatures there might be employed in the prison's defences.

He had a mental map of the prison firmly committed to his mind now. He knew that there were four principle guard stations which, of course, had been located right next to the four major intersections of the three cart tracks that laced through the maze of cell blocks.

There were wards, there were curses, there were guards, there were creatures. These things had all been noted during the course of his eight weeks' captivity. What Harry was *certain* of, though, was that there was more to the place than met the eye, or sense. The Goblins *had* to have anticipated that some of their charges would attempt to escape.

And it wouldn't be Goblins unless there were anything but sympathetic in such situations. He tried not to listen to the small voice that was reminding him that Gringotts was reputed to have dragons.

Still, brushing to one side for the time being the small matter of escaping from a seemingly impregnable fortress, situated miles out to sea, and ignoring the trifling detail that he wasn't exactly what one might call a natural swimmer, he then had to get to the Third Key, at Durmstrang.

From his visions, Harry knew that Voldemort was engaged in fairly major hostilities across both Britain and France. Voldemort was not a - Harry was going to use the term 'man', but decided against it - Voldemort was not the type to discuss strategies and objectives with underlings. Since that basically seemed to cover just about everybody, Harry was pretty much in the dark as to what Voldemort's plan was.

Taking Beauxbatons had obviously been centred around draining the Key there. It stood to reason, then, that Voldemort would be seeking to increase his strength by draining the Durmstrang Key, hence Harry's resolution to get there first, whatever the cost. If anything, Voldemort's strategy seemed to be centred around creeping Northward in Britain, as though he was going for Hogwarts first.

But Harry dismissed this notion; the Hogwarts Key had been drained, and was of absolutely no use to the Dark Lord. So Durmstrang it had to be.

And then, finally, with the Third Key disposed of, Harry would move on to the final stage - to track down Voldemort and end this thing.

Patience had never been one of Harry's strong points. He'd always been the type that, once the task had been identified, set out to complete it there and then. This went some way to

explaining why he felt so frustrated at being holed up in Blackrock, when he *knew* - well, he hoped he knew - when he *knew* that in a few short hours his sight would be restored, and he could begin to make his escape.

A flicker of movement caught his mind, as Lucas admonished his earlier recklessness with the Knight to launch an attack on his now unprotected Queen. Harry grimaced, inwardly; how could he abandon Lucas to remain in prison?

He'd surely have lost his mind much sooner had he not had the welcome distractions of chess. *Hogwarts: A History* could only stave off the madness for a limited time, Harry feared - and with so little to occupy the brain, it was a wonder he hadn't gone completely over the edge already.

Alright, he conceded - certainly, he was a lot more focused on the task at hand, having been forced to do pretty much nothing else but dwell on the role he had to play; but that didn't mean that he'd lost his marbles or anything. Fudge would no doubt be shocked to learn that prison had actually helped Harry develop an edge, but then, what did they expect him to do? Maintain body temperature until he died? He thought not.

Yes, his time 'inside' had allowed him to develop his edge. A resolve. Call it what you will, the fact remained that he'd done little else in the eight weeks but focus on escape. But not in the sense of self-interest. Obviously, he'd much rather have been at Hogwarts than at Blackrock, but personal freedom was not the motivation that had sustained him through the relentless void of whiteness that greeted every waking second.

It wasn't madness, and, somehow, it didn't feel as though it was an obsession. It was just...

Well, it wasn't something he could explain to other people, but deep within himself, Harry knew that he'd discovered the answer to his 'why me?' question. He didn't like the term 'destiny', or 'fate' either, come to think of it - both had far too many Trelawney connotations to be taken remotely seriously... but, on the other hand, there *was* something.

Like it or not, he *was* connected to Voldemort, and whereas, in previous years, the curse-scar connection had been a cause of disquiet, of unease, and, put simply, a cause of pain, now it simply reminded him of his purpose. It was there, on his forehead, a burning reminder that he had a responsibility. It was strangely comforting to fully know one's purpose in life; to have a role was to carry a responsibility.

In truth, and following on from Dumbledore's first meeting with him after Vellum's attack, Harry had been a little fed up of 'responsibilities' being heaped upon him. But now was different; now those responsibilities had been placed by him, on his terms, and he was going to see this duty through.

From absolute whiteness to a sort of dingy, murky grey; his eyes stung, and his mind reeled from the shock of transition.

"Oh yes!" breathed Harry, light assaulting his senses. His glasses sprang from their cubbyhole on the cell's ledge, leaping directly into his fingers as in one fluid move Harry restored in-focus vision.

Running a hand through his hair, he took a long, and what he hoped would be last, look at his home of the previous eight weeks.

That would be 'previous eight weeks *to the second*'. No doubt about it: Bill was *cool*.

He hadn't been missing much; the bed was a tattered, rough looking affair. The walls were rough stone; cold to the touch, but at least yielding suitable nooks and crannies for the very few possessions Harry had to his name.

No windows - he knew that already, of course, but the room seemed much more oppressive, somehow, when you actually *saw* it for being a hole cut in the rock, rather than *sensing* it as some kind of vaguely cuboid chamber.

Cho's scarf, the colours of which were more muted than Harry had imagined, wrapped itself loosely around his neck, and his stack of non-duplicate Chocolate Frog cards flew into a pocket on his somewhat tattered prison robes.

No mirror, he noted, as he stroked the patchy stubble on his chin - since his visitors had to relinquish their wands during decompression, no-one had been able to take care of the shaving duties. And besides, it wasn't as if a beard would make much of a disguise; he'd need a new forehead for that.

A means of escape will present itself, Bill had promised. Sweeping outwards, across the sea, Harry couldn't detect anything, which was a little unsettling. Nonetheless, Bill *had* said 'run', as soon as he could see. Insisted, really.

And Bill had been right on the important points once already that day.

"Oh yes," breathed Harry once more, allowing a tight smile to play across his lips, "oh yes!" Emerald eyes gleamed with a dark determination; *time to leave*.

With a flick of his hand, he blew the cell door to pieces; the metal and wood disintegrating in a cloud of violet and blue sparks as Harry Potter, Last of the Magi, entered the tunnels of Blackrock.

And the very walls *screamed*.

Chapter 66

Before the advent of formal snapping, what was the preferred method of wand disposal?

Padma and Cho had joined them at the Gryffindor table for Monday's breakfast, and Hermione was secretly pleased to note that Draco seemed to be watching her with particular interest that morning.

He was so hard to read, though; sometimes it seemed as though he really didn't feel much of anything for her, and then other times he was obviously *very* interested. She allowed herself an inner smile: take that, Parkinson!

Well, it was a little confusing, but it was nice to be appreciated... wanted, even. And he really wasn't *that* bad; he'd had a hard childhood, and anyone with an upbringing like that would turn out seeming unpleasant on the surface.

Anyone but Harry, but Harry was... Harry, really.

She could still feel Draco's eyes on her back as she sat down between Padma and Ginny, hoping that she didn't look too flushed or anything. At least she wasn't opposite Lavender, who seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to that sort of thing...

"Juice?" asked Neville, opposite, passing her the jug, and in the process of so doing managing to knock Dean's goblet over. "Oops! Sorry... I didn't mean..."

"It's alright," Hermione assured him, as Ginny performed a simple drying charm on the table. *She* would have done that, had her wand not still been in Professor McGonagall's office.

Poor Neville: he was so openly full of admiration for her it was, at times, a little hard to bear. And sweet though he was, surely she'd given him enough hints by now that she liked him as a friend, and not as anything more than that?

Her morning cheeriness dissipated somewhat, though, as she wondered whether she looked at Draco the way Neville looked at her... and what did Draco think of her, really, anyway?

He never *said* that he felt anything - sometimes she almost felt as though she was just a package being taken off the shelf, used for a while as it amused him, and then put back.

No, Draco didn't give much; but perhaps he'd learn... maybe she could help him become a... well, a better person, basically. A sort of personal restoration project, in a way. Because he wasn't *bad*... he was just... aloof, but not in a bad way, as such.

Really, there wasn't anyone else she knew who was quite like Draco; he was intriguing, and maybe even a little exciting. And if he had a hard time showing how he felt, well, she liked challenges - it would just need a little more work. As she opened up more to him, so, in time, he'd learn to open up to her.

That was how these things worked.

"So," explained Cho over her toast, "we've done the calculations, and Padma and I both think that The Thing should work within about a 200 mile radius..."

"What do you mean, '200 miles'?" queried Hermione, looking up from her Charms textbook.

Cho shrugged apologetically, "well, be fair, we're only sixteen, it's not as if we'd have the power to make a continent crossing Portkey, is it? That takes *real* power."

Hermione closed her book with careful deliberation; she couldn't believe that their so-called-plan would have such a huge gaping hole in it. "So what you're saying is that..." she chanced a glance at the rest of the Gryffindors about her, to make sure no-one was eavesdropping, before lowering her voice and continuing, "...that The Thing is *useless*?"

Padma bristled, "*not* useless," she corrected, a tad snappily, "we just need to get within range to actually be able to activate it."

Hermione looked from Cho to Padma to Dean, who'd been following the exchange, before turning back to Cho, mouth agape, "just need to be in range? Well how are we going to do that?"

"A... later," murmured Cho, before leaning back in her chair to greet the Trio of new arrivals, "don't hex me, I'm *invited*," she asserted, as Fred, George and Lee cast dubious glances at the two Ravenclaws in Gryffindor's midst.

"Is that so?" enquired Lee, taking the seat next to Padma.

Opposite her, Hermione couldn't help but notice Neville warily cover his pumpkin juice goblet with his hand.

Fred, or George, spotted this, and put Neville's mind at rest, "Nev," he cried, "we're... we're..."

"Hurt," supplied his counterpart, "it's like you don't trust us, or something..."

"I wonder why *that* would be?" pondered Hermione, innocently.

"You're late down," observed Ginny, with some suspicion.

"Who?" enquired Lee, making a show of turning around to look over his shoulder, "us?" he enquired, disbelievingly, hand spread across his chest in a gesture that somehow included all three of the Twins.

As one, the Away Team froze, eyeing their breakfast with new-found suspicion. There was an almost synchronised clunk as cutlery was placed carefully on the table.

"Well, if you're not having any," observed the second Twin, leaning over to grab some of Neville's toast. "You don't mind, do you?" he asked as he munched noisily.

Neville still looked terrified - Hermione remembered well the Canary Cream incident. And then of course there had been Seamus and Dean with the Exploding Hair...

Looking across the table at what she suspected would be George, she narrowed her eyes; "what, *exactly* have you done this time?"

In typical Twin style, his counterpart answered, "y'know, Sweetheart, I've always thought that those Ravenclaws, present company excepted, of course," Cho and Padma gazed levelly at a completely unfazed Weasley, "well," he continued, "they're always so *serious*, aren't they?"

"We're *Ravenclaws*," Padma informed him, as though this explained everything. Which, to be fair, it probably did.

"Take your friend Terry, for example," suggested George.

"Oh yes, please do," agreed Padma, eagerly, evidently recalling her treatment at the Yule Ball.

"Yes," supplied Lee, in posh, clipped tones, "terribly *serious* chap..."

"Sober..." added Fred.

"Reserved..." commented George.

"Studious," agreed Lee, nodding in very proper fashion.

Fred beamed at Padma, "marked man," he commented, wickedly.

Almost at that precise moment, Terry, unaware of the attention he was receiving from Gryffindor, appeared to cough.

Then he coughed again, his shoulders twitching. Then his body twitched some more as he allowed himself a small snicker, which somehow didn't seem to subside.

Ginny, who'd turned round to watch, returned her attention to her brothers: "What, exactly...?" she invited.

The Twins ignored her, however, evidently feeling that Terry, who was now cackling madly, much to the consternation of his tablemates, was supplying sufficient explanation on his own.

Ravenclaw now had the entire Hall's attention, as, tears streaming down his face howling with laughter, Terry's body started to slump lower and lower in his chair, twitching with each new wave of mirth.

"Poor Terry," said Hermione, despite herself; this was *cruel*.

"Oh don't worry," said Padma, brightly, and *much* too quickly, "he'll be fine."

Terry's chin was now level with the tabletop, as he slumped ever lower in his chair, unable to stop the laughing fit that had seized him so viciously.

"Incapacitating Giggle Juice," explained Lee, proudly, "took a while, this one; had to be careful not to overdo it..."

"Excellent!" approved Seamus, grinning.

Dean flicked his dreadlocks, "does exactly what it says on the tin," he noted.

George frowned, "but it doesn't come in tins."

Hermione could just make out a few strands of Terry's hair poking up over the edge of the Ravenclaw table, and his fingers clutching the wood as he slid onto the floor, reduced to a completely helpless pile of increasing mirth.

The Twins were making a great show of studiously eating their breakfast as Professor McGonagall's chill glare landed on the Gryffindor table.

"Innocent until proven guilty," Fred reminded them all, seemingly oblivious of his Head of House's acid gaze.

"Not when it's you three," countered Ginny, knowingly.

Looking at the Staff Table, Hermione noticed that Professor McGonagall's lips were drawn into a razor thin line, and marvelled at the Twins' ability to weather a look that would cut concrete.

"Lunch, library," commanded Cho as the Away Team left the Great Hall; they'd not had a further chance to outline their plan to reach the Third Key - or even what they were going to do when they did - so it was agreed that they'd pick up the thread at lunch. Given that it was miserable, rainy February weather, meeting in the library seemed a much better bet than braving the elements at the top of the North Tower.

"Well all I'm saying," asserted Hermione, as she sipped her tea, "is that it's risky... what if they get caught? Or lost? Or... or anything really..."

"You're just miffed that *you're* not going," Ron pointed out, perhaps a tad smugly.

What was worse was that Hermione couldn't quite convince herself that Ron *hadn't* put his finger on the root cause of her anxiety. But she was hardly going to let *him* know that, "no," she protested, "I'm just saying that... well, neither of them have done anything like it before..."

"Whereas," supplied Ron, helpfully, "you helped Harry to the Philosopher's Stone..."

"So did you."

"...in the first year, and you helped free Sirius *and* Buckbeak in the Third. *And* you're Muggle-raised, *and* you've actually been to Durmstrang..."

"Well precisely!" pouted Hermione, giving up the pretence, "it's just not fair! It should be *me* who goes... I'm the one who did the research on portals, *and* I know Durmstrang *and* I can actually *speak* French..."

Ron gave her a sympathetic look, but appeared unmoved, "*and*," he pointed out, none too helpfully, "you don't have a wand, *and* wasn't there some small detail about you having to pretty much toe the line from hereon in?"

"Exemplary behaviour," confirmed Hermione, slumping back into her chair.

Ron grimaced, sympathetically, "call me Percy, but I don't *really* see how skiving off school for four days, smuggling yourself on Muggle transport under Harry's cloak, intending to perform illegal, underage magic in a foreign country *and* stealing the Durmstrang Key..."

"We're not stealing it," corrected Hermione, "we're just... placing it beyond reach."

"Whatever.. it's not exactly the stuff House Points are made of, is it?"

"But it should've been me," sighed Hermione, weakly, before correcting herself, "should've been *us*; you, me, Harry... and now that's gone."

Ron ran his fingers through his hair, Hermione still fascinated by the way the frost tinged the ends with white. The fire was roaring, full on, and Ron was perched on his desk, as usual. There was still a wall of cold just beyond her chair - almost like one of the weather maps you saw on the news. She understood why Cho and Padma had arrived at the plan they had, and, probably she'd have reached the same conclusions herself.

No, the thing that *really* galled was that she hadn't even been asked. "I mean," she continued, hurt rising anew, "they just presented the whole thing as a *fait accomplis*, you know - 'this is how we're doing it'," and that was that.

"Didn't they...?"

"No they didn't ask me for my opinion," she knew Ron so well that half the time he didn't even need to finish his questions, "and, y'know, I'm Muggleborn too..."

"Famous for it," noted Ron, dryly.

"...so it *could've* been me instead of Dean... and that... well that would've been two of us..."

"Dean and Padma... correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that also two, Hermione?"

"Well yes, but, you know, two..." Hermione's face flushed, "well, two 'brains'."

"Oh I'm *sure* Dean was flattered to hear you put it like that..."

"Don't be stupid! Of *course* I didn't say that; but, it *would've* made more sense, wouldn't it?"

"Nope," said Ron, in what was possibly his most infuriating manner, the tone he seemed to reserve just for her. "Hermione, you're being watched; one step out of line and you're *expelled*." Ron spread his hands wide, "I don't want that to happen to you - really I don't - and, if you've got any sense at all, *you* don't want that to happen either."

"But... the Third Key... it's bigger than whether or not I get expelled from school! Don't you see that?"

"Hermione," countered Ron, flatly, "it's. In. Hand. Yes, if Dean and Padma weren't going, then fine, we'd have to do something..."

"We?"

"You and me," confirmed Ron, without hesitation, "but as it stands, those two have a plan, and it's the best plan we've got..."

A plan. Oh yes - route mapped out on the back of *How to see Europe for less than Six Sickles a Day*, Dean and Padma smuggling themselves onto Muggle planes under Harry's cloak. Then use Floo to get to Charlie's dragon camp, which, according to Ginny, should lie within the Ravensclaws' predicted range of 200 miles for The Thing. Risky wasn't the word.

"But why did it have to be Dean and Padma?" protested Hermione, draining the last few drops of tea from her cup.

"You said yourself," Ron pointed out, "*and* you agreed, by all accounts; Padma for the portal stuff. Cho couldn't go because she's got Quidditch practice all week for the game against Slytherin..."

Quidditch. *Again*. Every single thing in the wizarding world seemed to revolve around the game, and despite her best intentions, Hermione *still* couldn't get her head completely round her compatriots' obsession with the sport.

"...and then Dean because he's Muggle raised, and knows how to operate in the Muggle world..."

"I know how to operate in the Muggle world, too," Hermione interjected. Not that anyone had listened to her. In fact, to all intents and purposes, it had seemed as though no-one had even *heard* her in the library. And when she'd drawn breath to repeat herself, Ginny had nudged her softly in the ribs, a gesture evidently intended to convey the message that she should drop it.

"...and," continued Ron, "Dean can wolf out... could be useful."

Maybe she should have told the others about her *own* form - it certainly had its own distinct advantages, but something had compelled Hermione to keep that particular ability secret. She hadn't told Ron, hadn't even told Draco... her Animagus form was hers alone, and she wanted very much to keep it that way unless her hand was forced.

"Ginny wasn't too happy, though," she recalled.

"Eh?" asked Ron, reverting to clueless mode. Honestly, boys sometimes...

"Dean and Padma... *forced* to travel halfway across Europe together, hiding underneath Harry's cloak? A girl could get suspicious, you know..."

Ron shook his head, "damn! I *still* can't get my head around that one, you know? Dean and Ginny?? But she's... Ginny!" He frowned, as though working through the implications, before continuing, "hey! He'd better not hurt her..."

Hermione tutted, "of course he won't hurt Ginny... he's *Dean*..."

"...although he *did* say that Padma was the best looking girl in the year," remembered Ron.

This was news to Hermione: "did he? When?" she demanded.

"Champions' Ball," supplied Ron, "last year - asked me 'n Harry how come we got the best looking girls in the year..." He grinned at her, "animal magnetism, of course."

Hermione rolled her eyes resignedly; the problem with Ron was that although he *pretended* that he was mocking himself, she was prepared to bet that secretly he *did* hope he possessed some kind of animal magnetism... after all, there had been all that running around after Susan's sister, hadn't there?

With Ron, you very much knew what you were getting. Ron, really. Honest, loyal, perhaps a little quick tempered, but funny, a loving family and a dangerous obsession with Quidditch.

Draco, on the other hand... well, he was... *guarded*, perhaps, was the best way to put it. Clever, considered, knowing... *interesting*.

"Oh c'mon, Hermione, drop it," urged Ron, interrupting her train of thought.

"What?" she gasped, guiltily, wondering whether he was now psychic too.

"Look," he said, placatingly, "there'll be other times - we still *need* you..."

He was talking about the Away Team, she realised, "no they don't... they've got Padma, and Cho..."

"Yeah," conceded Ron, "but, respect and everything, they're not *you*..."

And the way Ron said that suddenly made the whole world seem right once more. Perhaps she could find Draco after seeing Dean and Padma off?

"Anyway," continued Ron, "what time were they going?"

"Eight," she replied, "after dinner - we're going to use Lupin's office again..."

Ron nodded, "OK, 'got time to beat you at chess then, haven't I?"

She glared at him.

Ron made a show of looking at the clock on the wall; "in fact, probably got time to beat you twice, the way you play 'n everything," he smirked.

The fact was, Ron's confidence would be a whole lot *less* annoying if it hadn't been so well founded. So *this* time she was going to make absolutely certain he'd end up eating his words...

"Well this is it, then," announced Padma, somewhat uncertainly. She and Dean were dressed in Muggle clothes. To a degree. Quite how many Muggles wore song blades across their back, as Padma was doing, was open to debate. Still, since they were going to spend most of the time in public under Harry's cloak, it shouldn't be too obvious. And Dean knew about metal detectors.

"Now remember," instructed Cho, earnestly, "you've got to keep out of sight of the Muggles..."

"Yes, yes," Dean waved his hand dismissively, "Prime Directive, we know..."

"Prime what?" asked Padma.

"Directive," explained Seamus, "Starfleet thing: no contact with pre-warp civilisations."

"Unless, of course," added Dean, "it's crucial to the plot."

Neville had obviously missed Dean's rider, "the Muggles have a *starfleet*?" he queried, incredulously.

Cho shook her head in mild exasperation - Hermione knew how she felt; this was important stuff, and Dean wasn't helping with all his quote banter.

Padma and Parvati hugged each other; it was only this year, getting to know Lavender and Parvati, that Hermione had seen how close the Patil twins were to each other. It was almost a little sad that the House system at Hogwarts enforced separation on them, really.

"OK sis," Padma was explaining, "Cho's got my robes, and my password's *Mirabilis*... the gargoyles should believe it's me..."

That, Hermione conceded, ruefully, was sneaky; to minimise Padma's absence, Parvati was going to be spending the next few days playing the role of both twins, attending just enough lessons of each in a bid to convince the staff that although they'd both come down with some sort of bug, they were both actually at Hogwarts.

And Parvati and Cho were... well, at least they were being civil to each other; Hermione hoped that lasted - Harry wouldn't want those two to constantly be at each other's throats. Not, however, that *he* was entirely without blame in the whole affair.

Ginny, subdued, and casting dark scowls at Padma whenever she thought no-one was looking, was enveloped in a goodbye that was sufficient for the rest of the gang to avert their eyes, until, finally, they were ready.

Cho, who'd hung on to Harry's cloak ever since *that* night, when - and, frankly, it was still hard to believe - she'd slept in Harry's bed, handed the cloak to the two fifth years.

"You're on your own, mate," Seamus reminded Dean, "so watch yourself... and if you need *anything* send word. Anything..."

Well, it was noble sentiment on Seamus' part, but Hermione suspected that any help the Hogwarts-based members of the Team would be able to provide would be of limited value, given the time it would take to reach them.

"Well," announced Padma, "wish us luck..."

No-one was actually able to vocalise proper words, and instead vague, encouraging and hopeful murmurs emanated from the seven who were staying behind (Ron was still holed up

in Gryffindor Tower - he'd wanted to come and see them off, but it would have drawn far too much attention to the escapade).

Dean raised a finger in a mock salute. Hermione willed him with all her might not to say it, but it was a lost cause; "smoke me a kipper, I'll be back for breakfast," he promised.

And with that, the two threw Floo powder into the fire, and in calm tones announced their destination; "The Leaky Cauldron."

The office was silent for a moment, Dean and Padma having disappeared in the flash of Floo powder, no-one quite knowing what they had to do next. Dean and Padma were on their way to Durmstrang; they had the Portkey, Padma would construct the portal, and as much as could be done would have been done on that front.

Hermione found herself thinking of Harry; he should have been the one to go with Padma, or Dean. Perhaps both - a new Trio forged, she noted, bitterly, still feeling a bit left out, overlooked.

But what would he have done *then*? Because with Harry the fight didn't end; he knew how to carry the cause, and how to continually make the right stand... it was a conviction he carried that infected you. Harry inspired loyalty in his friends, and, remaining loyal to Harry, Hermione knew that the cause didn't end with the Third Key.

But then, where to carry the fight next? Hermione was ruminating on this when the silence was broken.

"Only three will return," intoned Parvati, listlessly - almost trance-like. It *certainly* wasn't Parvati's normal, slightly giggly tone, nor the waspish snap she employed when riled. It was almost... disembodied - as though it wasn't even *Parvati* who was doing the speaking.

The others warily turned their attention from Lupin's fireplace to Parvati as she repeated her words, this time with her own, sounding puzzled voice: "only three will return... three. But...?"

Lavender covered her open mouth with the sleeve of her robes (she always managed to stretch the material so that it completely covered her fingers), "Parvati!" she breathed, fascinated, "the Inner Eye..."

Hermione rolled her eyes, discreetly; there was far too much superstition and silly beliefs floating around at Hogwarts. It had long been recorded that Divination was the most imprecise of the magical arts, and, frankly, it was her considered opinion that Divination Studies seemed to have a great deal more basis in theatre than magic.

But whilst Lavender was looking thrilled to have witnessed her best friend experiencing a vision, Parvati was looking terrified.

"So," interrupted Seamus, not quite failing to keep the doubt from his voice, "you think you had a vision?"

"Only three will return," repeated Parvati, fearfully, before taking a step nearer the fire, "Padma!"

"You mean," gasped Lavender, "that... they're not coming back? That they *can't*?"

"*Only* three will return," replied Parvati, who was evidently juggling the stresses to the words to see if she could wring any clearer meaning from the sentence.

Sensing that the moment had come to dispense some much needed, sober rationality, Hermione pointed out the obvious fact they all seemed to have missed, "well, since only *two* people left, *three* returning doesn't make a lot of sense, does it?"

Honestly; if that was Parvati and Lavender's idea of a vision, it wasn't a very good one, was it?

But then Parvati *looked* at her, and Hermione saw in her friend's eyes that she genuinely believed she'd experienced a vision. Genuinely believed with a conviction no amount of well argued logic seemed likely to dislodge.

"No, no," countered Parvati, not argumentatively, or in irritation; she just seemed to want Hermione, everyone, to understand, "all I saw was that three would return... and that that was... bad." Despite the absolute conviction in Parvati's eyes, the rest of her carriage betrayed fear, doubt and uncertainty. "Padma... Padma! We've got to..."

But before she could step nearer to the fireplace, Seamus had grabbed hold of her, "Parvati!" he admonished, "you *can't* follow..." He paused, still holding Parvati from behind with both arms as she made a half-hearted attempt to escape, before continuing in a softer, more understanding tone, "*if* it was a vision, then what's happened will happen... and if it wasn't..."

Hermione thought everyone was missing the excellent point she'd made earlier, so decided it would bear repetition, "but only two people went," she persisted, "so how can three return? It doesn't make sense..."

"Actually," interrupted Ginny, "there are more than two who have to return to Hogwarts, aren't there? I mean, there's Snape, and Vellum..."

"Vellum won't come back," vowed Hermione, darkly.

"Sprout... she left, too," Neville reminded them.

"And Harry... don't forget Harry," put in Cho.

"Well, yes," agreed Lavender, "but Harry's in prison... I don't think... well..." she trailed off under Cho's hurt look.

"You OK now?" asked Seamus, relaxing his hold on Parvati.

"Yes..." she replied, unconvincingly, taking Lavender's proffered arm.

The remnants of the Away Team stared at the flickering flames in Lupin's office, wondering what it all meant.

Beside her, Ginny clung to Hermione's arm, "and Dean's Captain..." she whispered, softly.

Fighting to restrain the impulse to dismiss the ridiculous notion of the Gryffindor Curse that seemed to have most of her supposedly courageous house cowering in fear, Hermione leant into the fourth year, "he was only Acting Captain, Ginny..."

"Hmph," Ginny didn't sound satisfied with that answer, somehow; "He'll be OK, won't he?"

"Of course he'll be OK," attested Hermione, with confidence that seemed to be growing falser by the second. "He and Padma both..."

She wanted to glare archly at Parvati for stirring everything up so badly, but somehow she couldn't quite bring herself to fully disbelieve her.

But she was being silly. Parvati couldn't see the future - it was a notoriously weak area of magical practice, full of fakes and charlatans. And it didn't make the slightest scrap of sense.

And yet.... and yet they all knew now: only three would return.

Which three?

Chapter 67

Mandrakes are primarily used in restoratives. What animal-based derivative did the Mandrake replace?

The walls were screaming.

Worse than that, the previously subdued patterns that had denoted the rough hewn chambers and corridors of Blackrock had sprung to life. Energy was boiling off the walls, forming into serpents of flickering light, converging on Harry as he paused, mesmerised by the transformation.

None of it looked remotely friendly.

The rock reverberated with the noise - a Banshee-like scream, muffled, deep drum beats, and a distant, shrill chatter. The whole place was ablaze with energy, and as more... things unfolded, liquid-like, from the rock, Harry shook himself to his senses.

Flicking his arm outward, he sent a sparkling hail of blood red arrows down the corridor, slicing through his adversaries' patterns, whereupon the energies dimmed and slowed.

They didn't die immediately, however, the light flickering like dying embers, energy rising and falling as the demons' energies fought to remain alive. And all the time, more power was oozing from the rock.

Realising that he was in danger of being trapped by the wall of energy that was being constructed in his corridor, Harry forced his feet to move, and he set off, running to the first junction of the labyrinth.

This hadn't been in the plan at all.

The dying embers of the burnt-out entities crunched underfoot as Harry made his way down from his cell to the end of the corridor. Indistinct shapes pressed out from the walls as new beasts formed, ready to emerge and fight.

Fortunately Harry was ready for them, slicing foes apart with a blade of energy almost as soon as they sprang from the rockface. The ceiling rippled, as more demons caught his scent, and he was having to wince from the noise of the screams as they assaulted him from all sides.

The whole rock seemed alive - there were patterns moving *everywhere*, through the walls, running down corridors, up and down through the rock. The dull energies that had been dormant in the walls on first arrival were now very much active.

An elongated snout, reptilian nostrils and dark red eyes lunged at him, serrated teeth aiming for his throat. Harry had vaporised it with barely a second thought, the stump of the beast's neck all that remained, protruding from the rough-cut archway, twitching spasmodically.

Above the walls' cries, which seemed to be the trapped patterns' desperate pleas to escape the confines of the rock, an angry screeching, almost birdlike, seemed to have added itself to the din.

The opposite wall suddenly dissolved, and thousands upon thousands of scurrying beetle-like things started scurrying towards Harry. He obliterated them with a single thought and involuntary shudder.

He had to keep moving.

The guard rooms, obviously, had immediately detected the disturbance. The whole rock was straining and groaning, as though somewhere, deep, deep beneath Harry's feet, massive levers and pulleys were being operated, and mechanisms long asleep were being awoken.

With as much spare sense as he could muster, battling as he was with assailants on all sides, Harry swept the prison. Six guards were on a cart on the first track, evidently hoping to cut him off at the middle intersection.

Flames leapt out of the floor as he dodged curse traps, and set off chains of alarm wards. The walls, he was dismayed to learn, could move. Fortunately, they could only move slowly, and for the time being he was making sufficient headway for his anticipated route not to have been cut off.

Nonetheless, with the imminent arrival of the guards, and the increasing battalions of patterns that were rallying against him, Harry was wondering how long he would last in this war of attrition.

And where the hell was Bill?

A means of escape will present itself, he'd said. But Harry couldn't see anything remotely likely; he didn't even know what he was looking for, or where he should be looking for it.

And with each step, the need to focus his sense on nearer surroundings increased, until ultimately he was sprinting through corridors with his sense barely extending beyond the visual.

But the visual was pretty impressive.

Goblins weren't particularly imaginative creatures, except when it came to dreaming up new methods of torture, and new dimensions of cruelty. Blackrock had evidently been so named because, firstly, it was a rock, and secondly, it was black.

Well, under normal conditions the rock would have been black. Today, however, it pulsed luminescent colours, the walls seeming almost organic as shapes swam inside, pacing Harry's progress.

It was a full-scale visual assault; colours and patterns everywhere, mists of energy swirling around cascading torrents of fire and magic. Charms gleamed like beacons, and curses lurked darkly within warded traps. The rock swam with iridescent colour, energy manifesting itself on an unimaginable scale.

There were serpents that would eject out of the walls, landing on the floor and slithering towards him with surprising speed. Multi-legged segmented beasts, looking something like the Crawlers from Beauxbatons, but with crab-link pincers instead of legs, and huge winged beetles with sparkling armour; these two would match Harry's sprinting from within the wall, and then leap out at his face, pincers, mandibles, claws and tendrils all flailing to grasp him.

It was exhausting work; Harry was able to dismiss most of his assailants with lightning bolts, or streams of concentrated fire. For a while he conjured up a sword of pure, blue energy, hacking his way through a forest of patterns that had made to seal off one of the access shafts, but the demands of concentration had proved too much, and he'd been forced to revert to gunning things down on sight, using fireballs or lightning bolts or energy spears.

About the only good piece of news seemed to be that the goblins had stopped their cart before they'd reached the intersection. Harry assumed that either they were picking up supplies (for which read 'weaponry'), or they were satisfied that the prison's own defences were more than capable of handling one attempted breakout.

Neither interpretation was particularly encouraging, when taking the long term view, but six goblins sitting in their cart on the track was much better than six goblins standing before him, so Harry was at least thankful for that small crumb of comfort.

The ground shook again, as though a massive door had been swung shut deep in the foundations of the Earth itself. Everything paused, warily - even the patterns seemed to freeze in mid air, and Harry wondered what new demon's release this signified.

The onslaught resumed almost immediately, however, and in a hail of energy, broken curses and alarm flashes, he staggered onto the cart track, thankful that the engineers had taken the time to level the flooring upon which the rails ran.

Another plus was that the walls to the cart track weren't patterned; they were just ordinary, dull walls. So apart from the beasts pursuing him, and the various other energies that were converging on all access points to the cartway's tunnel, the burden of the duel was lessened somewhat.

Where he was getting the energy from he had no idea, but with his heart hammering seemingly in his mouth, and his forehead throbbing, Harry tried to force his legs to run faster.

He was heading for a smaller passageway - a set of unused cellblocks lay off that corridor, similar in most respects to all the other cells in Blackrock, but with a thinner skin of rock insulating them from the outside world than anywhere else in the prison.

Whether he would be able to blast his way out of one of those cells had to be determined, but it seemed to be the best chance he'd have of escaping.

Although it didn't seem it, running frantically before the pursuing demons, Harry had spent a long time planning his escape, and working out which corridors to take, which to dodge, and whether it was better to trip a curse or trigger an alarm.

As the cart-track rose up and then twisted sharp right, Harry vaulted up out of the recessed path, heading back once more into the domain of the animate walls.

The floor crackled as his shoes skimmed the edges of hidden curses, his shield of Mage energy sufficient, for the time being at least, to ward off any ill effect.

Unlike a wizard, however, who could cast a spell and then happily ignore its existence, every single magical act Harry performed required concentration and mental discipline. So all the time he was using his shield to barrel through magical boundaries, and deflect the hostile patterns' assaults, his capacity to sense was diminished, and his capability to attack nullified.

His initial plan had been one of aggressively breaking out of prison; attacking the very structure with all the power at his disposal, employing brute force and sheer ruthlessness to escape his cell.

The course of his escape so far had resulted in him drastically revising that strategy to one of mainly defensive magic - protecting himself from the ever-multiplying guardians of the rock; there simply wasn't time to mount counter attacks. No sooner had he warded off one series of threats than something new rose up to challenge.

Quite how it had happened he had no idea, but for some reason he'd ended up rounding the corner backwards, arms flailing as he struggled to fight off a mass of writhing tentacles that had extruded itself from the ceiling - luminous tendrils attempting to leech onto his hair, his skin, his clothes.

So it was his sense that first picked them up. Six beasts, not patterns, but genuinely alive things, were hurtling down the next stretch of corner, towards his unprotected back.

Even as he raised his arms, spinning on his heels to face this latest challenge, Harry felt the air tingle. *Another* presence had arrived in the corridor, and out of nowhere, a spinning star of Magefire tore into the creatures, slicing through flesh, scale and bone as the victims shrieked in pain.

The creatures disposed of, the star exploded outwards, and swept through the corridor walls, which instantly turned dull.

"Thanks Lucas," breathed a relieved Harry into the temporary stillness of the air, pausing for a breather. He felt even worse about leaving the Carribbean Mage behind now, but he couldn't double back to fetch him; time was short enough as it was, and since Lucas really *had* been blinded, he was in no fit state to break out by himself.

Nonetheless, Harry suddenly understood why it was that the guards' progress on the cart track had been arrested: that was *two* he owed Lucas now.

His mentor's onslaught had only neutralised the rock temporarily, though, and energy was rapidly pouring into the vacuum he'd created.

Breathing hard, Harry ran his fingers through his hair, pushed his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose, and set off running once more.

Just a little slower than before.

The energy shield sparked in flashes of magenta as he hurled himself through another boundary charm, tumbling across the floor and towards the partly-concealed door just in time to avoid the walls collapsing on top of him.

When it came to booby-traps, Harry noted, the goblins didn't exactly do things by halves.

He paused to gather breath once more, sweat was pouring from him, and he started to shiver as the coolness of the rock took hold. Snapping himself out of the stupor with a judder, Harry fixed his eye wearily on a large, gleaming serpent that was pouring out of the distant wall.

He wished Dean had been there: *Snakes: why'd it have to be snakes?*

Blinking hard as he drew his power back in once more, Harry sent a sheet of cold energy down the corridor, a presence that touched all four walls, leaving a trail of glowing embers as it passed.

Predictably enough, the snake, too, shrivelled and burned, reduced to a snaking heap of ash on the dark floor.

But Harry was getting too weary to notice these things now, and he had to concentrate all his attention on simply keeping on track, and out of harm's way.

More insects, swarming from the cell block as the walls dissolved, an army of black beetles sweeping across the floor towards him. The serpent's residue crunched underfoot as Harry staggered onwards, his hands receiving a sharp shock as he accidentally leant against the rock for a moment's support, serrated teeth drawing blood despite his Seeker's reflexes kicking in.

Having spent the previous eight weeks locked in a cell, with poor diet, no exercise and an almost total lack of physical stimulus, Harry knew he was out of condition. And the pounding his body was taking as he fought, charged, cut and slammed his way through the labyrinth was taking its toll.

His feet felt like lead weights, it was a struggle to keep his eyes open, and the only thing that was sustaining onward progress was the certainty of recapture should he falter.

Behind him, he could sense Lucas' spinning a vast web of energy that was lacing through the rock and seemed, for the time being, to be able to thwart any further aggressors moving into Harry's area of the rock.

He still had plenty of things to combat, but at least Lucas' intervention was helping to level the playing field. The cell block he was aiming for, three levels above the corridor he was jogging raggedly down, was near the Blood Trackers' cage, and in the act of sensing his destination, his attention was drawn to the Trackers' movements: at that moment, they seemed to all be clinging, limpet-like, to the side of their cave - all struggling, it seemed, to get as near to their prey as possible.

All struggling to get as near to him as they could.

And then Harry remembered that the Trackers' cage had an opening in its roof, at the very top of the dome - these things were free to roam in the outside world... and that's where he was headed next.

Trying to run up irregular, darkened stairwells was hard enough. Trick stairs, invisible doors, moving doorways and curse-traps didn't exactly make life any more straightforward, but the thing that got him had been hovering just out of sight from the stair's entrance.

The closest thing Harry could compare it to would be a jellyfish; it had the same, sponge like consistency, translucent and bulbous, with long tendrils hanging underneath; it hovered in the air, its full length slightly taller than Harry, a thick forest of tendrils immediately grasping his outstretched arm, pouring stings through the rough material of his prison robes.

It was a curious thing, really; just as he'd always used his right hand for wandwork, in much the same way as he was right-handed when it came to handwriting, Harry had always associated his Mage abilities with that hand as well.

Suddenly forced to do all his channelling through his left arm was harder than he'd imagined, and he found himself almost back at the infancy of his powers, clumsily trying to fend off the jellyfish with ineffectual bursts of power.

His right arm was numb to the elbow, and he could feel the cold creeping further up as he finally managed to set the beast aflame, but not before the frenzied tentacles had managed to wind themselves around his legs in the thing's death-throes.

Shaking now with both exhaustion, cold and, no doubt, the side-effects of whatever venom he'd taken on board, Harry staggered into the empty cellblock. Freedom was simply a few metres of rock away.

Whatever defence mechanism Lucas had employed to keep the aggressors at bay had certainly been effective. Small patterns were tracking Harry's path through the block, towards the final cell on the right hand side, but they were of little concern to him now.

It didn't look that much different to its neighbours. Or, indeed, to any of the hundreds of cells scattered throughout Blackrock at the whim of whatever mind had designed the place. But Harry knew differently: *this* cell was special.

This was the cell where Blackrock's walls were at their thinnest. *This* was his one and only chance of breaking free of the walls, and reaching the outside world.

He hobbled into the room, his right knee now having gone the way of his arm, frozen - either numbed or poisoned, he wasn't sure which, but the end result was the same.

He blinked, and then tried to will himself not to close his eyes again - he wasn't sure he'd be able to re-open them if he did, he was so tired now. But so close. He just had to get through the rockface.

Standing in the cell, a couple of feet away from the thinnest part of the wall, Harry paused to consider his options. Force? Flame? Energy?

It may have been ten seconds, it may have been a minute, Harry's brain had become too numb to actually process time accurately, but he was still alert enough to realise he'd wasted precious moments just... lost, staring at the barrier in exhaustion.

Still forced to manifest with his left hand, he decided to favour blunt force over subtlety, and launched a crushing hammerblow at the wall.

The entire cell-block shook, fragments of rubble falling about him, and the rock itself chipping, fragments sliding to the floor like slate.

He hit it again. And again. And again.

A crack had now developed - jagged, running broadly diagonally from floor to ceiling, although the air was now thick with dust, and in the dimness of his sense he could see Lucas' force barrier being forced to retreat, closing tighter and tighter around the cell as energies from all sides launched wave after wave of attack.

The final, staggered blow did it; the rock crumbled under the weight of the impact, and for one terrible second Harry half expected the ceiling to cave in on top of him. But, miraculously, the rock held, and Harry got his first taste of the outside world in two months.

It was a grim, dark and stormy February evening. Rain lashed in from dark grey clouds, the storm tossed sea a steely grey in colour, the tips of the waves flecked white by the spray.

A cold, biting wind whistled into the prison, carrying spray that immediately rendered his glasses virtually useless. But it also carried the unmistakable tang of sea air; salt, and cool, and, most important of all, free.

Not daring to wait any longer, Harry hauled himself through the opening, to find himself on the outside of Blackrock, rough hard stone, slick from the rain, crawling in seagulls that watched their cousins wheel and dive over the rough sea.

He attempted to stand upright; the numbness in his leg was slowly working its way higher, and he'd lost all feeling in his shoulder too. Nonetheless, he limped further out onto the rock, desperately scanning the waves for a sign.

Where the hell was Bill?

A new sound entered the air now, though, and with his blood chilling, Harry hobbled about to stare at the tip of the rock, where a stream of creatures were shooting through the hole in the roof of the Trackers' cage, like some grotesque fountain.

The seagulls panicked, and almost as one dived towards the sea, evidently desperate not to face the rock's guardians. Harry, of course, had no such luxury, and could only look on, both horrified and transfixed, as more and more patterns launched themselves into the skies, wheeling and diving as they explored the freedom of the air.

It wasn't long before the first one made its move. All Harry could see, in the first instance, was a long snout, dragon-like wings and squat, stubby legs. The tail was spiked, similar to a Hungarian Horntail's, and for an odd moment Harry was bizarrely reminded of Spark, his Thresher.

The Tracker swooped down from the circling flock, making straight for Harry as he stood, weight now pressed entirely onto his good leg, braced against the freezing spray and biting wind.

They made a high pitched screeching sound, much like the sound of fingernails being scraped down a blackboard, and as the leathery body launched its attack, Harry flailed out with his left arm once more, a lance of green energy connecting with the Tracker's ribs.

The flesh split apart and the creature screamed and wailed as a second lance ran it through. The jaws still snapped, though; a long, elongated snout, reptilian slits for nostrils, and deep, red eyes fixed upon Harry. The Thresher pushed itself towards him with its hind legs, as Harry found himself backed against the rock, with no further retreat possible.

This time he hit it with force, a crushing blow that sent the carcass plunging off the rock and into the crashing waves of the sea below.

But no sooner had he watched the beast's remains be swallowed up by the steely grey water than renewed shrieking announced another attack. Four of the winged beasts had dropped from the flock, aiming directly for him.

Where *was* Bill? Harry scanned the sea in desperation, looking for sight of a boat, a raft, a giant squid; *anything*. He couldn't do this on his own...

The Blood Trackers were continuing to funnel up out of the opening to their cave, a fountain of blackness, patterns burning darkly in the sense.

It was slippery underfoot, as Harry continued to make his way along the rockface, looking for something, *anything*, that might get him out of this mess.

Bill had *said*... he'd *promised*. But there wasn't anything in sight.

The metallic screeching signified another attack; three Trackers had landed on the rockface before him, long snouts sniffing the air, scaled wings flapping lazily.

He was tired. Drained. Weary, cold, alone and beginning to lose faith in Bill's ability to extricate him from this mess.

Each subsequent lance of energy was getting weaker than the one before, and as he engaged the Trackers in yet another round of tumbling, snapping wrestling, with yet *more* beasts launching themselves from the rock to aid their comrades, Harry began to realise that he was staring defeat in the face.

Fatigue numbing his mind, he was able to conjure up a claw of energy, the points of green flame acting as though they were extended talons to his right hand fingers. With a loose, barely controlled flailing, he sliced through the Trackers immediately facing him, before slumping heavily against the rock, exhausted.

The cold on his right side had connected now - from his legs to his shoulder, the entire right side of his body felt like ice, and he could feel the coldness seeping through his veins, lacing across his ribs, chilling his lungs, and squeezing the oxygen from his body.

The cold sea spray had soaked him to the skin, the thin prison robes offering scant protection from the elements, and Harry could only shudder involuntarily as he looked inevitability in the face.

New calls announced more arrivals. His exhausted sense told him that six, seven, maybe more creatures were landing on the rock encircling him, and drawing closer.

Too tired to count.

Harry barely had the strength left to stand, let alone raise his one good arm sufficiently to lash out at his aggressors. The steely grey waves continued to crash into the rocks, absorbing all of Harry's listless mind - he'd done all he could, and it hadn't been enough.

Even as the beasts slunk nearer, however, their dull scales scraping on the rock's surface, a new cry pierced the February sky.

As one, the Trackers flinched, and pressed themselves flat against the rock, frantically working their way backwards from the new aggressor, plummeting down from the sky.

Gathering himself up for one last, final stand, Harry raised his eyes to the heavens to see what fresh misery was about to be wrought upon him.

His jaw dropped; shoulders slumping and knees buckling, Harry collapsed against the rock; "you've *got* to be kidding me..." he breathed, disconsolately.

What *more* did he have to *do*?

Chapter 68

What is the furthest recorded distance a wizard or witch has ever Apparated?

The dragon swooped downward, wings curling, claws spread before it.

Harry raised a half-hearted left hand, trying to summon up some kind of defensive energy, but he knew the situation was hopeless - the escape had drained him totally, and he had nothing left to give.

"Harry, mate!" The dragon had a rider.

Harry blinked. There was a *rider* on the dragon. And he *knew* that voice. Despite the freezing pain that had paralysed his entire right hand side, relief swept through him.

Charlie Weasley had come to pick him up. On the back of a sodding dragon.

The dragon, jet black, with ivory spikes encrusting its spine and tail, landed lightly on the rock, its amber eyes level with Harry's own. With almost casual elegance, it swept its tail, smashing a clutch of Trackers clean into the rockface, pulverised bodies trailing bloody smears in the half-light.

The dragon beat its wings softly as Charlie dismounted, robed entirely in black, right down to the mask covering his face. A pointless disguise, in Harry's opinion - the Weasley hair was a bit of a dead giveaway.

"C'mon, let's get out of here," firm hands grabbed Harry, and unceremoniously dumped him on the back of the winged beast. It was all Harry could do to hold on to the pommel of the saddle with his one good hand, his left knee doing its best to grip on to the side. There was no way he could survive a flight on this thing.

Charlie had leapt back on board in front of him, and with an urgent flick of the wand, silver ropes bound Harry's arms and legs to the saddle. The dragon snorted, raised onto its hind legs and then took flight, powerful wings beating uncomfortably as they left the ground.

And now Harry understood why he hadn't detected Charlie's presence earlier. He'd been looking *outward* for assistance, not up.

As though seeing their opportunity, almost as soon as the dragon took to the air, the swirling flock of Trackers started to approach, guttural screeches filling the air.

Although not an expert on dragon flight, Harry could tell that his mount hadn't yet got into a comfortable flying rhythm; the beast's wings laboured heavily, the spine underneath the saddle flexing and twisting as Charlie fought to build momentum.

The first of the Trackers plummeted down towards them, wings tucked into its body, tail perfectly inline with the head, giving the impression that it was a thin, sharp dart plummeting at them.

Staying awake was a battle, but Harry fought the urge to close his eyes. If this was to be the end, he didn't lose much by being around to see it. Charlie barely gave the Tracker a second glance - he pulled the reins and the dragon dipped its left wing, causing them to pivot in mid air, right wing aloft.

It wasn't until he'd registered the two separate pieces of ex-Tracker slapping into the stone that Harry appreciated that this manoeuvre had allowed the dragon to free its right fore and hind legs for attack. The Tracker, unable to divert its dive, had been sliced apart by the ivory talons, a strange gurgling cry that was soon lost under the roar of flame.

Immediately Charlie pulled hard on the reins, the saddle again shifted beneath Harry, who was buffeted this way and that unceremoniously. They wheeled about, gaining altitude once more, as the dragon's muscles started to sink into a thick, solid rhythm, power thrumming along its spine. The flock of Trackers were still above them - indeed, Charlie seemed intent on flying directly at the swirling mass - but as a few more beasts lunged at them, a fundamental truth about dragons struck Harry.

On the ground, a dragon was bad enough. If the head didn't get you, then the tail would. In the air, however, freed from the need to use its legs for mobility, a dragon suddenly gained an extra four weapons; in this case each of the beast's jet black claws, tipped with sharp, serrated ivory talons.

Couple this with a jaws that bit *and* spat flame, a tail, encrusted with similar ivory extrusions to the talons, and a rider who clearly knew how to use his mount as a weapon, and it was actually starting to look like a fair contest.

The swarm of Trackers had thinned considerably - much more than could be accounted for simply by the dragon's kill-tally. Harry's mind was too far gone to dwell on the implications of this, however - the cold had enveloped his body, and he was shuddering uncontrollably, too tired to try and control it.

One thing was for sure, though. This dragon could *fly*. They'd swooped, dived, spun, climbed. The beast had laid waste to assailants from all angles, using a combination of claws, jaws, fire and tail, Charlie's head constantly checking all angles in the sky.

Harry couldn't understand why the Trackers didn't simply give up in the face of such superior opposition. It was obvious from the fourth or fifth wave of attack that they weren't going to stand a chance at intercepting his escape.

Maybe they had - all that were left now were a bare handful of the reptilian beasts, attempting to match the dragon's flight. But now that the immediate battle had been won, the dragon seemed to spread its wings still further, and the assailants soon started receding.

Harry tried to ignore the cold, and extend his sense backward to see what had become of them, but the fatigue had dulled all ability, and it was as much as his brain could cope with to process the fact that he was alive, he'd got free from Blackrock, and he was on dragonback.

They climbed higher.

It had been cold at sea level. Further up, in cloud, it was colder still, despite the best efforts of Charlie's Warming Charm. The ice in Harry's veins was creeping further across his chest, as though flesh and bone was being systematically replaced with ice.

He shivered uncontrollably as Charlie gave the guided tour: "Harry, say hello to Akiko..."

Harry murmured something incoherent, but hopefully sufficiently grateful, to the jet black beast's back.

"She's a Japanese Gothic," continued Charlie, shouting above the noise of the howling rain and driving wind, "very, very rare. Quick as hell, though, but they've got a bit of a short fuse..."

Oh great, thought Harry. Just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, he gets to hitch a lift, half-paralysed, on a quick-tempered dragon. He wondered, with what little brain could function above the cold, where they were headed. "R... R... Romania?" he croaked?

"Merlin no!" responded Charlie, shocked, "can't take Akiko near any of the dragons at the camp; she'd tear them to pieces..."

Well, thought Harry feebly, desperately looking for the positive spin to place on events, at least Charlie had thought ahead.

"Spain, Harry."

Spain? *Spain*? What were they going to Spain for? It was in *completely* the wrong direction.

Although he would dearly have loved to query Charlie's chosen destination, it was a struggle to formulate any words at all.

In fact, it hurt to breathe, his lungs feeling as though they were filling up with freezing liquid. He tried to explain his predicament, but all that came from his mouth were a few, half choked coughs and a string of drool.

"Hang in there, Harry, hang in mate..."

Not knowing what else to do, Harry gave in to the impulse to close his eyes. Just for a second.

Darkness engulfed him.

Weary beyond belief, chilled to the absolute bone, it took Harry a little while to realise that he was no longer being buffeted from side to side by Akiko's somewhat brutal flying style.

His chest felt like ice. His whole *body* felt like ice, and the only hint of warmth was his mind's promise that keeping his eyes closed would fend off the chill. He just needed to sleep a little more, and everything would be fine...

It was a strange dream. The room, for he seemed to be out of the rain, echoed as someone walked past where he lay; footsteps echoing sharply off the walls.

Stone floor. He didn't know how, but somehow he knew that the walls were stone, too. And it was so quiet. But warm - as though the air was thick with steam, as though potions simmered nearby, just out of sight.

Someone called his name - a youngish, blonde woman. He knew her, but he couldn't think where from. And then a male voice. Latin - a spell, obviously, and that was *definitely* a familiar voice. He knew them, but, the incantation finished, the two voices dropped to a murmur, and the two presences disappeared simultaneously, leaving him alone once more in the unknown room.

If the dream had been strange, waking up was truly bizarre.

He'd been right about the room - soft, yellowy walls, dark grey flagstones to the floor. It was daylight outside, judging by the fuzzy glow emanating from part of the wall - had to be a window, he guessed. Daylight - he'd not seen real daylight for over two months; it had been dusk when he'd finally blasted his way through the cell at Blackrock, and Charlie had flown through the night to get him here.

Wherever 'here' was.

His right arm tingled. Peering down through squinted eyes, Harry was disturbed to note that it appeared to be completely covered in a thick forest of needles. Quite how he hadn't noticed as soon as he awoke he had no idea, but now he couldn't take his eyes off the spectacle of his arm being used as a pin-cushion.

And then, as though he were watching himself in slow-motion from some distant vantage point, Harry felt himself lowering his line of blurred sight to consider his right leg, noting with resignation that it, too, was completely covered in short, silver needles, clustered together so thickly you could barely see the skin.

Cautiously, he stretched out his left, good, hand to test the needles in his arm, to see how deeply they were buried, but just as his fingertips brushed the silver, the door opened, and, guiltily, he withdrew his hand with a start.

"I wouldn't do that," advised the visitor; short, vaguely black robes, approached the bed, handing Harry his glasses, which he slipped on gratefully. The witch was short, a kind, round face, blue eyes and whitened hair pulled back into a bun. Her robes were very basic, black affairs, with white trim.

"I wasn't," lied Harry, for no good reason whatsoever. "Where... who, er, I mean, where am I?" More to the point, where was Charlie? What was he doing here? Was it safe?

"My goodness, we're quite forgetting ourselves, aren't we? I am Sister Angela - I have a much longer name in the Order, but Sister Angela will do nicely... We *knew* you were British," she added, as though pleased to have been proved right.

"So you're a Mu..." Harry caught himself just in time, "a nun, then?" Come to think of it, they definitely weren't robes she was wearing. So why was he in a Muggle convent?

Why had Charlie flown him across the sea on a back of a dragon, to then throw him into a *convent*, of all places? The small crumb of consolation had to be the fact that it didn't take a tremendous amount of concentration to act confused, disorientated and, not to put too fine a point on it, bewildered.

"We are the Order of Francesca Rosario," explained Sister Angela, as she pressed a cool hand against Harry's forehead, and took his pulse from his left hand, "and we run a small hospital here for the locals. It's not often we get tourists around here - not much to see, really... Anyway, that's me taken care of, and you are...?"

"Neville," replied Harry, reflexively, and he then cursed himself for picking on Neville again. Why couldn't he have chosen Dean, or Ron, or Seamus? What made him identify himself so strongly with Neville? "Neville Longbottom." He nodded his head vigorously for emphasis, but had the strong suspicion that Sister Angela could see right through him.

Figuring he ought to throw everything into it, Harry widened his eyes in what he hoped was a convincing expression of complete innocence, with a dash of utter sincerity thrown in for additional seasoning.

There was something about the way the nun was looking at him that seemed to compel further explanation. "I, er... well," he began, and then paused. What should he say? 'Well, actually I'm an escaped convict, famous throughout the wizarding world, and committed to hunting down my sworn enemy. To the death (because that would be *sure* to go down well in a convent). By the way, you haven't seen a dragon, recently, have you?'

No, somehow Harry knew that that wouldn't be the best way to approach the conversation.

But what was he supposed to do? He couldn't lie to a *nun*.

Could he?

Sister Angela had tsked, and hummed about his bedside as she poked and prodded him, peered intently into his eyes and muttered constantly to herself. Harry just sat there patiently, life in prison having taught him how to be passive.

"Well," frowned the nun, eventually, "I must say that either Sister Amerie mis-diagnosed you last night, or you are the fastest natural healer I have *ever* seen."

Harry had the presence of mind to look baffled, and surprised at this pronouncement, but was secretly wishing that Charlie would turn up soon and get him out of this mess. It would only be a matter of time before the witch, nope, he corrected himself, the nun, would start asking more searching questions of him.

He shrugged his shoulders apologetically, aware that Sister Angela was regarding him with a calculating gaze that was beginning to border on the suspicious. He gamely tried widening his eyes even more; Bambi had nothing on this.

Sister Angela merely frowned back, as though biting back a question that was on the tip of her tongue, and replacing it with a different, far less satisfying enquiry, "would you like some breakfast?"

"Er, yes please," agreed Harry, with unseemly haste. Food! He hadn't eaten properly in, well, eight weeks.

Eight weeks and a day. To the second; his last 'real' meal had been breakfast with the Away Team at the Gryffindor Table. It was definitely official; Bill was cool.

Almost as cool as Charlie. Escaping on dragonback! Hagrid was right, Harry thought, dragons *were* brilliant.

A small voice in his mind noted wryly that Harry's appreciation of dragons increased directly in proportion to how far he was able to maintain his distance from them. Right up close they were still more than a little scary. But, in principle, he was now definitely in Hagrid's camp in the 'dragons are fantastic' debate.

Breakfast consisted of scrambled egg on toast (the Order of Francesca Rosaria were vegetarians, it turned out) and orange juice. Sister Angela had brought the food in on a rough tray, with a younger nun, with whom she was engaged in a particularly high speed conversation in a language Harry didn't have a hope of following.

Spanish, he guessed, since Charlie had said that's where they were headed. Carefully he tried extending his sense beyond the room's walls, but the effort was too much for him, weakened as he was from the previous day's exploits.

"Well, Neville," interpreted Sister Angela, as her companion beamed a dazzling smile at Harry, "you're quite a special boy by all accounts."

Internally, Harry bristled at 'boy'. But then 'man' wouldn't have been right, either, and nuns didn't really say things like 'guy' or 'bloke'. Ignoring his wounded pride, he attempted to dust off his 'look of earnest gratitude'.

"Sister Amerie here thinks it's nothing short of a *miracle* how quickly you've recovered from the road accident..."

Harry kept a fixed, bewildered smile on his face. There was a deep irony to the fact that his parents' fate had also been ascribed to a car accident for many, many years. Frankly, the year was proving to have far too many parallels with previous disasters for Harry's liking, and accommodating and helpful as the nuns were being, he grew impatient to get out of the convent, and get to Durmstrang.

As he shovelled his breakfast in as quickly as he could whilst still appearing to be respectable, Harry felt the edge reassert itself to his resolve. He had to get to Durmstrang. He had to reach the Third Key.

His arm and leg were stuck full of acupuncture needles. OK, first things first, he had to drop the pincushion impression, and *then* he had to reach the Third Key.

"You'll be famous," explained Sister Angela, as Sister Amerie clutched Harry's hand and gabbled delightedly to him, "I mean, such a *quick* recovery... I've never seen anything like it in my life..."

Inwardly, Harry groaned. Fame in *two* worlds was more than he needed at that particular moment in time.

What he *needed* was to get out of the ward, which was already beginning to take up in his mind the role of a slightly more upmarket variation of prison, and he needed to get out fast.

Time was of the essence.

And he was still stuck full of needles.

Sister Amerie had removed probably 80% of the needles from his arm, and all the pins from his leg before the two nuns had left him to his own devices. The nun, who couldn't have been any older than Percy, but was obviously a lot nicer, had delightedly chattered away to Harry all the time, despite his wholly obvious lack of comprehension.

As she left, however, she managed a few words of English, "Good. Bye, Neville," she managed, patting his hand.

"It's Harry," confessed Harry, feeling wholly guilty for having lied to Sister Angela in the first place.

Sister Amerie seemed unfazed, "Good. Bye, 'arry," she modified, before gathering up the needles, which were looking alarmingly long as they lay in the stainless steel kidney bowl she'd used for their collection, and sweeping out of the room.

Harry watched the door close, feeling slightly guilty for his rather obvious lack of gratitude. His forearm was covered in tiny pin pricks, the skin all mottled pink, and there was a residual tingling, as though his brain couldn't quite believe that most of the needles had been taken out. Gingerly, Harry wiggled one of the remaining needles, but was surprised when he couldn't feel a thing. How long, he wondered, before he could get rid of them all?

That, he decided, was a question for another time. Right now he wanted to explore his environment, and work out what he was supposed to do next. Taking a deep breath to compose himself, Harry closed his eyes, and let his sense fill the room, pushing tentatively at the walls as he started to explore the convent.

Being looked after by the nuns was all very well, but he had things to do, places to be, and even though the rational half of his mind strongly suspected he barely had the strength to

cross a road, the other, slightly more focused half (it definitely wasn't an obsession, he reminded himself) needed to get going. Kind as the nuns evidently seemed to be, Harry was developing the rather uncharitable opinion that he'd simply been transferred to a new kind of prison.

So he had to get out. Again.

However, he'd barely pushed beyond the walls of his room before a blaze of energy erupted at his bedside, and he snapped his eyes open.

"Thought she'd never *leave*," complained Charlie, rolling his eyes in exasperation, "c'mon mate," and with that, he grabbed Harry's arm and they Disappeared.

Chapter 69

Which witch was credited with guiding the Muggle Explorer Columbus to America in 1492?

Not that Harry was surprised, but forced Apparation clearly *didn't* have to be as uncomfortable as Percy had hinted. There was still the odd, ringing sensation in his teeth, as though he'd just taken a blow to the head, albeit without the pain, but as he opened his eyes after their involuntary closure from surprise, his first thought was that he was back in Little Whinging.

They'd Apparated into Mrs Figg's - *Arabella Figg's* - front room. Or so it seemed, but then Harry remembered the Quidditch World Cup, and how the tents there had also been similar to his former babysitter's house (he couldn't call her Arabella - sort of like Lupin, you *couldn't* relabel people like that), only this place had the added benefit of a refreshing absence of *eau de chat* to its air.

He processed these thoughts in less than a couple of seconds, during which time Charlie had already steered him towards the armchair. Harry's bewildered gaze scanned the room, which somehow managed to look both lived in *and* impersonal...

"'s just temporary," explained Charlie dismissively, indicating their surroundings. "Sorry about the Muggles, but they know their stuff..."

"Wh..? Wha..?" the questions, in their rush to escape, somehow became tangled up with one another in Harry's throat. He stared at the patterned carpet, suddenly realising as he did so that he was barefoot. And, indeed, that his entire right leg was bare, the cloth obviously having been cut to allow Sister Amerie to use him for darts practice.

He'd told her his name. He hoped that wouldn't prove to be a mistake.

Charlie, by now, had collapsed heavily lengthwise onto the sofa. Harry winced internally at Aunt Petunia's reaction to dragonhide boots sullyng her chintz fabric. With a lazy flick of a wand, two mugs came through from what had to be the kitchen.

Coffee. Harry cupped his hands round the mug, feeling the drink's warmth seep into his bones, aware that Charlie appeared to considering him with some concern. "So, um... well thanks for coming to get me," Harry remembered that he hadn't actually expressed his gratitude to Charlie in proper fashion for the previous day's heroics.

Charlie made a derisive sound, "like I wouldn't..."

"Well," began Harry, feeling terrible now for having doubted Bill's planning during the ordeal, "um, I mean... where are we? Are we sti..."

"We're in Spain," confirmed Charlie, taking a sip of coffee as he allowed this news to sink in, "but," he continued, "we're not staying here..."

"Right," acknowledged Harry, inviting further elaboration. Drawing an explanation from Charlie could sometimes be a protracted affair, "so...?"

"So," continued Charlie, taking another sip, "you're coming with me to the dragon camp..."

"Romania?"

"Romania, and you'll be..."

"Whereabouts in Romania, exactly," interrupted Harry, feeling his body begin to waken almost by the second. "In the North?" he asked, hopefully. In his mind's eye he could see the maps; Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, the Slovak Republic, Romania; all joining more or less together. And in the middle, Durmstrang. In the middle, the Third Key.

"Yeah," confirmed Charlie, surprised, "anyway, Dumbledore figures you're best lying low for a few weeks yet, let the dragons keep watch over you until we can find a better solution." Charlie frowned as he relayed this information, as though a rather intractable problem had presented itself.

A somewhat Harry-shaped intractable problem.

"Dragons? Keeping *watch*? Er..."

"The Blood Trackers, mate; they've got your scent now. Akiko saw off the first pack last night, but they'll be back. 'bout the only things that the Trackers are wary of are dragons."

"I didn't mean to be any trouble," apologised Harry, wondering how he was supposed to repay debts of these sizes. Bill risking his life to put him under a temporary charm, Charlie literally putting his neck on the line to pick him up from Blackrock.

Not able to look at his rescuer, Harry scanned the room once more. It really was *exactly* like Mrs Figg's. It even had the same gold carriage clock on the mantelpiece, the same picture of dogs playing poker on the wall...

"Standard issue," explained Charlie, observing Harry's gaze. "Anyway, this place belongs to Mica - she studies Egyptian Sharptails in the South; I said I needed a place to crash..."

"Egyptian *Sharptail*?" queried Harry, directing a puzzled look at Charlie, "they're not in Fantastic Beasts. And what did you say Akiko was, again?"

He could *see* Charlie's eyes lose their focus as a dreamy expression settled across his face, "ah, she's a Japanese Gothic," he sighed, happily.

Comparisons with Hagrid sprang quickly to Harry's mind. "They're not in Fantastic Beasts, either," noted Harry, before he'd had time to think. Ron had warned him repeatedly never to get Charlie started on dragons; he was impossible to stop.

Ron was right.

"Japanese Gothic: very, very rare fighting dragon," explained Charlie, sitting upright as the energy of his explanation infected the rest of his body. "See, the Japanese Samurai wanted a fierce dragon for battle..."

"A fierce dragon..." echoed Harry, disbelievingly. Was there any other kind?

"Right," confirmed Charlie, "so what they did is they got into this selective breeding programme, y'know, to accentuate aggressive qualities..."

By the clock on the mantelpiece, it was fifteen minutes later by the time Charlie had finally finished extolling the virtues of Japanese Gothics. In truth, under the power of Charlie's enthusiasm, Harry was also beginning to believe that the Japanese Gothic really *was* the greatest thing since sliced bread, but then the night's questions began to resurface.

"So," began Harry around a mouthful of one of the croissants Charlie had summoned during his eulogy to Japanese selective breeding programmes, the pastry flaking over the remnants of his prison robes, "*why* are we still in Spain?"

Not that he was unappreciative of the accommodation, but the Third Key was in Durmstrang, and that's where he had to be.

"Harry, mate, you've just broken out of a maximum security prison. People will be looking for you. Trust me on this; you are beyond front page news now; they ran a special edition of the Prophet just on your escape. Bloody reporters, though; they claim you rode to safety on the back of a Fireball..."

"Kind of like when Sirius escaped, then?" asked Harry, trying to gauge the level of alarm that would be spreading across the wizarding world. "I mean, they told the Muggles that time, didn't they?"

"Yeah - moreso. You've been mentioned on the fellytishun and everything; they figure your first move will be against the Ministry, presumably you're going to do the world a favour and off Fudge for us..."

"Death's too good for him," quoted Harry, before a thought occurred to him. Spreading a little misinformation about the place couldn't exactly hurt, could it? "Uh, Charlie?"

"Mmm?"

"I don't suppose you could somehow get word to reporters about, erm, I dunno. Just let us drop some misleading hints 'n stuff... pretend that I *really* am out to get Fudge?."

"Send everybody looking in the wrong place, you mean?"

"Yeah," mumbled Harry, now on his third croissant, "pretend I've got some anti-Fudge obsession?"

"Pretend?"

"Well, emphasise it, anyway." And then a wicked thought occurred to him; "you said the Muggles knew, right?"

"Yeah; 'course, they think you're some deranged psychopath..."

"Well, can you make sure that everyone knows I'm going by my cousin's name? Dudley Dursley? It's *really* important that you stress that Dudley's my cousin. It'd be even better if you can get a photo of the Dursleys next to a photo of mine..."

Charlie looked baffled. Harry didn't care - the thought of Aunt Petunia's face as her association with *his kind* was plastered all over the national media was compensation enough. He wasn't going back to Privet Drive this year.

"Anyway," recalled Harry, realising that they'd drifted off track somewhat, "Spain. I mean, *Spain?*"

"Mmmpf," mumbled Charlie, finishing off his own breakfast, "Spain," he agreed, nodding his head.

Harry raised his eyebrows, peering over the top of his glasses at Charlie, trying to will him to volunteer a little bit more information as to the reasoning behind the location of their chosen refuge.

"Well," elaborated Charlie, "every wizard and his House-Elf is looking for you in Britain. Goes without saying."

Harry nodded. That, of course, was obvious.

Charlie shrugged. "Germany and France are both under the control of the Death Eaters. It'd be madness to take *you*," he jabbed a finger at Harry's chair, "into their midst in the state you were in.

"So, from Blackrock, it was either Ireland or Spain. Ireland's not much better than Britain for you, at the moment, so we brought you here. Kolchan knows the nuns at the convent..."

"Kolchan!" Harry suddenly had placed one of the visitors in the night, "she was there last night, wasn't she? And you..."

Charlie nodded, "yeah - the Muggle needles helped a lot; neither of us are medi-wizards after all, and the Floater - it was a Floater, right? - got you good."

"Floater? Sort of big jellyfish thing?" Harry shivered at the recollection of the seeping cold; ice in his veins, lace-like networks of frost crystallising throughout his body. Not to mention the mind-numbing effect of what, no doubt, was highly lethal poison. He'd run straight into the thing, on that staircase... pursued by energies and demons on all sides.

"Thought so," noted Charlie, slightly triumphantly, "Kolchan thought it could have been a wyvern bite, judging from your face, until we saw your arm... the tentacle scars are a bit of a giveaway."

Harry rolled back his sleeve, to see the faint circular patterns from the Floater's leech-like suckers all over his skin. Pale and faint, but, now that they'd been pointed out to him, impossible to miss. There were more on his leg. A souvenir from Blackrock. Nice.

"So," continued Charlie, "Spain. It was the closest neutral country we could find. And the nuns didn't hurt, either. What we need to do next is get you to the dragon camp, before the Trackers regain your scent."

"I thought Akiko could see them off?"

Charlie rolled his eyes, "yes, but she's a Japanese Gothic... I can't let her fly anywhere near other dragons, or, really, anywhere too near prey. I borrowed her from a mate in Portugal; he's a bit crazy about dragons, Pedro, really. No-one's ever tried domesticating a Goth before..."

"He's a bit crazy?" echoed Harry, innocently, with a straight face. The irony was somewhat lost on Charlie, however, who nodded confirmation, oblivious.

Having washed the last traces of Durmstrang from himself courtesy of Mica's rather nice shower, Harry dressed in a set of plain black robes Charlie had dug up from somewhere. Charlie had also taken care of the eight weeks' stubble, and freshly groomed, with real food inside himself, Harry felt as though a great weight had been taken off his shoulders. The lightness was probably not unrelated to the fact that Charlie had pulled out the last of the needles from his arm - twelve slender, silver needles, the tips stained with blood, and each actually having penetrated his arm an awful lot further than he'd imagined...

OK, so he'd escaped from prison. The wizarding *and* Muggle worlds were both on the lookout for him. The goblins' Blood Trackers were, presumably, regrouping and about to resume their hunt. He was still a Mage, still despised by law. He somehow had to get to Durmstrang to drain the Third Key, and then he was going to find Voldemort. Ron was dead, Hermione had engaged in necromancy. Seamus was a werewolf, and he'd been forced to abandon Lucas in Blackrock...

The weight that had temporarily lifted from him settled back once more on his shoulders. But rather than becoming dispirited, the memories served Harry as a reminder of his purpose. He had a role, a responsibility and a duty to fulfil.

"Oi, Charlie," called Harry, as he ran his fingers through his damp hair, causing it to stick up slightly more aggressively than usual in his reflection, "what's to stop the Ministry doing a Location Charm on me?"

"Ah, yeah, about that..." started Charlie, somewhat evasively, it seemed to Harry's ears.

Frowning, Harry made his way back into the living room, again struck with the feeling that he really was back in Little Whinging, "yeah," he prompted, "about that?"

"Right, well we anticipated that they'd probably slap a locator on you as soon as they could... or, at least, they'd try to. Fortunately, those charms don't have a massive range - unless it's someone like Dumbledore, of course, and he wouldn't anyway..."

"Right," confirmed Harry, wondering when Charlie was actually going to get to the point.

"But we couldn't rely on them simply not looking in the right place..."

"Well, no."

"So - and don't worry - Kolchan and I put you under the Fidelius Charm..."

Harry blinked. "The Fidelius Charm?" In his experience, that charm hadn't worked particularly well in previous years. "How does that help, then?" Somewhat oddly, despite all that he'd learnt of his parents' final days in the Third Year, he'd never actually looked up what the Fidelius Charm did, or how it was summoned. Hermione, of course, would know, but it was something Harry hadn't actually faced himself. Partly, he suspected, he hadn't *wanted* to know; hadn't wanted to remind himself of how close his parents had been to safety. Security.

Life.

"Right," answered Charlie, getting to his feet, "the thing with the Fidelius is that it makes you unlocatable, by magic. So you can't be Owled, you can't be found with a Location Charm, or a Summoning Charm, and people can't Apparate to you..."

Well, thought Harry, it seemed a pretty decent deal. He wondered what other methods of detection the Fidelius *didn't* cover.

"But," continued Charlie, "it won't stop the Trackers. They've got your scent, and, basically, they don't stop till they've got you back, or they're called off..."

"Who calls them off?"

"The goblins. Forget about it - it ain't going to happen."

Well this was cheery news. "Don't you need a Secret Keeper for the Fidelius?" asked Harry. That had been the weak point in his parents' defences; betrayed by one of their closest friends; perhaps the opening move in a huge catalogue of betrayal and double crossing, pain and murder that had, most recently, seen Parvati and Hermione kidnapped, Ron killed and... Harry again cursed the misplaced nobility that had possessed him to prevent Sirius and Lupin killing Pettigrew that night in the Third Year.

Charlie was talking, "well yes," he confirmed hesitantly, "and, well, we thought about it for a while - we both can understand that you might not be, um, *comfortable* with the Fidelius, given... Well, y'know. But the point of the Charm is that it's as safe as your Secret Keeper..."

"And that's you, right?" guessed Harry. Another debt to owe the Weasleys.

"Actually, no," countered Charlie. "Too obvious. Kolchan's your Secret Keeper. Outside of the Order, no-one knows that you've even *heard* of her, let alone met. The only people who know for sure who your Secret Keeper is are me, Kolchan and Dumbledore.

"And now you," he added, after a moment's thought. "Keep it to yourself, though," he added, unnecessarily, "Dumbledore's going to Obliviate me when we next see him; as Weasleys,

we'll be amongst the obvious choices for being your Secret Keeper, so if it comes down to that, we don't want to be able to have the information dragged out of us..."

Charlie's tone was deathly serious, and though unspoken, the implications of his words were obvious. He expected to be tortured for the information, if it came to it. Harry felt slightly overwhelmed; what had he done, *really* done, to deserve this level of support?

It was too late to change anything now - Kolchan, Charlie, they'd both made their choices, presumably in the full knowledge that Harry would play his part. There had never been any doubt in Harry's mind that he would see this whole thing through, but the actual *knowledge* that Charlie, Bill, Dumbledore... the fact that people were putting their own lives at risk, *real* risk, for his sake strengthened his resolve still further.

The Third Key: he had to get there.

"Right," nodded Harry, pulling his outer cloak about him, "to Durm... I mean, to Romania?"

Charlie eyed him carefully, "don't go getting any madcap ideas, Harry. You've been systematically starved for the past two months. You nearly died from the Floater's stings, *and* it looked like you were exhausted from the escape. You, mate, are not going *anywhere* when we get to the camp. Understand?" It was not hard to see his mother's forceful nature behind the unflinching gaze that pinned Harry to the spot.

"Bu..." began Harry, attempting to explain.

"No ifs, no buts, no nothings," countered Charlie, firmly. "We're about to trek across half a continent of occupied territory, you as probably the most famous escaped prisoner *of all time*. *If* we make it to the camp alive, you are going to rest. Understand? We didn't put our lives on the line yesterday to get you out of Blackrock so that you could swan off into the night... You're not ready yet."

Harry gulped. Charlie, he could see, had a point. But perhaps he'd be within sense range of the Third Key when they got to the camp... and it really wouldn't take all that long to drain it, and *then* he'd rest and recuperate.

Anyway, he was sure he wouldn't need to get too close to Durmstrang to drain the Third Key - it really wouldn't be as though he were putting himself at too much risk. Still, Charlie's demeanour didn't seem to encourage debate on the point, so Harry resigned himself to having to play along - at least for the time being.

From Mica's fireplace, they travelled to a dark, dingy room, which, on further examination, turned out to be some kind of pub. It being mid-morning, the place was closed, the chairs upturned on the rough wooden tables.

Extending his sense through the building, Harry noted with some surprise that it was completely empty. Charlie fished out a pocket-watch, and flipped the silver cover open to consult it.

"Hmm," Charlie held up his left finger, in the universal gesture that signalled to Harry that he was to wait and keep quiet. After about ten seconds, Charlie snapped the watch's cover shut; "right, c'mon - 'nother fireplace in the back - should be clear now..."

Placing one hand on the bar, Charlie effortlessly vaulted over, stepping through the doorway between bottled ranks of obviously potent brews, deeper into the pub.

Glad that Charlie wasn't there to observe his own lack of gymnastic expertise, Harry clambered over the bar and followed, into the kitchen.

From the kitchen fireplace, they travelled to the front room of a small, modest house - obviously magical, given the swirling nature of the abstract art, but again completely empty. This time, Charlie poured some white powder into the flames upon arrival, resulting in small 'pop' and a large cloud of thick white smoke. The smoke hung in the air briefly before dissolving into nothing.

"Spring cleaning," he explained, noticing Harry's bewildered expression. "C'mon, kitchen," and with that he was off once more, obviously knowing exactly where he was headed.

For his part, Harry felt more than a little guilty at his intrusion into someone's home, and walked everywhere on the balls of his feet, attempting to minimise his impact on the carpet.

Again Charlie fished out the watch, and this time he seemed to be studying it quite deeply. From the glance Harry caught, it seemed to be a fairly elaborate piece of work, with at least four large hands, and a couple of smaller pointers, one of which seemed to be spinning around madly.

"C'mon, c'mon," muttered Charlie, his eyes flicking alternately between the watch, the fireplace and towards the house's front door.

That, thought Harry, would be all they needed - the house's owner to catch them intruding on his or her property.

After what seemed an eternity, but was probably little more than thirty seconds, the watch was again snapped shut, and they were off once more.

Harry disliked travel by Floo - had done ever since the second year, when he'd mis-announced his destination from the Burrow, and ended up in Knockturn Alley. By the time they'd made six more hops, and ended up somewhere in Northern Italy, he was beginning to wonder why he'd ever bothered having the shower at Mica's.

Ash clung to his skin, his robes were caked in muck and dust, and his throat was raw from the soot. Everywhere they went, he extended his slowly recovering sense to investigate the immediate surroundings. So far, every destination had turned out to be deserted - there was no way that was coincidence, but Charlie seemed intent on keeping tight-lipped as to how the whole process was being co-ordinated.

They ate lunch sitting on a dry stone wall, staring across at the Alps. France, under the rule of the Death Eaters, lay on the far side.

"See that village over there?" asked Charlie, pointing to a barely visible cluster of white dots, nestled in against the hillside.

"Mmm?" nodded Harry, mouth full of the sandwich they'd surreptitiously summoned from the bakery down the road.

"Dark Mark was seen there night before last. Means they're moving into Italy now..."

Harry returned his gaze back to the distant hillside, trying to comprehend what this meant. Someone there had died two nights ago. They'd been killed - masked wizards (and witches) appearing at the door. The Killing Curse. He wondered if they'd had family, wondered if there'd been survivors.

In one of her earlier visits, Hermione had explained about Lupin's map - told him about the red and the blue, creeping across the parchment as the old Marauder had outlined the respective progression of the campaigns of Tempus and Voldemort.

He thought he'd got it then, but now it connected at a deeper level. Here he was, sitting on a wall in Italy, notionally 'free', the extent of the Death Eaters' territory somewhere within his line of sight.

And unless something was done, unless Voldemort was stopped, the line of dominion would creep further and further into the land, until...

Frankly, it didn't really make a lot of sense. Until what? Until they'd killed everyone? What good did it actually do Voldemort to enslave wizarding Europe? What good did it do Tempus? There had to be a deeper reason to all this than that the two powers were pursuing further power simply because they could.

After lunch, the atmosphere changed, their route taking them through Slovenia and into Romania. Charlie was now alternating between forced Apparation and Floo to get them wherever it was that they were going, but once out of Italy, it had been impossible not to notice that everywhere he looked, the blue sign of Tempus, the capital 'T' inscribed within a circle, shone from house windows.

These, Harry assumed, were magical communities. He couldn't imagine that wizards and witches would wish to proclaim their presence so boldly amidst the Muggles. They were also somewhat busier than Spain and Italy had proved to be. Charlie no longer consulted his watch - instead, with their hoods drawn up to fend off the driving rain that had set in somewhere in North-West Italy, they trekked from pub to chapel to library to school.

Sometimes Charlie would pour some more white powder onto the fire, after they'd emerged, provided there were no witnesses to their arrival.

Sometimes they took the same fireplace out of there, sometimes they walked across the entire town. It was miserable weather for travelling. Charlie had charmed the cloaks, and Harry's glasses, but the rain lent a depressing air to the journey.

There had been no sign of pursuit. Neither following through the Floo Network, nor within the towns. Harry swept the skies occasionally, still jumpy about the prospect of being dogged by the Blood Trackers, but all seemed quiet.

They walked the final two miles on foot, through a thick forest on hillside, as the light started to fall. Although the trees did at least manage to act as a break against the worst of the rain, the ground underfoot was heavy and sodden, making the going tough.

Still recovering from the previous day's exploits, Harry was starting to seriously tire when a cluster of lights came into view. The camp appeared to be a collection of small, rough stone houses, arranged more or less at a kind of staggered, muddy crossroads.

Charlie raised an arm in greeting at a robed figure emerging from one of the doors, but Harry's fears that he might be recognised were allayed as they disappeared off down the muddy track, away from the village.

"'s Jones," explained Charlie, "he's really a Fireball specialist, mugging up on the Ridgebacks for cross-referencing..."

"...and there are dragons near here?" asked Harry, disbelievingly. It was so quiet and so, well, desolate, it didn't look as though there was any other life within a ten mile radius of the camp.

"All about you," confirmed Charlie, sweeping his arm around in theatrical manner - I'll introduce you to them all tomorrow. First things first, though; let's get inside."

Charlie indicated the penultimate doorway on their left hand side, and as he flicked his wand at it, lights illuminated the doorway and window.

For the first time that afternoon, the Sign of Tempus was nowhere to be seen.

Frowning and stamping his feet once he'd made it inside, Harry slumped into the nearest chair, kicking off the borrowed boots to let his feet recover as he scanned the latest of a whole series of environments he'd had to take in that day.

An inordinately large fireplace took up the bulk of the main wall in the living room. "Charlie," called Harry, after his host's form had disappeared deeper into the house, "why didn't we just get the Floo straight here?"

"Too easy to track," came Charlie's reply, muffled by the walls between.

Well that made sense, Harry supposed. Still, materialising directly into Charlie's front room did, on the surface, seem a much more attractive prospect than tramping for miles through sodden forest in the middle of nowhere on a cold February evening.

"'sides," continued Charlie, as he re-emerged, offering a bottle of Butterbeer to Harry, "this way, if we were followed, the dragons'll pick 'em up."

It may have been his imagination, but Harry thought Charlie actually sounded slightly hopeful at the prospect.

As the warmth of the Butterbeer soaked into his bones, Harry's eyes landed on the bookshelves lining the wall opposite the window. "Whoa, Charlie!" he breathed, impressed.

Following Harry's gaze, Charlie explained further, "some of them are Muggle, y'know. Not bad stuff, actually..."

Harry nodded dumbly, transfixed by row upon row of empty beer bottles, each with different labels, all carefully lined up on Charlie's bookshelves.

"course," explained his host, "Mum would have a fit if she saw them. Bill got me the Egyptian ones last summer," he pointed in the general direction of a cluster of golden, sphynx headed bottles at the bottom of the right hand bookcase.

"And Adams, mate of mine from Gryffindor, Muggle-born," continued Charlie, in full tour-guide mode, "he sent me the Mexican stuff. One was off, though - had a bloody worm in it!"

Harry chose not to correct him; he'd never realised before how many different shapes of bottles there could be - tall, short, fat, thin, florid and basic. It was as he was reading the labels that a terrible suspicion dawned on him, "Charlie," he pleaded, indicating the shelves with a vague wave of his Butterbeer, "please don't tell me it's alphabetical..."

"course not!" exclaimed Charlie, affronted, "Country, brewery, label," he clarified. "Taken me six years to build that lot up..."

Whatever else Charlie was going to say was lost, however, as at that moment, the fireplace erupted in the greenish flame of Floo, and two figures stumbled through.

With reflexes that were worthy of someone who had been touted as a possible Seeker for England, Charlie had whipped his wand out to point directly at the intruders. "Who in Merlin's name are you? We weren't expecting anyone..."

"Hah!" crowed a *very* familiar voice, triumphantly, "no-one *expects* the Inquisition!"

Chapter 70

Where is the oldest known example of a Golden Snitch kept on display?

The euphoria had been short-lived.

Tuesday, Hermione reflected, as she stabbed at her fried egg, had been a pretty good day. The Special Edition of the Prophet had arrived almost immediately after the day's ordinary copy, and a murmur of excitement had swept across the Great Hall at Tuesday's breakfast like a breaking wave.

Cho and Parvati, in Padma's robes, had immediately left the Ravenclaw table to join the Gryffindor remnants of the Away Team, everyone buzzing with the news. *ESCAPED!!!* screamed the Prophet Extra's headline, immediately above a photograph of the 'extremely dangerous Dark Mage Harry Potter, formerly known as the Boy Who Lived'. As was usual with photographs of Harry, his likeness seemed to be doing its best to squirm out of the picture, but with little success.

Parvati, who knew about such things, had explained that they'd probably charmed the image to make him stay more or less central.

The account of Harry's escape was somewhat brief - the goblins were remaining tight-lipped about much of the affair, and the only real concrete bits of information that were supplied were that Harry Potter had indeed successfully escaped from Blackrock, and in so doing he'd flown off into the sunset on the back of a Chinese Fireball.

Slightly more disturbing had been the goblins' confident assertion that mechanisms were in place to ensure his speedy location and recapture. They'd sounded very confident that no matter where he ran, they'd been able to track him down. Just that tiny hint on the goblins' part had been enough to sow a tiny seed of doubt in Hermione's mind that maybe, just maybe, it hadn't all been over at that point. But she'd really not expected....

Although specifics had been lacking, the Prophet had certainly pulled out all the stops in castigating the goblins, the Ministry, Dumbledore and Hogwarts for allowing the 'appalling chain of events' to come to pass. Hermione didn't doubt that if she'd had the stomach to read the rest of the poisoned drivel, the kitchen sink would have come in for a fair amount of stick too.

Nonetheless, she did feel a slight, *very slight*, pang of sympathy for Fudge, since the article was knifing him good and proper; 'this shambolic excuse of a Neanderthal we have as a Minister', and 'the Prophet has long predicted that the well documented history of Fudge's vacillation, hesitation and just plain lunacy during his all-too-long term of office would end in disaster. But never, in our darkest nightmares did we envisage being proven right with horror on such a scale.'

Yes, she'd thought at the time, the Ministry certainly wouldn't be enjoying the morning's press coverage. Now, of course, she felt nothing of the sort. Fudge deserved every word, to say nothing of *him*...

Excitement had coursed through everyone's veins that morning. He'd done it - he'd actually made it out of Blackrock, the first prisoner ever to do so. And she *knew* that Harry didn't actually set out to make himself a legend, but escaping on the back of a Chinese Fireball lent the whole operation a certain class.

The other tables, with the normal exception of the Slytherins, had also seemed excited by the news. Unsurprisingly, this had rankled with Ginny, "where were they," she'd muttered, jabbing her red hair backwards towards the Hufflepuffs, "when that pompous git that calls himself my brother dragged Harry out before Christmas?"

Hermione well remembered how the whole hall had seemed to erupt in hissing and boos, as Harry had been dragged off, how long had it been? Two months, near enough, she thought. Anyway, now that Harry had, officially, been relabelled as a celebrity escapee, the Hufflepuffs seemed more than happy to bask in the reflected glamour of having once rubbed shoulders with such a daring renegade.

"He set a snake on me once, second year..." Justin had recalled, proudly, as the younger Hufflepuffs had looked on in open admiration.

Ginny'd made a disgusted sound, and stabbed her toast with wholly unnecessary violence.

The Creeveys had dished out badges that lunchtime, gold text on red background that read *Run, Harry, Run!* "Gryffindor colours," Colin had needlessly explained, his Harry-worship elevated to alarming levels as his hero had increased his legendary standing ten-fold.

And *everyone* assumed that she would know where he was, how he'd escaped, and what his plans were. And she really didn't have a clue. She'd hoped that he was safe, certainly, and that he'd manage to evade capture for at least a little while, but...

"Oh Harry," she sighed, aloud; the long faces at the breakfast table about her echoing her own feelings.

Tuesday had also been significant as it had been the first time Draco had called her by her first name. She sort of knew, really, that she shouldn't get into snogging a boy who would only call her 'Granger', but... well, it was *Draco*, and normal rules didn't really apply in his case.

So he'd finally been able to call her 'Hermione', which had sounded almost alien, coming from his lips, but very, very welcome. It proved that they were making progress, somehow. And despite Ron's paranoid ramblings that evening, Draco hadn't asked her a *thing* about Harry. Not a thing: in fact, he was so obviously not interested, she'd almost felt like telling him what little she knew, as a sort of 'thank you' for not pestering her about it. But in the end she'd decided against it.

She wasn't quite sure why: part of her desperately wanted Draco to know that she trusted him, the other part of her told her quite plainly that she did *not* trust the Slytherin one little bit. Quite how she was supposed to reconcile these two wholly conflicting assessments she had no idea. Draco remained an enigma - hard to read, difficult to get through to, and, yes, slightly dangerous.

But she knew what she was doing. Really, she did.

He'd been watching her that breakfast, in fact; it was quite nice to feel someone's eyes so obviously fixed upon you. To feel wanted in that way, but everything had been shattered with the arrival of the second Prophet Extra in as many days.

And yet Wednesday had started off so well, too. With the morning post had come a small tawny owl, bearing a piece of parchment addressed to 'Ensign Cho Chang, Starfleet Academy, Alpha Quadrant'. There was only one person on the planet who would address owl-post in that fashion, and they'd all huddled around the Ravenclaw as she unfurled the parchment.

"Right," Cho'd whispered, scanning the note, and preparing to read it aloud, "it, uh... Um." She'd blinked, and craned her neck backwards, as though distancing herself from the spidery handwriting might somehow have made the message more intelligible. "Er," stalled again, eyebrows creeping higher, she'd backed down; "perhaps if we just pass it round?"

As it happened, Cho had taken the seat to Hermione's left, so she was second to view Dean's letter, and couldn't help but grin as the source of Cho's uncertainty was made abundantly clear. Feeling at least partially qualified to relay the words, Hermione had cleared her throat and whispered the full text aloud to the Away Team:

Stardate 25.7-13

Greetings, Hoglings.

Our quest for the Grail continues:

Having successfully made passage to Mos Eisley Spaceport, we have made contact with the Rebels, but henceforth are reverting to Plan A.

We still propose to demonstrate the power of this battle station on our chosen target of Alderaan, and expect to return in a little under four of your Earth days.

The third of our number has the con.

Weather here, wish you were nice.

May the Force be with you.

The Wolf and the Sword.

"Weather here, *wish you were nice*?" Lavender had echoed indignantly, her voice rising as she'd reached the end.

"Dean, my man!" had been Seamus' grinning response; "who needs coded messages when we've got *him*? The boy's a language unto himself..."

"I didn't even know we had a Plan B," Parvati had confessed; she'd looked as bewildered as Cho.

"Plan A: Harry drains the Key, Plan B: portal," Seamus had explained, succinctly, in forced whisper, using his butter-knife to emphasise the punctuation. "And *that's* what he meant by 'the third of our number has the con'; Harry's in charge. Don't you get it? They've met up with Harry!"

"Where do you *learn* this stuff?" - it had been nice, she'd thought, as her dorm mate had put this question to Seamus, to see that the Ravenclaw robes were having a positive influence on Parvati's academic nature.

As Seamus had attempted to cite the references for the Un-Muggled of their number, Hermione had finally felt that things were going well. Dean and Padma had obviously made it to Charlie's dragon-camp in Romania, but, better still, they'd met up with Harry there.

So they were back on the original plan of Portkeying to Durmstrang, Harry draining the Key, and then Dean and Padma returning back to Hogwarts. Perhaps Harry would return too? They could use Sirius' old cave as a hideout, at least in the short-term; it'd just be nice to have him back around...

But all that had been before the second Prophet Extra had landed on the table, with a headline that had read like a hammer-blow: *CAPTURED!!!*. That single word had made her head-ring, her eyes welling up immediately.

And beneath the screaming headline, a photograph of Harry, looking utterly exhausted, defeated, legs in chains, wrists cuffed, and, worst of all, a smug looking Percy gripping his shoulder triumphantly.

Not knowing quite why she was torturing herself like this, Hermione re-read the article once more: *The short-lived escape of the Dark Mage Harry Potter was ended in the early hours of this morning in a dramatic confrontation with his arch-nemesis, Under-Secretary Percival Weasel of the Ministry for Magic.*

Although the Ministry is remaining tight-lipped as to the exact circumstances regarding the Dark Mage's recapture, reliable sources indicate that the operation was the direct result of a tip-off received from Muggles who had been in contact with Potter, who, at the time, had been travelling under an assumed identity.

Citing the event as a shining example of the benefits of co-operation with Muggle governments, Minister Fudge was at pains to point out how decisive action from the very top of the Ministry had resulted in Potter's quick recapture, thereby preventing further atrocities being carried out at the Mage's willing.

Although pressed for time through the demands of his post as Under-Secretary, fast-rising star Weasel was able to share with the Prophet what gave him his edge in the dramatic confrontation, "well, it always gives you an edge to know that you're carrying the good fight, with truth, justice and honour on your side.

"Obviously, we knew that we'd be up against it, fighting the ruthless Mage, unafraid to use Dark Powers in his desperate bid for power, but the with the ethos of the Ministry on our side, we knew we wouldn't fail in our mission to recapture this abhorrent danger to our society.

"If I might say, Minister Fudge's leadership in this entire episode has, as usual, been exemplary; he has shown once again that he's not afraid to commit Ministry resources to tackle the real issues of the day, and I would urge all right-minded citizens to consider the Minister's track record in next month's elections..."

As readers will know, Minister Fudge is standing for re-election next month. The Prophet has, as history relates, been somewhat critical of certain aspects of recent Ministry policy, but, as the whole sorry Potter episode has demonstrated most effectively, when it comes to the crunch, Fudge has proved time and again that he is not afraid to make the big decisions that are part and parcel of the office of Minister for Magic..."

The rest of the piece went on in similar vein, whilst Percy's image kept trying to keep its chest puffed out, and Harry's picture just moped. She'd never seen her best friend look so *broken*... and they'd been so *close*.

She couldn't face lessons that day - Herbology and Charms in the morning, Runes, Scripts and Lore in the afternoon. Neither Professors Grubbly-Plank nor Flitwick would be too incensed by her absence, and Madam Pince had a very hands-off attitude to her role as teacher for Runes, Scripts and Lore.

So she ended up at her table - their table, but *he* had Transfiguration and then DADA - listlessly reading up on goblin rebellions. Books normally pulled her in, captured her imagination, literally *compelled* her to read further, devour more knowledge, answer new questions.

But not today. She must've read the same paragraph ten times without a single word sinking in. All she could think about was Harry, recaptured, and once more imprisoned. It would have been cruel enough for anyone, but to do that to Harry was just too much to bear. He'd suffered so much in such a short space of time, and just when they thought he'd finally found a way out, he'd been recaptured, by a member of the very family he knew she thought of as his own.

Knowing Harry, she mused, he wouldn't have put up much of a fight anyway, no matter how much Percy tried to insinuate otherwise; it simply wasn't in his nature to harm a Weasley.

Giving up on goblins, she dug out the Prophet Extra, and stared glumly at Harry's photo, and looked daggers at Percy's insufferably smug smile.

"You too?" asked Cho, just off her shoulder.

Hermione twisted round in her chair - she hadn't heard the Ravenclaw approach, and they were still in the middle of the first double period of the day; the few students in the library were those who either were *supposed* to be there, for Runes, Scripts and Lore, or who had a revise and study period (not 'a free'). "Hmm?"

The sixth-year gestured vaguely with her free arm, as she slung her book-bag into the chair opposite. Draco's chair. "I couldn't face lessons," she confessed, "not when..."

Hermione understood what Cho was trying to say - it was as though their sole hope had been crushed. She wondered if Harry was aware of how much responsibility he shouldered, carrying the hopes and dreams of the rest of his world on his shoulders. In a way, she hoped he didn't - not because she was worried he'd get big-headed, but because, knowing Harry, he'd take it all to heart, and all too seriously.

And it would crush him even more to know that not only had he failed, but he'd failed the rest of his world as well. Hermione dismissed such thoughts from her mind; moping didn't further their cause one bit - what they had to do was ascertain whether Dean and Padma had managed to evade detection. She suggested as much to Cho.

"Well," the older girl opined, "if they *had* captured Dean and Padma, they'd have said, wouldn't they? I mean, I know those two aren't news in the way Harry is, but..."

"But they would've said *something*, wouldn't they?" agreed Hermione, relieved that not everything had fallen apart completely. "So we wait?"

Cho reached across to consider the front page of the paper once more. "He shaved," she noted, sadly, looking at the picture of the manacled Harry, "the stubble really didn't suit him... what do you think's going to happen now?"

"Blackrock, again," sighed Hermione, "but the article goes on to talk about how more Draconian punishment might be more suitable, given his 'obvious lack of regard for the mechanisms of justice.'"

"Meaning?" pressed Cho, hesitantly, although they both knew *exactly* what the outcome of Harry's recapture would be.

There weren't any Dementors about to Kiss people, which really only left the Death penalty.

"Oh Harry," sighed Hermione, mournfully. How could they do this to him?

More pertinently, how did Percy sleep at nights?

That last point was clearly at the forefront of Ron's mind, too: "I'll kill him. I'll chop him to pieces and feed him to the Flobberworms," promised Ron, pacing up and down angrily, sending a cold front pulsing through his room. "And *then*," he vowed, "I'll kill him again. Slowly. And after that I'll..."

"Um, Ron?" interrupted Hermione, hesitantly, "er, most people, y'know, they tend to have just the one death..." She tensed warily - Ron never took correction on matters of detail well, particularly when he was riled.

And right at that moment, Ron Weasley, dead or not, was *livid*. "Well what would *you* do?" he demanded, pointing at her with outstretched finger. "C'mon, tell me," he invited,

goadingly, "go on then..." His eyes burnt furiously, his red hair sparked with ice that seemed to make the anger more intense.

By reflex Hermione flinched as the lance of cold brushed against her face - Ron's frustrated pacing had brought his chill much closer than she could normally bear, and in the act of pointing at her, a sharp-pointed cold front swept right through her, making her eyes sting.

"...and don't get all high and mighty about it," cautioned Ron, who'd withdrawn his hand and reverted back to pacing the short width of his room, "I mean, you got that bloody Skeeter cow good and proper last year, didn't you?"

Yes, she recalled, she could do revenge. And if, as the saying went, hell had no fury like a woman scorned, then Percy should realise that he would never in his life have a clear night's sleep again. One way or another, she, or Ron, they'd make him regret this. One way or another they'd...

Murderous thoughts were cut short by a brief knock at the door, causing Ron to start backwards, making sure that his coldness didn't present an impassable barrier to his next guests. Hermione, who had become an expert over the years in noticing the small bits about Ron that made him Ron, felt the breath sucked out of her lungs.

Ron was so *passionate*, but so thoughtful too. And honest. And true. And selfless. He was a *good* friend - even if he was dead - and, really, Draco didn't hold a candle to the tall, impulsive red-head. There was just something vaguely mechanical to the taste of kissing Draco - there wasn't any *passion* in him.

The door had opened, and the Twins (the two, rather than the three) and Ginny entered, eyes flicking from Ron to Hermione and back again.

"Er, we can come back," offered Ginny, dubiously, "if you haven't, um, finished..."

Hermione frowned, puzzled, whilst Ron's face took on a small tinge of colour (without heat to warm his blood, Hermione had noticed that Ron's face had lost its dazzling array of reds with which it betrayed his feelings).

"What's all this?" asked Ron, recovering first, as Hermione was still puzzling over Ginny's insinuation, and trying to work out why she felt so flustered by the fourth year's offer. After all, it wasn't as if anything could happen - he was dead.

Very, very Ron, yes, but dead, all the same.

"Weasley Council of War," announced one of the Twins - probably George, Hermione guessed - in a completely alien tone of absolute sincerity.

"Oh," she suddenly realised she was intruding on a family matter, "well," she said, lamely, as she stood to leave, "see you later?"

"Where do you think *you're* going?" enquired Fred, his voice on the verge of being affronted. "Weasley Council of War," he echoed his brother's statement, before adding, "you stay put."

Warmth seeped through Hermione's bones as she settled back into her customary chair. She really was a Weasley in their eyes, and, she realised, that was really something. Really something indeed.

Chapter 71

What universally popular wizarding sport did Quidditch replace?

Charlie's sofa, tatty, lumpy and battered was, nonetheless, responsible for what may well have been quite possibly the most luxurious night's sleep Harry had ever known. Of course, that wasn't exactly saying a great deal; he'd lived the first ten years of his life sleeping in a bed crammed into the cupboard under the stairs after all, but, nonetheless, as he allowed himself to wake slowly on the Wednesday morning, Harry didn't think a better place on Earth existed outside of Charlie's house at the camp.

He squinted across the room towards Dean's sofa, noting without a great deal of surprise that it appeared to be empty. Muffled conversation was just audible through the kitchen - Dean and Padma, by the sound of things. The two fifth-years' unexpected arrival the previous night had thrown Charlie's carefully planned operation ('I cleared a space for you in the spare room, mate') into chaos, ('you and Dean'll have to kip on the sofas, Padma can have the spare room - you like Quidditch, right?'), but, for all that, had buoyed Harry's mood tremendously.

Not least because they had a Portkey to Durmstrang. He hadn't actually seen it - Padma had explained it was fragile, and best only handled when it was actually needed. Dean had appeared to smirk at that, suggesting there was something Padma wasn't saying, but she'd levelled the all-too-familiar Patil-Glare-of-Death at her counterpart, and Dean had shut up.

Dean was sharper than he let on.

Craning his neck to rub the stiffness out of it, Harry padded into the kitchen, to see Padma at the kitchen table, engrossed in the morning's Prophet, and Dean at the cooker, evidently in charge of breakfast.

"Afternoon, Harry," greeted Dean, cheerily, "toast?"

Harry, bemused, looked at the clock, "it's 8.45, Dean - that's hardly late... uh, yeah to the toast." He slid into the chair opposite Padma, and attempted to read the article upside down.

"Coffee's there," indicated Padma, without lifting her eyes from the newsprint, "ooh, harsh," she noted, "Dean, they're accusing Fudge of being unable to outwit a sedated Flobberworm!"

"Nah, still think the prize goes to 'moronic ineptitude'," opined Dean. "Harry," he called, "toast!"

Harry was forced to jerk backwards in order to catch the two slices Dean had frisbeed at him in quick succession, taking secret delight in the speed of his reflexes. He hadn't been the youngest Seeker in a century by accident.

"Dean," chided Padma, rolling her eyes at him.

Dean shrugged backwards in a gesture of helplessness. Harry frowned at the exchange; the two seemed to have become awfully familiar since he'd last seen them. But then, he supposed, they *had* just travelled across Europe to get there.

A thought struck him, prompted in part by the adjustments Charlie had been forced to make to the domestic logistics the previous night; "hey, Padma," he enquired, tapping the Prophet to get her attention, "how did you two work out sleeping and stuff when you were on your way here?"

"More toast, mate?" asked Dean, quickly, still manning the cooker.

"*What?*" frowned Harry, forced to turn away from the Ravenclaw to respond.

Dean held up his hands, "OK, well how about a waffle, then?"

"Here, have some coffee," suggested Padma, suddenly businesslike, and leaving the newspaper unattended as she marshalled the mugs.

Further investigation of this intriguing state of affairs was curtailed, however, by the rather dramatic entrance of a red-headed whirlwind of fury.

Charlie slammed into the kitchen via the back door, turning the air blue with the most extensive, colourful and imaginative collection of expletives Harry had ever heard in his life, book-ended by the words 'that' and 'Percy'.

Padma had frozen, coffee pouring unchecked into the overflowing mug, whilst Harry's eyes blinked in astonishment, his mouth agape at Charlie's impressive fluency.

Dean, typically, was unfazed, "something vexes thee?" he enquired, mildly, "croissant?"

"Cheers, whatever's going," responded Charlie, as he slumped angrily into his chair, and slapped the second special edition of the Daily Prophet Harry had ever seen down onto the table.

Harry stared at the headline in disbelief, "*Captured?*" he echoed, "but... but... but it's not true!" he protested. "How can they print something that's not... oh, er, well..." It *was* The Daily Prophet, after all.

And it was a *very* good likeness, he had to confess. They had the hair, the eyes, the scar. The only reason he knew it wasn't actually himself in the photograph was the manacles. Despite all that had happened to him in his life, Harry was absolutely certain he'd never been chained up like that.

Dean came to join the three of them studying the paper as he served up the toast (clearly airborne delivery wasn't on the cards in front of Charlie). "What d'ya reckon? Is that superimposed or something? I mean," his eyes suddenly narrowed as he turned to face Harry, "it *is* you, isn't it?"

"What?" asked Harry, momentarily flummoxed, "of *course* it's *me* - watch," he conjured up a spinning star of energy that circled the table once, before extinguishing it with a close of his fist, trying not to wince. Pitiful display though it had been, that had *hurt*.

"Just checking," responded Dean, placatingly, "after all, once we've eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable..."

"But this is good news, isn't it?" interrupted Padma, evidently not needing to hear Dean's full Sherlock-impression, "I mean, no-one's going to be looking for Harry now, are they? If, you know, they think he's back in prison and everything?"

Charlie leant back in his chair, "Well..." he began, before trailing off. The dragon enthusiast sighed deeply before taking a thoughtful bite of toast.

The others waited as patiently as they could for their host to continue his thought, and for a short moment, the only sound that could be heard in Charlie's kitchen was that of dry toast being consumed.

"The things is," continued Charlie, finally, "I'm not so sure..."

"Riiight," invited Harry, wishing that Charlie had a fast-forward button somewhere.

"You see, if everyone thinks Harry's at Blackrock, then him being discovered *not* in Blackrock..." Charlie encouraged his three guests to come to their own conclusions with an inviting wave of his hand.

"Well, true," agreed Padma, "but people *won't* be looking for him. The Ministry said that they were pleased with the conclusion to their operation... so that makes it... sound... like..." Padma's words slowed down, and Harry could almost see her mapping out the implications as she spoke.

"The Ministry," growled Charlie, through gritted teeth, "are not to be trusted. Fudge only pulled this because he couldn't bear the bad press he was getting... no other reason. But if you think *that's* bad," he tapped Padma's own newspaper, "can you *imagine* what would happen if Harry was discovered alive and well?"

"It wouldn't look good?" ventured Harry, trying to get the hang of the 'understatement' thing.

Charlie sniffed derisively, "Fudge will be doing his best to make sure it doesn't happen. Sure, they've called off the public search, but trust me, he won't want you showing up. Ever. You catch my drift?"

"Uh," replied Harry, suspecting that he *did* follow Charlie's line of thought, but not entirely happy with the conclusion it led to.

"Would anyone like a muffin?" enquired Dean, helpfully, breaking the awkward silence that had begun to build.

Post-breakfast, Charlie took the three of them on a tour of the camp. Padma in particular was extremely interested in the operation, citing its usefulness in Hagrid's written assignment for Care of Magical Creatures.

The rain of the previous afternoon had evidently settled in for the duration; it was pouring, turning the roads that formed the intersection at the heart of the camp into something of a quagmire. The quartet trooped out, Charlie and Harry sharing one umbrella, Dean and Padma (again) sharing the other.

Almost by instinct, Harry swept outwards with his sense, to feel out his new surroundings, but a splitting headache from the effort required soon cut short that idea. His mind, run close to exhaustion, was certainly taking its time to recover from his escape, and he was impatient for his powers to return to a usable state.

There were normally about forty people working with the dragons, Charlie explained as he went into Tour Guide mode. Most of them lived in the camp itself, but a few had commuted from the surrounding area, mostly from Harceek...

"From *where*?" asked Harry, seeking clarification.

"Harceek," supplied Charlie, "it's a magical community, near Durmstrang - y'know, sort of like Hogwarts and Hogsmeade? 's a little bit further away from the school here, though..."

"Right," accepted Harry, mind working overtime, "so we could... what, maybe Floo there? I mean, how far is it from Durmstrang?"

Charlie fixed Harry with a steely glare that immediately conveyed the uncompromising nature required of someone who lived amidst a pack of dragons, "you, matey, are not going anywhere *near* that place just yet..."

"Charlie," complained Harry, "I *have* to... you know that. I've *got* to get to the Third Key, before Voldemort - you *know* this..."

Charlie looked as though he was undergoing some kind of internal struggle, and seemed on the verge of starting his reply several times before he eventually responded, "look, you were cream-cracked..."

"Knackered," translated Dean, sotto voce, from behind Harry's back, presumably for Padma's benefit.

"...when we pulled you off that rock. No *way* are you doing *anything* until you've recovered..."

Harry would have protested that he felt fine already, the Third Key at Durmstrang shining like some kind of beacon in his mind's eye (but, sadly, well beyond his range of sense). However, he was alert enough to recognise that Charlie's position on the matter had shifted somewhat, and decided that he'd let it drop for the time being. Besides, Charlie *did* have a point.

A very good point, Harry reminded himself, as his brain again seemed to scream in protest as he attempted to sweep his surroundings. It *was* getting better, he thought. Just not very quickly.

"It's not right, y'know," observed Charlie, darkly, as the rain continued to *thrum* on the twin umbrellas.

"Eh?" enquired Harry, with practiced eloquence.

"You," muttered Charlie. "It's not right..." he looked off into the grey, wet, middle-distance, the low cloud obscuring the hillside, and suddenly the only sound in the world seemed to be the sound of the rain.

"Um, what's not right, Charlie?" prompted Harry, gingerly.

"We got you out of there, still a kid, and you're being put right into the front line of a war that's not even been declared yet... I mean," weathered eyes locked onto Harry - he saw them flick to his scar and then back again, "I know... we all know that you're... *you*... But..."

"But what?" asked Harry, pretending that he didn't mind being called 'a kid'. It was hard to hold that kind of thing against the person who'd ridden to your rescue on the back of a dragon.

Charlie sighed, resignedly, "but Dumbledore says... and, well, he *knows*." He shook his head, nonetheless, "people ask a lot of you, mate."

People gave a lot for him, too, Harry thought, but couldn't quite manage to bring himself to actually *say* so to Charlie. Bill and Charlie, for example - they'd both put themselves in serious danger to get him out of Blackrock. Sirius, he reminded himself, guiltily, continued to invite recapture at every turn as he attempted to keep watch on his godson.

Even as he thought this through, however, Harry decided he didn't really believe in balance at that kind of level. He did what was needed, and others, those that fought the same battle he did, they did what was required of them. He didn't *like* it, necessarily, and if he could prevent his friends putting themselves into danger, he would, without a second's thought.

Some battles you had to fight alone.

Nonetheless, Harry didn't have some grandiose scheme of debt and honour marshalling his actions. He did what he saw was right. He did what he had to because he had no choice, and because the consequences of *not* having chased what had turned out to be Professor Quirrell through the trapdoor would have been too dreadful to contemplate.

And as if he had needed proof that that had been the right course of action, back when he really *had* been, as Charlie put it, 'a kid' (not that it bothered him, really), then you only had to look at what the world had become in the months since Voldemort's resurrection the previous summer.

"OK," whispered Charlie, hoarsely, as he led them along a rocky path across the hillside. "The important thing here is not to show fear... they can sense it, you see. Gets 'em all edgy. Wait here..." Charlie edged off into the rain, leaving the three friends to contemplate his receding back as he headed off the path, clearly checking out whatever lay past a particularly large clump of rocks in front of them.

"triffic," muttered Dean, who seemed to be somewhat less keen on seeing dragons from close quarters now that they were actually deep in dragon territory, miles from civilisation and BBC2 (although, to Dean, Harry suspected, those two were one and the same).

Harry chanced a glance backwards at the pair following on the path, surprised to see that the two were holding hands, presumably in mutual support, Dean's free hand carrying the umbrella. Padma looked even more nervous than Dean. They'd be alright, he figured; dragons were great once you got to know them.

Charlie jogged back towards them, motioning them towards them with a signal that simultaneously conveyed the need for absolute silence and the need to collapse the umbrellas.

"s alright," he whispered, "these ones know us at the camp, so they'll be fine. Swedish Shortsnouts - the female's nesting - c'mon..." Charlie, half crouched, disappeared ahead once more, the other three following with slightly less enthusiasm.

"If it's alright," hissed Dean, "then why are we supposed to maintain radio silence?"

"Well," answered Harry, as they finally caught up to Charlie's vantage point, "I s'pose... *whoa!*" he breathed, as the clearing below was suddenly revealed.

They were crouching behind a cluster of boulders, sprouting from the hillside atop what may have been once, some kind of quarry, a huge gouge seeming to have been torn from the hillside. The rockface fell away some fifty feet or so to the ground, where a cave entrance was visible at its foot.

Harry almost missed the cave, however, since the first thing that had struck him about the clearing had been the fact that there was a dragon in it. Fortunately, it seemed to be dozing, it's long, whip-like tail curled around underneath it's chin, eyes shut.

The wings, folded back against its deep grey hide, undulated gently with the dragon's own breathing, water running off the points of the bones that poked through the membranes' tips.

"Look in the cave," whispered Padma, pointing with her and Dean's combined hand to where a second snout was just visible in the shadows. "That must be the female," she continued, voice only just audible, "the nest must be in there..."

"Where's that lunatic going *now*?" asked Dean, despairingly, although his eyes betrayed the absorbing fascination even sleeping dragons exerted at close quarters.

Charlie's red hair could be seen bobbing down a steep path cut into the cliff-face, and Harry decided that, really, he ought to stand guard on Dean and Padma, in case anything... well, just in case. Dragons were great, really. Fantastic creatures. But he could see these two perfectly well from the top of the cliff, and it seemed a bit silly to traipse up and down the cliff-face when he was supposed to be *resting*.

Charlie had stopped at the very foot of the cliff, and appeared to be muttering something into his wand from his vantage point behind a conveniently large boulder. At the top of the cliff, the three fifth years watched on in slack-jawed wonder, oblivious to the rain soaking them to the skin.

Eventually, flush-faced from the climb, Charlie joined them at the top, and they retreated warily from the clearing.

"Beautiful, weren't they?" he enthused, eyes bright with excitement, "the male's called Fred - he was the one out in the clearing, and the female's Georgina..."

"'George' for short," noted Harry, grinning.

"Well, they got to have names, haven't they?" asked Charlie, innocently, unaware of how uncannily he was echoing Hagrid. "Fred's a twenty footer..."

"Twenty-five," drawled Dean on pure reflex.

"No Dean," frowned Charlie, seriously, "twenty. You don't measure the skull, you just go on the length of the spinal column. He's a twenty footer... Beautiful, though, aren't they?"

"He's a bit like Hagrid, don't you think?" asked Padma, as they made their way onward. Dean was now accompanying Charlie, who seemed to have mistaken the former's ill-placed Jaws quote for a genuine passion for dragons.

"Heh," Harry agreed, "you're not wrong there. Hagrid *loves* dragons."

"Remember Norbert, Harry?" asked Charlie, "Norwegian Ridgeback," he added as a wholly unnecessary prompt.

"What, 'ickle baby Norber't?" recalled Harry, "'course I do. Whatever happened to him?"

"Remember?" asked Dean, eyes narrowing suspiciously. "How, exactly, would a *dragon* remember Harry? I thought Charlie said you escaped on a Japanese Gotcha..."

"*Gothic*, Dean, Japanese *Gothic*," corrected Charlie, in a pained tone of voice, "Akiko - beauty, she is..."

"Earth to Charlie, Earth to Charlie," interrupted Dean, before their host got lost again in reminiscence of his apparently all-too-brief liaison with the Japanese fighting dragon. Dean and Padma had already suffered the full 'why the Japanese Gothic represents the pinnacle of life on Earth' hard sell twice the previous evening, and entertaining though he was when in full flow, it was possible to hear Charlie gush about dragons a little *too* often.

"Wha...?" asked Charlie, blinking, his thread lost.

"Norbert," prompted Harry, "you were saying...?"

"Oh," exclaimed Padma, "was that the dragon from the Triwizard Tournament?"

"Are you mental, woman?" enquired Dean, incredulously, "Norbert's a *bloke's* name - right Charlie? - and Harry's dragon had eggs... duh!"

"And *that* was a Hungarian Horntail," explained a slightly vexed Charlie, who was obviously irked that his charges didn't seem that well versed in dragon species, "and *her* name is Fifi-Trixibelle..."

Dean looked at Charlie aghast, "you have *got* to be kidding me," he pleaded.

"...anyway," continued Charlie, "we'd better not see Fi, since she will *definitely* remember him," he jerked his shoulder towards Harry, "and *nothing* holds a grudge like a dragon." The way he said this left them all in no doubt that such a thing was nothing they wanted to behold. "Anyway, Norbert, Harry, he's joined this pack of Ridgeback's we've got over on the South side... just wait 'til you see how much he's grown..."

And with that, Charlie plunged off into the rain once more, Dean, Padma and Harry following behind, exchanging long-suffering glances.

Thus was set the pattern for the day. Norbert, to Harry's eyes, looked virtually indistinguishable from any of his adopted family. Nonetheless, Charlie's eyes seemed to grow brighter and brighter with each sighting, and by mid afternoon, Harry was seriously wondering if a song and dance routine would be coming next.

"I know I shouldn't say this," grimaced Padma, who was sharing umbrellas with Harry, their arms linked in companionable fashion, "but..." she trailed off hesitantly.

"Er," ventured Harry, cautiously, "seen one dragon...?"

"Seen them all?" finished Padma, "and poor Dean!" she continued, "he's terrified of them..."

Harry was about to follow up on Padma's concern for her fellow truant, but she'd already changed the subject.

"Cho misses you, you know," Padma squeezed Harry's arm as she relayed this news.

Truth be told, Harry felt a bit of an idiot confessing that he'd missed Cho to Padma. Padma, of all people, he reminded himself, who'd not exactly been jumping for joy when nothing had first started happening between himself and the Ravenclaw Seeker. "She gave me this scarf," offered Harry, which was the most he was prepared to admit to in front of an audience; the scarf had been a constant companion since he'd escaped Blackrock, and he genuinely liked it. As a scarf, and not just because it'd been a present from Cho. He *liked* scarves. And Cho.

"She would've come, you know," continued Padma, obviously understanding that Harry wasn't about to get down on bended knee and declare undying love through a proxy, "but we thought she'd be missed - Ravenclaw are practicing every night this week..."

"Slytherin, Saturday," confirmed Harry, his firm grip of Quidditch schedules not having deserted him, despite everything else that had been thrown at him. "She'd better *crucify* Malfoy," he added, darkly. Then, sensing his opportunity, he tried to steer the subject back onto the lines of his intended enquiry, "so that's why you and Dean, then?" he invited, casually.

"And Hermione's fine, really," continued Padma, who suddenly seemed to have developed a flat spot in her hearing, "everyone's OK back at school. Parvati's pretending to be me half the week," she rolled her eyes at this, "Merlin *knows* what she's going to do to my reputation in Arithmancy..."

"Thanks for coming, Padma," said Harry, meaning it. She and Dean could, quite legitimately, have either gone ahead to Durmstrang (not, in Harry's opinion, the best plan ever), or have headed back to school. They still had a little battle to get over as regards to when they *would* have to leave Harry to continue alone, but he was confident that they would see sense this time. Beauxbatons had been bad enough. He wasn't going to let it happen again.

Dean was, if anything, even more difficult to crack than Padma, Harry discovered as the two followed Charlie and Padma's umbrella to what felt like the millionth nest, "so, Dean," he ventured bravely, "you and Padma...?"

Dean had thrown Harry a genuinely puzzled look, "what?"

"Erm," stammered Harry, momentarily thrown by Dean's wholly convincing confusion, "er, just, y'know, you two seem quite friendly... these days. Since you arrived... here, I mean. Y'know..."

"Nothing's happening," stated Dean, categorically, his eyes lingering on the subject of their conversation as she engaged Charlie in earnest discussion.

"Right," agreed Harry. He *had* been about to observe that he'd heard *that* before, but then he'd remembered that he'd been the one saying it the last time, and decided that he was probably better letting the matter drop.

"Well, you're all, what, sixteen, right?" enquired Charlie that evening, as they settled into the sofas in his front room.

Padma, Harry noticed, had settled herself on the floor, leaning against Dean's legs, which struck him as a particularly noble sacrifice on her part, given that there were at least four spare seats available to her elsewhere in the room.

Padma and Dean had both given affirmatives, by the time Charlie's raised eyebrows had turned to Harry, "uh, well," he hedged, "pretty much..." Everyone in the room knew that he didn't actually turn sixteen until the end of July, but it didn't seem to be a problem.

Charlie re-emerged with a quartet of bottles, holding them by their necks in the fingers of each hand, "I've got... Bulgarian, German and... er, Belgian," he explained, having briefly checked the labels. "Ladies first?"

Harry was mildly shocked by the assuredness with which Padma immediately said, "Belgian," and even *more* taken aback by the rider, "as long as it's not Van-Bessel."

Yes, mused Harry, eyes narrowing once more on his two school-mates' extreme proximity, he was beginning to see a whole new dimension to Parvati's sister. He considered himself something of an expert these days in 'nothing happening', and to his eyes, there was definitely plenty of nothing happening there...

The bottles distributed, they all swigged silently until Charlie dimmed the lights, and cast an Astronomy charm on the room's ceiling, showing the night's sky, without the cloud cover that was providing the rain that hadn't stopped *all day*.

"Whoa," breathed Dean, impressed.

"Hey," responded Charlie, pretending to be affronted at Dean's implication that he'd thought such a Charm would be beyond their host's talents, "I'm not as stupid as I'm cabbage-looking..."

After a short while, Harry was firmly convinced that Professor Sinistra's lessons at the top of the Astronomy Tower would have been a *whole* lot more compelling if she'd followed Charlie's line, and dished out free drinks as accompaniment.

And space was so *big*. Really big. Really, really big.

He needed a bigger word. It wasn't big, it was... really, really...

Huge.

"...isn't it weird," pondered Padma, dreamily, head now resting against Dean's legs as she stared up at the ceiling, "all those stars... billions and billions of them? And, y'know, maybe there's life somewhere else in the Universe? Do you think it's all chance? Or is it design?" she mused.

"Millions and billions and zillions," echoed Charlie, who was onto at least his eighth bottle of the night by that point.

"You never think about how *big* it really is," added Harry, "I mean, you know, *really* think. Really. Really, really..." he nearly lost track of himself, but recovered seamlessly, "really, really *big*," he concluded, shaking his head for emphasis.

"Vast," agreed Padma, sleepily, seeming oblivious to Dean's fingers as they laced through her hair.

"Well," ventured Dean, philosophically, "given that God is infinite..." he paused, staring off into space, focused, it seemed, on Orion's Belt, "and given that the Universe is *also* infinite..."

Charlie and Padma were nodding in agreement as they followed Dean's hypothesis.

"...would anyone like a toasted teacake?"

Chapter 72

Nicholas Flamel is the only known maker of the Philosopher's Stone, but who first postulated that such a thing could be created?

Charlie had left them in the house on Thursday, with strict instructions not to venture out into the camp. Although they'd glimpsed other people about the place the previous day, hoods drawn up to stave off the rain, they'd not been introduced to anyone, not had anyone made any effort to introduce themselves. Having no desire to announce his presence to the world at that moment, this state of affairs had suited Harry just fine.

"It's crawling with *dragons*," Dean had pointed out, not inaccurately, "what d'ya think we are? Mental?"

Charlie had almost looked hurt, as though the very prospect of rubbing shoulders with fire-breathing, claw-wielding, razor-sharp toothed magical monsters would have any right-thinking person tearing the doors down to commune at one with these magnificent animals. Gryffindors, clearly, weren't what they used to be.

Both dressed as Muggles, Dean had his sketch pad out, pencil scratching across the heavy paper in sweeping motions, whilst Padma, sitting just far enough away from Dean for their proximity to almost pass undetected, had her nose buried in one of Charlie's reference books: *Dragons: Majesty and Power*. His friends' cerebral pastimes had forced Harry to attempt to hide the spine of his own reading material, *Quidditch in Pictures*, feeling as though he was letting the side down somewhat. There *were* words, too, though. On some of the pages, anyway.

Padma came through from the kitchen with a trio of mugs, handing the coffees out as she settled back lengthwise onto the sofa, resting her heels on Dean's lap. Dean made an impatient sound as he nudged her feet into a more convenient location, but made no move to protest further at being used as footstool.

Nothing happening, thought Harry. Oh yes. Still, he didn't actually know what the situation with Dean and Ginny back at Hogwarts was, so unless something obvious happened, he decided to let the matter drop.

Something *really* obvious, anyway.

"How're you feeling, Harry?" enquired Padma, who'd cupped her mug in both hands, the sleeves of her cream jumper pulled over her fingertips. It wasn't *that* cold in Charlie's front room, but it wasn't exactly warm, either.

"Alright," he replied, carefully putting *Quidditch in Pictures* down by the side of the sofa, and letting his sense fan out across the camp. "I can see way past Fred and George now... doesn't hurt too much... so I think I'm pretty much ready to move."

Dean, whose pencil continued to sweep across the sketch pad, entered the conversation, "we," he indicated Padma with a nod of his head, "were thinking, about Harceek... d'you reckon you can drain the Third Key from there?"

"Depends how far it is from Durmstrang," mused Harry, "but, probably... but I thought we had a Portkey?"

"*You* were the one who pointed out that Portkeying into the middle of an enemy castle wasn't the most discreet arrival ever," observed Padma, taking a warming sip of coffee, wriggling her toes as she did so.

"Well, er, yeah," conceded Harry. That had always seemed like the weak point in a plan that was hardly foolproof to begin with. "So, what? We Floo to Harceek, and I drain the Key from there?"

"Makes sense, mate," confirmed Dean, who'd stopped sketching now, and was instead prodding Padma's toes with the pencil as she fought gamely back.

Something really, *really* obvious, Harry reminded himself. Those two had probably just struck up a natural friendship in their travels. That was it. So something *blatant*, and he'd make a comment, perhaps.

"That way," Dean continued, raking his free hand through his dreadlocked hair, "we can stay reasonably clear of the castle itself, *and* we're on the Floo network to get back to Hogwarts..."

"You *are* coming back to Hogwarts with us, aren't you?" enquired Padma, piercingly. "Once this is done? I mean, that'll be it, won't it? There's plenty of places we could hide you away in back there - at least until everything blows over..."

"Er..." Harry stalled. He *wanted* to get back to Hogwarts; it was the only place apart from the Burrow where he actually felt at home. But, on the other hand, this wasn't a situation that would 'blow over'. "I'm not sure, yet," he ventured cautiously.

"Well what else are you going to *do*?" asked Dean, incredulously, "you can't run your whole life... at least back at Gryffindor..."

"Hogwarts," corrected Padma, jabbing Dean's stomach with her foot.

"*Gryffindor*," persisted Dean, locking eyes with Padma in a way that very much made Harry feel superfluous, "at least back there, mate, we can look after... well, y'know, sort you out. Food 'n stuff."

"I'm not going to run my whole life," countered Harry, resignedly, trying to convey a conviction he didn't feel, "I just have to..." he stalled, feeling his two friends' gaze turn from concerned to suspicious, "y'know... finish this."

"*Que*?" asked Dean, in a Manuel accent.

Padma frowned at him, and nudged his ribs with her toes, "*what*?" she demanded.

"Y'know," persisted Harry, knowing that they'd have to have this argument at some point, "there's this... bond. Between me and Voldemort..."

Padma sucked her breath in through her teeth. Dean frowned - as a Muggle, the impact of the name didn't hit quite so hard with the West Ham fan; he rubbed Padma's calves in an attempt to calm her down somewhat.

"But Harry," pleaded Padma, either oblivious or accustomed to Dean's ministrations, "you can't mean that you're going to..." the look in her eyes, however, gave away the fact that she completely understood what he'd meant.

"I'm *involved* in this, Dean, Padma," Harry explained, forcefully. "I'm not just Harry Potter, Gryffindor, I'm *The Boy Who Lived*. This scar," he parted his ragged fringe to display the lightning bolt mark more clearly, "connects me to Voldemort. He took *my* blood to rebuild himself. I've faced him down before, and I will face him down again..."

As he spoke these words, Harry could feel the lethargy of his recovery ebb away, as the edge returned to his vision, and determination was fuelled by the resolve that had sustained him through the sightless days of prison. "Voldemort and I are connected," he repeated, "linked. In some ways, we're sort of similar..."

"No you're not," contradicted Dean, flatly, and with total, deep-rooted conviction.

Harry held his free hand aloft in a gesture of appreciation, but continued, "we're less different than you'd like to think, Dean. But I have it in me to end this. I can't say *how* I know... I don't even know *how* I'll do it, if at all.

"All I do know is that this is down to me, and I have to try..."

"But you *don't* have to try on your own!" protested Padma, sitting forward, resting her forearms on her knees, feet now flat against Dean's legs as he idly ran a finger up and down her jeans, from knee to ankle.

"Didn't Beauxbatons show you that you can't put yourselves into that kind of situation?" asked Harry, incredulously. "Ron died!" he reminded them. "Seamus got bitten, *you*," he pointed an accusing finger at Dean, "nearly killed yourself..."

"And you know what?" asked Dean, "I'd do it again in a second, and so would Seamus. I can't speak for Ron, but I'll bet *you* could," he challenged. "We're here to do our bit. Make what difference we can..."

"Maybe you're right, Harry," continued Padma, taking up the narrative, "maybe you *are* the one, the only one, who can end this thing with... with... with You Know Who. But that doesn't mean you have to get there on your own..."

"But you're going to get yourselves *killed*!" protested Harry, trying to make them see sense. To stand next to the Boy Who Lived was to declare yourself an obvious target; he couldn't put his friends at risk like that.

"Harry," stated Dean, firmly, "we trust you. Wholly. But the deal here is that you have to trust *us*, as well..."

"It's not that I don't tru..."

"...and," persisted Dean, refusing to be cut off, "part of that is to let us make our stand with you," he paused, and flashed his brilliant, wicked grin, "or, y'know, maybe just a little behind and to the left," the grin faded, "but we *know* what we're doing."

Harry's response in his mind was that neither Dean nor Padma *did* know what they were doing. They hadn't been there in the graveyard, seen Cedric's body consumed by the flash of green light, evidence of Voldemort's casual disregard for those who didn't feature in his plans. Expendables, in Dean's terms. They hadn't been there in the Chamber of Secrets, or seen Quirrell, driven mad by possession, desperately lunge for the Philosopher's Stone. All these arguments, protestations and caveats swam around in his mind, but his traitorous mouth formed the simple word, "thanks."

Dean and Padma both visibly relaxed, as though realising they'd won the battle. Harry, on the other hand, found a new wave of guilt eat away at his conscience; he hoped he hadn't condemned his friends to the same fate as Ron or Seamus. Or something even worse.

He flicked his sense out across the camp, "I'm going for a walk," he announced, suddenly, and pushed himself to his feet, summoning his cloak into his outstretched hand with barely a thought.

"But Charlie sai..." started Padma.

"I'm a Mage," responded Harry, needlessly, "there's not a thing out there that can touch me." He didn't mean to sound arrogant. He wasn't *being* arrogant. The dullness that had afflicted him since escaping Blackrock, only noticeable now through its absence, had given way now to the familiar focus. The drive. The *conviction* that events hung on *him*, and him alone.

Great things were headed his way. *Terrible*, in Ollivander's language, Harry didn't doubt, but great. And he would meet them head on. He caught both Dean and Padma's eyes; "I'll be a *good* hour," he informed them, meaningfully.

He had a terrible suspicion that he'd just signed their death warrants; the least he could do was give them a little time together first.

Stepping out onto the muddy path, Harry swept the site, intending to meet up with Charlie. To his surprise, however, their host was nowhere to be found. He could sense far beyond any of the nests that they'd visited the previous day. There *were* keepers about the place, and it was a simple enough matter for Harry to pick a path that avoided both humans and dragons, but Charlie's pattern, midnight-blue with frost white clouds, had disappeared completely.

It struck Harry as odd. If he had travelled out of the camp itself, why hadn't he simply taken the Floo from his front room? Or Apparated? Certain that Charlie would have had his reasons, Harry checked his watch before heading into the forest, cloak drawn tight against the wind, aiming to climb the nearest peak. Not for any particular reason other than the infamous 'because it was there', and to ensure that he didn't return to Charlie's any earlier than he'd promised.

Dean and Padma were both good friends, he knew. He could trust them, they trusted him, but... But they weren't Ron and Hermione. They didn't *know* the world as the Trio did. But Ron was dead, and Hermione to all intents and purposes wandless. He himself was a fugitive, with what amounted to a signed death warrant in the publication of Wednesday's Prophet Extra.

Having made his way through the forest, he eventually crossed the tree-line, and slowly started to make his way up the exposed hillside, feeling slightly vulnerable as he did so. A Norwegian Ridgeback glided across the forest canopy on the opposite hillside, prompting Harry to remember why Charlie's had been touted as the best place to lie low: the Trackers. Dragons were about the only thing that the goblins' Blood Trackers were afraid of.

And having seen Akiko tear the leathery, long-snouted beasts apart, Harry could understand why. He extended his sense through the skies, searching for likely patterns, but nothing seemed to be in range, which provided some small measure of reassurance. Nonetheless, Charlie had made it perfectly clear that the Trackers would be back, and would stay on his tail until... well, that part hadn't really been made clear, as such. It was unlikely that any conclusion to the Trackers' hunt would be a pleasurable experience, as far as Harry could tell, though, and staying as far away from the winged reptiles as he could seemed an eminently sensible strategy.

Cold rock underfoot now, residual dampness from the previous day's rain forming tiny pools in the crevices and crannies of the hillside, but testament to the fact that the temperature was at least above freezing.

Deciding that perching right at the summit would definitely put him in the 'sitting duck' category of targets, Harry squatted down on his haunches, leaning back against a medium sized outcrop a few metres below the top, scanning the valley below.

He concentrated his gaze vaguely Northward, almost feeling the call of the Third Key, located somewhere within Durmstrang. It was a bit late for doubts to be creeping in; certainly, he *hoped* that both his and Hermione's combined intuition would prove correct - that the Third Key of the Magi was protected by Durmstrang just as Beauxbatons and Hogwarts had protected their own relics of the ancient tribes. The names alone were simply too similar for Harry to believe that there could be any other outcome, and it provided another bond between the three schools of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The explanation fit, to have come all this way to find the cupboard bare was simply not going to be on the agenda.

Krum had talked of Durmstrang being cold, with snow, glaciers and stuff. Certainly, Charlie's camp wasn't exactly hostile in weather terms, which led Harry to deduce that Durmstrang had to be located at a higher altitude than they currently were. There was also the matter of the Durmstrang ship - there *had* to be some expanse of water connected with their destination - another coincidence to link the three schools, he realised, recalling that Beauxbatons, too, had a lake hard up against one side of the castle.

Durmstrang, by all accounts, had been smaller than Hogwarts, making it the smallest of the three schools. Apparently it had been the most spartan, too. Nonetheless, if Tempus had adopted it as their base, it was certain to be at least adequately protected. Padma's reminder

that Portkeying onto the very castle walls wasn't exactly subtle had been well made; it certainly made more sense to keep as far away from Durmstrang as he could.

As Lucas had told him, if he could sense the Key, he could drain it. And Harry could sense for *miles* in these parts - the low number of patterns in the area meant that his vision didn't get cluttered as quickly as it had done at Hogwarts, with the bustle of Hogsmeade assaulting his senses. It was impossible to gauge distance with accuracy, but Harry was confident that if Harceek was within five miles of Durmstrang, then it would be enough.

It was Thursday... he felt fine, the stiffness from limbs had more or less evaporated, and to be breathing clean, clear air after two months of the stuffiness of prison was invigorating by itself. The call of the Third Key was almost irresistible - a shining lure that insisted that he make his move sooner, rather than later. He was fit, they had a plan, what good did waiting further serve?

They had him, the Last of the Magi. They had Padma, who was, by all accounts, wicked with a sword, and Dean, an Animagus with the transform of a wolf. As assets went, they weren't bad things. A Ravenclaw, Padma was no slouch as a witch either, and although Dean's wizard talents weren't perhaps of the same level as some of the others in their year, he got by. And Dean had Muggle nous that his Pureblood compatriots lacked... Padma a Pureblood, himself a Mixed blood and Dean a Muggleborn - Harry was slightly surprised that the makeup echoed that of the original Trio, and wondered if there was some significance there; it *felt* as though there was more to it than balance, but Harry couldn't quite place why.

So they comprised the new Trio, not replacing, nor usurping the original friendship forged that Halloween night in the First Year, but a single aspect of a bigger partnership that had been forged in the Fifth. Dean's label of the 'Away Team' had stuck, like most of Dean's labels stuck with things, and as his eyes scanned the distant hilltops, unseeing, Harry's mind ran through the friends who were left at Hogwarts.

Hermione would always be Hermione; bookish, clever beyond description, loyal, but with a well disguised streak of cunning that wouldn't be out of place in a Slytherin. Not, of course, that he'd ever suggest as much to her - he quite liked having just the one head, thank you very much. Ron was different now, he understood. Different, but still the same. No magic, confined to darkness, impossible to touch, but still the same Ron Weasley he'd befriended all those years before. When the crunch came, and Harry knew it would, he wanted Hermione and Ron there with him, by his side as they had been through almost every important trial in his life.

There was Cho, too, the scarf about his neck a constant reminder of their connection: he'd put her through anguish enough making her relive the night of the Third Task, when they'd Portkeyed to Hogwarts via Azkaban. Cedric's ghost still hung about the two of them, not *unwelcome*, exactly, just there; a reminder that the world was real and not a game. And despite what he'd put her through, that night when they'd gone from the trials of Beauxbatons' dungeon to the despair of Azkaban, Cho had promised that he need only ask, and she'd be there to make her stand, too.

Ginny, Seamus, Parvati, Lavender, Neville; all good friends, but all seemingly unaware of just how much danger they were putting themselves in.

He'd *tried* to explain it to them. After Beauxbatons, he'd have thought the answer was obvious: *stay away from Harry Potter: he'll get you killed*. But they'd stood by him, if anything they'd strengthened the bond that had formed in the fifth year, and, as he himself had been forced to admit, he wouldn't have walked away from any of them if their roles had been reversed.

But deep in his gut, Harry knew that their blood would be on his conscience, if not his hands exactly, before the battle was over.

Chapter 73

For how long did the infamous 'Hundred Day' Goblin Rebellion last?

Dean was not impressed: "see this?" he demanded, waving the intertwined fingers of his and Padma's hands in front of Harry's eyes.

Harry, not wholly sure to what his friend was alluding, nodded mutely.

"Pigmentation!" explained Dean, "we were not *made* for this," he continued, developing a Blackadderesque tone of voice, "you see, *our* medium is sun-kissed beaches, palm leaves fluttering gently in the balmy breeze, clear, turquoise waters lapping the golden sand... We weren't designed for this! Right?" he directed the last question at Padma.

"Mmm," agreed the Ravenclaw, supportively, nodding her head, teeth clenched against the cold, "sun-drenched beaches. Palm-trees... waiters serving us drinks?" she looked up at Dean, hopefully.

"As you wish," breathed Dean, causing Harry to grit his teeth, closing his eyes momentarily.

Padma had renewed the *Impervio* charm on Harry's glasses, which was useful, since it meant he could actually see the snow settling in his two friends' hair. Big, powdery flakes that took their time to dissolve, causing Dean to shake his head like a dog every now and again, releasing small flurries of snow. Padma would then jab him with her elbow in admonishment, he'd act contrite, and then they'd both giggle.

Harry, a few steps behind, had Cho's scarf wrapped around the lower half of his face, and the hood of Charlie's cloak up. If it bothered Dean so much, why didn't he pull his own hood up? Personally, Harry thought those two were actually having a good time in the snow, and all the theatrical complaints were, well, just that; theatre.

"But it's just like Hoth!" tried Harry, attempting to win Dean over to their new environment with the Star Wars connection.

"The Rebels were forced to evacuate Hoth in pretty short order, I'll have you know," was Dean's response, before he adopted a distant, dreamlike tone, "a poor omen, my dear child... Your sister would *kill* me for mocking the Inner Eye," he added, turning to Padma once more.

"But I thought you said the Rebel Base was on Yavin?" questioned Padma, seriously.

Dean beamed at his companion, "yes, it was! Well, technically, a moon orbiting Yavin, but well remembered! But that was at the end of Star Wars, and Hoth's at the start of Empire. See, what happened next was that Darth Vader, obsessed with finding Skywalker, despatched thousands of probe droids..."

Harry gave up trying to make conversation with the two, and instead left Dean to his self-appointed task of founding the oral tradition of Star Wars within the wizarding world. There was definitely *something* going on between them; he wasn't blind (any more), but when he'd

finally returned back to Charlie's house, after staring hungrily into the distance, trying to will Durmstrang nearer, he hadn't intruded on any acts of mad passion.

Instead, he'd discovered that Dean had been carefully explaining Star Wars, probably retelling the tale line by line. Padma *had* been an extremely attentive audience, however, and she'd turned around on the sofa, so her head had been resting on Dean's lap rather than her feet, but Harry still hadn't been certain what, if anything, was going there.

They were following a path out of Harceek, into the mountainous terrain surrounding the small village. Well, they *thought* they were following the path, but the snow was falling so heavily the point was moot.

This didn't actually matter too much. Harry had swept the area with his sense as soon as they'd stumbled clumsily out of the fireplace into a cellar of some kind, Charlie having synchronised their departure with that intriguing timepiece of his once more. Harceek was smaller than Hogsmeade, nestling in a kind of hollow, steep mountains on three sides, the shores of a lake forming the remaining boundary.

The sign of Tempus burnt from windows *everywhere*, mostly the familiar, vivid blue colour, but with the occasional flash of a green symbol half hidden in the small village's cramped streets.

Durmstrang's ship, the rigging heavy with ice, lay moored to a small wooden pier, but there had been no sign of life anywhere near the vessel, and the dark water had been as smooth as glass.

Durmstrang itself lay on the far side of the lake, where the mountain appeared to rise straight up out of the water, the sheer rock face a dim, grey wall through the blizzard. The castle itself was out of sight, lost high up in the thick, heavy cloud, but the view had been enough material for Dean to work with: "Hah!" he'd cried, pointing triumphantly at the far shore, "*the Cliffs of Insanity!*"

The castle may have been out of visual sight, but its presence seared into Harry's mind with burning clarity. Any vestigial doubts he'd held that the whole escapade would turn out to be a twisted wild goose chase had been firmly squashed the moment their feet had hit the cellar's stone floor. The Third Key was there, in the castle, burning like a naked star.

They'd shrugged the Invisibility Cloak off almost as soon as they'd stepped outside of the mysterious building into which they'd travelled (and just after they'd finally got Dean to stop humming the theme tune to *Mission: Impossible*); the snow had been settling thickly on the fabric, and the trio reasoned that if anyone was close enough to see them in person, they'd have been close enough to see the snow- covered cloak, too.

They were heading for a series of caves he'd detected to the North of the village: it was a fair trek - a couple of miles, probably, through a blizzard, in the falling dusk - but they needed to be safe from prying eyes when Harry started to drain the Key, and the cave had been the nearest cover he'd been able to detect.

"Dean," hissed Harry, suddenly, interrupting his friend's explanation of exactly what an AT-AT looked like, "patterns." He pointed in the vague direction of a cluster of energies that had entered their rough area. Not exactly on a collision course in the frozen wilderness, but close enough to be cause for concern.

Dean morphed into his Animage form, and the black shadow ghosted swiftly across the snow, out of sight, the wolf *made* for this environment. Harry and Padma continued trudging towards their destination - they didn't want to hang around in the snow any longer than they had to, and Harry was confident that Dean's wolf would be able to track them, although probably not with the same accuracy that he himself could observe his friend as the familiar pattern inscribed a careful, discreet circle about the group of presences.

"I hope he's alright," fretted Padma, nervously, continuously throwing glances in the direction the wolf had disappeared.

"He's fine," Harry assured her, "he's just circling them now," he gestured vaguely in the direction that the wolf lay, "and they're not changing course, so it doesn't look like he's been detected..."

"Well if you can *see* all that," protested Padma, "why'd you have to send him off in the first place, then?"

"s like I said, before," he apologised, with a guilty shrug of his shoulders, "I can sense patterns, energies... things. But if I've not *seen* them before, then I don't have anything to match the patterns *to*..."

Padma gave him a *look*.

"I'm sorry... but we *have* to know, what's out there... and he's *fine*, he's not going anywhere near them. I promise... here, c'mon," he extended his own hand, and the two of them ploughed onward through the thickening snow.

As the cave entrance drew closer, and Dean's pattern started to make its way back towards the path (headed first to the point at which he'd left them), Harry allowed his mind to return to the main question that had been bugging him ever since he'd left the dragon camp: what, exactly, had Charlie meant by 'a diversion'?

"So you give me your word, *your word*," Charlie had repeated the request as he paced nervously about his kitchen that afternoon, "that you're not going to go anywhere nearer Durmstrang than you absolutely have to, right?"

The three friends, seated at Charlie's table as they drank their parting mugs of coffee, had nodded confirmation: "no nearer than I have to," Harry'd promised, "I can sense things like Keys from pretty far away, so we shouldn't need to be that close at all..."

"Good," Charlie'd responded, before lapsing into one of his trademark lengthy pauses as he took a careful sip of coffee, "and just to make *sure* you're not detected..." he'd continued.

"Yes?" Dean had ventured, after they thought they'd waited a sufficiently respectful amount of time. That was the trouble with Charlie - you could never be sure whether he was just pausing, thoughtfully, or whether he'd lost his train of thought completely.

"Yeah," Charlie'd agreed, nodding, before, *eventually*, adding, "got a sort of diversion lined up..."

Unfortunately, that had been as much information as any of the three had been able to draw from their host, and they'd returned to the business of preparing to set out for Harceek that Thursday evening.

Dean had caught up with them now, echoing Sirius' trademark shake of the head as he transformed back into his human form: "goblins," he explained, with the vague trace of a frown, "seemed to be heading into the village..."

"Might have been a sentry patrol," suggested Harry, recalling Bill's news at one of the meetings of the Order of the Phoenix that the Order of Tempus had sent messages to the giants, the goblins... just about everyone in the magical world, in fact. "Twelve, right?"

Dean nodded confirmation, the snow settling once more on the three friends as they continued towards the promised shelter of the cave, "yeah, twelve. Couldn't get too close to 'em, mind, but I don't think they like the snow..."

"Don't think goblins like much of *anything*," was Harry's assessment, recalling without noticeable fondness the previous two months' imprisonment.

"...and *where* is all this stuff coming from?" continued Dean, sweeping his free arm in an expansive gesture to indicate the heavy snow, and drawing Harry's attention to the fact that Padma had lost no time in seizing hold of her fellow fifth year's hand once more.

"From the sky, Dean. Those cloud thingies? Y'know? I understand it's a well documented meteorological phenomenon even in the Muggle world," teased Padma, nudging him slightly with her shoulder as they trudged onward.

Harry, however, thought that Dean had a point. They weren't *that* much further North of Charlie's place, nor did they seem to be much higher up, but it was certainly much, much colder here, at Durmstrang.

"They've set up their own micro-climate, silly," even though he was behind, Harry *knew* that Padma would be rolling her eyes just like Parvati as she explained the blindingly obvious to her two ignorant companions.

"They *choose* to freeze to death?" Harry enquired, doubtfully. Padma's explanation made sense, of course (it was clear that Padma's House had never been in doubt), but why would they *choose* to live in a freezer? Even Krum had sort of complained that Durmstrang was cold.

"To keep the Muggles away," replied Padma, in the tone one used for explaining the incredibly obvious to the unbelievably dense.

"Oh that's not fair," countered Dean, sounding surprisingly serious, and almost hurt for once, "this whole Muggle-wizard segregation thing..."

"But it's *always* been that way," protested Padma, in what sounded to Harry like apologetic tones. "We keep ourselves to ourselves," she protested, weakly, "we always have..."

Dean, who was clearly trying to reign himself from getting started on a topic that was dear to his heart, attempted to counter, "it's not *that*," he protested, reluctantly, "it's just the whole... the whole..."

"Mmm?" prompted Padma, attentively.

"I don't mean this like it sounds," said Dean, clearly deciding to get a pre-emptive apology in (as Harry had noted previously, his Gryffindor compatriot was a lot sharper than he let on), "but, y'know, the whole thing about the wizarding world being so much *better* than the Muggle one..."

The ground started to rise sharply, the rock of the mountain punching through the snow, their destination now just a short climb away. "We're almost there," interrupted Harry, moving to the front, "follow me..."

The sense was a useful tool. With it, Harry could map out boundaries, and detect virtually any living presence within a reasonable radius of his own location. All the way from Harceek, he'd felt the brightness of the Third Key sear its location into his mind, tauntingly close.

When he'd been able to drag his focus from the lure of the Key, he'd been able to check for any patterns that might cross their path, such as Dean's goblins, the dense congregation of energies that were cooped up inside Durmstrang itself, or the sparse collection of people that lived in Harceek.

But the sense did have its limitations, especially in new, unknown environments: it was very difficult to overlay a sense of scale to the images processed by his mind, and what might seem like a small distance in his head could sometimes turn out to be quite different in the cold light of day.

Or freezing dimness of fast-falling night, as it so happened.

"Define," invited Dean, his customary tone of banter restored once more, "'almost there' again for me, mate..."

"Sorry," apologised Harry, wincing slightly. His fingers, numbed as they had been by the cold, were sore, the sharp cliff face having inflicted numerous small, but stinging cuts during the ascent. "But," he promised, with slightly more confidence, "we're *really* nearly there now..."

Dean wasn't listening, "you OK?" he called back down to Padma, who seemed to be the least adept at climbing cliff-faces in the dark in a blizzard. Not really a skill there was much call for within the studious confines of Ravenclaw, apparently.

The cave itself, once Harry had burnt any potentially unpleasant residents away with a sweep of crimson fire that rippled across the walls like a film of water, seemed reasonably accommodating. It was about twenty feet deep, and more or less level, dipping slightly as it turned and narrowed towards the end.

Padma had already conjured a bronze, smokeless fire right at the back of the cave, to keep it out of sight from the cave's entrance, and the three friends huddled around the flame as they planned their next move.

"Right," announced Harry, feeling his mind pulled almost magnetically back towards Durmstrang, "we made it..."

He could almost feel the burning in his muscles as he contemplated transferring the Key's power to augment his own, and could sense his eyes brighten with hunger at the prospect. They'd made it - they were within sense range of the Third Key, and he was about to suck the rock dry of every trace of power it possessed.

Take it. Take it *all*. Oh yes...

His thoughts were distracted by the arrival of an artfully skimmed sandwich (the trio's parting gift from Charlie), which he was able to trap deftly in his right hand with barely a moment's thought.

"Dean..." admonished Padma's voice, but Harry's mind was already lost to the draw of the Key's aura once more, so he missed the rest of their exchange, chewing absently.

Two months in prison, with nothing to do but focus on getting to this place. Two months, watching repeated, brutal sacrifices of innocent victims as Voldemort attempted to realise his dream of, truly, being the most powerful wizard the world had ever seen. Two months for the edge to harden, the resolve carrying him through the sightless incarceration.

And now, Harry mused, his time had come. Any moment now, he'd leap into the Third Key's pattern - his skin tingled at the prospect of feeling the tendrils of energy snake across his skin, course through his veins, sink deep into his very bones.

The Beauxbatons Key had carried with it a different *taste* to Hogwarts, and Harry didn't doubt that Durmstrang's own Key would convey its own, unique persona. It was irrelevant, in a sense, though, because within a couple of days, it'd all be his anyway, and then...

And then? He wasn't really sure what would come next, and reluctantly pulled his sense back in to look across the cave to Dean and Padma. His two companions were sitting with their backs to the cave wall, next to the fire, leaning companionably against one another as they tucked into their sandwiches. Sandwiches which, of course, Dean had enthusiastically labelled 'dragon-burgers', much to Charlie's obvious horror.

Padma had a point, he realised. He probably *would* be safe, at least temporarily, if he returned to Hogwarts. And it would be fun to see the shock on the Away Team's faces when *three* people returned when only two people had left... Harry had wanted to send another of Dean's intentionally baffling notes to Cho, to let them all know that he was OK, but Padma had advised against it.

Dean, who'd been *itching* to confuse the purebloods still further, had put up a half-hearted argument in favour of writing, but they'd both reluctantly agreed with the Ravenclaw. The Ministry *knew* they hadn't captured the real Harry, and they would be on the look-out for any indication that Harry's friends knew where he was. If the Away Team, presumably moping after Wednesday's news, suddenly starting leaping about Hogwarts in giddy abandon on hearing that Harry was actually OK, then it might give the game away.

So yes, maybe he *would* go back to Hogwarts with Dean and Padma. See Cho, see Hermione and, weird concept though it was, he'd be able to see Ron. Kind of. Yes, that would count as 'weird'...

Surprised at how quickly he'd finished his dragon-burger, Harry got to his feet, "OK," he announced, "I'd better make a start on this... remember, though, that once I go under, I can't sense anything else, so, you two'll keep watch, right?"

"Hang on a sec," protested Dean, waving his own half-finished food before him, "you wolfed yours down pretty sharpish, but *some* of us here have a tad more decorum, I'll have you know..." Nonetheless, Harry's dorm-mate of the previous four and a half years got to his feet, and headed towards the cave entrance to keep watch.

Padma, having watched Dean disappear around the corner, turned her attention back to Harry, levelling a gaze that he hoped wasn't accusatory at him. "Right," started the Ravenclaw, seeming a little lost, "so... er, what do I do? You can do this just by yourself, right?"

Harry nodded, adding a shrug of apology - the Third Key was his to deal with. *All* his, and Dean and Padma couldn't really help in that regard. "You've not seen me do this, have you?" he realised, suddenly, remembering that he'd only demonstrated the Key draining to the Gryffindors, and to Cho in Beauxbatons. Unable to suppress a grin at the prospect of taking on board a massive amount of energy, he tried to put Padma's mind at rest, "now don't worry, but this is going to look a little weird..."

Stretching his arms out, tipping his neck back, and allowing his sense to envelope the Third Key as it lay at the edge of his perception, he felt the muscles burn, his skin start to glow. He could hear the static crackle around the cave as energy poured from his cloak to the floor, and he revelled in the sheer warmth of being completely surrounded by power of unfathomable magnitude.

Harry could feel his eyes burning with delight as he pulled back, limbs literally aflame with energy as the ocean of power receded, if only temporarily.

Oh yes, he'd missed this.

His arms, arms that had a few moments previously been completely wreathed in incandescent flame, were now reverting back to normal, his skin crackling in the relative darkness of the cave as the energies cooled.

Padma looked at him dubiously, "are you *sure* you're alright?" she asked, her misgivings plain to see.

"Yeah," Harry confirmed, nodding his head vigorously, "it's always like that. I just have to drain the thing in short bursts, to prevent myself from drowning... but I'll be fine," he

promised her. "Fine, really. You'll see." He wasn't trying to get rid of Padma, exactly... he just wanted to be left alone so that he could drain the thing as quickly as he could.

Padma didn't seem wholly convinced, "well I don't like it," she fretted, "you might get... carried away or something..."

"It's fine, it's fine, Padma," urged Harry, a little too quickly. Why couldn't she just go and snog Dean or something, and leave him to drain the Key uninterrupted? Not that he wasn't grateful for their company, or anything, but...

The welcome ache to his muscles and limbs had returned, and his mind's appetite had been amplified a thousand times by the tantalising glimpse of the power on offer to him. He revelled in the feeling of soft needles of pressure enveloping his body, the almost salty tang of welcome discomfort remembered with the fondness of returning home. The Third Key: it was his for the taking.

And take it he would: funnelling all his sense along the tight beam that connected the cave to Durmstrang, Harry leapt into the energy field once more, limbs trailing iridescent streams of energy as he endeavoured to absorb the whole thing completely.

Padma soon tired of watching him turn into a human firework every few minutes, and so, with a dark warning not to get obsessed, she'd gone off to the cave entrance to sit with Dean.

Dean, as it happened, had transformed himself back into the wolf, Harry noticed, supposing that his friend had reasoned that the wolf's heightened senses would be of use in that situation. Padma didn't seem too fussed, however, and had sat down with her back against the cave wall, as the wolf adjusted its own position to end up lying across her feet.

Nothing happening, Harry reminded himself, as he let his body unwind from its latest immersion. Oh yes, nothing at all.

Still, none of that detracted from the fact that he was *alive*, the energy of the Key infecting every thought. He could *feel* his body strengthening, as though fluid were being poured into a hollow vessel. And he didn't mind the aches, the weariness of tight skin across his face. He could cope with the stiffness in his legs, and the soft, insistent pressure *everywhere*.

He could cope with the discomfort... not that it really counted as discomfort, really; in fact, as the night grew deeper, he started to find that he *liked* the sensation, it strangely welcome, carrying with it as it did the knowledge that each jarred nerve brought with it more and more power.

The night drew on, with Harry throwing himself deeper into the Third Key's power each time, pushing his body's tolerance to the limit, trying to tread the fine line between discomfort and actual physical pain. In the breaks between, he could see Padma, talking to the wolf as it, in turn, stared out into the blackness of the light, a few stray snowflakes fluttering into the cave every now and again.

Pulling back from the sharp comfort of his latest connection to the Third Key, Harry's attention was caught by the wolf at the cave's entrance suddenly morphing back into Dean, who walked backwards warily into their cave. "Er Houston?" the Gryffindor ventured, "uh, we have a problem..."

Harry was about to ask for a more informative report, but the need for further information was dispelled by the screeching calls that filled the cold night air, causing the blood in Harry's veins to chill at the association.

He'd heard such calls before.

Even as his skin continued to crackle, and his body recovered from its latest immersion in the power of the Third Key, the recollection of the Floater's sting swept through Harry's mind, the memory triggered by the last time he'd heard the same, cold cries. Pulling his sense away from the tight focus he'd been maintaining on that quadrangle in the castle, Harry was dismayed to see the skies above them thick with patterns.

And the final traces of doubt were swept aside as a long, leathery snout appeared at the cave entrance. The Blood Trackers had found him.

The leathery beast, with cold, pale green eyes appeared to consider each of the trio in turn before it locked on Harry as its target. Opening its jaws to emit a triumphant 'caw', the reptilian beast took a step further into the cave.

Padma, who'd been tending to the fire, had drawn the song blade from the scabbard on her back, although it was unlikely that she'd be able to get anywhere near enough to the Trackers for such a weapon to be effective. Dean had his wand drawn, as he continued to retreat warily, finally joining Padma on the other side of their small fire, nestling against the back wall of the cave.

"We should kill it quickly," Dean suggested, "before it tries to make friends with us..."

"*What?*" enquired Harry, completely stunned by this surreal instruction.

"The chicken. Withnail and I. No?"

"Not seen it," confessed Harry, as the Tracker took a further, more deliberate step into the cave. Feeling his muscles finally relax from the exertion of the drain, Harry flung a lightning bolt at the intruder, the associated clap of thunder shaking the rock as he did so.

The beast, stunned and injured, scrambled to its legs once more, shuddering violently. Intent, transfixed, even, on acquiring its target, it lurched forward once more, the previously chill cawing now reduced to a throaty wheeze.

It was the persistence, more than the overt hostility, that Harry found most unsettling about the Blood Trackers. They seemed fixated on reaching him, and, quite literally, would continue to creep nearer and nearer their prey until their progress was halted in unquestionable manner. What possible drive could be so deep-seated in these beasts that they focused on capturing Harry to the exclusion of *all* other things?

Disturbed, then, by the Tracker's persistence, Harry wheeled his shoulders about as he conjured up a trace of energy in the form of a tendrilled whip, sparkling white ribbons lacing through the creature's body as they lacerated its skin. By the time Harry had pulled the force back in on the upward swing, the Tracker's pattern had died, and the beast had crumpled to the floor.

There was a brief moment of silence as the three exchanged looks.

Padma spoke first, "was that... it?" she enquired hesitantly.

Harry, who could see the dense swarm of patterns swirling above the rock, shook his head, as a new series of cries cut through the night air.

Dean and Padma didn't really know what to do with themselves. Harry was a whirlwind of energy, repelling successive waves of intruders with force, fire and energy. The power of the Third Key, that that he'd been able to acquire, at any rate, was a welcome boost to his capabilities, but it didn't change the fact that they were hopelessly outnumbered.

"Harry!" demanded Dean, as the latest wave of beasts lay slain on the cave floor, the accumulated bodies inching closer and closed to the trio, trapped against the rear wall, "we've got to get out of here..."

"It's solid *rock!*" protested Harry, gesturing to the walls. Even *he* couldn't blast a tunnel out of this place. And it went without saying that trying to escape via the cave entrance didn't seem like a good idea.

Dean and Padma shared a meaningful glance. "But we have The Thing..." Padma reminded him, hesitantly.

"The what?" asked Harry, impatiently: more patterns had started their descent from the cloud cover, and if ever there had seemed to be a time for plain speaking, this seemed to be it.

"The Thing," elaborated Dean, carefully. "The Portkey," he clarified, which lessened Harry's confusion enormously, "it'll take us out of here, at least, and on to Durmstrang..."

"We *know* it's a bit frying pan/fire," explained Padma, apologetically. She paused, briefly, as three lances of lightning leapt from Harry's right hand to skewer their latest guests, "*but*," she continued, as the thunderclap died, "there are probably more options open to us there than here..."

"It buys us *time*, mate," urged Dean, persuasively.

Harry tried to argue against it in his mind: they'd *promised* Charlie that they'd stay well away from the castle, and that they wouldn't deliberately court danger in such a fashion. On the other hand, they were under siege in the cave, and he couldn't stem the tide of Trackers forever.

And they were right - it did buy them time, and another escape route might present itself. Things had generally tended to work out before, more or less; was it too much to hope that they might continue to do so? "OK," he relented, "let's do it..."

Padma fished around in her bag, obscuring the contents from Harry's view until the very last second.

"Right," she said, in a business-like tone, "if we all grab hold of it..."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Harry couldn't help himself, "you've *got* to be kidding me!" he begged, "where on *Earth*.... wh... do I actually, y'know, have to, er, *touch* it..."

"*This* is the carving Krum made for Hermione," explained Dean, grinning wickedly in a way that confirmed that yes, they *had* made her suffer for the association.

"And *yes*," snapped Padma, briskly, "you *do* have to hold it... it's *just* a carving..."

"But... but... but it's *moving*!" protested Harry, not sure whether to laugh or cry. *Now* he understood why Hermione had been so evasive about Viktor's gift when she'd first mentioned it at the top of the North Tower.

"That wasn't our *fault*!" protested Padma, indignantly, eyes flashing dangerously in a signal that told Harry, who had at least some practice in dealing with riled Patils, that he wasn't to pursue that line of observation.

Beside him, he saw Dean grimace, close his eyes, and grab hold of the... The Thing. More calls from the skies warned Harry that this probably was their best chance, so, quelling his involuntary reluctance, he, too, took a resigned breath, closed his eyes and took hold of... it, trying very hard not to visualise exactly what it was that was now squirming horribly beneath his fingers.

"Excellent," sighed Padma, clearly relieved that the boys weren't going to be too prudish about the whole affair. "Darling? If you would..."

Harry's eyes flashed open. *Darling?* Maybe there *was* something going on between those two after all.

Dean, meanwhile, had summoned up his full-on classically Shakespearian tone of command as he brought the index finger of his free hand down in a sweeping motion, "engage!"

The pulling sensation at the pit of his stomach confirmed to Harry that Padma and Cho had obviously known their stuff, and his last thought, as the rock about him faded from view, the Trackers' cries muted by their transportation, was that he wasn't going to let Hermione forget about this for as long as they both lived...

Chapter 74

What caused the 1959 match between the Ballycastle Bats and the Holyhead Harpies to be abandoned?

"Well I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," ventured Dean, warily, having almost managed to let go of The Thing as quickly as Harry had.

Harry swept the castle with his sense, surprised at just *how* high up from the lake's surface they were; above the clouds, which meant that although there were patches of snow on the roofs, just visible in the dim moonlight, the pathways, walls and other areas were simply a cold and damp. "This place is pretty small, compare to Hogwarts," he noted.

Padma had finished fastening her bag, and caught Dean's eye, meaningfully: "Plan B?"

"Well, we're here, aren't we?" agreed Dean, before turning to Harry, "what're the Trackers doing?"

"Well, at the moment they're sort of spiralling around the cave... looks like they're going to widen out until they find us..."

"That doesn't give us a lot of time," deduced Padma, unnecessarily.

Harry was forced to agree with this assessment; Dean had explained the difference between Plans A and B to him when they'd written the Starfleet Transmission to Cho. Since they *were* in the castle, at least, they could consider trying to push the Key through the Portal as the Away Team had planned: "how long would it take you?" he directed the question at Padma, even as his mind was once more pulled towards the irresistible lure of the Key's aura.

Padma paused, allowing Dean to flick a stray part of her fringe clear from her eyes, before conceding defeat, "too long. We've never tried it anyway, and there's all sorts of stuff we have to do to prepare the ground first... I don't think we're going to have enough time to do all that before those things find us again..." she trailed off, reluctantly, aware of the defeatist tone she'd struck.

"Um, don't you two think we ought at least to be under the cloak at this point?" enquired Dean, "I mean, we are, technically, in enemy territory now..."

Harry couldn't help give a small half-chuckle at the thought. To those two maybe. As far as he was concerned, though, *everywhere* was enemy territory. Nonetheless, a thought occurred to him, as the silvery fabric settled down over his eyes, Dean to his left, Padma beyond him. "Um, well, you do realise, don't you," he asked, tentatively, "that the Blood Trackers are only after *me*?"

In the dim light under the cloak, Harry could see Dean's face consider him with a look that somehow encompassed both incredulity and pity, "so you're saying that you'll scarp, and us two should still run with Plan B?"

Despite the clearly dubious tone of Dean's voice, Harry tried to convince his two companions, "c'mon, you'll have the cloak, I'll be the diversion... it'll be fine..."

"Oh yes," agreed Dean, laying on the sarcasm with a trowel, "one of the all time greats: 'Hey! Let's split up!', 'cos that *always* works, doesn't it?"

"No. Way," added Padma, forcefully, in one of the twins' shared expressions that reminded Harry of her sister's more stubborn (he could be diplomatic, when he tried) moods.

"Then *what*?" protested Harry. "We're *here*," he hissed, mindful that they should at least try to keep their voices down, "we've got to either drain the Key, or put it through the portal... haven't we?"

"The Primary Mission Objective," countered Dean, "would appear to have been reassigned to the simple aim of continued self-preservation. Sorry mate," he continued, "but needs must... we were finished back at the cave, we came *here* as a means of *escape*, not as a new advance..."

"But we're *here*!" protested Harry, "the Key's here - I ought to drain at least a little more whilst we've still got the chance, and it..."

"You," snapped Padma, "have had *plenty* of that thing. We have to get out of here, before we're discovered, and before those reptily-scaly-things..."

"Ooh," enquired Dean, quickly, "is that, like, y'know, official Ravenclaw-ese 'reptily-scaly-things'?"

"You know what I meant," she responded, her previously sharp tone having disappeared completely.

Dean nodded affirmation, "yeah, reptily-scaly-things..."

"Don't be mean!" chided Padma, pretending to be offended, and nudging Dean in the stomach with her elbow.

"Well," said Dean, readying himself to rise to the challenge, "ca...."

Harry cleared his throat a little louder that was probably necessary, "I don't mean to *intrude*, but since you two are obviously in agreement that we ought to get out of here, perhaps you'd like to know that it seems that we've been detected?"

Two faces immediately snapped to their right to consider Harry, the previous moment's playfulness swept away.

"Two," whispered Harry, closing his eyes so as to tighten his focus as the two patterns clambered up a spiral staircase that opened up onto the castle's wall a short distance to their right.

They were standing on the outer wall of the castle, the walkway being more than wide enough for the three of them to walk side by side, even without the need for huddling together dictated by the Invisibility Cloak. The outer wall dropped a fair distance before it blended into Dean's Cliffs of Insanity, which, in turn, fell still further, through the clouds, into the lake.

Durmstrang had been built into the mountain. Literally. They had Portkeyed onto the first section of the wall, the structure springing from the mountainside, the rock itself completing the castle's perimeter defence. As they looked along the battlements, towards the small turret that announced the first staircase, the lake was to their left, and the castle's interior was to their right.

The wall continued after the turret, but had turned slightly to the right, where it ran along for 30 metres or so, whereupon it met another staircase, and then the wall turned slightly to the right once more, and so it continued, all the way around the central keep, until the outer wall once more met the mountain on the opposite side.

The main gates were at the very centre of the outer wall's route around the castle, flanked by two thick, circular towers, where a loose collection of patterns appeared to be maintaining watch. The gates, from what Harry could sense of them, anyway, were massive, extending almost the full height of the walls themselves, which had to put them at about twenty metres tall. Naturally, they were closed.

And all that was just the outer wall. Immediately inside the wall, indeed, building out from it, were a cluster of buildings, corridors and towers, with a small series of narrow alleys lacing through the conglomeration, before they reached the second wall. Built along the same design as the outer wall, the second was again made up of sections of straight wall, mirroring the former's construction as it formed a rough semi-circle of protection for the central keep, the weight of the mountain at its back.

Durmstrang was certainly smaller than Hogwarts, yet it also seemed more warlike - more overtly military in its design, and far, far less welcoming.

In addition to the moonlight that bathed the dark stonework in a weak, blueish tint, there were burning torches held in wall brackets everywhere, with signs of larger fires being maintained through the small windows that faced the castle's interior.

The two patterns that had evidently been assigned to investigate whatever wards the trio had disturbed when they Portkeyed onto the wall had reached the staircase behind them, at the mountain's face, and were climbing upwards methodically, but without any undue haste.

Onward, then. Harry flicked his head forwards slightly, all three friends instinctively knowing to remain silent, as they headed towards the first turret.

"So," whispered Padma, as they watched the two guards perform an extremely half-hearted search of the area of wall where they'd initially arrived, "do we have a plan? Or is that asking too much?"

"Don't look at me," protested Harry, as his two companions did precisely that. Feeling compelled to elaborate, he tried to shift the onus elsewhere, "*you*," he indicated Padma with a

nod of his head (a feat made difficult since she seemed to have completely melted into Dean's side), "were the one who told us we had to grab hold of your..."

"It's *not* mine," hissed Padma, defensively, "it's Hermione's..."

"Ah," clarified Dean, helpfully, "but you were the one who got it moving..."

"It *already* moved," Padma reminded him, with just the vaguest hint of underlying threat were he to pursue the matter.

Distracted, Harry blinked, "it *already* moved? Seriously? Krum gave Hermione *that*? And it *moved*?"

"Pretty stupid guards, huh?" enquired Dean, dragging the conversation back out of the gutter with a brief nod of his head.

The guards, having made a half-hearted attempt at looking left, right, up and down, had returned back to the turret, but had not yet started down the staircase. It was almost as though they were waiting for something.

"Anyway," Padma shook her head slightly, echoing Parvati's 'let's forget that argument' flick, "plan?"

"Your steel, his strength, my brains," listed Dean, evidently drawing inspiration from *the Princess Bride*.

"That's not technically a plan," countered Padma, "nor have I got any clue whatsoever what you're talking about, but I'll bet it's a film..."

"Picky, picky," protested Dean, "and yes, The Prin..."

"Plan, darling, plan," she cut Dean off before he could finish, "focus?"

"Floo." Dean shrugged, apologetically, "I mean, there *has* to be a fireplace in here that we could use, right?" He paused, as Harry and Padma both considered their companion carefully, "right?" he repeated.

Remembering belatedly to draw his sense away from monitoring the state of the Third Key, Harry swept outwards across the water, beyond the village to their former hideout in the cave. The Trackers were continuing to circle, and were nearing the village as they continued their hunt. There was always the remote possibility that the beasts might get bored and give up the search, Harry tried to convince himself, but suspected that that was possibly abusing optimism.

So the Trackers were nearly at the village, which lay on the edge of the lake. The opposite side to the castle, in fact, so it stood to reason that they would be closing in on him sooner rather than later, and, as such, they needed to decide what they were doing.

"Why haven't they gone back to wherever they came from?" asked Dean, nodding back along the wall to the first turret, where the two guards continued to wait, patiently.

"Dunno," replied Harry, "but I'm starting to get a bad feeling about it... Floo. Do you guys know anywhere that's likely to be connected? I mean, even *I* know we can't go straight from here to Hogwarts..."

"All taken care of," explained Padma, withdrawing a small, battered travel book from one of the pockets on her robes, the title just visible in the half-light: *See Europe on less than six-sickles a day*. "We have a return route worked out; the village will be connected," she continued, "so all we've got to do is to find an unattended fireplace that's connected..."

"Simple, then," noted Harry. "Just one question: how do we tell which fireplaces are connected?"

There was a brief, ominous pause, "ah," ventured Padma, hesitantly, "we were sort of hoping you'd be able to use that... thing of yours...."

"Jedi Mind Trick," translated Dean.

"...to tell us." finished Padma.

"You *can* tell, right?" prompted Dean, picking up on Harry's own hesitation.

"Ah," stalled Harry, "you see, it's not *quite* that simple..."

Nothing ever was. Not in the fifth year, anyway.

Harry opened his eyes, and once more his sense was magnetically drawn back to the Third Key. He knew, rationally, that there was no need to keep such an active watch on the object; it wasn't exactly going to go anywhere. He knew where it was, there was no-one even *near* it, and he'd spent so long analysing it already that there was absolutely nothing more he could wring from it without investing himself in further Key Draining.

But he couldn't simply pull himself back from it, and, all things considered, it didn't *really* hurt just to keep an eye on it, did it?

"Well?" enquired Padma, whose tone was starting to betray slight nerves.

"Bugger!" exclaimed Dean, who'd been watching the first turret as Harry had been attempting to locate a suitable candidate for a Flooable fireplace. The West Ham fan locked eyes with Harry, "they've brought a dog up..."

"So?" asked Harry, thinking that he should have noticed the new patterns heading to join the first two guards. A cluster of three patterns had made their way up the first turret's stairs, making a total of five working their way along the wall.

"Dog?" repeated Dean, inviting his friends to make the small deductive leap of logic, "sniffer dog? Bloodhounds?"

"Oh," exclaimed Harry, his face falling as he belatedly put two and two together, "we'd better ge.."

The rest of the suggestion was cut short by a frenzied barking cutting through the night's air.

The three were on their feet, fleeing downwards into Durmstrang as Dean explained the obvious, "it's a safe bet the Empire knows we're here..."

The dog's barks were muted temporarily by the thick rock of the castle walls, but even so the accompanying guards' voices were audible, if not exactly intelligible. They dropped two floors before Harry led them through a wooden door into a wide corridor that, he knew from sense, ran the full length of the walls, following the roughly semi-circular design.

"C'mon," he urged, heading off towards one of the main staircases - his plan, the result of his full-scan of the keep moments earlier, was to find one of the larger rooms, on the assumption that it would belong to someone important, and that that someone important would have their fireplace connected to the Floo network.

Yes it was thin, but what choice did they have?

They'd followed the corridor for one leg, just passing the next staircase back up to the wall, when suddenly every torch in the castle leapt in intensity, and a huge gong sounded three times, the reverberations thrumming through the rock as the final stroke died, calls of alarm rising in its wake.

Dean broke the silence, "I think we're safe in assuming that all systems have been alerted to our presence, right?"

Dean could see *Star Wars* in everything.

"No, really?" enquired Harry, starting to get a little jumpy as the castle started to come alive, and more and more patterns became distinguishable. And behind them, they suddenly heard the clatter of claws race across the stone flags of the corridor.

Immediately, Harry span round to assess the new threat. The cloak seemed to settle over him a little more fully as he did so; looking across to determine the reason, he saw Padma wring her hands in worry. Dean had vanished.

The wolf had leapt out from the cloak, fur bristling, teeth bared, landing to adopt a crouched stance, low to the ground as it faced off with the guards' dog, a medium sized, jet black beast that had skidded warily to a stop as it considered the intruder.

"Do something!" hissed Harry to his counterpart. The guards, who'd evidently let the dog race on ahead, were now racing down the corridor in pursuit. Other patterns on nearby floors were also converging.

"Like what?" enquired Padma, desperately, "I can't... I mean... I..."

"Never mind," he responded, and shrugged off the cloak. He could sense six reinforcements sprinting down the corridor from behind them, the guards knew *something* was in front of them, beyond the rather odd sight of a wolf being loose in the castle. The time for hiding had passed.

Evidently disconcerted at the sight of someone materialising apparently out of thin air in front of them, the four guards skidded to a stop, wands drawn.

"Just try it," thought Harry, with grim amusement, and then, not bothering to get involved with the pleasantries, he conjured up a stinging whip of energy that laced through his adversaries' wands, feeling somewhat guilty at the looks of shock and horror that immediately planted themselves on the guards' faces.

Rattled by the sharp snap that had accompanied Harry's outburst of Mage power, the dog had leapt towards Dean in attack, exposing its underside as it did so. The wolf countered immediately and ruthlessly, and where once had been two animals was now a vicious whirlwind of dark fur, brilliant white teeth and low guttural howls.

The outcome of that particular contest had never been in doubt, however: it seemed evident that one should never pick a fight with a wolf.

Playing with pure energy now, lacing the whip in scything patterns in front of the guards' eyes as they paced nervously backwards in retreat, Harry advanced further, shepherding the now terrified guards into a nearby chamber. Once inside, he brought part of the corridor ceiling down across the doorway, sealing them inside.

Not even bothering to turn around to look, he flung an arm backwards, conjuring up a wall of burning crimson flame that extended from floor to ceiling, just behind Padma's own pattern as she caught up with Dean. Harry pushed the wall of flame further along the corridor ahead of them, using it to push the reinforcements into retreat as they were confronted by the impenetrable barrier.

Mind almost solely concentrated on maintaining his energy's focus, Harry had nevertheless made his way back to his two companions when he extinguished the fire with a clenched fist, and then brought down an intervening section of corridor, thereby preventing any immediate counter attacks.

"...it's nothing... just a scratch, honest!" Dean was protesting, as Padma dabbed the cuff of her cloak on a cut that ran across his jaw.

"Well just let me clean it up a bit," persisted Padma, fussing as Dean protested half-heartedly.

Noting Harry's approach, the Gryffindor raised his eyebrows, "subtle, mate," he opined, nodding towards the mountain of collapsed rubble that had previously been the corridor onward.

"We don't have a whole heap of time," countered Harry, defensively, "so..."

"I wasn't complaining!" protested Dean, before his face was twisted away from Harry as Padma continued to tend to his war wounds.

"I think he'll live," ventured Harry, feeling that Padma's Florence Nightingale act was beginning to border on the obsessive. He tried not to grin in response to the affronted scowls that presented themselves in equal measure on both faces.

Dispensing with the cloak in favour of speed, at least temporarily, the trio plunged down one flight of stairs. From a small window, Harry could see burning torches flickering as they were carried by people running along the castle walls. It seemed as though just about the entire castle had now been woken up in honour of their arrival, a truly terrific state of affairs, given that they were attempting to break into an *empty* office to Floo out.

Plunging his sense deeper into the castle, Harry tried to locate a suitable alternative target - the collapsed corridor having ruled out his initial candidate. As reinforcements raced through the corridors, along the walls, stormed out of the various rooms, halls and chambers that made up Durmstrang, so they became individualised in Harry's mind. In a room full of thirty or forty people, it was nearly impossible to separate the individual patterns from one another unless one were sufficiently close.

As groups of patterns broke up, reformed in different areas, or simply struck out on their own, individual flashes of character were revealed to him, as he sensed the world around him with his mind. And that was when he found her.

Harry's eyes snapped open, an entirely new objective having presented itself. "Vellum!" he hissed at his two companions, "she's here! In the keep..."

It took a moment for this statement to seep into Padma and Dean's minds - it was, after all, now deep into Friday morning, and the dulled reflexes of the small hours were beginning to seep into the trio's bones.

"Vellum?" repeated Padma, incredulously, "but where... but... but this is *Tempus*..."

The brief skirmish with the first party of guards, with Harry's attendant interior remodelling of Durmstrang, had evidently helped the forces within *Tempus* to pinpoint the intruders' position. Clusters of energies were converging in from practically every direction, Harry noted grimly, as he once again stretched out to make sure the Third Key was still there, unharmed. Just waiting for him to sink into it.

"I have a cunning plan, my lord," suggested Dean, shaking Harry out of his trance-like state.

"Mmm?" asked Harry. They were essentially trapped. He'd brought down the walls surrounding their section of the corridor, but that would only buy them a limited amount of time. Big, bulky patterns were already lumbering into the debris, and he assumed that it would only be a matter of time before a path was cleared.

"Padma," Dean called the Ravenclaw away from the small window, where she'd been monitoring the build up of opponents as they darted through the castle's dark interior, "we need The Thing..."

"We're already *at* Durmstrang," protested Harry, halfheartedly, noticing now that if he adjusted his angle of perception just so, he could see a whole new spectrum within the Third Key's aura... he'd not noticed that about the Hogwarts Key, and his time with the Beauxbatons Key had been lamentably short. It seemed a shame to be forced to leave this one so soon.

"Are you listening to a word I've been saying?" asked Dean, slightly vexed.

Harry blinked, and tried to sit up a little straighter from the slumped position he'd allow himself to collapse into. He nodded, vigorously: "yeah. Cunning plan. The Thing," he nodded fervently again, attempting to ignore Dean and Padma's collective look of suspicion, "I think we should go for it..."

He actually had no clue what Dean's plan entailed, but wasn't about to let on that he'd been too busy studying the Key as it burned its presence into his mind. The Hogwarts Key hadn't exerted this power over him... but then, he reminded himself, he'd emerged from two months of sensory deprivation on all counts into a veritable Land of Plenty. People would just have to make allowances for it, that was all.

"So is it clear?" asked Padma, with a tone that suggested that perhaps she'd already posed the question to him on more than one occasion. By the set of her features, Harry knew that an answer was expected of him.

Belatedly bringing himself back to the present, and putting the pieces together, The Thing, their current predicament, trapped in the Outer Wall with Tempus ranged about them, Harry suddenly realised what he was being asked: "yeah, yeah," he nodded confirmation, gritting his teeth as he stretched out an unwilling traitorous hand towards the Portkey that was squirming madly in Padma's grasp.

"Engage," breathed Padma - she didn't have Dean's Picard-style delivery, but the effect was just the same.

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," ventured Dean, before adding, dubiously, "again..."

"Groundhog Day," Harry noted.

"And Wizard of Oz," added Dean, before returning to the matter at hand, "OK, we have to take the first stairs, then, right?"

They looked at the dark stairwell (the torch that had been illuminating the first turret's interior had vanished, presumably taken by the first set of guards when they'd initiated their pursuit of the trio) hesitantly. Seemingly as one, Dean and Padma looked at Harry, looked back at the stairwell, and then, once more, fixed Harry with an expectant kind of look.

"Where's Vellum in all of this?" enquired Padma, who'd shouldered her bag once more.

Harry considered his two friends in the weak moonlight; they both looked tired - it was, after all ridiculously early on Friday morning, and his skin had the stretched numbness that came with the small hours. Dean yawned, blinking furiously, whilst Padma rubbed one eye with her free hand.

"Vellum," he answered, "seems to be in a large room..."

"Fireplace," interjected Dean.

"Possibly," acknowledged Harry, "in a large room in the Keep. There are a lot of other patterns sort of close," he warned.

"Nah," offered Dean, dismissively, "we've *got* to find out what she's doing here, right?"

Padma bit her lip, thoughtfully, "right," she relented, slowly, "there aren't any other likely places for Floo nearer are there, Harry?"

Harry paused to consider this a moment. There were plenty of rooms all over Durmstrang. The difficulty was that he had no way of knowing which were connected and which were not. In terms of closeness versus size, Vellum's room appeared as good a bet as any... and he, too, was desperate to know what their former Defence Against the Dark Arts professor was doing in the middle of Tempus' stronghold. "It's as good a place as any," he conceded, "but they're going to be on to us soon," he added, indicating the length of the wall with a vague sweep of his hand, "so we'd better get going..."

He set off towards the stairwell, the darkness holding no particular fear for him, since his sense told him that most of Tempus' attention continued to be focused on the isolated section of corridor he'd created earlier. Having reached the stone archway at the top of the stairs, he checked behind, to see Padma and the wolf following quickly to make up the ground that he'd opened up on them.

The Third Key was still safe and well in its courtyard, on the opposite side of the castle, hard against the second wall. Nonetheless, Harry gave it a quick second going over, just to make sure.

"They must have the same kind of Anti-Apparation wards here as Hogwarts," mused Padma as the trio flitted along a narrow open corridor cut into the mountain face at the back of the Keep, "and that's why they're running everywhere..."

Harry followed her line of sight. Torches could be seen, flames flickering as their carriers jogged along the castle walls, fires dancing against the dull black of the night sky. Heavy blows could be heard resonating through the castle's walls, as though great hammers were being smashed against crumbled masonry, and further figures weaved through the open alleyways that laced through the castle's floor.

"It would make sense," Harry agreed - there were, indeed, numerous spheres of energy encompassing the castle. Not as prevalent as they had been at Hogwarts - his old school had often been cited as the safest place in the world. Not *invulnerable*, as it had turned out, but at least safer than anywhere else. He couldn't tell from sense what a charm did, but the very presence of the concentric bubbles of magical force lent credence to Padma's theory.

"Anyway, it gives us a little extra time when they *do* work out we've gone, doesn't it?" persisted Padma, whom Harry suspected was more thinking aloud than specifically asking him for reassurance. "Darling," she looked down at the wolf, "you can probably morph back now... we might need wands..."

Mid stride, the wolf transformed back into Harry's former dorm-mate, the trademark flick of his head completing the transformation. Harry barely noticed the instinctiveness with which his two companions linked hands once more.

Barely, but he *did* notice.

In the lead, Harry held his right hand aloft, indicating that they should stop, and then carefully raised three fingers to relay his count. One each, in an ideal world.

Before he could move again, however, silvery fabric floated down across his face as the three crowded underneath the Invisibility Cloak once more, and stepped out of the narrow corridor, into a wider, evidently more well used thoroughfare.

The three patterns turned out to be three goblins, each equipped with a shield with the sign of Tempus inscribed upon it in flaming red script, two armed with battleaxes, the third carried a mace.

Unfortunately for the trio, all three immediately turned to face them, noses wrinkling as they traced the unfamiliar scent: clearly, it was going to take more than an Invisibility Cloak to evade detection.

The goblin with the mace made the first move, launching itself towards the trio as Harry impatiently shrugged the useless Cloak off. The creature swung the weapon in a high arc, bringing it down directly towards Harry's skull, but the Mage simply held his hand aloft, creating a barrier of force to impede the ball and chain's progress.

The goblin gave a guttural cry in agony as its arm, not having expected to be presented with a physical barrier, snapped, the creature's shoulder twisting as the guard struggled to maintain its footing, its balance completely shot.

Padma had already unsheathed the songblade from its scabbard, and had launched herself at the second goblin, leaving the third to Dean. Needing to ensure that the two remaining opponents weren't aided in any way by their fallen comrade, Harry sent the first guard shooting down the corridor, where, eventually, its progress was interrupted by the stone wall. It screamed once more, but Harry's attention had returned to the immediate fight.

Dean was in trouble. His goblin had already lunged at him with its battleaxe, a well aimed sweep having snapped the Gryffindor's wand, and Dean was being forced to retreat to avoid the repeated swings slicing him open. Padma, on the other hand, clearly had the upper hand in her own contest, her swordwork dancing a chill tune that seemed somehow both comforting (after all, this was on *their* side) and yet tinged with darkness, too.

Harry interrupted Dean's assailant's latest swipe with the same trick he'd used to disarm his first opponent, conjuring up a solid, invisible wall of force that the goblin's sweep connected to full on. Carried by the momentum of the swing, the goblin's feet left the floor as its body pivoted in mid air. Again the sound of bone snapping as the goblin's body encountered realms of physics Nature had never intended it to cope with, and Harry scooted the body away from Dean, where it lay, crumpled in a heap, broken, but alive.

Padma lunged in against her attacker, carving a network of slashes across both forearms, before stabbing the point of the song blade into the front of the goblin's shoulder. With a flick of her wrist, the blade's tip span in the wound, causing the final guard to release its grip on the battleaxe.

"Cowabunga!" exclaimed Dean, softly, but approvingly. Harry sort of felt the same way: this girl was *good*.

The creature glared at Padma, knowing it was defeated, yet showing no sign of abating hostilities. For her part, Padma was capably demonstrating that she could give as good as she got in the stare-of-death contest. "What do we do now?" she asked Harry, not moving her eyes from her victim, the sword held absolutely rock steady in her hand, the point still resting in the goblin's shoulder.

"Er," Harry stalled. They couldn't *kill* it... not when it was disarmed. The other two were breathing; a few broken bones, cuts, bruises - they weren't going to present an immediate threat, but they weren't going to die, either. Experience hadn't yet taught Harry how to deal with a prisoner of war, however. "Stupefy, I guess... Dean, can you....?"

"Wand's knackered," replied Dean, morosely, having scooped the two halves of his wand from the stone floor.

"Oh, Dean!" exclaimed Padma, turning to look.

The goblin, seizing its chance, attempted to lunge free, but Padma was too quick for it. Twisting her body back to face her opponent once more, she drew the song blade's tip down across the goblin's chest diagonally, slicing it open as dark blood stained its rough white uniform.

The beast still frozen from the incapacitating pain of this initial assault, she span the sword hilt around her wrist, and sliced the beast's throat open with a backhanded sweep of the blade, the stone walls echoing to the sword's victory cry with a keen, hollow shriek of triumph.

Gagging as blood spilled from the gaping wound, the creature slumped against the wall as Padma stood there horrified, the blood pooling unnoticed about her shoes.

Chapter 75

Who was the first Minister for Magic to be elected uncontested?

Padma was trembling, looking wide-eyed, stunned, at the song blade, its edge tainted with the dead creature's blood: "I didn't... it just turned on... it was reflex..." she protested, weakly, as Dean gently pulled her away from the growing pool of blood, one hand on each shoulder.

"Shhh, it's OK," Dean whispered, massaging Padma's rigid arms as he continued to murmur words to her that Harry couldn't catch, and didn't particularly want to.

He was somewhat unsettled himself: it was odd, really, that he could walk into situations fully prepared to die, but not to kill. The Trackers, the Beauxbatons troll, the many hued watchers at Blackrock, those things had been different, somehow. Less... personal, in a way that the dead goblin wasn't: the creature's face convulsed slightly every now and again, but he could tell with his sense that its life-force had long since departed.

Harry scanned the length of the corridor - torchlight again illuminated the dark stone with orange patches of glow every few metres, unpromising doorways cut straight into the rock on both sides. It wasn't supposed to end here, he reminded himself - they had to find a fireplace so that they could Floo out.

Vellum's dull yellow pattern loomed tauntingly in his vision, in a large room at the front of the Keep, one floor up from their current position. A collection of weaker patterns, hard to separate, were close by her, with more forces gathered on the Keep's other levels.

Harry turned back to his two friends - Padma was sobbing gently into Dean's shoulder as he rubbed her back soothingly, whispering into her dark hair, the song blade gleaming brightly in the half-light, its point resting on the stone floor as Padma still kept her hold, albeit with her arm completely limp.

Sensing Harry's eyes upon them, Dean pulled back, kissed Padma lightly on the forehead, and looked her in the eyes, "OK?"

Padma nodded feebly, and twisted round to disengage herself from the embrace; her cheeks sparkled in the torchlight, but, with a single deep breath to compose herself, the Ravenclaw's earlier resolve appeared to return, and her eyes met Harry's: "OK," she assented, "OK...."

"Do you sti..." Harry was about to check that they were both still prepared to go through the rest of it, but his question was cut off before the words were out of his mouth.

"Where's Vellum?" asked Dean, in a level, no-nonsense tone that indicated in no uncertain terms that their next objective had never been in doubt.

Ignoring the voice inside his head (which sounded very much like Hermione) telling him that they ought to quit whilst the going was good, Harry paused for a couple of seconds, chewing his lip, before nodding, curtly, towards the far end of the corridor, where, he knew, a spirial

staircase down would bring them out onto the main steps that connected all the levels of the Keep.

Subtler minds might have considered alternatives to marching in via the front door, but it was deep into Friday morning, and strategy was having to take a back seat.

The Keep was more or less square in plan: the slanted rock of the mountain at its back, the side walls of the tower, eight storeys high, emerged seamlessly from the cliff-face, and the main stairway snaked its way up the front of the tower, lit by huge, mullioned windows that afforded a view of Durmstrang's inner compound and the second wall, the lip of the outer wall just visible beyond.

Vellum's room was on the fifth floor, so the trio had to ascend two levels of the huge, wide staircase to reach it. The steps, easily wide enough to accommodate ten people abreast, were empty, most of the Keep's personnel clearly either manning the second wall's defences, or engaged in the clearing operation that was still underway in the perimeter corridor in the outer wall.

Although only eight storeys tall, each of the storeys was at least three times as tall as it needed to be - the rooms in the building had vast ceilings, and the arched doorway to Vellum's room had to be at least twenty feet tall at its apex.

Suits of armour stood guard either side, giving Harry an idea; with a brief flick of his hand, the ornaments' swords flew into his and Dean's outstretched hands respectively. Dean had never really been much of a swordsman, but without a wand, it was better than nothing.

Harry considered Padma's song blade enviously, but knew that she was the better fencer, and deserved the best weapon. The Durmstrang sword in his own hand felt a little too heavy for total comfort, but it was immaterial - it was there more for insurance than actual utility.

Closing his eyes, and allowing himself to briefly check that the Third Key remained unchanged, nestled safely in its courtyard, Harry returned his sense back to Vellum's room. There were other doors leading in and out of the large, square chamber, and a corridor with a rough jumble of patterns, some bright, some flickering wanly, ran off the far corner.

But as for the room itself, only Vellum lay inside.

Harry caught his two companions' eyes, inviting their assent before starting the onslaught. Padma, dry tear stains just visible in the light that fell in through the huge staircase window, dipped her head fractionally, her gaze resolute. Dean span his sword into a more comfortable hold, before inclining his head to Harry.

Sweeping his sword upwards through the air, Harry marched towards the twin doors, hitting the wood with a blast of Mage force that caused the barriers to splinter, the wood crumbling to dust as he led the Trio in.

Almost immediately, a green, luminous serpent of energy, scales glowing feverish yellow lunged straight for him, its opening jaws easily six feet wide, ruby red eyes glowing in attack.

Feeling his eyes widen in shock, Harry dived to his left, rolling onto the balls of his feet, and looked on, horror struck as his adversary twisted its dive, and the huge body lunged at him once more.

He knew this thing, he recalled, as Vellum's cold voice shrieked *Expelleriamus*. This was Amaraletta's Serpent, although much, much larger than they'd encountered before. The body was fully four feet wide, glowing with malevolent energy, vivid pulses of white power moving in ripples along the serpent's glowing hide as it weaved about the room, tracking Harry relentlessly.

Taking on energy with energy, Harry was only dimly aware of Dean morphing into wolf form, and hurling himself at their former professor, as Padma held guard, song blade seeming to almost burn with its own need for... battle.

The serpent lunged at him once more, and Harry fell backwards, scrabbling on his hands and knees towards the wall as his adversary slithered towards him. Trapped against the stone, Harry watched the snake raise its head far above him, before it twisted it's angle of attack slightly, and the jaws darted down, ready to close about its prey.

Instinctively, Harry met the attack with his own shield of energy, hearing the two fields of power spark as the two forces collided with one another. He could *taste* the serpent's presence in his mind, he could feel its power, coursing through the air between them, and, he realised, he could map his adversary's entire being, all within his mind.

This knowledge triggered something in Harry's mind, as though a switch had been flipped, and he felt his eyes gleam bright once more. He *knew* this snake - knew its energy, knew its power, knew its motive.

He *knew* this thing, and it was *his*.

As the serpent lunged in again for its next attack, as he'd known it would, Harry stretched out both arms to meet its charge, piercing its energy field with his own life force, and drinking its very existence from its core.

He could feel his eyes bulging as the sheer momentum of the power he was assimilating slammed into him full force, forced to swallow vast quantities of energy repeatedly, pushing his body's capacity beyond anything he'd ever done before. His limbs were aflame with dancing, magnesium flame, lace networks of violet auras rippled across his chest, and every bone in his body felt as though it was burning up from the inside.

The serpent had attempted to pull out of its attack the moment Harry had welcomed its offering into his outstretched arms, but it had realised its mistake too late, and was now locked in the battle, its body thrashing wildly about the room as it struggled to escape.

Power was pouring into Harry's body, torrents of silver energy streaming into him, and then, his own capacity overflowing, streaming out from his skin, forming pools of burning fire that

seeped across the stone floor, decaying as they did so. The snake's struggles grew more frantic, its formerly huge, powerful body now thrashing in a whiplike frenzy as four patterns stormed into the room, presumably to assist Vellum in her own battle against...

Harry was dimly aware that Dean's form lay slumped against a wall, and it seemed to be just Padma against the Tempus witch. The sound of steel on steel rang out at frequent intervals, but he couldn't afford to take his mind from his mental battle with the serpent long enough to establish any further the state of affairs there.

Realising that he could use the serpent's escape frenzy to his own advantage, Harry started pulling his own arms about, inducing his opponent's body to flick about the room like some gargantuan skipping rope. He managed to flick the line of energy through two of the new presences on his first throw, causing the snake to grow brighter momentarily, as their life-force was summarily adopted for its own.

Still Harry drunk furiously from the stream of power that was being offered to him in the connection of battle, and still he wheeled his arms furiously, sending the ever-narrowing band of energy flicking about the room as he attempted to take down the final two patterns.

The serpent's tail was dying now - he could sense the formerly bright ribbon of evil fire decaying, crumbling to ash and falling to the floor as the upper part of its body still struggled in its match against the Mage. As the beast grew smaller, so it grew more lithe and quick, making up for the decrease in size with increased speed.

His body shaking uncontrollably from the onslaught, Harry nonetheless knew he'd won this particular contest, and that knowledge alone was enough to carry him through the final stages of his adversary's drain.

He couldn't remember when he'd last taken a breath - his lungs were full of liquid fire, his eyes were bulging, his skull felt fit to burst. Every inch of skin was burning in white hot flame, and the floor about him continued to be inundated with energy that poured out of a body that simply couldn't assimilate power of this level at such a speed.

He didn't care - the serpent continued to dissolve to ash, the speed increasing as more of the tail simply crumbled away until, finally, all that was left was a tiny, glowing globule of energy that Harry extinguished with a clench of his fist as he slumped, exhausted to his hands and knees, lungs screaming in pain as he was finally able to breathe once more.

Heavy footsteps lunging towards him alerted Harry to the threat, and before he even had time to think, he raised one, quivering arm and slammed a fireball into his assailant. Agonised screams were cut short as the Mage fire intensified under Harry's will, and he watched the pattern's energy vanish in his mind's sense.

Still on his hands and knees, Harry raised his head slowly, to lock eyes with the fourth and final opponent, who was advancing on Harry with wand drawn, but fear in his eyes. Warningly, Harry shook his head slowly from side to side, aware that his body was still convulsing uncontrollably, drool hanging from his slackened jaw.

But it was only fair to warn: this wizard had no idea what he was up against.

The wand arm flicked upwards, in a move Harry recognised as the precursor to inflicting a spell. Mentally tired, physically exhausted and emotionally drained, he reacted on instinct, unable to summon enough control on his powers to temper his attack to a less aggressive level. An emerald lance of energy leaping from his hand and knifing straight through the wizard's chest. The man died with a look of horrified incredulity on his face, a fact from which Harry derived no satisfaction, only sadness that it had come to this.

This, he told himself, was war. There were no half-measures open to a Mage. He couldn't put his opponents in the full body bind, he couldn't incapacitate them with a sleeping charm. His powers were geared to attack, not built around subtlety, and Lucas' words echoed within his mind as his opponent crumpled to the floor: *think carefully before you take what you cannot replace.*

The problem with that advice was that you didn't always have the luxury of time to think.

Still unable to stand, or even crawl, Harry craned his neck to the other side of the room, to see Padma and Vellum fencing, Dean's wolf form stirring from its formerly slumped position against the wall.

He tried to raise his arm, to send some kind of intervention their way to assist Padma, but his strength had entirely deserted him, and he slumped to the floor once more.

Padma was a good fencer, with a good sword. Unfortunately, Vellum was a better fencer, and had the advantage of superior height, and thus reach. Wave after wave of attack was being hurled at the Ravenclaw, who was doing her best to block and parry, but she couldn't afford to move close enough in to do any damage herself, as it would have put her well within reach of Vellum's own steel.

With a cruel flick, Vellum disarmed Padma, the song blade being scythed from her hand as her opponent's sword sliced open her forearm. Screaming in pain, Padma clamed her left hand over the gaping wound as she stumbled backwards, trying to escape from her former teacher's triumphant march forward, sword outstretched, ready to finish the contest off.

Harry again tried to pull himself up to his feet, but was still too exhausted from the power transfer to achieve this. Dean, on the other hand, had thrown his wolf-form's body against Vellum, causing the tall witch to break stride for a moment.

Those two were then engaged in a brief struggle at close quarters, the wolf attempting to tear at Vellum's arms from within the sword's useful range as the Tempus witch wheeled and spun, trying to find an angle of attack to use the sword against her aggressor.

Feeling his strength begin to reassert itself feebly into his mind, Harry raised his right hand fractionally off the ground, flicking the song blade towards Padma, who clutched it in her right hand, her left still clamped firmly over her lacerated forearm as she staggered to her feet.

Dean's wolf howled out in pain as Vellum's boot connected with its jaw, and the dog again slammed into the stone wall. Harry watched as Dean transformed into his human shape,

shaking his head vigorously as he tried to reorientate himself in time to raise a defence against Vellum's next move.

Padma staggered back into the duel, although attempting to fence with one hand clamped over her sword arm had clearly put her at even more of a disadvantage in the contest than before. Vellum was now simply too quick for the Ravenclaw, and successive swipes first disarmed Padma, and then inflicted further wounds to the fifth year's arms, face and chest as she fell backwards once more under the ruthless onslaught.

Hurling himself forward, Harry used his momentarily free arm to slam Vellum against the wall before she could inflict any more damage upon his friends. The former Dark Arts Professor struggled against the unseen force before letting her arms drop, limply, her sword still clasped firmly in her hand.

Harry collapsed to the floor, doing his best to maintain the force that held Vellum in place as he waited for his strength to return once more.

Dean had managed to get to his feet, and was cradling Padma in his arms. They both seemed OK from a pattern sense of view, so Harry returned his attention to Vellum as he finally felt his burning muscles reform, and staggered woozily to his feet.

Silver trails of liquid energy, excess from his battle with Amaraletta's Serpent, continued to fall from his body as he stumbled, exhausted and drained, to face the tall witch, who sneered down at him from her position pinned against the wall.

"Wh... Whh... *why?*" croaked Harry, brokenly. *This* was the person who had started it all... or at least some of it all, any way. That Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson, *Subsumatum*, his life as a Mage. It all came back to the witch that stood before him now. He had to know. "*Why?*"

"I answer to no-one," returned Vellum, defiantly, and with a tone of voice that seemed to imply that she thought she'd won the contest.

It unsettled Harry; not, of course, that he'd expected a full justification of her actions to date, but... but he had to find out *why* the year's events had been set in motion. "I thought you were a Death Eater," he confessed, unable to keep bewilderment out of his voice.

Vellum sighed, wearily, "foolish child," she returned, "everything black and white..."

Puzzled by the odd response, Harry momentarily relaxed his force hold on the witch, a fact that she obviously recognised immediately, as she threw herself from the wall at him, leading with her sword outstretched.

In pure self-defense, Harry conjured up a wall of force to repel the attack, flailing his arm desperately to ward off Vellum's thrust. His assessment of his abilities dulled both by the ordeal of his battle with the serpent, and by his own mental weariness (how long had he been up now?), Vellum's body was slammed into the room's stone wall with a sickening crack, her head lolling from her body at a grotesque angle as the black cloaked figure slumped to a crumpled heap.

The yellow pattern flickered out, and one route for answers to Harry's questions was summarily cut off.

This death was different again to the two, no, four, guards he'd fought earlier. They'd been faceless, nameless opponents. The dead, crumpled body before him now had a name. Had *had* a name. She'd had a motive, too, but that, presumably, was forever lost, now.

Dean's voice cut through the silence: "Harry, mate, we've got to get Padma out of here... c'mon, we've got to get..."

He didn't hear the rest of Dean's words, however, as the huge glass window that fronted the staircase was suddenly smashed to pieces, and an all too familiar cold shriek of triumph echoed within the Keep's stone walls.

Chapter 76

Under the old system, how many Half-Knuts were there to a Triple-Frice?

Harry wheeled around to stare at the doorway, noticing for the first time the large mirror mounted to the left of the twin doors... except it wasn't a mirror. He was suddenly reminded of Moody's Office - or, technically, Barty Crouch's - from fourth year, and the Foe Glass.

Vellum's Foe Glass appeared to show the Keep's central staircase; the area just outside the room's doors, and, of course, the window beyond. What it was also showing, although he didn't really need a Foe Glass to tell him so, was the crystallising image of a Blood Tracker, the relentless creature obviously having hurled itself through the Keep's huge window (slightly irritably, Harry wondered why Durmstrang's architects hadn't thought to cast an Unbreakable Charm on the castle's obvious weakspot). Sense confirmed that his pursuer was stalking up the stairs, headed towards the room's open doors.

The Trackers' shrill cries again froze the blood in Harry's veins as his memory relived his escape from Blackrock, the ice of the Stinger's poison creeping through his body. He could feel the cold return to his fingertips, needles of pain working the way down the length of his fingers, despite his brain's insistence that it was only his mind playing tricks on him. Of all the things he'd faced in the escape from Blackrock, he wondered why it was the cold that stuck with him.

His escape from Blackrock on dragonback...

Dragonback.

Where the *hell* was Charlie's promised 'diversion'?

Knowing it was at best a token gesture, he slammed the doors shut with a wave of his arm, and then looked desperately about the place for likely components for a barricade... dropping the ceiling felt a bit extreme.

The place was reasonably furnished; quite what its original purpose had been in the overall scheme of things seemed impossible to tell: too large for an office, too comfortable for a classroom, too... ostentatious for staff living quarters. It was academic, anyway; Harry started hurling desks, chairs and bookcases up against the doors with as much strength as he dared risk. Tendrils of energy continued to seep out of his body, mercury trails pooling in his wake, as though he were oversaturated with power.

Dean was hurriedly patching Padma's wounds up (Harry had lent him Cho's scarf, it being the closest thing they had to a tourniquet), occasionally checking on Harry's progress, his eyes flicking from door to Mage and back again.

Beyond Vellum's room, their attention caught by the Trackers' somewhat dramatic arrival, Tempus' forces from within the castle also appeared now to be rushing to the Keep, to see what had created this new disturbance.

Large patterns began to lumber heavily up the staircase from the lower floors, as the forces previously concentrated on cutting through the still decimated perimeter corridor headed towards the second wall, the energies rolling across Harry's mind like the tide rolling in across the sand.

The Third Key beckoned him with its intensity. It was just on the far side of the Keep, in a tight quadrangle all to itself, hard up against the second wall. Despite the repeated draining in the cave, its aura seemed hardly dimmed.

Taking a short break from hurling furniture about the place, Harry let his left hand weave through the brilliant aura, the warmth welcome against the earlier chill.

If you can sense it, you can drain it.

Yeah, he knew all about that, now...

"How's it look?" asked Dean, grimly. He'd managed to bring Padma to her feet, her right forearm wrapped in Cho's scarf, the Ravenclaw clinging to the tall Gryffindor for support.

Harry stared blankly back, trying to process the request. The room, he noticed, had a carriage clock on the mantelpiece, telling him it was currently 2.45am on the Friday morning. The physical confirmation that it really was *that* late, or early, depending upon your point of view, seemed to trigger a fresh wave of almost crushing fatigue. He'd suspected it had been a long night, but now he *knew*, and yes, it made a difference.

Harry blinked, screwing his face up as he tried to battle the urge to fall asleep on his feet, "um... patterns above," he gestured vaguely towards the Keep's front window, now obscured by the barricaded doors. "Patterns below," he swept a hand in front of him, to denote the floor, and the Keep's storeys beneath their feet.

He sighed, wearily, "Tempus out there," he gestured vaguely in the direction of the walls once more. "Not good."

And then a thought struck him, and he looked anew at the carriage clock, sitting as it was on the mantelpiece. "Dean," he ventured, "that's a *fireplace*..."

And it was lit, too.

Somehow, it seemed, they'd completely forgotten that their original purpose had been to find a suitable fireplace to Floo out of the castle. Harry attempted to stifle a yawn, his eyes momentarily lost in the swirling aura still encircling his left hand.

The doors creaked slightly, as force pressed against them, lightly, testing.

"Floo Powder," instructed Padma, weakly, eyes blinking repeatedly, "there must be some in here somewhere... look for, for... for... for a jar, or something..."

Dean, still supporting her, hobbled the pair of them over towards the room's main desk. A large, leather-topped official looking thing, it had been fixed too firmly to the floor for Harry to incorporate it in their barricade, his recovering mind not quite up to the exertion such force would have required. Depositing Padma to deal with the desk, then, Dean proceeded to rifle frantically through the shelving behind, whilst the Ravenclaw turned the desk inside out.

A second, malevolent voice joined the first Tracker's calls, and claws could be heard scraping and tearing at the wood as the beasts tried to make their way in. Harry extended his sense outward once more, flicking a cursory sweep through their surroundings when something brought him up cold.

No.

No way.

It was faint - barely alive, even, but it was *him*, no question. One of the first patterns he'd determined to commit to memory, in fact, and despite the chaos about him, the lateness of the hour and the dullness of his mind, his need to be aware at all times of where that pattern was, almost to the exclusion of all others, had instinctively tasted its presence within the Keep.

"I don't believe it," whispered Harry, stunned, as Padma and Dean paused from their search, directing questioning looks at him, "Snape," he explained, "he's here..."

Padma looked up from the desk drawers, disbelievingly, "*what?*"

"Snape. Here," elaborated Harry, already starting to head towards the corridor that met the room at the far corner, "well, through there, technically... really weak, though..."

The doors were hit once more, with slightly more force, but the makeshift barricade was holding firm, at least temporarily.

Dean raised his finger, his mouth open as though about to make a comment, before, having shared a meaningful look with Padma, the two turned their gaze on Harry, dipping their heads slightly, eyebrows raised, inviting further explanation.

Sometimes those two seemed able to hold entire conversations without saying a word.

"Er, I *have* to check... really," he persisted, in the face of the extremely dubious looks he was receiving. "Two minutes, 's all..."

His two friends left their frantic search to accompany him into the corridor, Padma limping, holding her right arm uselessly across her chest, but seeming more or less OK.

"No!" protested Harry, "you two stay here and look for the Floo powder, I'll check on Snape..."

"No way, mate," countered Dean, "we stick together. So either we all go, or none of us do..."

This time, the doors resonated to a solid impact, as one of the Trackers evidently attempted to throw itself through them. The hinges creaked, ominously, but the doors held.

"Dean..." Harry attempted to argue against the show of unanimity, but was cut off.

"We stick together," repeated the Gryffindor, firmly. "That way we all know what's happening... where is the greasy git, anyway?"

"Seems to be some kind of..." Harry fished for the right word, "er, prison, I guess..."

Casting one last, fearful glance at the ramshackle collection of furniture that was supposed to stave off the persistent attention of the obsessed Trackers, they left the relative brightness of Vellum's room, and entered the cooler confines of the passageway, stepping past the bodies of the two guards who'd not been subsumed by Amaraletta's Serpent.

His left arm now sheathed in the pale aura of the Third Key, Harry didn't spare too much thought on his earlier opponents. They'd got what had been coming to them, after all...

The cell block was a gruesome, dark foreboding place. Rats scurried into the shadows, fleeing the torchlight as the trio made their way along the corridor. Three cells from the end they reached him.

Not that they could tell, immediately: a twisted heap of black robes lay in the middle of the floor. A disquieting pool of *something* lay underneath him, and the foul stench of the air seemed to thicken still further.

Rat droppings littered the cell floor, and long, unkempt black hair seemed to hide most of the fallow complexion, the body's face pressed hard against the floor.

"Er, Professor *Snape*?" enquired Harry, dubiously. He knew, as manners went, the greeting was a little wanting, bordering perhaps too much on the incredulous side. What was he *doing* there?

The crumpled heap twitched spasmodically, and the neck craned around in their direction in a slow, painful juddering movement. "Potter?" croaked a voice that carried the barest hint of the former Head of Slytherin's snide, superior tone. "*Potter*?"

"Professor?" replied Harry, dubiously, aware that the conversation wasn't getting off to a particularly illuminating start.

"Potter..." wheezed the Potion Master's broken voice, the words almost lost as his lips formed the words just barely above the filthy stone of the cell's floor, "you've *got* to help me..."

For three *glorious* seconds, Harry gave serious consideration to whether he did, indeed, *have* to help the former (and possibly still current) Death Eater. What debt of honour did he owe to this man, who'd taken every opportunity to hurt, abuse, undermine him? The teacher whose goading, victimisation and sheer venom had made Potions a living hell for almost his entire time at Hogwarts. The man who'd taken seemingly insane delight in pursuing his very public campaign against the Boy Who Lived.

"Potter, Granger, Weasley..." persisted the Potions Master, clearly making some assumptions about exactly who had accompanied Harry into the castle, "you've... *got*...." The broken voice collapsed into an indistinct wheeze, Snape's twisted body shuddering as the man seemed to succumb to a horrendous coughing fit, drool pooling on the grime-caked floor.

Dean and Padma both looked at Harry helplessly. As if to emphasise their plight, the outer room's doors resonated once more with a thunderous crash, as the Trackers tried again to beat their way into the chamber, and in towards their prey.

It struck Harry, as he thought the situation through, that they really didn't *have* to do anything. Snape still carried the Dark Mark, after all, and had shown nothing during the first half of term to indicate that his manner had changed at all after the third task. The man's pattern was so frail, flickering wanly against the brightness of the castle's chaotic bustle, that it seemed death would come to him sooner rather than later...

And he tried, he really *tried* to convince himself that the former Head of Slytherin deserved nothing more than to die here, unknown. After all, if he hadn't just happened to have flicked his sense through the walls... if, indeed, they'd never come into the Keep, they'd never have known.

And, he reminded himself, no-one else would know either. There would be no witnesses, were they to leave him there. Padma was already injured, and taking the crippled Potions Master with them was simply going to hinder their escape still further.

As if they needed a reminder as to the urgency of their plight, the sound of splintering wood reached the cell block, the Trackers' impatient cries suddenly sharper, less dulled. Closer, then. This particular development served to strengthen Harry's resolve still further: they didn't have time for this. Snape had brought this end upon himself, and contrary to the man's words, none of the trio were beholden to assist him now.

Satisfied that he'd made his mind up, Harry cast one last, calculating look at the man he'd been convinced had been out to get him for the previous four and a half years. Let the bastard *know* that his life was in Harry's hands. He revelled in the power of the situation for a fraction of a second, the virtual role reversal of it all, before making to spin about on his heel and leave, wordlessly. Snape, in Harry's eyes, didn't deserve so much as an *explanation*, let alone a full blown rescue.

That was the plan, but as he shifted his weight to his right heel, ready to twist his body about and set off towards the fireplace once more, he found he couldn't do it.

Closing his eyes, and letting his shoulders droop as he let out a frustrated sigh, Harry reminded himself that Dumbledore trusted Snape. Trusted him wholly, and, as Professor McGonagall had admitted earlier in the school year, you didn't go against Professor Dumbledore's assessment of a person lightly.

Sending what he hoped Dean and Padma would be able to interpret as a heartfelt look of apology, Harry turned to face the cell once more, trying not to find the sight of the broken man wholly repulsive.

Seeing her cue, Padma advanced on the cell's lock: "*Alohamora!*" she cried, but to no avail. The clasp remained firmly closed.

Time for Plan B, then. Relaxing the unthinking grasp that he'd maintained on the Third Key, Harry gently teased the entire door away from its moorings, the metal buckling slowly under the relentless application of massive, controlled force.

Discarding the useless iron latticework with a flick of his hand, Harry stepped through the opening, not quite sure how to actually pick Snape up without contaminating himself with the repellent filth that coated *everything*. As he pondered this problem, Snape twisted his face upwards, slowly, and evidently with a great deal of pain. Dim, lifeless eyes appeared to relay, if not thanks exactly (that would clearly have been expecting a little much), at least acknowledgement of Harry's move.

However, Harry soon discovered that, as usual, his assessment of Snape's reaction had been spectacularly optimistic: the broken, mangled figure managed one single, accusatory word before slumping unconscious to the floor: "pet...ty."

Trust Snape to still hold a grudge against Gryffindors, even when he was an inch from death. He wasn't being petty, Harry reminded himself angrily, he had to think through the implications of what he'd been about to do.. it wasn't *his* fault if Snape thought the delay in freeing him was just because he was a Slytherin.

As far as Harry knew, the man was a Death Eater. Tempus probably had every justification to throw the man inside until the end of Time. What did he expect?

And he hadn't made him wait that long. Not really, but, well... maybe just long enough to make him *know*, oh yes...

Padma and Dean looked sideways at Harry, who shrugged reluctantly back. He'd stayed his executioner's hand once before, and that had proved disastrous. He only hoped his instincts would fare him better on this occasion.

After a slight argument between the three of them, Snape had ended up being carried, virtually comatose, between Harry and Padma. They were the same height, after all, and trying to balance Snape's unaccommodating form between the shoulders of the two boys had been hopeless, Dean being a clear head taller than his fellow Gryffindor.

To be honest, Harry was quite surprised to learn that, yes, Snape's physical appearance could take a turn for the worse compared to his Hogwarts persona. The habitually greasy, lank hair was matted thick with muck, his robes, which *might* still have been his teaching uniforms, were caked in grime, unsettlingly damp to the touch and reeking of all sorts of unpleasant things.

"You OK?" checked Harry, looking across to Padma as they dragged Snape towards the room, where the door continued to receive a merciless hammering from the Trackers - flashes of claw now punching through the splintered wood, and the makeshift barricade showing signs of imminent collapse.

Padma grimaced, an expression of solidarity more than anything: yes, it was repulsive, but, they'd reasoned, Snape might possibly have some *answers* for them. And answers, at that moment in time, were in very short supply.

Dean, who'd headed back into the room before them, was now frantically engaged in checking all likely cannisters for any sign of Floo powder, discarding the rejects over his shoulder.

"Hah!" he cried, triumphantly, as he came at last to a medium sized ginger-jar, decorated in some kind of ancient script, "what d'ya think?"

Harry opened his mouth to suggest that they throw a scrap onto the fire, to see, but he realised that his opinion hadn't been sought in the first place, as Dean's attention was fixed completely on their Ravenclaw counterpart. This, Harry reminded himself, was perfectly sensible under the circumstances; Padma was a pureblood witch, after all, and undoubtedly used to dealing with things like Floo Powder, whereas Harry wasn't sure he'd know the stuff if it bit him on the ankle.

Padma nodded approval as the twin doors lurched, pushing the barricade slightly further into the room, giving the Trackers much more purchase for their second attack. "How're we doing this?" she enquired, looking at Dean.

Dean, unhesitatingly, pointed to Padma and Snape with both index fingers, "you two are worst off, so you get out first, we'll be right behind, OK? Right behind... promise."

Padma looked as though she were about to protest, but then obviously relented, "right behind?"

"Promise," whispered Dean, as the doors crashed again with the impact of a Trackers' body hurling itself at the barrier. In the Foe Glass, Harry could see the shapes of at least four of the beasts scrabbling frantically at the wall, further shapes beyond in the darkness.

"Let's get moving," he suggested, as the doors finally gave way. He'd already slipped his shoulder out from underneath Snape, and Padma was doing her best to support the teacher's limp form as she made her way awkwardly towards the fireplace.

Harry didn't actually see them leave, concentrating instead on training his mind, still screaming in pain, to conjure up a shockwave of energy that tore through the room, towards the doors, ripping everything in its path to shreds, working from the inside out.

A bit messier than he'd expected, really.

The roar of Padma's Floo exit had died down, and Dean's voice called across the room, "Padma said to give her twenty seconds to get clear," he relayed, "c'mon Harry..."

A last flick of sense about the skies of Durmstrang told him that they had those twenty seconds at least, and he turned on his heel to head back towards his remaining companion; Dean was standing at the fireplace, Floo powder held ready in his open palm.

A glint of metal caught the corner of Harry's eye, and he stuck out his hand to receive the song blade as it cut an arc through the air. The Third Key's aura welcomed the familiar heft to the weapon, its energy linking with the steel's own, their combined presence serving to make Harry feel a whole lot more awake.

Oh yes, he recalled, feeling instantly at home as he span the blade in his hand, this was a bloody *brilliant* sword...

"Sod this," muttered Dean, impatiently, after maybe half the allotted time had expired, "they're clear *now*..." he threw the powder towards the fire, the tiny particles sparkling in the room's torchlight.

That was the visual image that stayed in Harry's mind - the tiny granules of powder, frozen in mid-air, heading towards the flickering tongues of flame that danced magically above the grate.

Dean's hand, outstretched still, palm open, a thin trail of dust falling from the outstretched fingers, the cloud-like tendrils barely visible in the room's dim lighting.

But the powder never reached the flames.

At that exact moment, the whole Keep reverberated with a colossal crack, immediately followed by a deep, seismic reverberation that rolled through the stone, causing the floor to heave like some kind of thick liquid. Simultaneously, every source of light in the entire castle was extinguished, plunging Durmstrang into darkness.

Frantically flinging his sense up beyond the confines of the Keep's stone walls, trying to ignore his mind's screams of protest at the exertion, Harry discovered, awestruck, that the spheres of protection he'd noticed before had disappeared.

In the fraction of a second of horrified silence that followed, he heard the Floo Powder scatter softly as it landed on the cold hearth.

It seemed that he and Dean wouldn't be going *anywhere*.

Chapter 77

Who was the first wizard to capture a live Manticore?

In the darkness, Dean heaved a broken, defeated sigh, "what *next?*" he enquired, the fatigue evident in his voice.

"Dunno," admitted Harry, warily, "but it isn't looking good..."

The momentary stillness was curtailed in an absolute blaze of energy, as suddenly the entire castle seemed to consist of patterns flashing in and out of existence. Apparation: now that Padma's supposed Anti-Apparation charm had been disabled, it seemed that Durmstrang itself was under attack, opposing forces materialising inside the castle's twin walls, the sparks flickering across Harry's mind giving some small hint as to the scale of the multitude of battles being fought about them.

It was *insane*. The ground, the stone, the rock and even the very skies, they all shook from the hammering being inflicted upon Durmstrang as the battle unfolded.

He closed his eyes in preparation for more thoroughly scanning their surroundings (the Third Key, thankfully, remained undisturbed), but the harsh screeches of more Trackers refocused his attention swiftly.

Barely having stretched beyond the Keep's main window, Harry had just located a trio of patterns that appeared to be intent on launching themselves into the Keep when two much larger, more powerful energies burst onto the scene.

The shattered fragments of the room's doorway were suddenly illuminated in glowing jets of orange flame, thunderous roars echoing off the stone as two massive, winged shapes scythed into the Trackers, claws tearing the Goblins' minions to pieces.

Dragons. So *this* was what Charlie had meant by 'a diversion' then.

Pausing only momentarily to bemoan Charlie's poor timing (not that Harry wasn't grateful for the dragons' intervention, but... but just five more seconds, five more, and they'd have been out of there), he reached for Dean's arm, "c'mon," he urged his friend, "we've got to get out of here..."

Dean followed Harry's lead readily enough, albeit with the leaden feet of the impossibly weary. They made their way through the shattered remnants of the barricade, the twisted carcasses of the first wave of Trackers strewn about the floor, to stand once more at the head of the Keep's main staircase, looking out across the castle.

In the weak moonlight, now the only source of real illumination, Harry saw Dean pulling his hair tightly upwards in his left hand, as though his eyelids were somehow connected to his dreadlocks, and this action would keep him awake.

More cries filtered through the night's skies from the circling Trackers, still wheeling about in the skies overhead, but no longer the triumphant calls of just a few moments earlier. Now the calls carried with them an air of disquiet, unease. Panic.

Larger energies were swooping down, tearing through the Trackers as they attempted to evade the dragons' claws. Huge shadows crept across the Keep's walls, deep black against the slight blue of the moonlit stone. As the two Gryffindors watched, the unmistakable silhouette of a Norwegian Ridgeback swooped along a length of the second wall, strafing the battlements with crimson fire, its rider casting shimmering rockets of purple that lodged into the wall's rock before exploding in a brilliant mass of colour, the stone crumbling to dust about the impact.

On the outer wall, Harry could just make out figures appearing and disappearing, other forces running, energies flickering back and forth.

Every few seconds, the ongoing battles were illuminated by yet more jets of flame as Charlie's riders celebrated another kill.

"Whoa," whispered Dean, transfixed, "*this*," he assured Harry, shaking his head gravely, "is no Tupperware party..."

Harry's entire right arm was now aglow, a pale luminescence that enveloped the song blade, the weapon abuzz with an energy that seemed almost impatient in Harry's hand. He found he kept spinning the blade round with a flick of his wrist, the tip inscribing dancing circles in the air, painting a sharp signature of energy that he could *almost* see in the darkness.

He'd given up trying to keep track of which patterns were where. The entire castle just seemed to be awash with presences appearing out of thin air, firing off a series of spells, and then disappearing just as swiftly. The attacks seemed to be coming in waves, and he wasn't surprised to see that some of Tempus' own forces appeared to have fled the compound whilst the going wasn't terminal.

A dull, low groaning resonated in the stairwell, as heavy footsteps made their way up the stone steps. One of the large, lumbering patterns Harry had noticed earlier was on its way to meet them, it seemed. Confident that the dragons had taken care of the threat from the skies, Harry advanced down one flight, preparing to meet the newcomer with the Keep's huge glass window to his back.

Dean, followed, a little dubiously, "Harry, mate, are you *sure* this is a good idea?"

The giant lumbered into view before Harry considered how to reply to Dean's enquiry. He'd always thought of Hagrid as being huge, but the giant before him was forcing him to reconsider that classification: perhaps this was why all the floors in the Keep were so tall? The Giant had to be at least 20 feet tall, and thickly built, wearing rough armour that clanked heavily in the darkness.

When Harry had first learnt that giants were *really* real, just like dragons, and mermaids, and werewolves, and unicorns, he'd imagined that they'd just look like people, sort of scaled-up a bit. The reality was sharply different, the huge bulk confronting the two of them now seeming

to be built much more along the lines of a gorilla; huge, muscular, with massive, powerful shoulders, virtually no discernible neck, and a barrel like chest. In fact, Harry had never seen a beast so obviously war-like in his life; dragons, of course, were dangerous, but the giant before him looked *savage*, and the fact that it was wearing armour only served to heighten the suspicion that it understood fully the role it was expected to play.

Its preferred weapon seemed to be the huge stone mallet it carried almost lazily in its formidable right hand, the protecting gauntlet made from rough, segmented armour. Giants, it seemed, had no need for finesse. Seeing the two remnants of the Away Team facing it on the stair's landing, the giant lifted its shoulders, bringing its thick arm about in a laboured circle, the mallet crashing down onto the stone steps with colossal force.

Again the Keep's walls shook, only this time Harry and Dean could *see* what had caused the seismic shockwaves. Shattered masonry clattered down to the floors below, whilst in the half-light, they could see the giant continue its hammer-swinging, again bringing the huge weapon down onto the staircase, with a deep, growling roar, ugly, yellowing teeth just visible behind the faceguard.

Heavy steel-capped boots lumbered forward, crunching fragments of stone to dust underfoot as Harry's ears rang from the aural assault. The mallet swung again, but Harry made his move before the weapon could fall.

Feeling oddly as though the song blade was *urging* him to do so, Harry span the bright steel in his wrist again, sending a trio of lightning bolts at the lumbering monster in quick succession. The first appeared to be nothing more than a minor nuisance to the huge beast. The armour sparking briefly, blue static discharges illuminating the coarse welding.

The second strike seemed to halt the giant's momentum, the third sent it back half a step, the massive beast jerking its head upwards as it sought to regain balance.

Scenting blood, Harry felt his eyes brighten with the taste of imminent victory, and conjured, a storm of violet laced with brilliant white tendrils, projecting the tight beam of energy directly at his adversary's skull. He *felt* the flames connect in his mind, a tangible impact with the thick bone that lay underneath the creature's gnarled features, and turned up the intensity as what had been a dull moan of discomfort was transformed into a banshee like wail as the giant screamed in agony.

As its footing faltered, Harry swapped the stream of Magefire for a massive body check of force, slamming his opponent into the wall, the satisfying crack of bone audible even amidst the increasing tumult of the battle that continued to rage in the world beyond, all forces appearing to converge on the Keep.

A stinging whip of emerald fire ripped through the giant's crushed form, Harry wanting to make absolutely certain of his kill before continuing on to the lower floors, deeper and deeper into the Keep. The dull grey pattern flickered pitifully, before being extinguished completely by a crushing blow to the beast's torso.

"Harry," ventured Dean, carefully in the aftermath, "are you... alright?"

Surprised at the odd enquiry, he turned to face his inquisitor, ribbons of aura streaming from his arm towards the Third Key as he did so, "yeah," he shrugged, non-plussed. What kind of a question was *that*: was he alright? Of *course* he was alright: he was *made* for this stuff...

"Er, it's just that that was a bit..." Dean paused, evidently feeling he needed to choose his words carefully, "erm, a bit, *vindictive*, wasn't it?"

Harry shrugged, "'s what it took," he explained, curtly. More patterns, presumably attracted by the commotion he'd just had a hand in, were heading up the stairs.

He flicked the song blade around in his hand, finding the repeated move somehow calming, yet also encouraging, the adrenaline surging through his veins as the thrill of anticipation took hold.

Bring it on, he urged the forces in the darkness. Bring it *all* on.

Now.

As far as a plan went, Harry didn't really have much of an idea from which to work. His basic intention was to get at least to ground level, so that he and Dean could then make, or fight (he was *fully* prepared to fight, oh yes. Almost looking forward to it, in fact), their way out of Durmstrang, and down from the mountain towards the lake.

He hadn't thought beyond that stage, but it seemed obvious that their first step should be to get down from the higher levels of the Keep. At the very least, remaining in the fifth floor would have been an invitation to be trapped: at least at ground level, with Durmstrang's maze-like warren of corridors, alleys and narrow streets, at least there they had *options*.

Another flight down on the massive staircase, a party of goblins launched themselves at him. He could, he knew, have obliterated them all in one fell swoop, but where was the fun in that? The song blade danced its bone chilling tune, screaming in delight as he lunged the blade's tip straight through one of the guard's throats. Mimicking Padma's amazing backhand sweep, Harry retracted the blade as the stricken creature crumpled to the ground, slicing his second assailant's weapon arm clean through at the wrist.

He hadn't even known he *could* fence like this; it was just such a brilliant sword, that whole new moves and styles seemed to transmit themselves, either from his mind to the sword, or vice versa; he wasn't entirely sure which way round it was actually working, and, to be brutally honest, he didn't really care. All that really mattered was the result, and the result at the moment was that he and the sword combined were virtually *unstoppable*.

Lightning bolts and fireballs. Walls of immense force and curtains of torrential energy that cut his opponents' energies to ribbons on contact. Screaming stars of incandescent power that illuminated the stairwell as their opponents succumbed to the unstoppable force, the walls ringing with thunderous reverberations as each new example of Mage firepower sought to outdo the previous display.

He'd caught Dean glancing askance at him a couple of times on the descent through the Keep's floors, but after one further attempt at venturing to express a certain... uneasiness at

Harry's methods, his companion had evidently given up. Good thing, too. This was *war*, and it was no place for tempered half-measures and apologies.

If they were bringing the fight to Harry, then they should bloody well expect to have the fight brought right back to them. Tenfold. His eyes gleamed in the dim light of the stairwell, flitting down the wide steps on the balls of his feet, song blade whirling in his hand.

He was *good* at this.

His left hand ghosted luminescent trails, testament to the unthinking connection he was maintaining with the Third Key. Despite the chaos of their surroundings, the swarming waves of energy that imparted a tangible thickness to the air and the panicked cries and shouts, Harry managed to maintain a regular watch on the Magi relic, fearful that harm might befall it at any instant.

A small, tiny voice in his mind attempted to ask him what on Earth could possibly harm the Third Key, but the muted protestation was lost amidst the fury of energies that raged in his mind. He actually felt more alive than he had done since... well, *ever*: his body felt incredibly light, his reflexes were on the absolute edge of mortal perception, his nerves pulsed with the thrill of total awareness.

Every aspect of Harry's being was invested in the battle. He no longer thought of himself as being a human with an ability to manifest the powers of the Magi. No, he was *more* than that: every act he performed was simply an extension of his being. Part human, part lightning, part fire: Durmstrang, he was certain, had never seen wrath like it.

They'd reached the first floor landing, broken, charred corpses littering the marble flooring that had, in a distant, former time, lent this level an air of opulence.

Standing with his arms outstretched, ribbons of fire melting into the cold floor at his feet, savouring this latest victory, Harry finally let his arms drop to his sides, absently flicking the song blade around again when a cascade of sharp *cracks!* announced the arrival of new adversaries.

Noting with something dangerously close to disdain the arriving spell, Harry effortlessly blocked the attack before, with a sweep of his sword arm, the six tiny figures were swept clean off the floor, and hurled against the marble wall.

He barely registered the large, luminous eyes, the pointed ears or the green, wrinkled skin as a vicious blast of blue flame incinerated the Tempus House-Elves.

Somewhere in his mind, a dry voice suggested that he'd best not mention that particular episode to Hermione.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," repeated Dean, dubiously.

Harry turned on his companion, incredulously, "*what?*"

"You're not right, Harry," continued Dean, raking his fingers back through his hair once more, desperately trying to keep himself awake. "You're getting a bit... carried away. Perhaps we should, y'know, rest for a moment? Gather our... thoughts?"

"We've only got one more floor to do," countered Harry, impatient to meet the next batch of foes whilst he still held the upper hand. "Once we've got the initiative, we have to keep it..."

Dean muttered something under his breath that Harry didn't quite hear, although if it wasn't 'psychopath', it certainly rhymed with it. Harry gazed challengingly at the tall, black Gryffindor, "you got a problem with that?" he asked, warningly.

For a moment, he thought that Dean might actually dare to admit that he *did* have a problem with it, but the fifth year evidently thought better of it.

Harry'd noted it before, and, he didn't doubt, it would strike him again: Dean was a lot sharper than he let on.

But they were wasting time: "Onward!" commanded Harry, sending an electric bolt of force at the wizard who'd crashed through the ornate doors opposite. He saw the man's skeleton light up, the bones aflame inside the shocked flesh, the strike hitting before Harry's opponent had had the chance to utter even a syllable of whatever hex he mistakenly thought would have stood a chance against a Mage.

Let them *try*, thought Harry. If they hadn't known what they were up against at the start of the night, he knew that Tempus would be left in no doubt as to what force had levelled the infamous stronghold of Durmstrang before daylight broke.

Outside, the battle raged on. The dragons continued to patrol the skies, swooping down across the castle's walls every now and again. Of the Trackers there seemed no sign - they'd either been finished off by Charlie's forces, or they'd chosen to flee in the face of the superior beasts.

The swarm of invading patterns appeared to be making swift ground. There was virtually no activity beyond the second wall now, all the fighting seeming to be concentrated in the compound that stood between the Keep and that second line of defence. Screams could be heard echoing off the stone in the moonlit night - multicoloured flashes would render silhouettes in stark illumination for fractions of a second, afterimages haunting Harry's vision in lurid hues before decaying slowly.

There were the fast, powerful spells that lanced from the caster's wands. There were the softer, but no doubt just as aggressive incantations that generated slow spirals of energy that swept inexorably towards their target, crushing anything in their path. Sparks cascaded down in lethal curtains from atop the walls, as stone crumbled, roofs collapsed and the ground was torn asunder.

Tempus appeared to be retreating ever further, marshalling their forces within the confines of the ground floor of the Keep, where a considerable force had amassed, evidently prepared to meet the invading parties head on.

Harry allowed the corners mouth to twist upwards in grim satisfaction: all that effort on defending themselves from the forces outside, but what they didn't realise was that they had a Mage at their back.

The ground floor was different in plan to the higher levels of the Keep. The giant staircase unfolded, splitting in two as it straddled the huge entrance hall to the fortress, each wall lined with ancient banners, presumably harking back to distant, feudal times.

Goblins, witches, wizards, giants: the crowd that had been clustered in the central Hall turned almost as one to view the two figures descending the staircase that had been at their back.

Letting crimson fire flow freely from his body, as though it were some grotesque foreboding cloak, Harry had the lead, Dean a few steps behind as he stepped onto the ground floor, every sense absolutely *wired* to the moment.

He could see the fear in the whites of his opponents eyes, and wicked delight coursed through his veins as he saw the assembled forces take half a step back, *en masse*, as the most total embodiment of pure energy they had ever seen advanced towards them.

A trio of goblins made the first move, attempting to race towards the Mage and engage him with their pathetic, laughable weapons. Extending his sword hand, the blade afire with its own presence, Harry swept his adversaries clear across the room, accelerating all the way until they were smashed into the Keep's stone wall.

Three down.

The nervous glances the enemy were passing between themselves weren't lost on Harry as he waited for the next move. And the best thing was, they probably thought that *that* had been the best he could do.

Evidently favouring numbers over the application of individual force, Harry found himself engaged by a whole collection of adversaries, whilst he was dimly aware of the external forces launching a fresh wave of attacks on the Keep's exterior. Unfortunately, as had always been the case with the more extreme manifestations of his power, he wasn't able to discern with any great deal the events in his immediate surroundings, as his mind was wholly focussed on the battle in front of him.

So he had no warning.

None, apart from the noise as the wall to his left dissolved in a heap of masonry, the dust mingling with the taste of spent magic, burning flesh and spilt blood.

Slicing a particularly persistent goblin's throat open as he spun to investigate further, Harry saw two giants lumber through the opening they'd smashed. One held a stone hammer, the other seemed unarmed.

It mattered not, as far as Harry was concerned, and he looked back over his shoulder to check that Dean was OK before he set about annihilating the new arrivals.

He froze: Dean was *not* OK.

Everything came crashing home to Harry in that fraction of a second. Dean, slumping, horrified, to his knees, eyes bulging with terror and pain, body convulsing in shock.

A bloodied spear tip was protruding through his ribs, the grotesquely thick main shaft of the giant's weapon at his back as the fifth year fought for breath, his shaking hands inching closer to the weapon's cruelly blunt tip.

As Dean's back curved forward, his head lolling, seemingly powerless to prevent the boy's collapse into the floor, the giant's stone hammer caught him on the left side of his chest on the upswing. Notwithstanding the desperate, wrenching splinter of bone, Harry watched, paralysed in shock as his friend's body was swept clean off the floor by the blow, to end up slumped in a heap against the far wall, the impact forcing the spear's shaft to tear his chest open still further.

Aghast, aware that all breath had left his lungs, Harry's fingers relaxed their grip on the song blade, the burning steel clattering to the ground. And things immediately got worse.

Where before Harry had felt his entire body had been alive with energy, vitality, power and purpose, now the full weight of fatigue landed upon him, sapping the strength from his bones, his eyes bulging as he tried to stay awake.

A full day of Key draining. The battle with Amaraletta's Serpent, the follow up duel's with Vellum's guards, and then the witch herself. Deflecting the Trackers, all that business with Snape, cutting the bloodthirsty swathe down through the Keep's levels. All that activity now came back to haunt Harry, who seemed unable to do anything but slump to his knees as exhaustion threatened to overpower him.

Tears of fatigue blinded his vision as his knees buckled beneath him. All the earlier poise, vitality and sheer *purpose* having completely vanished. Empty lungs fought pathetically to catch half a breath, his shuddering body making a broken, wheezing sound.

His conscience sprang to life in a brilliant, scolding flame of accusation: he'd done *terrible* things that night. And, he reminded himself, Dean had tried to stop him... Dean had seen what he himself hadn't, and yet, cruelly, it was Dean who'd paid the price for the Mage's stubborn insistence that he was fine.

The first giant had set about retrieving its spear from Dean, ripping the wooden shaft of the weapon from Dean's mutilated body with barely so much as a second glance.

Appalled by such callous disregard for flesh and blood that had once been a true friend of his, Harry only belatedly registered that *two* giants entered the fray when the wall had dissolved, but he'd only been keeping his eye on one of them.

Blinking hard to stay awake, eyes welling more with fatigue than actual grief at that moment, Harry attempted to turn to check up on the other assailant's progress, just in time to see the stone mallet swinging at him, lined up to smack him directly between the eyes.

He'd been tired before. He'd been in terrible, impossible situations before. He'd faced incredible odds, and managed to both stand his ground and live to tell the tale. Right at that moment, slumped to his knees on the ground floor of the Keep at Durmstrang, however, Harry seemed to see only the immediate inevitability of his own death.

A kneeling position didn't give him adequate purchase from which to take too much evasive action, but he did his best, anyway and hurled himself to his left as the stone whistled through the air.

Not quite quick enough, the tip of the mallet caught his right shoulder, and Harry screamed out in pain as he felt the bone smash, his body twisting round from the force of the blow. Landing flat on his back, winded, right arm useless, he attempted to push himself up with his left hand as the giant took another step, bringing the mallet in range once more.

Why, wondered Harry, bitterly, was it *always* his right side that took the hits? The second thought that struck him, however, was an awful lot more sophisticated, his eye was once more caught by the song blade's inviting gleam as it lay on the floor, ten feet distant.

He'd felt the sword's energy, of course. He hadn't really thought of it as having a presence of its own until that point, but, in his sleep deprived state, something clicked. He hadn't felt tired until he let go of the blade; perhaps, if he caught the blade again, he'd be able to recover strength sufficiently enough to at least make...

He was too tired to process the rest of his reasoning. The important point was that he *needed* the blade. The mallet was curving through the air once more, and he instinctively raised his left hand to construct a defensive block. Unfortunately, and as he'd experienced previously, channeling with his left was nowhere near as effective, nor powerful, as channeling with his right, and although it did arrest the giant's strike, it didn't have any repercussions for his assailant.

The giant took half a step back, drawing its shoulders in a circle that warned Harry that it was about to try again. Only harder.

The song blade burnt fiercely on the floor: recalling the trail of carnage he'd wrought in their passage down, Harry wondered whether what he was about to do was entirely sensible, or honourable.

But then again, he reasoned, flexing his left fingers to receive the sword's hilt as it slid into his grasp, he was running out of options.

The steel connected with his fingers of his left hand, and in the same instant dark vitality returned to the very core of his being: oh yes; he... was... *back*.

Astonished, Harry discovered that he could spin the cruel steel about his left wrist just as easily as his right, and the wave of crushing fatigue that had threatened to drown him just moments ago had been completely swept aside.

His battered, torn right arm dangled uselessly from the mangled stump that had been his shoulder as Harry used the sword as a makeshift crutch to bring him to his feet.

He remembered now what he'd set out to do: kill them. Kill them all...

The stone mallet came hurtling down through the air once more, but in full possession of his powers, Harry simply flicked the giant across the room, it no more than a minor irritation.

Liquefying the floor with a carpet of magnesium flame, Harry's conscience fought to be heard. He *wasn't* there to kill, he was there to escape...

A powerful instinct to lash out and destroy everything in his path immediately railed against the voice of moderation, explaining that this was war, and that he didn't have time for niceties and diplomacy.

Torn, Harry tried to bring his mind back from the brink, back from the darkness of the abyss he only now was beginning to recognise. There was darkness in the song blade itself - it's energy was infecting his own, drawing on his powers as a Mage, corrupting intentions to suit its own bloodlust.

He had to drop the sword, he reasoned, it was dangerous. Corrupting, malevolent, Dark.

The second, alternate voice, reminded him, however, that the second his fingers relinquished their grip on the song blade's handle, he would be engulfed by a tidal wave of exhaustion. And then he'd be dead.

What was left of his mangled shoulder burned with an increasing pain as Harry attempted to work out what he was supposed to *do*. He *needed* the sword; he couldn't survive without it.

But, he reminded himself, that didn't mean he had to give in to it: he was better than that.

Resolve strengthened, Harry reentered the fray once more, this time fighting his own mental battles internally as he sought to somehow retreat from the Keep's main chamber. Retreat into darkness and safety. Recuperate somehow: after all, he was *still* a Mage... they'd be mad to follow...

So a *new* battle was joined inside the walls of Durmstrang that night. In addition to the dragon riders tearing the goblins' Trackers to ribbons in the night sky, the as yet unidentified, but presumably benevolent forces storming the castle beneath, and alongside Harry's personal battle against the agents of Tempus, his mind was locked in its own struggle against the seeping Darkness of the weapon that was both ally and aggressor.

Dean's body, limp, torn and lifeless remained slumped against the wall. He remembered Cedric's plea in the graveyard, that his own body be taken back to Hogwarts, but his arm was smashed to pieces, it was taking every ounce of willpower he possessed to maintain his

calculated retreat. He didn't *want* to leave Dean there, dead, seemingly forgotten, seemingly *spare*... Voldemort's label haunted him once more.

If only he'd *listened* on the stairs... Dean's misgivings about the whole escapade had proved beyond doubt that his friend hadn't been a spare... except, Harry recognised, his own arrogance in refusing to listen had ended up bringing that end upon him.

The song blade hissed malevolently in his left hand, the steel dancing with its own life as seductive whispers assaulted Harry's mind at its most primal level. *Kill them all.*

He had the power to, after all... his mind, the sword's purpose and every single living thing before him could be reduced to ash. And all he had to do was...

Shaking his head, feeling his vision lurch as he wrestled with the inner demons whilst fending off the outer ones, Harry stepped further backwards, attempting to sense some avenue of escape that would get him out of this hell. Dean's body was lost to both sense and sight, his friend's tell-tale pattern, so similar to Seamus', having finally burnt out after an agonisingly slow decay.

"I'm sorry, Dean," whispered Harry, hoarsely. Numb shock threatening to paralyse him, that was the best apology he was able to muster as he continued to retreat backwards, trying to find somewhere safe, somewhere defensible, where he could wall himself in.

Perhaps never to be found. He didn't deserve any better.

Evidently having sensed some kind of turning point in the battle, more and more of the Tempus forces were engaging in the battle against the clearly hamstrung Mage. The pain from his shoulder was starting to increase, the wound still bleeding heavily. He'd deliberately shied away, now, from killing his opponents; he knew where that path led, and was trying desperately to stick to the tricky, narrow path that divided 'proportionate response' from 'vindictive force', in Dean's terminology.

Unfortunately, it seemed clear that his opponents did not feel that the rules had changed in the slightest, and were taking evident heart from the perceived weakening of their enemy's powers.

The invading forces came to his rescue; the front wall to the Keep was suddenly blown apart as a multicoloured beam of pure magic disintegrated the Keep's very fabric, and immediately the patterns in Harry's mind swarmed in new directions. They hadn't left him unattended; he still had a clutch of goblins and two, spear-carrying giants to contend with, but they he could deal with. The song blade's energy was still granting the edge to his vision, and the keenness to his mind; he could channel his powers with just as much subtlety through his good, left hand as he had been able to with his natural right, so it was short work to separate the beasts from their weapons, and then repel the bodies away to a respectable distance.

Still battling the sword's will, Harry's breath caught in his throat. The battle, it seemed, was over: Dumbledore had Apparated into the thick of the massed forces, and with his arms outstretched somehow wordlessly commanded a silence that all present adhered to.

The great wizard's pattern was burning furiously in Harry's mind, seeming to dwarf almost every other presence in the room. It was evident that this, truly, was the greatest wizard of his generation, and equally obvious that there were none present who were about to dispute that fact.

In the compelled silence of the moment, Harry allowed the song blade to fall from his grasp, feeling the fatigue well up from inside his body, eyes once more brimming with tears of pure weariness. The exhaustion that had now seized his body, and sucked the very core of his existence from his bones dulled even the memory of Dean's death, all knowledge being swept aside by his body's total collapse.

Dumbledore didn't appear to have seen him. Somebody else had, though: thock, step, twist-then-flick.

Thock. Step. Twist-then-flick.

"Potter," hissed Mad-Eye Moody, malevolently, "*what* were you doing here?"

Harry's muscles lacked even the energy to close his sagging jaw, and it was just about all he could do to roll his eyeballs upward to consider the bitter Auror, standing above him in what could not be mistaken by anyone for anything but apoplectic rage. "Dean..." breathed Harry, tears rolling down his face as the enormity of the loss set in.

Moody's magical eye swivelled as it scanned through the back of his head, before both eyes levelled a burning, searing glare upon Harry's fast-numbing form. The Auror's voice dropped to an almost inaudible whisper, the sheer control of the wizard's anger completely terrifying, "you... you..."

The magical eye completed another revolution whilst the normal one continued to lance through Harry's conscience with accusation so intense it burned. Both eyes trained on Harry once more, Moody shook his head slowly, "you worthless, self-centred, egotistical, spoilt *brat*," he hissed, "you killed him, didn't you...?"

"A..." started Harry, but Moody was evidently not in the mood to engage in conversation.

"I warned you before... *told* you before. One kid dying not enough for you, is it? You had to go playing hero again... *What is it going to take, Laddie?*" he demanded, "tell me!"

Harry quivered, helplessly, all power of speech long since having deserted him. He didn't *need* Moody to point out his mistakes in painstaking detail. He didn't *have* to be reminded that Dean was dead and it was *his* fault.

"You make me *sick*," continued Moody, the magical eye scanning back through his head once more, "absolutely *sick*..."

Harry flinched, instinctively, as a gnarled hand reached out sharply to grab his shoulder. His *right* shoulder, naturally.

"You don't deserve this," muttered Moody, as he prepared his wand, "Merlin's teeth," he spat, disgusted, shaking his head once more, "I don't know how many chances you're going to get in this charmed life of yours, Potter, but I tell you this now; I've had it with you..."

Harry's eyes widened in shock as Moody trained his wand: the next thing he knew, the unwelcome sensation of forced Apparation was zinging through his skull, his body shuddering as it recovered from the paralysis.

Still kneeling on the floor, shaking uncontrollably, Harry barely registered Moody's harsh voice commanding someone to 'deal with *him*', before the Auror's presence vanished once more.

"Here, drink this," commanded an unknown voice. Harry's vision was completely shot to pieces now, the fatigue, the grief, the disorientation of forced Apparation combining to render him virtually blind.

He meekly did as instructed, allowing the strangely cold, thick liquid to be poured down his throat, suspecting it was Dreamless Sleeping Draught.

Registering on some distant level that his body had been lifted and placed in a suspiciously medical bed, Harry gave in to the potion's demand, and closed his unseeing eyes, his mind relaxing as sleep engulfed him.

He'd been partly right. It evidently *had* been Sleeping Draught that he'd been given. Unfortunately, it wasn't Dreamless; he knew this because he'd suddenly been plunged into a vicious, swirling darkness. Voices called out in languages familiar and unknown. Energies flashed like lightning, and that disturbing sensation that he was inside the mind of someone truly insane struck him with crushing force.

His own mind, utterly spent, hopelessly unprepared to deal with connecting *now*, after so much had already happened, was at least able to interpret one terrifying fact: Voldemort had Apparated directly into Durmstrang.

Chapter 78

Before Albus Dumbledore extended the count to twelve, how many uses had been discovered for dragons' blood?

The second wall was in a poor state. The earlier onslaught had left the stonework crumbling along its length, damage that would no doubt look even worse in the cold light of day.

And the coming day's light would be cold, of that there was no doubt.

Overhead, the dragons that had earlier claimed the skies were now facing a battle more equal in contest as the Death Eaters' own beasts rose upward through the cloud that still hid the lake from view. Evidently taken by surprise, the attack coming from an unexpected quarter, the Phoenix dragons were immediately put on the defensive.

Oblivious to the despairing, broken screams that echoed within the fractured mind, dispassionate eyes watched as the newcomers tore into their opponents' relatively unprotected underbellies. When faced with an equal opponent, the slightest advantage told, and that clearly lay with the Death Eaters.

The distinctive profile of a Norwegian Ridgeback was frozen against the moon, the fast rising Firebolt's jaws tearing through its straining neck as the Phoenix rider sought vainly to minimise his, or her, exposure.

Futile: its neck broken, the great beast plummeted groundwards, screaming rider wreathed in flames. Elsewhere, the individual battles may have been slightly less clear cut, but as another Ridgeback succumbed, its belly slit open from throat to midriff, the Death Eaters' superior numbers started to tell.

The gaze returned to the second wall, noting with contempt the damage inflicted in the night's first attack. Now it would be hit again.

The trapped voices moaned in pain inside the blackness of the mind, a mind so riven with fractured consciousness, bright flashes of competing egos railing vainly against the smothering darkness, that it seemed barely human. Even in thought, Darkness chilled.

"It was... unfortunate," observed the thin, sharp-edged voice, "that you were not able to... locate Snape sooner...?"

In the midst of a war, with spells collapsing all about, it was still evident that this had been far from a mild enquiry. The cruel gaze turned slowly from considering Durmstrang's ruined walls, bricks crumbling to dust in the moonlight, to fix upon the accomplice to the right.

"M... mm... mmmmy Lord?" the balding, contemptuous traitor of a man flinched at the thinly veiled accusation, "I... I... I had barely identified him when... Potter... arrived." Eyes blinked with wholly unnecessary frequency behind the man's glasses, the silver arm glinting in the

moonlight. Almost paralysed with fear, it seemed that Wormtail didn't dare to so much as breathe in Voldemort's presence.

Lightness suddenly swept through everything, and even though the sights of battle continued to assault the eyes - dragons overhead tearing into each others' bodies, wizards racing forward, the Dark Mark projected into the skies above, the accompanying sound seemed to be drowned out by this inner... calm.

The sensation of floating intensified, as though the whole spectacle was somehow being viewed by a remote camera, that seemed to be pulling back from Voldemort's body, just on the edge of actually being able to see the Dark Lord's figure.

A brief moment of dizziness, and then the calm was extinguished as a wave of despair came crashing down, tearing into the peace as violent storms of rage and darkness hammered the senses anew.

Pettigrew now looked openly terrified: "my L.L.. Lord?" he ventured, eyes flicking in every direction, anxious to avoid direct eye contact with his Master.

With almost superhuman control, the violence was quelled as thick blackness crushed every element of hope within the conscious, the screams that had risen as accompaniment to the howl of the tempest being muffled with agonising pain.

The sounds of the surrounding battle faded back in, the tang of magic hung thick in the air, the desperation of the protagonists tangible. But it mattered not to Voldemort. As Tempus had fallen to the Phoenix, so the Phoenix would fall to the Dark Mark.

There was no doubt in this assessment of the likely outcome of the night's events. No multiple scenarios, contingency plans or retreats mapped out. The night was his....

From within the dreamworld, Harry was aware of both his own consciousness and the mind to which he was connected, as a powerless, captive observer. Although his brain told him that his limbs were flailing, his lungs screaming, his head thrashing madly as he sought to wake himself up from the agony of the darkness, somehow, he *knew* that the Sleeping Draught would have rendered all external signs of the connection invisible.

He was completely helpless in the face of the connection's will: the only person within the Order of the Phoenix who could see the defeat that was about to be inflicted upon them, but with sealed lips and paralysed body unable to signal his panic. They were all going to die; this he knew, yet could not stop.

Feeling very much as though he were on some insane kind of rollercoaster, Harry's mind was slammed forcefully back into the connection once more, all senses screaming as his nerves burnt up. Behind sealed eyelids, Harry's emerald eyes were recording events in open terror, as the second wall finally crumbled, and Voldemort considered the Keep with practiced disdain...

"You were wise," noted Voldemort, "not to choose to hide the fact that you had located Snape... Less... loyal servants might have sought to keep their find as a... bargaining tool..."

Wormtail nodded, gratefully, and feverishly, "no, my Lord, I... I mean yes... Of course... No..."

Wormtail's protestations were worthless: it was immediately apparent that the Animage evidently had found Snape at least a little while beforehand, and had decided to see how the situation would develop before playing his hand.

"My... my Lord? You do remember... that Potter, that Potter..." Wormtail paused, evidently attempting to select the correct phrase for the situation, "Potter, captured Snape?"

It was clearly apparent that Voldemort was not particularly appreciative of this reminder, "and yet, if you had been but... moments earlier, my loyal servant, you could instead have delivered the man to me..."

There was an ominous pause, the two figures silent amidst the roar of battle about them. The dragons continued their aerial battles overhead; the great beasts slamming into one another with colossal force, riders battling to both stay in control of their mounts, and also find time to hex the new opponents.

The crackle of flame mingled with roars of triumph, anguished, primitive screams and a thousand other noises. The ground shook with each new force that assaulted the rock's defences, and the inexorable march of the Death Eaters towards the Keep continued.

Towards both the Keep and the Third Key, the route having been paved at least partly by the Order of the Phoenix' own assault on Durmstrang earlier that same night.

A second maelstrom of presences had stormed Voldemort's conscious mind for a moment; broken desperate screams, unseen voices crying, desperate minds begging for release. The loss of balance was palpable, the disorientation more pronounced than the previous episode.

The sheer energy inside the mind was beyond comprehension. Vast expanses of emptiness, punctuated by flashes of brilliant energy, jagged fissures tearing deep into sanity's fabric. Contests between wills illuminated the mental landscape like alien lightning: reds and blues and violets. Thick clouds of presences shimmered, divided, regrouped trying to escape the all-encompassing darkness that swept everything before it, mercilessly, flickering lives extinguished as all opposing energy was consumed.

Whether Voldemort himself was affected as strongly by these lapses was hard to judge. Certainly, Wormtail seemed more nervous about his master the moment Harry's connection was restored to the Dark Lord's primary mind, but as they now seemed to be standing upon the second wall, it seemed that the Dark Lord must have retained at least some awareness of their surroundings.

Harry felt his fingertips start to freeze, and a chill seep upwards from his feet. With no Blood Trackers' cries to trigger this reaction, he was momentarily lost to explain the cause.

But only momentarily.

The dark robed figures glided silently towards the Keep, the weak moonlight far too feeble to penetrate the deeply shadowed hoods to reveal whatever face lay within.

Dementors.

Overrun, the few, feeble attempts at the Patronus that could be heard from the Keep were soon overcome by the dark robed figures' relentless sweep forward. Some figures disappeared on the spot, evidently choosing to run, perhaps to fight another day.

Others were not so fortunate, however, rooted to the spot as the Dementors swooped in on them, administering the Kiss, and rendering previously active bodies to nothing so much as blank, vacant husks.

With a group of Death Eaters following, spraying curses liberally about them as they proceeded, all that soon remained of those who had stood ground in the Keep was a small group of wizards, the silver-haired figure of an old, tired wizard, at their centre.

Descending the wall's partially crumbled steps, striding towards the vanquished Keep with measured paces, emotionless eyes considered the image of Dumbledore, and noted that the great wizard appeared to view the onrushing tide of darkness more with apparent resignation than actual fear.

He would learn.

Harry's mind thrashed at the potion's suffocating restraints, trying to bid every scrap of power he possessed into willing Dumbledore to escape. Run, flee, Apparate; whatever it took, but the genial wizard simply *had* to escape: Death was coming.

There were few in the wizarding world who could look upon Voldemort, reincarnate, without fear. The Dark Lord's very existence within the confines of the Keep seemed to sow fresh doubt within the assembled forces. A number of people had Apparated away in panic as soon as the walls had been breached.

Still more had fled when the Dementors had descended, and now, of this last defiant core of Dumbledore's forces, quick, nervous glances betrayed their fear. Such cowards were hardly worth worrying about, however.

A sweep of the hand took care of this last circle of resistance, Voldemort careful to ensure that Dumbledore himself remained unaffected as the twisted corpses of the Muggle-loving fool's underlings collapsed broken to the ground.

He was dimly aware of some internal sense of honour driving Voldemort: a need for an actual contest between what had once been Tom Riddle and Dumbledore to be played out. This twisted sense of principle seemed to have spared the Hogwarts Headmaster until this point.

Although 'spared' wasn't perhaps the best term to use, given the malevolence he could detect within Voldemort's ever shifting mind.

The Death Eaters themselves formed a leering audience as Dumbledore's allies were picked off, the great wizard himself standing upright before them still. Old, frail, but resolute.

"The great, revered Dumbledore," crowed the cold voice, "I have looked forward to this moment for a long time." He swept his arms expansively wide, inviting his audience to observe the interaction, "they said I was afraid of you: I, the greatest wizard who will ever walk this Earth, afraid of a broken, visionless fool... And now, with your defeat, I take one further step towards my destiny..."

"Oh Tom," sighed Dumbledore, "be careful what you wish for..."

"You pathetic fool, do you see what you have become? Afraid to even dream, too cowardly to embrace the powers we by rights command... Expelleriamus!"

Dumbledore's wand flew through the air, long, thin white fingers catching it neatly. Voldemort made a show of examining it before cruelly snapping it in half.

Dumbledore appeared unmoved by the gesture, although perhaps his eyes drifted briefly floorwards for a fraction of a second. "You are, of course right, Tom..." observed the venerable wizard, before being cut off.

"My name, is Lord Voldemort," asserted the Dark Wizard in a sharp edged hissing tone, "and you will accord me the respect I am due!" Voldemort flicked his own wand: "Imperio!"

"Oh, Tom," sighed Dumbledore, evidently disappointed.

"You will call me Lord Voldemort," insisted the cold voice.

Dumbledore didn't so much as flinch, "you will always be Tom Riddle to me," he countered, mildly, although to shrug off the Imperius Curse must surely have been taking great reserves of strength.

"It is indeed a fool who does not recognise his enemy, and a greater fool that does not bow down to the victor. Kneel before me!" ordered Voldemort, flicking his wand in command.

Again Dumbledore remained unmoved, "our darkest enemies have always been those within ourselves, Tom... I fear myself more than I fear any other force in this world. And, although I doubt you will thank me for the observation, I sense that you, too, shall in time find yourself as your own victim..."

Voldemort sneered contemptuously at this statement, "and again the laughable blindness of what you think of as nobility will prove your undoing. You lack the faith in your own abilities,

too afraid of your own power to challenge me..." The words hung in the air between them, before Voldemort added a postscript, "and you will kneel," he promised.

In a separate, yet connected world, Harry's mind attempted to scream urgent warning to Dumbledore as he *felt* Voldemort's thoughts marshal themselves within the fractured mind.

As his mind's image of his body convulsed in the bed, thrashing as though drowning in a cold dark ocean, the immediacy of his connection to Voldemort continued to assault every sense with events as they unfolded in Durmstrang.

Having foreknowledge of Voldemort's intentions only served to make the experience worse.

Twin streams of silver fire leapt from the Dark Wizard's wand, lancing into Dumbledore's legs, his kneecaps shattering from the assault. The twinkling blue eyes dulled momentarily, and then, as his legs buckled beneath him, Dumbledore's body was indeed forced into a kneeling position on the stone floor of the Keep.

"Governance by submission is not true Power, Tom; one cannot rule without respect, one can only suppress..."

"Don't bore me with semantics; your tired, self-serving arguments have held sway too long."

"Subsumatum," intoned Voldemort, levelly, and the familiar sight of a wizard's flesh being eaten up by dancing flame played out once more.

To his credit, Dumbledore remained as physically unmoved as he could manage, his aged skin cracking, then tearing apart as energy poured from the core of his being, luminescent trails gravitating to the thin, cruel, outstretched hands. Blood poured freely from the lacerated skin, ribbons of flesh burning as the charred remains crumbled to the floor.

The crooked nose became more pronounced, the cheeks more hollow. The silvery hair lost its sheen and the deep burgundy robes seemed to hang more loosely about the ancient wizard's meagre frame by the second. Years piled on to Dumbledore's face as the drain increased, flesh and bone being ripped apart by the incantation's insatiable thirst.

No resistance was offered: the great wizard neither screamed nor writhed in agony, and though dulled considerably, the blue eyes still contained within some of the Headmaster's unique spark. In some way, it almost seemed as though he had not only anticipated this end, but... counted on it?

The pain was unbearable: his body's protests swamped by the stifling effects of the Sleeping Draught, Harry's mind could only scream in internal agony as his scar seemed to burn a channel through his skull directly into the soft tissue within.

He could *sense* the magical drain; every scrap of power that Dumbledore had ever commanded being channeled into Voldemort's own mind; yet another voice that would no doubt be lost amidst the homeless chorus of tortured souls that were trapped within the prison of the Dark Lord's insanity.

What was slightly worse, from Harry's perspective, was that receiving *Subsumatum*, privy as his mind was to all of Voldemort's own senses, seemed uncannily similar to assimilating the energy from the Keys. The same, pleasurable discomfort, the same saltiness on the tongue as energy coursed through veins, flesh tingled and eyes brightened.

To have so obvious a parallel drawn between the thrill of draining the Third Key, and the horror of inflicting *Subsumatum* was unsettling, to say the least. A dark, internal voice asked him just how different was he to this thing he despised, really?

To see one's mentor defeated so cruelly, so completely, was one thing. But to experience the whole process through the senses of the victor made the whole spectacle unspeakably gruesome, Voldemort's cold triumph easily swamping Harry's own abhorrence.

And then it was over: Dumbledore's body toppled forward and sideways, the torn flesh on his skull slapping against the cold stone, empty, glassy blue eyes staring lifelessly across the floor.

The electric spark of energy continued to tingle about Voldemort's fingertips, skin burning comfortingly as his body assimilated the new powers he'd forcibly taken from his foe. Invigorated.

The host of lost voices that lived within the Dark Wizard's mind seemed momentarily silenced, as though horrified by the spectacle that they had witnessed. The symbol of their last hope utterly vanquished without so much as a token struggle.

There truly seemed nothing left to stop him now: Dumbledore was dead, with no successor immediately apparent.

He was only dimly aware of his retching scream, his body shuddering violently, limbs completely uncontrollable as Dumbledore's death burned vividly in his memory. He'd been there. Seen it, with, if not his own eyes, at least his connected mind.

Blurred shapes seemed to converge on his bed almost immediately. He heard a horrified voice make some reference to his scar, and the slap of a bottle hurriedly being prepared. As his ears, at least, tuned themselves into the commotion about him, he detected that the place, which *had* to be a ward, or field hospital of some kind, was busier than when he'd first arrived.

Busier, yet also strangely numb. And they didn't even know yet.

Cold glass was pressed against his lips as other hands pushed his heaving chest back against the pillows. Powerless to resist, Harry allowed a second dose of thick liquid to be poured

down his throat, only this time the fluid proved to be not so cold as the first dose. He fervently hoped that this would be Dreamless... or, perhaps, even permanent.

Dean was dead. Dumbledore was dead. Durmstrang had fallen and Voldemort had the Third Key.

As leaden eyelids closed firmly, his body's spasmodic twitching subsiding as his muscles succumbed to the draught's bidding, Harry's final thoughts concentrated on just one, single fact: he'd failed.

Chapter 79

In what year did Boris the Bewildered die?

Cho and Parvati were eating with the Ravenclaws for a change; they'd been worried that it might draw undue attention to one of the twins' absence if Parvati had hung around Gryffindor's table too frequently over breakfast. So that just left the five of them: Neville, Seamus, Ginny, Lavender and herself.

In truth, it was a little depressing, the stark reminder of how their numbers had been whittled down that year. No Harry, no Ron. No Dean and no Parvati either, but at least those two would be back by Sunday.

All being well, of course. Hermione hastily brushed such concerns aside before she made herself thoroughly miserable. The glass, she reminded herself, forcibly, was half-full. It might have been chipped, cracked, somewhat fragile, and obviously nearing the end of a hard life, but it was still half-full, and that was the important thing.

It was Friday morning, and Hermione truly couldn't believe that they'd actually got away with their scheme so far. It was, she knew, probably too much to expect their collective luck to hold, but just one more day's lessons, and then it was the weekend, and Dean and Padma would be back.

The intense emotions of midweek - elation at Harry's escape, dejection at his prompt recapture - had now given way to a more even keel. A keel that was, needless to say, a *little* depressed, but at least they all knew where things stood.

More or less. Poor Harry! It just was beyond belief that he'd fought his way out of prison, only to be immediately recaptured and thrown back into that depressing place. About the only silver lining she could find (and she'd spent a long time looking) had been the fact that at least he didn't have Dementors leeching his life from him. Apart from that minor plus, it had been a pretty bleak situation all round.

And Percy, of all people. Percy Weasley, brother of his best friend, and whose sister Harry rescued nearly three years previously. Percy had been the one to read the charges, make the initial arrest and, by all accounts, somehow recapture Harry *again*. Percy! It just didn't seem possible... but then, the Ministry, despite whatever rumours it spread about 'the Dark Mage', the Ministry probably knew that Harry could never bring himself to hurt a Weasley, and they'd probably sent Percy along for that sole reason.

And she just couldn't *imagine* what the whole affair would have done to Harry's notion of 'family'. He'd been brought up by the thoroughly detestable Dursleys, his only living blood relations, and it was no secret as to what he thought of *them*. And then, during his first year at Hogwarts, the Weasleys seemed to have adopted Harry as one of their own. It had all looked as though it would work out perfectly, and that Harry would finally be able to understand what family *really* was, and then Percy...

She didn't have the words: 'betrayal' was too soft when you tried to process the whole picture. This was *Harry*: of all the people in the world to throw blind and isolated into prison, to do it to *Harry* just ate her up from the inside.

Cho was miffed. This much Hermione knew: the Seeker had tried to visit Blackrock, but had been informed that 'the Dark Mage' had lost all right to visitors, and would remain in isolation 'indefinitely'. It rather sounded as though 'indefinitely' could have been substituted with 'for ever', but Cho had vowed not to give up on the battle.

Recalling the Ravenclaw's next step in her campaign, Hermione scanned the staff table for any sign of Dumbledore, aware that *she* was hardly in a position to beg favours from the great wizard. Not after... Ron. She was surprised to note that Dumbledore wasn't present at breakfast: not that it meant anything, particularly; after all, she was pretty sure that the Headmaster would have plenty of other things to occupy his time with besides supervising hundreds of school children having breakfast.

Still, not to see him at *all*...

Professor Lupin was there, though, looking a little drawn as he engaged Professor McGonagall in a low, murmured conversation. Hermione averted her gaze quickly, before her Head of House levelled *another* admonishing glare at her; it was bad enough having to openly collect and return her wand daily without allowing the Transfiguration teacher *another* opportunity to demonstrate how ably she could convey to all present that Hermione Granger couldn't even be trusted with her own wand.

Yes, that *still* hurt. The public shame, the initial humiliation; that had dulled - a little, but it *had* dulled - but the thing that really cut deep was that she was a *witch*, and without her wand she was just... incomplete. Handing Ollivander's creation over, 11 inches of polished yew, unicorn hair at its core; handing that over to someone else, *anyone* else, was just **wrong**. She felt as though she was parting with her soul.

Ron, predictably enough, had been scant comfort on the matter. Quite why she thought he'd have been understanding was beyond her, and yet, equally strangely, his very lack of sympathy was somehow... too *Ron* not to be touching. Of course, it didn't exactly help his objectivity, the fact that the reason that she didn't have her wand was because she'd brought him back from the dead.

As one did.

Within the very walls of Gryffindor. Yes, that did kind of put a damper on Ron's innate ability to sympathise with her plight.

But still, he could at least *pretend*... Although even before he'd... died, one would have been hard pressed to label 'tact' as a Weasley trait.

Idle musings on Rons both living and dead were cut short by the entrance of The Other One. He'd called her 'Hermione' on the Tuesday... he hadn't done since, but... well, he obviously found these things hard, so she could be patient. Deep down, she knew, there was something worthwhile in Draco, and she felt sure that once he realised that there were people who truly

did care for him, and not the trappings he surrounded himself with, then she was sure that he would turn out to be a better person than any of them had given him credit for.

Her personal redemption project smiled briefly at her, but immediately engaged Crabbe in some urgent conversation before he could catch her own shy grin in response.

Ginny, sitting diagonally opposite, and therefore with her back to the Slytherins, evidently caught the direction of Hermione's glance, and looked as though she were about to make comment when the owls arrived.

"Post!" observed Neville, who seemed to have made something of a trademark from the observation.

Honestly: the Great Hall's charmed skies were lost in a blizzard of wings, and Neville somehow felt the need to observe for the rest of them that the post had arrived. As if, by some bizarre visual deficiency on his house-mates' part, the sight of a flock of owls swooping down on the five tables might go unnoticed.

Ginny twisted sharply, scanning the birds for a trace of any owl that might be destined for their section of the table. But as the swirling flock grew thinner and thinner, the half smile of anticipation slowly melted, until the fourth year returned to her plate, shoulders slumped, morosely buttering the cold toast.

Hermione felt a little guilty for having built her friend's hopes up ('of course he'll write, Ginny'), and not a little cross with Dean for not having written even so much as a postscript on his Starfleet Communication. "There's always tomorrow," she whispered, sympathetically.

Ginny sighed, "I know... but... but I just *thought* he'd write.... I *know* it's probably dangerous for them, and they're probably too busy and... But I *really* thought he'd write. I blame him for **not** writing: does that make me a bad person?"

"Of course not!" protested Hermione, before she felt compelled to supply further reassurance, "I mean, they probably haven't got access to an owl... and they'll be back tomorrow night, according to Dean's note..."

"Only three will return," Ginny reminded her.

Now it was Hermione's turn to sigh, "I don't know, Ginny: I'm not sure I believe..."

"*Only* three will return," echoed Lavender, sternly, joining the conversation in defence of Parvati, who was eating with Cho at the Ravenclaw table, well out of earshot.

"Well, yes," conceded Hermione, "I *know* that's what Parvati said..."

"Saw," corrected Lavender, instantly.

"Saw," amended Hermione, albeit somewhat sniffily, not being one to take great stock in Divination, "but... well, it's not as if Parvati's got a recognised track record in soothsaying, is it?"

"She has the Inner Eye," Lavender assured the other two (Neville and Seamus, true Gryffindors at heart, knew an impending argument when they saw one, and had started to make their exit) in a tone that just *dared* them both to contest that supposed 'fact'.

Hermione closed her eyes, and counted slowly to ten. Well, in truth, she got as far as three (almost), "it could have been *anything!*" she countered, irritated that, just like the silly Curse of Gryffindor that was supposedly out to get the Quidditch Captain, Parvati's supposed *vision* had everyone jumping at shadows. "And besides, even if it *was* real, and," she added hurriedly, noting how quickly Lavender's eyes were narrowing, "I'm not saying it isn't, but, even if it *was*," she continued, in what she hoped was winning fashion, "*two* people left..."

"But Parvati said *only three*," Ginny reminded them both, unhelpfully, "and she said it like it was a bad thing..."

Hermione gritted her teeth, wondering what, exactly, it was about basic mathematics that caused wizards such difficulties. *Two* people, Dean and Padma, had left, and 'only three' were supposedly going to return. By her reckoning, then, they had a place spare...

Obviously, she'd hoped that it would have been Harry. Except for the fact, naturally, that she didn't believe in all that rubbish anyway. But if she *were* to be the type of person who believed in such superstitious clap-trap, then, well, Harry, Dean and Padma all turning up tomorrow evening would be very nice indeed, thank you very much.

And speaking of Harry, where *was* Dumbledore, anyway? Cho needed to talk to him about re-instigating the visiting rota, and he normally made at least *some* kind of an appearance at every meal.

Trying not to get too involved in that one, particularly since she wasn't allowed off Hogwarts grounds until the end of term, Hermione allowed her attention to drift. Astronomy first thing... with the Slytherins.

And then Care of Magical Creatures with them, too: all in all, Fridays weren't actually that bad. She caught his eye, briefly, as she stood up from the table before making her way back to Gryffindor Tower.

The normal pairings wouldn't work for Astronomy, since Parvati was being a Ravenclaw, and Dean was being absent with gusto. Therefore Neville had fallen into step with Seamus, meaning that Hermione's partner was Lavender.

Her dorm mate still hadn't forgiven her for doubting Parvati's prophecy, and Professor Sinistra's decision to focus on planetary alignments' roles in the Fate of the Universe was not helping Hermione's case against: "...and you can see that the planetary alignments of Mars and Venus are particularly auspicious at the moment..."

Although they were doubled up with the Slytherins, House politics dictated that the two halves of the class segregated themselves sharply, a column of blank desks down the middle of the classroom testament to the long-standing rivalry. Unfortunately, it also drew attention to the fact that there were only four Gryffindors present.

"Thomas? Patil?" queried Professor Sinistra, looking pointedly at a pair of empty chairs in the demilitarised zone.

"Ah," ventured Seamus, apologetically, and pulling a gruesome face, "Dean's come down with some sort of... bug." He patted his stomach whilst grimacing further, "Madam Pomfrey said he just, um, 'needed to get it out of his system'."

Slytherins, being thick (for the most part), sniggered dutifully at the oblique reference to unappetising digestive functions, and Professor Sinistra clearly seemed to have bought Seamus' explanation. There again, he *had* had a week to perfect it.

"And Miss Patil...?" the raven-haired witch enquired, turning to Lavender.

"The same," confirmed Lavender, with a trace of regret, before extemporising further, "Padma had it earlier in the week - we think Parvati got it from her, and Dean from... well..."

"I see," noted the Astronomy professor, scribbling a note for herself before returning to the day's role of explaining why it was that Parvati's vision *had* to be right.

Well, that was certainly Lavender's take on things, anyway. It was abundantly clear to Hermione, however, that the wizarding world just simply didn't have a use for the word 'coincidence'.

Care of Magical Creatures, with Hagrid's more *relaxed* teaching style, normally provided a slightly better opportunity to engage Draco in conversation (although no subject was quite as accommodating as Potions in that regard). Assuming, that was, that no Gryffindors took it upon themselves to nobly protect her virtue from the Slytherin's corrupting advances.

Hagrid's huge beard shook as he nodded his start-of-lesson headcount. The Threshers had now been released into the lake, charmed collars supposedly sufficient to stop the beasts tearing through the castle corridors in rampant bloodlust, so the day's lesson was taking place in the enclosure next to Hagrid's hut, where something slavered ominously inside a trembling crate.

Hagrid came up short: "eigh'een?" he queried, "where's youn' Thomas?" he enquired of Seamus after a second scan.

"Oh," exclaimed Seamus, apologetically, "sorry; forgot - he's still in bed - stomach upset or something." You had to hand it to Seamus, who was simply *exuding* sincerity; he was the type of guy who could market snow to Eskimos. Unfortunately, he then ruined the effect, by adding, "think it got Parvati too..."

"Sorry t' hear tha'," rumbled Hagrid, goodnaturedly, before turning to Parvati, "bu' yer alrigh' now, righ'?"

Seamus, evidently, had forgotten that Parvati had swapped back into her Gryffindor role during the revise and study period that followed Astronomy. Fortunately, and Hermione didn't mean anything *bad* with the thought, but fortunately it *was* only Hagrid, and he could be relied on not to pick up on Seamus' mistake.

Across the enclosure, Draco's eyes were obviously deep in thought - an expression that people might at first glance take to be a slightly calculating air. But they didn't *know* Draco like she did, and couldn't appreciate just how much the Slytherin thought about... *things*. He was surprisingly deep, really.

The grey eyes were locked onto her with an almost predatory look, one in danger of sending too much blood to her face, so Hermione quickly turned away before anyone else noticed. He *was* so hard to read, though: but when he was interested, well, it was normally pretty easy to tell. And besides, it was normally her who made the first move...

They were meeting in the library that evening; Hermione felt a slight thrill of power as she decided the he could certainly manage to wait until then...

It nagged. It gnawed. It just didn't *feel* right, somehow. In a way she was reminded of ground coffee, and the way that the aroma always promised far more than the actual taste of the stuff ever delivered.

So it was with Draco: the thrill of *anticipation* far outweighed the reality. It was almost mechanical, almost lifeless. Yes, he was there, and, he *did* seem to know what he was doing and everything... but it never *quite* clicked as she imagined.

But, on the other hand, his *eyes* were so obviously interested. Interested in *her*; it was just that she always seemed to end up breaking off from the kiss thinking that it wasn't the snogging that was keeping him interested.

But, arguing against the 'ulterior motive' argument was the fact that he *never* tried to pry any information out of her about Harry, or Padma's Portkey or anything. If he was *really* out just to use her to gain some kind of upper hand somewhere, he'd have been drilling her for information from the outset.

Wouldn't he?

And he'd opened up to her, too: told her about his family life, his father (who he attempted to distance himself from by referring to as 'Lucius'), his poor, broken mother (in care at St Mungos, apparently). She knew that he wouldn't tell anyone this stuff; it had taken a little time to reach this point, where they could share confidences, to get him to realise that he *could* open up to her...

But *something* still gnawed away at her conscience: was this *really* all that there was? She just expected more of a... connection. The bolt of lightning, the clap of thunder, the... well, any kind of sign at all, really.

In the end she decided that if Draco had even been half as decent a kisser as he thought he was, she wouldn't be having any of these doubts. And so feeling nicely superior (the natural order to the world having again been restored), she arrived back at the Portrait Hole.

"But do you *have* to spend all your evenings in the library?" protested Ron, later that same night.

"Well, actually," she bristled, "yes I do... if you remember, and I'm sure you haven't actually forgotten, all my borrowing privileges were revoked when I... I..." trying to remain worked up was tricky under the circumstances.

"But *every* evening?" he repeated, slightly hurt.

"I *told* you what Dumbledore said; I have to maintain an exemplary record for my remaining time here, Ron, and that means that I've got to keep up with my schoolwork. And *that* means..."

"The library," he finished off for her, nodding in resignation. There was an awkward pause, "it's just that... y'know, I don't get to s... *talk* to you during the day, and then you spend every evening reading in the library..." he trailed off, looking slightly embarrassed.

Deciding that telling Ron that she wasn't *just* reading in the library wouldn't exactly be conducive to a peaceful night, especially if he *ever* found out who she was doing more than reading *with*, Hermione tried a different tack, "but I *have* to keep up..."

He gave her a pitying look: "Hermione, you are, quite probably the brainiest witch this place has ever seen. Believe me, keeping up will never be a problem for you..."

Despite the coldness of the room, and the acute awareness that whilst her left side was being roasted by the fire, and her right side chilled by Ron's frozen aura, Hermione felt herself flush slightly. Nothing ever felt quite the same as a compliment from Ron - probably, she reminded herself quickly, because they were so few and far between.

"...but," continued Ron, doggedly, "I just thought that we'd spend a bit more time together than we have... y'know... Not that we could do anything..." Ron stopped abruptly, his eyes widening at his choice of words. He hurriedly made amends, "I mean, y'know, we could just talk... play chess... the usual things..."

"Well, yes..." started Hermione, off balance; what other 'things' had he had in mind then?

"And," interrupted Ron, running his fingers through his frost-tipped hair once more, "you brought me back for a *reason*, right?"

No matter how dire the situation, how desperate the emotions or how high the stakes, Hermione knew that she could always rely on Ron to somehow shift the blame for *everything* onto her. Well, she *did* owe him on this one: "I missed you," she confessed, quietly.

This was evidently not the response Ron had been expecting, and Hermione suspected he'd been mentally limbering up for another of their arguments.

"Well, y'know," she continued, defensively, "they took Harry..."

"Percy," he promised her, with total sincerity, "is a dead man."

"...and you were dead..."

"Still am."

Honestly: she was trying to be sincere, and heartfelt, and he was just *mocking* the situation. As usual. She glared at him.

"What: you can't deny it!" he protested, arms spread in the oft-practised 'oh, blame me, then!' gesture of the habitually wronged.

"Well no," she conceded, "oh Ron... I'm *so* sorry..."

He waved her off before she could continue along in that vein. "Well, it's just, y'know, I... well, I just sort of assumed we'd see a bit more of each other... y'know, *talking* and stuff..."

Hermione felt her eyebrows raise: *what* was he trying to insinuate? Or not trying to insinuate? Whatever, she was fairly certain that there was subtext to this conversation somewhere.

"But I *do* come and see you," she pointed out; "I'm here now, right?" She made a show of scanning Ron's room to drive the point home. Surprisingly, perhaps, the Quidditch posters hadn't lasted ('too bright,' he'd admitted to Ginny), but the walls were now covered with charcoal sketches and scribbled Quidditch strategies (ink froze when he tried to write with it, she recalled, guiltily).

She, of course, was seated in 'her' chair, jammed hard against the fireplace, comforting mug of tea balanced on the tattered arm, whilst Ron was perched on the desk, his legs kicking loosely as they dangled over the side.

Ron could hardly deny the simple, incontrovertible fact of her presence in the room, and there was a brief moment of reflective calm, before a seemingly idle question popped into her friend's head: "so," he asked, lightly, "is it pretty quiet in the library that late at night?"

"Well," she ventured, warily, "there aren't too many people about, but, I'm not there on my own, if that's what you're worried about..." She rather suspected he was worried about precisely the opposite, truth be told.

"Other people like, oh, I don't know," Ron made a theatrical gesture of plucking a random name from thin air, "like... Malfoy, perhaps?"

She knew, even as she paused, that her hesitation was fatal. So Plan B swung into immediate effect: honest answers to honest questions: "yes, he's there."

"You two are still 'studying' together, then?" Ron articulated the question through clenched teeth, yet, amazingly, still managed to convey the inverted quotes about 'studying'.

Honest answers to honest questions: "yes, we study together." She had nothing to be ashamed of... well, OK, she had nothing to be ashamed of that Ron needed to know about. It was her life, after all...

"So, *actually*, you're spending your evenings snogging Malfoy in the library," he deduced.

"It's the *library*, Ron, not the Astronomy Tower," she countered. That wasn't technically the answer to his question, but this was Plan C.

"Oh yes," he growled, "forgot; you've already done the Astronomy Tower, haven't you?"

When all else fails, Hermione reminded herself, change the subject: "so what do *you* do all day, anyway?" she asked, archly, trying to keep her growing anger in check.

"Huh?" asked Ron, bewildered. He blinked, shrugged, and then expanded upon his reply, "I sleep... sleep during the day, I'm awake through the night..."

"Oh!" exclaimed Hermione, slightly taken aback; "so you just... sit here... all night?" It didn't sound like a tremendously fulfilling life for her friend. Or fulfilling death. Fifth year at Hogwarts, she reflected, had made her *way* too morbid.

"Nah, it's not too bad," Ron corrected her agreeably enough; "'sides, I get to crash the Hufflepuff toga-party on Thursdays..."

"*What?!*" she demanded, incensed.

Ron snickered wickedly; "can't believe you fell for that..."

"You're not funny."

"Your face was, though..."

Talk about 'divided loyalties': Hermione squinted into the bright February sunshine as she watched the two Seekers, Draco and Cho, face off above the rest of their team-mates, gathered in a circle beneath, waiting for Madam Hooch to start play.

On the one hand, it was Cho, and whilst Hermione really didn't feel she had that much in common with the girl, Harry and she obviously had *something*, and, well, *technically*, any friend of Harry's...

On the other hand, it was Draco, looking quite imposing in the green Quidditch robes of Slytherin. Cho was the better flyer, and she had the better broomstick too. Ally that to the fact that Hermione was watching from the Gryffindor stands, where her entire *House* wanted nothing more than total humiliation for Salazar's house, and Hermione felt sorry for her... her... her *friend*.

It vaguely troubled her that although they were doing the... *kissing* thing, she couldn't quite bring herself to say that he was her boyfriend as such. You couldn't really put labels on to Draco: he was Draco, pure and simple. Well, perhaps not quite so 'pure', and not really 'simple', either. But he was most *definitely* Draco.

"Swift Bludger to the head, nice and quick," muttered Seamus, hopefully, from her left. There was absolutely no doubt as to exactly who's cranium Seamus was talking about.

Poor Draco: sometimes he really did seem to have the entire world ranged against him. And against that kind of adversity, well, you just *had* to wish him luck, didn't you?

In the general spirit of compromise, then, Hermione hoped that Ravenclaw won, but that Draco got the Snitch. From her friendship with Harry she knew how much catching the Snitch meant to a Seeker, and at least that way Draco would be happy. And Cho's team would have won.

Unfortunately, she had a sneaking feeling that events might not be so accommodating.

"Thought Dumbledore might've come to see this one," noted Parvati, who was playing her Parvati role for the game's duration, not having Cho there to protect her from making some dreadful *faux pas* with the Ravenclaws.

"Oh," replied Hermione, vaguely, "he doesn't *always* watch, though, does he?" Draco was circling high above the action, which, predictably, was turning brutal quite rapidly.

"Well no," nodded Parvati, vaguely, "still, Cho's not seen him since Thursday now... and he's really the only one who can talk to the Ministry for us..."

"FOUL!" hollered Seamus, and three quarters of the rest of the school. Killane, one of the Slytherin Beaters, extended both arms in a 'who, *me?*' expression as one of the Ravenclaw Chasers plummeted groundwards. Oh yes, pure as the driven snow, that one.

Pulling out of the dive just in time, the Ravenclaw Chaser circled back up to join his colleagues as Madam Hooch awarded the penalty. It seemed clear, even to Hermione, that Slytherin were intent on employing their overly physical brand of Quidditch in the match.

What took her a little bit by surprise was that Ravenclaw proceeded to demonstrate that they could give as good as they got in that particular arena.

"This isn't Quidditch," breathed an amazed Seamus, a short while later, "it's *carnage*," he beamed, delighted, as one of the Ravenclaw Beater's bats thumped straight into a Slytherin's stomach on the follow through. The force of the impact actually sent the green-cloaked Chaser backwards in the air.

Lee, on commentary duty as usual, was having a whale of a time, calling fouls and bad sportsmanship left right and centre. In Hermione's opinion, however, his impartiality still left a lot to be desired; the dreadlocked seventh year made no attempt to hide his glee every time there was even the remotest chance that a Slytherin might have been injured, or, even better, taken out of the game completely.

With both teams' players bloodied, bruised and battered but wholly, scarily *fixated* on the game, the score crept inexorably upwards, Slytherin slowly pulling away from their opponents, who, though brutal, still had such a thing as 'qualms'.

Cho, evidently sick of Draco tailing her, had started to weave in and out of the play, pushing the Firebolt into steep dives, twists and turns. Draco was forced to follow every one of these Feints in case it turned out that she really had caught sight of the Snitch, but he couldn't hold a candle to the Ravenclaw's flying ability.

It was so unfair, thought Hermione crossly; Cho had by far the better broom in the contest, and she was just rubbing it in. On the other hand, she reminded herself, Slytherin were continuing to edge away from Professor Flitwick's house (the score was now 180 to 100 in Slytherin's favour), so although it wouldn't be *quite* as nice if Cho were to grab the Snitch but Slytherin were to win the game, at least the honours would still be shared.

It wasn't so much a Quidditch match as a dog-fight on broomsticks, with the Bludgers being pinged across the skies with ever increasing maliciousness by the four bruised and bloodied beaters, all trying to knock their opposing Seeker off the hunt.

By the way that Cho's head had snapped around, and the sharp, upward flick she tried to pull on the Firebolt, Hermione could see that the Ravenclaw had spotted the incoming Bludger. But she could also tell that she'd spotted it too late to actually avoid the cruel ball, as it slammed into her chest on her right hand side.

Winded, Cho slumped forward on her broomstick, but, already off balance from the first Bludger, she could evidently do nothing to prevent the second from smashing straight into her left elbow. No real need to hear Cho's strangled scream to know that *that* had hurt.

Pausing to check that Draco was OK (and he was fine, sensibly having kept out of harm's way), Hermione reverted her attention back to Cho as the stricken Seeker plummeted to Earth in an increasingly steep dive.

The whole arena appeared to get to its feet as one, mouths open in shock as they watched Cho, practically crippled from the twin assault of the Bludgers, hurtle towards the pitch, apparently hell-bent on impaling herself into the ground at maximum velocity.

It was only when the girl extended her right arm (her left presumably broken, flapping uselessly against her body) that Hermione saw the tiny speck of winged gold, hovering scant inches above the turf: Cho had seen the Snitch, and Draco, she noticed with a sinking heart, was nowhere *near* it.

Chapter 80

Of the Hogwarts ghosts, which is the eldest?

Rough game, Quidditch.

Chang, the Ravenclaw Seeker, was ridiculously easy to bait; all it had taken was a few words about pretty-boy Diggory, and then a comment about Potter back in prison to get her riled up.

Using her Firebolt as a Potter substitute: well, the two things both had the same amount of personality, after all. And come on, if a girl mounting a broomstick *wasn't* suggestive, then what, in Merlin's name, *was*?

Chang had dived into the melee below. It *would* be just typical of his luck so far this year if the silly bint had spotted the Snitch... The Slytherin strategy for the match had been two-fold. First off, use whatever means possible to knock the Ravenclaws out of their stride.

Secondly, Draco was to tail, dog, bait and harass Chang continually until a clear 160 point lead had been attained. Lucius may well have been dead, but the team still flew on Malfoy brooms, and until such time as that changed, Draco was still Seeker.

Chang *could* fly; he was prepared to concede that much, but there again, she *was* flying a Firebolt. Hell, that broom would make even *Goyle* look agile. Still, all the time she was flying to avoid further taunts, she wasn't looking for the Snitch, and that was the point.

Wells, the Slytherin Captain, nodded his head to indicate that Draco should get out of the way - he'd been tailing Chang as she flew right into the thick of the battle, Beaters and Chasers going at each other hell for leather. Wells had a gash just above his left eye, whilst Harkness had been temporarily winded by the *blatant* foul the Ravenclaw Beater had just committed.

Typical biased refereeing, though: Hooch had somehow missed that. The guy's broomstick had been knocked backwards with the impact: what more evidence did the old bat need?

Still, following his Captain's bidding, Draco pulled back up to his circling pattern above the play, and then watched as Chang paid for showing off her precious Firebolt as she got sandwiched between two well-aimed Bludgers.

And all was right with the world: they were 80 points up, and the Ravenclaw Seeker had just been taken out of the game completely, meaning that Draco could hang around, staying out of harm's way until the Snitch showed up.

But then, as if to remind him of his current run of bad luck, Chang stretched out her right hand as she entered a vertical dive. Pausing only to complain, at the sight of Chang using only her thighs to retain her grip on the Firebolt, that Potter was a lucky, lucky, *lucky* git, Draco gave chase before he actually saw it.

Any hope that it was some desperate attempt on his opponents part at a Wronski Feint was swept aside when he, too, saw the tiny speck of gold hovering virtually at ground level.

The Nimbus 2001 went into an absolutely vertical dive as Draco hollered an extremely rude word into the wind. They didn't have enough of a lead, and there was no way he was going to catch Chang, not with the head start she had.

Evidently, however, Fate had chosen that day to smile upon Draco Malfoy, because the moment Chang tried to close her fingers around the Snitch, it darted to one side, and the Ravenclaw ended up clutching at thin air, before bodily smashing into the turf.

Draco, on the follow up, simply had to pull up from the dive in a nice, easy swoop before calmly extending his left hand, the Seeker's glove enveloping the fluttering prize.

And the Slytherin stand went *wild*.

As the rest of the team flew down to congratulate him, Draco chanced a disdainful look back at the pitch, where Chang's body was convulsing sporadically.

Beautiful. Just beautiful. Almost good enough to make him forget about his other problems...

That Tuesday, things had been shaping up nicely. Potter had, as predicted, escaped from Blackrock (Gryffindor nobility, clearly, had somewhat patchy ethics). So he'd known it was simply a matter of sticking close to Granger and eventually she'd give something away. She was stupid like that, although she probably preferred to call herself 'trusting'. Same difference.

Things had been looking up, then. But then the poncy git had allowed himself to get caught *again* the same day. Well, no-one ever accused Gryffindors of brilliance, did they? And whilst Draco was, under normal circumstances, all for pain, misery and torment being heaped upon Scarhead, *especially* if it was in the name of justice (the irony was nearly killing him), circumstances were currently far from normal.

So no, he had *not* been happy. And whilst he wouldn't say he was worried, per se (after all, he *was* a Malfoy), he would be lying if he didn't concede that he'd been, at the very least, concerned by the development.

How the hell was he supposed to deliver Potter to MacNair, as he'd promised, when the stupid git had gone and got himself recaptured? He'd almost felt like howling in rage at the Fates' warped sense of humour: what did he have to *do* to get some kind of luck these days?

But then Friday had come along, and something had clicked...

Care of Magical Creatures: Dumbledore's pet giant, that pathetic excuse for a teacher the school had inflicted upon them since third year, had unwittingly provided the trigger. Of course it was unwitting: the lumbering oaf had barely two brain cells to rub together. Pretty-

boy Seamus, werewolf, had given him the clue: Thomas, the Muggle-fanatic, hadn't been around all week.

Until Friday this had scarcely bothered Draco: one less Gryffindor was *always* cause for celebration, and if it was a Mudblood, well, better still. But that day something had clicked... the fact that he'd not seen both Patil twins in the same place at the same time suddenly rose unbidden to his memory's surface.

Watch, observe, record. Growing up at Malfoy Manor had taught Draco many things, not least was that it never hurt to keep your eyes open, and your ear to the ground. Knowledge was, and always would be, power.

Granger had looked guilty, and he'd *known* there and then that she knew something. Steeling himself to call her 'Hermione' once more, they'd met up in the library after Quidditch practice for more of the usual...

It was sort of like snogging a dead fish; well, not that he'd actually tried that, but, really, Granger seemed to have all the passion of a leaf of cabbage.

But *that* wasn't important. What *was* important, he continually reminded himself as he dutifully ran his hands up and down the Gryffindor's far too trusting body, was that she *knew* something. Patil had made a Portkey, Dean was *not* in the castle (his Animagus form had verified that quite simply, once the initial seeds of suspicion had been sown)... and there was something just too pat about the Ministry having found Potter so quickly.

Eyes on the prize: Granger's body wasn't that bad, even if she really didn't have a *clue* what she was supposed to be doing, but he wasn't in it for her (although, in the interests of maintaining authenticity, he was certainly happy to take whatever was offered).

Granger was his key to getting Potter. Without Granger, he probably didn't have a hope in hell in delivering on that promise. With her, he might actually get to live.

Another lesson from his childhood at Malfoy Manor: he had to look after his own interests first and foremost - no-one else was going to do that for him, after all.

"Draco, darling!" Pansy had collapsed onto his lap in the Slytherin common room, licking her tongue along his jaw like some kind of hound. "You were wonderful!" she crowed, wriggling about suggestively before moving in to nibble his ear.

The dungeons were in good cheer (a curious turn of phrase, if ever there was one, but strangely accurate) following Slytherin's victory over the know-it-all Ravenclaws. The news that Chang had broken not only her arm, but had thoroughly smashed her skeleton to bits when she missed the Snitch was just icing on the cake.

No-one raised so much as an eyebrow at Pansy's shameless exhibitionism, and deducing that he was unlikely to be rescued from the forthcoming mauling, Draco decided he might as well at least enter into the spirit of things, and slid his hands underneath the girl's outer robes, attacking buttons on the next layer in.

"You haven't forgotten our deal?" she whispered seductively, pausing to take a break from mauling his earlobe, as her left hand slid up and down his thigh in a dangerous fashion.

The moment she detected the slightest trace of a pause to his response, the nails dug into his flesh like talons, reminding him just who was supposed to be answering to whom in the exchange.

"I'm on it," he murmured discreetly, finally reaching bare skin. Not even a shiver, let alone goosebumps beneath his fingertips: there again, it *was* Pansy.

"Of course you are, darling," Pansy's hand resumed its slightly sinister caressing, "but I still don't see how you're going to work it..."

Draco gritted his teeth, "the point of a secret plan is that it's secret..."

"I don't think you appreciate the situation, *Darling*. I've promised MacNair that I can hand him Potter..."

Well, that was the silly cow's own stupid fault, in Draco's opinion. Look out for number one. First and foremost.

"...and so if MacNair doesn't get Potter, then *He* will punish him. MacNair, obviously, will need to express his disappointment in *me*, and that, *Darling*, means that *I* will be *very* upset with *you* if you fail me..."

He struggled hard to suppress any reaction as Pansy bit hard into his earlobe to reinforce her point. It was all a bit childish, in his opinion, anyway: seemed like everyone and his dog wanted to get their bit of gratitude from the Dark Lord for being associated with delivering precious Potter. But of course, *he* was the one who actually had to do the legwork...

Not that Granger constituted legwork exactly, but still... if Pansy wasn't careful, she might find that her role as middleman in the operation was bypassed completely. And wouldn't *that* be a shame, he pondered, wistfully as he *finally* succeeded in unhooking her bra.

"This is a bit public, *Darling*," she breathed, "do you want to take it downstairs?"

As if the common room being a dungeon wasn't enough, whatever vindictive architect had designed Hogwarts (and Draco was willing to bet good money it had been Gryffindor) had evidently decided that the only way to keep Slytherin ambition sufficiently downtrodden was to ensconce the ambitious students in depressingly claustrophobic dormitories, buried deeper still into the castle's foundations.

Pansy led him by the hand to the girls' dormitory, the fifth years' accommodation being four levels beneath the common room itself. The place was empty, which suited Draco just fine.

Unfortunately, he hadn't expected Pansy to be thinking on similar lines: "*Crucio!*" she cried, wand pointed directly at his breastbone the second she'd finished casting the silencing charm onto the locked door.

It was a poor choice on her part. But then, he reflected, she couldn't help it: she really was that dense. Moody had explained to them the previous year that they didn't have enough power as wizards to actually do any damage with the Unforgiveables.

Still, he decided he ought to play the game, and slumped to his knees, conjuring up a look of pain on his face (easily enough done; he'd suffered enough at the hands of Lucius to know what he was *supposed* to be feeling). In truth, the sensation was far from pleasant; as though his flesh was being pulled back slowly, his entire body raw with stinging skin.

But it wasn't the Cruciatus Curse as he'd seen it inflicted, and, had Pansy anything at all approaching common sense in that addled brain of hers, she would surely have noticed that he hadn't dropped his wand.

Foolish girl. Hogwarts, he noted absently, seemed to have more than its fair share of those.

"That's just a taster, *Darling*," sneered Pansy, who was now standing, hands on hips, at the foot of her four poster bed.

Well, he assumed it was her bed - they were all much of a muchness, heavy four-posters, with the green and silver curtains pulled back. Very thoughtful, when all was said and done, for Hogwarts to provide such an obvious aid to privacy - the beds probably gave even Hufflepuffs ideas...

Still on his knees, Draco slowly raised his head to look levelly at Pansy, who had utterly failed to register that he still held his wand. She'd obviously expected that her Cruciatus would have had a far more debilitating effect than it actually delivered. Still, that was her problem, he reasoned. And sometimes, you had to learn things the hard way.

"So don't fail me, Draco," she warned, tapping her wand against her thigh, "my reputation is resting on you delivering Potter..."

Quite staggered to think that Pansy even *had* a reputation, well, one worth preserving, at any rate, Draco made his move, and levelled his own wand at his fellow fifth-year:
"*Expelleriamus!*".

Pansy's wand - light wood, pliable, non-descript sailed gently through the air into his right hand, whilst the girl herself was thrown backwards onto the bed with a squawk of surprise. Seizing the moment, inspiration drawn from her spreadeagled position, he conjured up silver binding cords that tied Pansy's wrists and ankles to each of the bed's posts.

It was either testament to her one track mind, or final confirmation of her utter stupidity, but Pansy's demeanour immediately returned to her more normal air of calculating seduction: "this is kinky, *Darling*," she purred, as she tested the strength of the bonds gently. Blonde hair flicking about her face as she twisted to check first the left, then the right wrist. "What did you want to do first?"

Numerous ideas played across his mind, and he vowed to come back to each of them in turn, but the first priority had to be his continued self-preservation. Pansy, undoubtedly, was a liability; and despite her 'come-on' attitude, so vividly apparent as she wriggled her hips invitingly, he knew that she would have filed this defeat away, seeking to gain revenge later.

Fortunately, he knew just the insurance against future vengeance from the captive blonde; Lucius had, after all, been ever so thoughtful in explaining the incantation's effect in lurid detail. Not one to take his father's words at face value, Draco had made his own study of the spell, partly in fear that *he* may have ended up as the next target, and partly just to feed his own desire for knowledge.

He honestly hadn't really thought about using it himself. Well, not quite so soon, anyway. But Pansy really wasn't giving him any choice, he reminded himself, as he watched her slowly lick her lips: she certainly knew how to use her body, he had to give her that.

Which was only fair, after all, since he was about to take everything else from her: "*subsumatum*," he whispered, enjoying the moment of panic that flashed through his victim's eyes (oh yes, she knew what it was alright) before her body flexed against the bonds as the pain hit.

It was quite neat: Pansy's skin lit up with a shimmering, greenish flame (and there *was* quite a lot of skin on display for him to observe this effect), and he felt his own mind open up, ready to devour his fellow student's energy.

It was obviously painful: Pansy's screams echoed off the chamber's dark stone walls, but the silencing charm she'd so thoughtfully cast first, presumably to drown out his own expected protests under *Cruciatius*, meant he need have no worries on that score.

The silver cord dug a red groove into each wrist, the hard fibre cutting deeper as Pansy's struggle intensified. He realised, as he flicked his wand casually, applying a twist to the transference pattern in much the same way that he would twist a knife in his victim's wound (basically, because he could, and there would be no-one around to extract recompense for his actions), that Pansy's experience of the spell would be so much worse because she *knew* what the end result was going to be.

Pansy Parkinson: squib. Oh yes, the Dark Lord was *really* going to be delighted with her loyal servitude once word got out that she was as magically capable as the average carrot.

"No-one," hissed Draco, "threatens me, Pansy. No-one."

He doubted she could hear him - her head was thrashing around frantically against her pillow, her body bucking as new waves of torture burned her up from the inside. This was, indeed, quite fun. Still, he knew that he ought not to get carried away: if he left her with a tiny bit of energy, then she'd be able to survive, barely, in the magical world. She'd be a laughing stock, pitiable and pathetic, but the effect wouldn't be so dramatic as having turned her into a complete squib.

She had an impressive set of lungs: the dormitory's stone walls continued to ring with her agonised wails of protest. As he savoured the spectacle of Pansy watching the absolute core of her existence being forcibly extracted, he wondered, idly, whether Granger would scream the same way. Probably. He reminded himself to compare notes when the moment came.

He felt *good*, and powerful, as though new, warm blood was circulating through his body, reinforcing him. To feast off Pansy's power was a delicious concept in itself; the knowledge that he was stealing her magical abilities for good was a bonus, and the fact that she was worthless to anyone as a virtual squib, well, it was just turning into one seriously happy day.

From the Malfoy perspective.

"Oh Pansy," he murmured, attempting, but not quite managing, a tone of regret, "you really weren't cut out for this, were you?"

He'd had his fill - he wasn't particularly interested in subsuming Pansy's powers for himself so much as taking away the threat she posed. Not quite certain *how* he could tell, he nevertheless realised that he'd almost bled her dry completely - just a pale shadow of her power remained, flickering hesitantly in his perception. One more sweep and she'd be extinguished completely, but he decided it was more fitting to leave her permanently crippled. Just enough power to qualify her as a witch, and he'd leave just enough traces of her memory to sow the seeds of doubt.

Pansy simply howled, thrashing blindly against the restraints on her bed until he severed the connection, and allowed her to settle, enjoying the look of terror in her eyes as realisation set in.

At length, he bent over her, wand tip pressed into her forehead, right between the eyes, "oh yes, bitch, you've had that one coming for a long, long time..."

Pansy's eyes narrowed murderously, but, tied up as she was, she was powerless to resist. Eventually she worked this out, and flung herself backwards in frustration.

"*Obliviate*," he hissed murderously before pocketing his wand as he shrugged his robe off. Just enough to remove all knowledge of *Subsumatum*, and to doubt the extent of her former powers. The doubt was important: he wanted her to live out her remaining life tortured by the knowledge that maybe, just maybe, she'd been so much more than she was.

On the bed, Pansy blinked several times, bewildered, before considering her bound wrists with passing interest. She eyed Draco suggestively, "so, Darling," she enquired, huskily, "what ever are we going to do now?"

"Everything," he promised, climbing on to the bed to join her, "absolutely *everything*..."

Chapter 81

What is the longest period to have elapsed between consecutive Quidditch World Cups?

Harry awoke in surroundings familiar yet different. As he experimented with sitting up, his right hand side still stiff and sore from the previous night...

That train of thought was immediately cut short. The previous night: Dean, Dumbledore.

Voldemort and his Death Eaters storming Durmstrang. His own, personal battle with the Dark will of the song blade. It all came flooding back, the sudden shock of recall almost overwhelming.

An incessant barrage of images from the previous night's battle pummelled his mind into submission, and from being slightly propped up on his elbows, Harry fell heavily back onto the soft pillow, eyes clamped shut in an attempt to stem the tears.

It was bad.

Dean. He hadn't asked to join the war: Muggle-born, he'd known nothing of the world which had claimed his life until he'd turned eleven. If he hadn't received his Hogwarts letter... hell, if he hadn't been sorted into Gryffindor, Dean would still be alive.

Twisting the knife still further, Harry reminded himself that *he'd* asked the Hat to put him in Gryffindor. That request had, ultimately, led to Dean's brutal murder.

Sharp grief swept through Harry's body, his head pounding as the realisation of what he'd inflicted upon his friend took hold. The blood in his veins seemed to freeze as the implications set in. Dean was dead. It wasn't possible to fix things - this was the real world, where second chances weren't always available.

Dean was dead, and it was his fault. Carried away by the song blade's seductive urging, he'd blazed a trail of destruction, gaining sick, dark pleasure from the thrill of ending so many lives, and all the time, Dean had been trying to warn him. Telling him that things weren't right.

Dean had seen what he hadn't: the vengeful assault on Durmstrang, driven by the insatiable hunger of Darkness, that had been wrong. And as with all things, it came with a price.

Attempting to stifle the broken cries of despair that were building mutinously in his lungs, Harry realised that the effort of restraint was causing him to shiver uncontrollably.

Silent tears rolled down his cheeks, his fingernails digging deep into the palms of his balled fists. This was grief mixed with guilt on the edge of the precipice, and he *had* to keep hold of himself: if the thin shreds of composure that remained were allowed to crumble, he wasn't entirely sure that he'd be able to recover.

"Harry, mate, are you sure this is a good idea?"

The gentle doubt in Dean's tone, the hint of warning: it came back now, to taunt Harry as he lay in bed. Dean had seen it coming... perhaps not his own death, as such, but he'd had the sense to see where Harry's path was headed.

Nowhere pleasant.

"You're not right, Harry." Ignoring the thin protests of his vanity, Harry gave in, whimpering at the recollection of what may well have been Dean's last words of substance.

The whimper turned to a fractured groan, which in turn became an agonised, screaming howl, causing his throat to burn, his body heaving as it was consumed by racking sobs.

Someone came into the room at that point, obviously in response to the commotion he was causing. "It's alright, Harry, it's alright," breathed a calming voice, female. Vaguely familiar, but his mind was too far gone to pursue the avenues of recollection to put a name, or even a face, to the tones.

No, he was more concerned with the fact that things *weren't* alright, and it was all his fault.

He registered the sound of fingers crumbling something - leaves? - underneath his face, and drowsiness soon gave way to dreamless black once more.

The second time he came round, he knew immediately that he was being watched, his sense picking out the pattern before he'd even opened his eyes. "Kolchan?" he enquired, voice scratched and thin. His secret-keeper; she'd patched him up once before, back at the Spanish convent, and now here she was again.

He didn't deserve assistance. They should have just left him to die the first time: that way, at least Dean would have lived.

The room swam into semi-focus, rough plastered walls, polished wood floor illuminated in the cold light of a February morning. Charlie's room. He was in Charlie Weasley's house, back at the dragon camp.

"Morning, Harry," returned the blonde witch, although her customary sharp awareness seemed lacking. There was an edge to the tone, a slightly distracted air, as though her mind was on other things.

Of course, he remembered, her mind *would* be on other things: Dumbledore was dead.

He wondered if anyone else knew. How long had he been asleep? Had word of Voldemort's victory spread beyond Durmstrang yet? Or had... no, he knew he hadn't imagined it. "Dumbledore," he croaked, "he's..."

"Yes," the blurred form of Kolchan's head nodded slightly, slowly. They knew. "Others, too..."

Harry barely registered the rider to Kolchan's confirmation, as an image of Dean, electric pink dreadlocks flicking as he quoted the Toaster from Red Dwarf, had leapt into his mind. The mental image of Dean laughed; brilliant teeth, wicked eyes. Exuberant. "Dean..." Harry had barely enough breath to even whisper the name, and what little he could discern of his surroundings immediately became lost behind a veil of fresh tears.

His counterpart sighed, heavily, resting a comforting hand on his forearm, "yes, Harry, we heard... We heard..."

Yeah, thought Harry, bitterly; they'd heard. Everyone would *hear*, but he'd been *there*. He'd seen it - Dean's body almost torn in two by the giant's attack; the pattern in his mind flickering fitfully as his friend had died. Death had not come quickly - no, Dean had suffered, probably watching Harry, the person who'd brought the end upon him, continue to delve deeper into the Darkness as he sought to save his own, miserable, worthless skin.

He should've tried to bring Dean's body back. He shouldn't have left him there, as though he were some disposable object that had served its purpose. Dean *hadn't* served his purpose, although he'd tried hard to do so, attempting to get Harry to see the precipice upon which he'd stood.

But the *power*, the thrill, the adrenaline of that descent through the floors of Durmstrang's Keep... even in the grief-ridden haze of guilty recollection, victory coursed through his veins as he remembered the individual battles. Opponents vanquished before his might...

That was when he knew that the Darkness hadn't left him. He could still feel the malevolence, lying just under the surface of his conscience, whispering suggestively that he'd been given all that power for a reason. It hadn't just been the song blade at work in Durmstrang, he realised with a certain amount of revulsion.

Certainly, it had amplified his rage, fuelled the obsession, fed on the desire. But the cold, hard truth of the matter was that it had worked with the mind it had been given. His mind, his Darkness.

Harry saw now the fallacy of the old saying that power was nothing without control. Nothing good, certainly, but the reality seemed to be that power, without control, wrought terrible consequences.

Dumbledore's parting words, or warning, that the thing the great wizard truly feared above all else had been himself, now struck a new chord within Harry. In fact, it almost felt like a direct warning had been passed from the great wizard to the Mage, with Voldemort simply being the unwitting intermediary.

Despite the colossal wave of guilt in the light of the consequences of his demonic spree of violence, Harry's mind was able to register the Headmaster's wisdom once more.

Great man, Dumbledore.

Great, but dead. Like Dean.

There came a point beyond which the body could grieve physically no more, emotion exhausted. Such a point arrived more or less at lunchtime, Harry spooning thin soup into his mouth, too numb to actually register the food.

He was still in Charlie's room, sitting up in bed, but the place had been brought into sharp focus with the recovery of his glasses. He wondered, in passing, whether Charlie had therefore spent the night on the sofa in his place - it hardly seemed fair, but that was the Weasleys for you. They had so little, but still shared everything nonetheless.

He'd already registered the fact that Charlie wasn't in the house. The main reason why he was still upstairs, however, was still in the kitchen: Mad-Eye Moody was there, and even though he knew he was being cowardly, Harry didn't feel quite up to facing the Auror just at that moment. Indeed, he had to confess mild surprise that Moody hadn't limped his way upstairs to heap more accusations and guilt upon him.

The old Harry observed darkly that Moody and Snape would obviously get on like a house on fire when it came to discussing Harry's qualities. But that was the old Harry, the Harry that hadn't lost, and been responsible for losing, two *good* friends, hadn't seen Dumbledore utterly vanquished. The Harry that hadn't been imprisoned, cast out of the only world he'd ever called home.

That Harry was all but gone now. Or maybe that Harry was still there, but it was the world that had changed about him. As always, such things ended up being matters of perception rather than fact. But as he tried to will himself to feel the soup's warmth spreading through his body, Harry couldn't help but feel that he'd ended up alone in a cold, Dark world.

Despite the warmth that burnt from within his stomach, the fifteen year old boy shivered in the bed.

One didn't easily shake responsibility for one friend's death, let alone two. The soup spoon shook in his hand, its contents scattering over the bedclothes as the tremors increased.

At length Harry staggered out of bed, knowing that whatever accusations were to be thrown at him downstairs, putting off an appearance would do nothing to allay his culpability. He shrugged on a fresh set of robes, and then crossed the room to the door, closing his eyes as his hand grasped the brass handle.

He paused, eyes shut, exhaling slowly. Dean was dead: *his* fault. Dumbledore was gone. Voldemort had the Third Key. Things were about as bleak as it was possible to get, and, having known himself succumb to Darkness once, he was terrified of his own susceptibility to temptation.

What would it take to nudge him back into the abyss once more? He couldn't bring himself to trust his abilities now: how could he expect others to maintain their misplaced faith in him? In a twisted sort of fashion, he convinced himself that he *needed* others' faith in him, their trust; he needed that to have been betrayed so that he would be loathed as was just.

He'd betrayed them all: perhaps that knowledge would be enough to spark the hatred of him that Dean's death warranted.

He'd done terrible things. Willingly. He'd embraced an evil that he'd thought he'd been intrinsically opposed to, and the realisation that what he fought and what he actually was were not quite as different as he'd once believed disturbed him greatly.

He stood there for some time, eyes closed, hand still clasped around the cold metal, reliving Dean's death, watching with semi-detached revulsion the vindictive pleasure he'd sought, actively *sought*, in the night's battles.

He should have been the one to pay the price, that night. It should have been him, not Dean.

Dean was dead.

Harry made his way into Charlie's kitchen, small, hesitant steps, reluctance in every movement. Not, particularly, because he was afraid of the reception he would be receiving, but because in his own mind, he didn't feel he had the right to even exist. He'd been the cause of Dean's death, and, further back, Ron's too. It didn't seem just that those two should be gone, yet he should still be alive.

Three people were sitting at the table, conversation conspicuous by its absence; to say that the atmosphere was tense was to understate the case severely; Harry felt as though he could've cut the air with a cricket stump.

Kolchan, naturally, and Mad-Eye Moody's presence he'd already had cause to notice. The third figure was none other than Bill Weasley. All three turned to regard Harry with their own distinct looks. Kolchan's was the most sympathetic, Moody's by far the most hostile. As for Bill, Harry wasn't entirely sure what planet Ron's eldest brother was on - it certainly didn't seem to be Earth.

Mad-Eye was sporting fresh scars from the night's hostilities: an eye patch covered what had been his ordinary eye, the magical one blazed coldly in its solitude. The left hand side of the grizzled Auror's face was completely covered in thick, scabbed flesh, lacerations extended down into the neckline of his professional robes. "Quite the hero now, aren't ya, Laddie?" he growled, the words heavy with accusation.

Already broken, defeated and full of despair, Harry didn't know what more he had to *do* to placate the man, "I'm sorry..." he wheezed, his shoulders slumping as he held his palms outward in a gesture of submission, his shuffling progress halted.

"Bein' sorry doesn't fix things... doesn't make it alright, Laddie. You play in the grown up world, then you've got to accept the grown up consequences..."

"Alastor," interrupted Kolchan, gently, "I think we can all see that the boy's had a hard enough time..."

"Entirely his own doin'," charged Moody, unimpressed. "I know it's not pleasant, but *someone's* got to get through to the boy that this is not a game. Two kids' lost their lives now..."

"I'm sorry!" repeated Harry, slightly more insistently. Yes, he knew it was all his fault. Yes, the very core of his being was absolutely saturated in guilt. Yes, he knew Moody was right. But still, it wasn't *fair* of the Auror to have a go at him *now*, not when, ultimately, all the vitriol in the world wasn't going to bring Dean back.

Dean was dead.

"Yeah, you're sorry," snarled Moody, "well I'm sure that'll be a source of great comfort to the lad's family, won't it?"

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but found he couldn't formulate an adequate response. Dean had been an only child, his mum a single-parent. He'd just taken her entire family away from her...

"You make me sick, Potter," Moody repeated his admission of the previous night, just in case Harry was in any doubt as to the Auror's opinion of his good self, "spare me the excuses, the self-pity, the whining... 's all too late for that now."

"B... B... Bu..." stammered Harry, still standing where Moody's initial greeting had stopped him in his tracks.

Moody cut him off with a disgusted, derisory snort, "I don't have to listen to this," he growled, and Disapparated.

Stunned, lips quivering, it took Harry a second or so to recover from Moody's outburst before he was able to switch his attention to the other two people in the room: "Kolchan, Bill," he nodded at each in turn, resuming his shuffling walk towards the nearest chair.

"Hmmm," nodded Bill, by way of return, his mind evidently not completely focused on the moment.

Sliding gingerly into the chair, attempting to minimise the imposition he was placing on all things, living or dead, Harry then voiced what seemed like the obvious question, "uh, where's Charlie?"

In the moments of silence that followed, Bill's eyes slowly moving from whatever point of focus in the middle-distance they'd previously been locked on, Harry desperately wished he could take back his enquiry. He really didn't think he could cope with hearing the answer.

"Missing," whispered Bill, his lips hardly moving as he enunciated the word.

"Oh," croaked Harry, lost for words. Not that they were needed, since Bill seemed to have zoned out once more, his eyes again focused on some point in the middle-distance that only he could see. "Oh," he repeated. What more could he say?

The afternoon and evening at Charlie's place were possibly amongst the most desolate and cheerless periods of Harry's life. Bill seemed lost, his usual wit and drive completely drained from his being; the red-haired curse-breaker wandering about his brother's house like some sort of ghost.

News of Durmstrang's fall was filtering into the world beyond the castle's borders, as evidenced by the arrival of yet another *Prophet Extra*. It was only when the owl had delivered the paper, headline screaming *You Know Who Takes Durmstrang as Castle Falls Twice in One Night*, that Harry realised that it was *Saturday*, and not the Friday that would have followed the Trio's ill-fated assault on the Tempus fortress.

The subheading was just three words, but he'd stared at the text so long the after-image overlaid the message across everything in Charlie's living room: *Dumbledore is dead*.

Harry had heard, via his prison visits, how the magical world had been taking the news of Voldemort's renewed campaign. He'd remembered reading himself the accounts of the early skirmishes between the Death Eaters, Tempus and the Ministry. Voldemort, of course, had never been mentioned by name, but everything had been relayed within an all-encompassing climate of fear.

But reading the *Prophet Extra's* articles, it seemed apparent now that fear had given way to despair. The last hope, Dumbledore, was dead, the final straw after the duplicity of Tempus had been unmasked. The end was inevitable, it seemed, for there was nothing left: no venerable wizard, no staunch army of opposition to the rise of the Death Eaters.

What had seemed like victory, back when the Boy Who Lived had triumphed over the Dark Lord now seemed to merely have heralded a brief period of hibernation, during which You Know Who's malevolence, cruelty and anger had grown, festering and burning until it had built into a sufficient rage to sweep across Europe virtually unchecked.

The consensus seemed to be the same: this was it, the old world had ended. The New Order had begun.

Later that evening, as Harry made up his bed on the sofa (he refused to return to Charlie's room, hope that he knew was futile insisting that it should be kept free for the dragon-enthusiast's return), Bill came in to see him.

"Harry," he began, before evidently losing the thread of whatever he'd been planning to say, his eyes scanning Charlie's library of beer-bottles.

Nervously, Harry waited for Bill to continue.

Flicking his head slightly as he gathered his thoughts, Bill glanced at his right hand, from which two lengths of cord were hanging: "Dumbledore," he explained, "said I should make sure you got this. Said you'd know what to do..."

Bill stretched out his arm, uncurling his fingers as he did so to reveal the green stone pendant that Dumbledore had removed back in the Minister's office. The Portkey.

Puzzled, Harry picked the device from Bill's palm with the same delicate, careful movements he'd been practising all day, seeking to minimise his contact with everyone and everything. He was going to get by in this world by doing the absolute bare minimum he could; that way, he'd have a minimal impact upon others' lives. That way, the trail of grief he'd inflicted upon those closest to him would, surely, come to an end.

"Thanks, Bill," whispered Harry, hoarsely. Long explanations weren't really appropriate, and besides, he was trying to work out what it was that he was supposed to know with regards to accepting the thing.

A Portkey. It would get him to either Azkaban or Hogwarts. Although Harry couldn't see the point of going to Azkaban, Hogwarts exerted a strong pull on him. It was *home* in a manner that nowhere else was. Hermione was there, Cho too.

Not to mention Sirius, and *Hagrid*, and Professor Lupin, and...

His guilt was still insisting that he divorce himself completely from his friends, whilst alternate voices in his tormented conscience tried to convince him that those very same friends would not only stick by him in troubled times, they'd insist on it.

Harry looked at the clock; they'd talked... well, sat in silence, really, until deep into the morning, and it was now past 3am. There was virtually no chance that anyone would be at the top of the Astronomy Tower at such a time, which was all the convincing Harry needed: "yeah," he whispered, nodding slowly as he turned to Bill, "I know what to do."

Bill nodded once, curtly, to indicate that he'd heard and had understood, but any other response was lost, as Harry had already pressed his thumb against the stone: "translocate!"

The all-too-familiar pulling sensation took hold once more, building from the pit of his stomach, pulling his body along with it in waves of concentric summons.

He had no idea what he was going to do when he got there. He had no idea what he was going to say, how he was going to explain himself, or whether his impulsive decision was even wise.

But his *family*, his *life*, that was all at Hogwarts, now, and he needed them.

Perhaps, he hoped, they'd need him, too.

Chapter 82

Apart from Dementors, against which creature is the Patronus Charm effective?

The entire stand held its breath, willing Cho to catch the Snitch, even though there was no way she could pull out of the dive. Well, *most* of the stand. Hermione didn't exactly wish Cho ill, or anything, but it was just bad luck on Draco's part that he'd been up above the play when the prize had made itself apparent.

Draco's Nimbus 2001 adopted a near vertical dive, the green Quidditch robes streaming vertically as the Slytherin plummeted towards Earth. Neither of them flew like Harry; no-one on the planet flew quite like Harry, to hear the others talk. Whether or not this was true Hermione didn't feel qualified to venture an opinion on, but she had to admit that Harry had *something* when it came to Quidditch.

Draco, on the other hand: well, you could *see* him trying, which was partly why she felt that he deserved a little luck. Hermione was a firm believer in meritocracy, and that hard work should bring just reward. So, to see Draco putting so much effort and energy in chasing an apparently lost cause... well, it just didn't seem fair.

Her eyes having momentarily been distracted by Draco's vain pursuit, Hermione's attention was swiftly drawn back to Cho's plight as the Gryffindors around her winced. "Oh!" she exclaimed, softly, "poor Cho..."

The Ravenclaw's prostrate form lay limply on the pitch, the deep blue robes twitching occasionally, a tiny winged speck of gold floating free, well out of reach of the Seeker, even if she hadn't been paralysed.

Draco had pulled out of his dive in a beautiful, elegant swoop, plucking the Snitch from the air with his gloved left hand in one flowing, graceful move. She felt a guilty thrill of shared victory, witnessing Draco's triumph as about her Gryffindor groaned in collective dismay.

It was *only* a game, after all. But he'd *won*...

The Ravenclaw team had hurtled down to Earth even before Draco had caught the Snitch, thereby ending the match, and were collected in an anxious huddle about Cho, evidently concerned for her well-being.

Madam Hooch had levitated the Seeker's still convulsing form into the air, and a sombre procession was headed towards the castle, and, undoubtedly, the Hospital Wing. Every now and again Cho's black hair shook as her shoulders convulsed, and from the looks of her teammates, she was in a very bad way.

The Slytherins had completed their obligatory lap of honour: she knew that Draco was only feigning the arrogance in the display for the sake of form... He was so *constrained*, in a sense, by the strictures of Slytherin politics, he hardly ever got a chance to be himself. For four years

even she'd been convinced by the exaggerated charade he'd maintained, not realising that he was caught up by the demands of expectation. Family, House, friends, they'd all imposed their will upon Draco, but, Hermione had been thrilled to discover, they hadn't killed the *real* Draco.

The *real* Draco, the one that only she got to see, well he was *interesting*. He wasn't exactly wholly redeemed, of course; no, she understood that on some things she'd have to meet him halfway, and on others he wouldn't give at all. But he wouldn't be Draco if he stooped to accommodate. And they'd made progress; he even called her 'Hermione', sometimes.

Reflections on this minor triumph were marred slightly by the other half of her mind pointing out that snogging boys who could only manage to call you 'Granger' wasn't exactly how she'd envisaged a relationship would be. But then, it was Draco...

"C'mon," urged Parvati, sombrely, tugging gently on her robes, "let's go and check that Cho's alright..."

Hermione blinked, further ruminations on blonde Slytherins cut short by the image of the glum crocodile of Ravenclaw Quidditch robes filing into the school. "Oh, oh..." she nodded, vaguely. See Cho: yes, in the absence of Harry, she supposed they ought to. And then she remembered who'd addressed her: "Parvati? I thought... thought you and Cho... and... Harry, stuff?"

Parvati's eyes clouded momentarily at the oh-so-tactful reminder of that particular mess. Hermione reminded herself to be more... discreet with her phraseology in future.

"Well," sighed her dorm-mate, "Harry and I patched things up, y'know, when I visited after..." she trailed off, diplomatically, although Hermione was fully aware of exactly when Parvati had made her trip to Blackrock, "and," she continued, "this week, well... she's OK, really. And Harry would want us to, wouldn't he?"

Hermione nodded, concurring with Parvati's assessment of Harry's girlfriend as they filed towards the steps that led down from the stands, Seamus and Lavender in the lead. Yes, Cho *was* OK, she supposed... and, well, she was part of the Away Team, and she deserved their support.

She surveyed the pitch one last time before heading into the stairwell; the Slytherin team had dismounted now, and were on their way to the showers. On the one hand, she would've liked to share the celebrations with Draco, but, on the other, though, she understood that she didn't belong in that part of his life. Draco's entire world was divided and subdivided. Form, conditions, tradition and respect - it all formed an elegant hierarchy of rules that dictated expected behaviour. Celebratory snogs with his Gryffindor girlfriend weren't currently part of the accepted scheme of things.

Girlfriend. Yes, she mused, the wooden treads of the stairs flexing softly beneath the descending mass of Gryffindors, she could live with that label. Somewhat ironically, however, she didn't expect that he'd be entirely keen with being referred to as her boyfriend.

Another of those things where perhaps she'd have to meet him a little bit *beyond* half-way.

The second voice inside her mind admonished her once more: evidently, it had spent too much time listening to Ron, however, and she ignored it.

Guiltily.

The Hospital Wing. It was quite possible, thought Hermione, that she'd had more cause to visit Madam Pomfrey's domain than any other student in the school. She and Ron together, perhaps. Harry too: their Trio had certainly got itself into more than its fair share of scrapes in their five years.

It was different, though, coming to see Cho. Dutiful rather than necessary: not the same emotional investment. It wasn't that she didn't care about Cho, just that Harry and Ron, they were... they were more than anything else she'd ever had before. Beyond friends, beyond blood, beyond family. The Trio they'd forged had been beyond words: each of them bound to the other.

Without Harry, without Ron, she felt lost. Adrift in a school of magic. Oh, she *belonged* at Hogwarts, that she knew with absolute conviction, but somehow her perception of the world had been skewed with, first, Ron's death. One corner of their triangle had been removed, disturbing the remaining bond.

Everything had spun out of balance.

And before she and Harry had had time to repair their world, adjust, adapt... before anything, Harry had been taken from her, and she'd been left, more alone than she'd ever felt in her life. Yes, she had the Away Team, but they were friends, not... not whatever word you used to label people without whom the world made no sense.

The ward's doors, triggering memories of the desperate hours of that night after the Third Task, caused her doubts about Draco to resurface anew. He'd been truly horrible those first four years... and what he'd said on the Hogwarts Express on the way home.

Could he really have changed that much? So quickly? Was she being silly?

But he *had* changed. He'd been handed his father's heart that day in Potions... he'd seen where the path he'd been set upon would ultimately lead, and he'd changed. She was almost certain of it... but... but...

An uneasiness gnawed at the pit of her stomach. She couldn't quite shake the feeling that she'd done something incredibly stupid...

As these thoughts swirled around her mind, Hermione and Parvati had been making their way towards the clutch of blue-robed figures standing at what, presumably, had to be Cho's bed. Madam Pomfrey, predictably, was attempting to get rid of the well-wishers: "yes, Mr Davies, I assure you that Miss Chang will be quite fine by the morning, although I must insist that she refrains from flying for at least six weeks..."

Roger started to form some kind of protest at this restriction, but was cut off before he'd even managed to form the first syllable.

"Mr Davies," the nurse snapped, brusquely, "Miss Chang had an *extremely* bad landing, and she needs to re-knit half the bones in her body." She waved a bottle that looked disturbingly similar to the one that had contained Harry's Skele-Gro potion from the second year, "she's going to have a rough night, I'm afraid..."

As was customary, Madam Pomfrey dispensed her medication upon the basis that her students' injuries were all self-inflicted. Still, when all was said and done, it sounded as though Cho was going to be OK.

Parvati and Hermione, failing to find a gap in the Ravenclaw Quidditch team through which to check on Cho, made to walk round to the other side of the bed, at which point they both froze.

"Padma!" shrieked Parvati, aghast.

"Sis," croaked Padma, dully, from the adjacent bed, haunted eyes tried to smile, but gave up.

Forgetting all thoughts of wishing Cho well, the Away Team immediately gravitated to Padma's bedside. Close up, Hermione could see tell-tale traces of cuts to the girl's face, shoulders, neck, arms...

"Sis," breathed Parvati, mouth agape, "what happened? Where's... where's Dean?"

"I don't *know*," confessed Padma, sounding somewhat distressed, "we got back this morning, they were supposed to be coming straight after..."

"We?" enquired Hermione, sharply, "who's 'we'? Who's 'they'?"

Padma managed a very weak smile, the thick scab across her right cheek limiting her mouth's upward movement, "'we' means me and Snape... we found him at Durmstrang..."

There was a collective intake of breath. *What?*

"...and 'they' means *Dean*," Padma put an odd stress on Dean's name, "and, y'know..." Padma trailed off and mouthed a name that made no sense whatsoever.

Unless... Unless... hope was surging in Hermione's veins, she could almost feel a huge weight being lifted from her shoulders, she could *see* daylight sweeping into the room, and she *knew* her eyes had lit up: hope, pure and simple.

Parvati, on the other hand, looked... worried. Scared, in fact, "but Sis," she protested, "only three will return... were they *both* coming... y'know, back?"

"That was the plan," confessed Padma, "but they never met up, so we," she jerked her head in the direction of the small room that Harry had been housed in after being hit by Vellum's curse, "carried on without them..."

Parvati wasn't listening, however, "but only *three* will return!" she insisted, sounding slightly frantic.

Padma considered her twin with a slightly baffled expression, "what?"

Lavender, whose jaw had dropped open, voiced a partial explanation, "only three will return," she repeated, "but you brought *Snape* back? That makes you two, which means..."

Padma looked from Lavender to Parvati and back again, but she evidently saw the fear in their faces, her own mind processing the ramifications just as her visitors were doing the same.

And although Hermione didn't like to admit it, the whole situation was giving her an unpleasant feeling as well.

"*Dean!*" the cry was actually in stereo, Padma and Ginny both calling the dreadlocked film-fanatic's name at exactly the same time.

There was a brief moment where Ginny smiled weakly at Padma, recognising their common fear. Alarm bells rang loud and urgent in Hermione's head, and Ron's comment rose unbidden to her memory's surface: *he always said she was the best looking girl in the year...*

The mutual recognition of each other's plight lasted barely a fraction of a second before realisation, or, at the very least, suspicion, set in to Ginny's mind. Her eyes widened, showing clear white around the iris as the fourth year took half a step backwards, distancing herself from Padma, half horrified.

The weak smile, really no more than a slight upturn of the lips at each side slowly levelled itself out as the colour drained from Ginny's face. "No," she breathed, shaking her head, not moving her eyes from Padma's, "no," she repeated, "he wouldn't... He *wouldn't*," she declared, her voice getting louder, and more shrill.

Hermione could *see* everyone take a mental half-step backwards, eyes flicking from Padma to Ginny and back again.

Padma appeared to have frozen stiff, sitting against the headboard, not daring to breathe a word. The time for laughing off Ginny's paranoid conclusion passed in silence, all the confirmation the observers needed.

"Dean," groaned Seamus, standing on Hermione's left, his voice only just audible, and certainly not strong enough to carry to Ginny, "what have you *done*?"

"No!" repeated Ginny, fiercely, seemingly unaware that all eyes in the ward were now fixed on her, Ravenclaws and Gryffindors alike. Her fingernails scored parallel tracks down her face as she took another, faltering step backwards. "*I hate* this school!" she shrieked, her shoulders heaving as she suppressed tears, "*I hate* it... I hope he's *dead*!" she screamed, levelling a burning glance at Padma before finally giving in to the sobs.

The others glanced nervously at each other and then the shivering form of Ginny, her red hair shaking violently, "*get* away from me!" she hissed, needlessly (no-one had dared move so much as a muscle), "*stay a-way!*"

Seamus, who'd always seemed to have some sort of knack when it came to saying the right thing, started to lift his hands, making a move to offer some kind of comfort to the fourth year, but before he'd taken half a step, Ginny had turned and fled.

Neville started to follow, but Seamus grabbed him by the arm, and shook his head, slowly, "best let her be," he suggested, before turning to consider Padma, an eyebrow raised not so much *inviting* an explanation as *requiring* one.

All he got in response, however, was a single, whispered name: "*Dean!*"

Madam Pomfrey, her attention drawn by Ginny's dramatic outburst and subsequent stormy exit, had swept into the ward and summarily dismissed all visitors. Since no-one in their right mind *ever* argued with the nurse, the group trudged soberly out, the Ravenclaws finally heading back to the changing rooms, the defeat to Slytherin seemingly long distant.

No-one said a word as they headed back up to Gryffindor Tower; so many conflicting emotions: Harry was safe! Dean and Padma were... something. Perhaps. Or maybe they were just friends?

No, Hermione quickly dismissed the 'just friends' argument - it seemed abundantly clear that Padma had felt as deeply about Dean as Ginny had. She just *knew* it had been asking for trouble, sending those two half-way across Europe huddled under Harry's Invisibility Cloak. She felt sorry for Ginny, really; she'd really thought better of Dean than that.

She lost not time in noting that the assumed situation explained the lack of letters to Ginny very nicely, thank you very much. They should have known... except, except that it was *Dean*, and she really couldn't, even now, see him deliberately setting out to hurt Ginny.

They'd just have to wait for him to turn up and explain himself, then. Except the cold knot that had formed in her stomach was reminding her of Parvati's prophecy: *only three will return*. And Snape and Padma made two of those three. Meaning that it was a toss-up between Harry and Dean as to who was third...

She shook her head violently to disabuse herself of such fantastical notions. Parvati wasn't a Seer, it was all just a mish-mash of coincidence and superstition, reading things into events with judicious application of hindsight and theatre. It was all nonsense, and Harry and Dean were going to be back themselves very shortly, the latter to face the music as he was due.

Questions that they'd been unable to pose to Padma sprung to the front of her mind: how had she collected all those injuries? She'd said that Harry and Dean were following, so they'd all emerged, if not unscathed, they'd all survived whatever battle had wounded the Ravenclaw. But why had they brought back Snape? Why was Snape in the Hospital Wing himself? Was he injured?

Remembering Harry's revelation at the end of the Fourth Year that Snape was himself a Death Eater, Hermione wondered whether the Potions Master could still be trusted... if he'd ever had their trust to begin with.

Having avowed to make the absolute most of the library's opening hours, since her borrowing rights had been revoked, Hermione spent the afternoon at their - her - usual table, but it was

more through habit than any real conviction that the afternoon's studies might prove productive.

Draco wasn't there: probably celebrating the victory, which was only fair. It *had* been a beautiful catch, after all. Still, no doubt she'd manage to catch up with him later. There was no question of it ever being the other way round: the world moved to accommodate Draco, and he *knew* it.

Still, thoughts of Draco were pushed backward in her mind as she pondered Harry's plight. Scruffy, jet black hair, a lightning bolt scar and those green, green eyes: what *more* was he going to be put through before it was all over? The uncertainty of it all was torture enough: was he still alive? Was he safe? Was he hurt? *Where* was he?

Hermione slumped back in her chair, letting her eyes drift along the twin bookshelves that bordered their table. Tattered leather spines, cobweb trails and dust denoting the truly ancient texts, texts she now knew to treat with respect - fear, even, for knowledge was power, and power was to be feared.

The library doors crashed open, and heavy, awkward feet lolloped in, causing Hermione to pull her eyes back in to focus to identify the source of the disturbance.

Neville, looking shocked, and worried, with no trace of the usual pinkish tinge to his cheeks. In his hand he clutched yet *another* copy of the Prophet Extra, and he proffered this to her with a slightly trembling arm, not having spoken a word.

Knowing it could only be bad news, Hermione steeled herself for the worst before unfurling the scrolled parchment: *You Know Who Takes Durmstrang as Castle Falls Twice in One Night*.

Hermione looked up at Neville, but he gestured to her to read further. Certainly, his expression didn't seem warranted by that headline. Yes, it was certainly alarming that He Who Must Not Be Named had evidently overthrown Tempus, but... she quickly scanned the article, before reaching the sub-heading.

Dumbledore is dead.

"No!" she exclaimed, horrified; with Dumbledore gone, who was left?

Neville nodded weakly, his mouth agape, presumably from the initial shock of hearing news of Dumbledore's death.

The afternoon's lethargy evaporated instantly, and Hermione devoured the rest of the article as she attempted to fight her mounting sense of dread. *Heavy losses... many missing... the Dark Mark in the sky... You Know Who's rise to power now unstoppable...*

It felt like the end of the world. And against the death of Dumbledore, petty things like whether Draco *really* liked her or not seemed completely irrelevant. War was coming unchecked now, and she had no doubt that He Who Must Not Be Named would soon be setting his sights on Hogwarts.

As though mourning already, the castle felt suddenly cooler, almost as if the loss of Dumbledore had caused the very stonework to chill. Dumbledore had been the only wizard that You Know Who had feared, and now... now that last defence had fallen.

All year, things had been taken from her. First Ron, then Harry, then her wand... Hogwarts had slowly transformed from the welcoming, familiar school to a foreboding castle whose shadows took on ever more sinister threats. And now, with its most prized asset, the greatest wizard in the world, dead, the castle seemed lost to her before the battle had even begun.

They needed hope, they needed power and resistance. Something to focus around, something to carry the fight and repel the Darkness. Something to end the war unequivocally.

They needed Harry.

Hermione returned to Gryffindor Tower with Neville, neither of them saying much, the shock of Dumbledore's loss too fresh in their minds, rendering all other speech somehow inconsequential. The picture inside the common room was much the same: bewildered Gryffindors of all years clustered together in tight huddles, heads shaking slowly as they tried to absorb the news.

Hogwarts had seemed as much part of Dumbledore as the Headmaster had seemed part of the school. The common room's fittings - the rich, deep curtains, the wall hangings, the ornaments, the candles - it all seemed somehow subdued, as though robbed of its energy. Even the fire seemed to burn listlessly, as though without focus.

It was as if everything lacked *belief*.

She remembered something Harry had said to her a while back: you didn't so much *believe* Dumbledore as believe *in* him. And with the great wizard vanquished, what was there left to cling to?

Dinner in the Great Hall was a sombre affair that evening: the five tables were barely illuminated, as a mere handful of the floating candles were lit. Black banners hung from the flagpoles that jutted into the Hall between the mullioned windows, and an unearthly hush had descended upon everyone.

The chime of Professor McGonagall's glass echoed eerily in the space, the vacuum, that Dumbledore's absence had created. The subdued clatter and scrape of cutlery died down, the students giving up on attempting to imagine some kind of appetite. All eyes turned to the Deputy Headmistress, who was standing at her customary place at the Head Table, wearing immaculate robes of deepest, deepest black.

"As I'm sure you have all heard," she began, the sparkling of her eyes evident even in the dim half-light of the room, "Professor Dumbledore has... passed away."

The Head of Gryffindor House paused, staring off into the distance, her immobility uncannily echoed by the students at each of the five tables. Even the Slytherins, Hermione noticed, didn't seem to have remembered to gloat for the occasion. For that she was thankful.

Professor McGonagall appeared to take a deep breath, composing herself before continuing on with her speech, "the exact circumstances surrounding Professor Dumbledore's death are far from clear at the moment, but it is apparent that He Who Must Not Be Named has established a strong hold across all of wizarding Europe."

"Professor Dumbledore was proud of Hogwarts: proud of the staff, proud of the pupils, and proud of the school. I ask each and every one of you, then, in the days to come, to remember, when faced with difficult choices, that Professor Dumbledore was proud of you. I ask only that you justify his pride..."

Professor McGonagall's voice cracked on the last sentence, and, dabbing a white handkerchief to the corner of each eye, she carefully resumed her seat.

Professor Lupin now stood, looking older than his years. The full moon was a little over a week away, so his gaunt aspect couldn't be ascribed to the impending transformation. "It is too early to even begin to compose a fitting eulogy to such a great man," he explained, not apologetically, nor was he indulging in hyperbole. The Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor's voice simply carried the unmistakable tone of *honesty*: it really was too soon to attempt to catalogue Dumbledore's life in some neat, carefully worded précis.

"So instead," the werewolf continued, "I ask that we all take a minute to reflect in silence on a truly great man. Albus Dumbledore's greatness came not through his ability, which was, to invoke an overused term, legendary, but through his humanity, compassion and love, all of which were extraordinary."

"I know that I have been privileged to have known Albus Dumbledore, and I trust that all present share in that sense of good fortune. So I ask you to join me now in a minute's silent reflection of a man who will be sorely, sorely missed."

A thick, suffocating blanket of silence descended on the Great Hall, a silence that lasted long past the allotted minute, and followed the Gryffindors all the way through the castle's corridors, up the moving staircases, past the patrolling gargoyles, through the portrait hole and into the common room.

It might, possibly, have lasted through the entire night, had it not been, a little later, for the entrance of Professor McGonagall, her lips compressed into a razor thin line, her face white. When she spoke, the sound was low, wavering, and almost... murderous.

"Granger. Finnigan. Longbottom. Patil. Brown. Miss Weasley," she uttered no other words, the implication clear that the Gryffindor elements of the Away Team were to follow her, the Professor's robes swirling about her as she span on her heel and exited the common room.

Hermione felt her insides turn to ice: there was absolutely no way that this could be good news. Ginny, who'd been perched on the deep windowsill, staring vacantly out into the evening, joined the fifth years, but ventured no greeting, nor did she meet any of their eyes. The scratches on her face were still evident, her eyes bloodshot, her carriage dejected.

Seamus leant in against Hermione's shoulder as they filed past Tweedledum and Tweedledee (the names no longer seemed as funny as they had at first): "she didn't ask for Dean," he hissed, quietly, as they fell in step behind Professor McGonagall's swift, harsh footsteps.

There really could only be one explanation, then: something had happened to Dean. And they were about to be castigated for attempting to delude the teaching staff as to his whereabouts over the past week.

Hermione began to get a horrible sense of *déjà vu*.

They filed into Professor McGonagall's office. Padma was already there, as was Professor Flitwick, together with Professor Lupin. No-one was smiling - Hermione tried to ascribe the lack of warmth in the situation to it not having been a very good day, but she knew she was deluding herself.

"Sit," commanded their Head of House, indicating the five free chairs ranged in a semi-circle before her desk. Professor Lupin and Professor Flitwick each had a chair to the right of Professor McGonagall, effectively creating a dividing line in the room.

Their Head of House was quivering with barely controlled rage, her eyes seeming to bore deep into Hermione's face, as though looks really *could*, if not kill, at least seriously wound.

The silence grew more oppressive: suspecting that they were in deep, *deep* trouble, the students all held their respective tongues. The age old defence of admitting nothing until it was proven had kicked into play, and so they waited for Professor McGonagall to make the opening move.

At length, she did: "I received an owl," she informed them, in a cold, wavering whisper.

Hermione, like her compatriots, nodded very, very slightly, to confirm that she had understood the statement.

Another long, dreadful pause. "Tell me," invited Professor McGonagall, her head quivering with the supreme effort it was taking to maintain control, "*where* is Mr Thomas?"

Hermione wanted to curl up and die on the spot. They'd been found out: she'd stepped well outside the boundaries of her expected 'exemplary behaviour' in assisting with the group's duplicity. Professor Lupin's expression was entirely closed, and it broke her heart to realise that she'd betrayed his trust.

Again.

"Surely," persisted Professor McGonagall, harshly, "surely... Mr Finnigan, I believe the two of you were close, surely you had *some* idea of Mr Thomas' whereabouts?"

Seamus, in a move that Hermione *saw* Professor Lupin detect, glanced first at Padma before stammering, nervously, "uh, I'm, er, not quite... sure..."

Professor Flitwick interceded at this point, laying his diminutive hand on his counterpart's forearm, "Minerva; we cannot undo what has been done," he reminded her, gently, before facing the Away Team once more.

Hermione had never seen the Charms Professor look so serious.

Professor Flitwick took a deep, calming breath, before explaining: "as Professor McGonagall stated, we received an owl this evening. A Ministry owl, bearing distressing, and I must say, *disturbing* news."

The Away Team eyed each other nervously. Distressing? Disturbing? After only just having been told that Dumbledore was dead?

"It is my terrible duty to inform each of you that Mr Thomas' name is amongst those listed as having lost their lives during the battle at Durmstrang," the Charms Professor's words merely confirmed the terrible suspicion that they'd all been harbouring every since Professor McGonagall had summoned them from the silence of Gryffindor Tower. But a suspicion didn't have the fraction of the authority of an actual fact.

Ginny froze, her fingernails once more digging deep, half-moon imprints into her cheeks, her mouth frozen open in horror. She'd wished the boy dead barely six hours previously, but it was clear now that she hadn't actually *meant* it.

Padma let out a low, long wail, her sister resting a comforting hand on her forearm.

On Hermione's left, Seamus seemed to be frozen solid. He didn't even seem to be breathing.

"This is," continued Professor Flitwick, "distressing and terrible news," he paused, sympathetically, before his tone changed into one of a strange mixture of horror and anger, "but we, as staff, were horrified to discover that we had been wilfully misled by each and every one of you as you colluded with Mr Thomas' and Miss Patil's ill-advised truancy..."

Professor Lupin spoke, his tone thick with disappointment, his eyes sad, "we would have thought that following the ill-fated excursion to Beauxbatons last year, none of you would have ever attempted anything of the kind again. To say we feel disappointed in you all is an understatement.

"The truth of the matter," continued the werewolf, "is that you betrayed the trust we placed in you. But it is neither yourselves, nor I who pays that price: Professor McGonagall has just come back from seeing Ms Thomas, having had to break the news to that poor woman that her only child is *dead* thanks to some ill-advised, hare-brained scheme that his so-called friends sent him to his death on."

Hermione blinked: this was so *unlike* Professor Lupin: normally he was the voice of reason. Normally he would at least make an attempt to see the story from their side of the argument. Except that, with hindsight, their side of the argument suddenly seemed an awful lot less compelling than it had done at the start.

Professor Lupin raised his hands in a gesture of helplessness, "all the punishments, all the House Points and all the detentions in the world will not bring Mr Thomas back to this world.

By the same token, all the promises, platitudes and apologies you can offer us will not restore our trust in each of you."

The tone was mild, a little regretful, but firm and unyielding, and the words felt like a slap to the face. They'd lost their Professors' trust. More importantly, Hermione knew that she'd lost Professor Lupin's faith in her; Professor Lupin who'd stood by her through the whole Ron thing, but now she'd pushed even his patience too far...

"Nonetheless," interrupted Professor McGonagall, back on familiar territory, "such transgressions cannot go unpunished. 100 points. Each. A further 100 points from Miss Patil for leaving school grounds without permission, Miss Chang will be informed of her penalty once she has been released from the Hospital Wing."

"You will all surrender your wands to either myself or Professor Flitwick at the end of each school-day. Each of you will be appointed detention, nightly, with a separate Professor until the end of the school year. Outside of meals, lessons and detention, none of you may leave your common room."

Professor McGonagall surveyed them all, sharply with an unflinching gaze. 900 House Points, no wands, permanent detention and confined to the common room. Well, mused Hermione, it could've been worse.

"And finally," completed Professor McGonagall, icily, "you will be accompanying me to visit Ms Thomas on Monday to explain your recent actions and apologise for the death of her son."

Hermione felt sick to the pit of her stomach, as, she was sure, did her friends. How were they supposed to apologise? What could they possibly say?

The wands were handed over, Professor McGonagall locking eyes coldly with Hermione, 'I already have your wand, of course,' she'd observed, sending new waves of fear down her spine at the prospect of having stepped outside the bounds of 'exemplary behaviour'. But her Head of House said nothing more, simply collecting Seamus' proffered wand instead.

Numbly, the remaining Gryffindors stared at the fire in the otherwise deserted common room.

"*Dean*," breathed Lavender, tears glinting in the fire's orange glow, her body shivering minutely, Seamus' arm about her shoulder.

Seamus was motionless, white as a sheet, staring deep into the fire's heart. Hermione's heart went out to him: he'd become a werewolf, his family had disowned him, and now he'd lost his virtual brother. In fact, she thought, frowning as she attempted to replay events following Professor McGonagall's incensed outburst, Seamus hadn't said a word since they'd heard the news.

First Dumbledore, then Dean.

Ginny's tormented screams echoed in her mind; first her hurt at his betrayal, and then his life had been ripped from them all before he'd been able to provide his side to the story.

Dean was - had been - an honourable boy. There hadn't been a malicious bone in his body, to Hermione's recollection. She was *sure* he wouldn't have deliberately set out to hurt Ginny. Padma she was less sure about, but...

She shook her head, weariness setting in, the flames blurring as unshed tears blinded her vision. It wasn't supposed to have happened like that. Dean and Padma were supposed to have infiltrated Durmstrang under the cloak, a short night's work, and then got back out.

And no word of Harry, either. Dumbledore and Dean - at least they *knew* about those - but, in some ways, the torment of not *knowing* about Harry was worse still.

She blinked, hard, shedding the tears that had been welling. Across the room, Ron's eyes had never left her face: he'd not said a word, either, just joined the rest of the fifth years in silent shock, keeping his correct, insulating distance from the living as he was forever cursed to do.

It should have been *her*. She *knew* about traps, enchantments, ordeal by challenge - what was her being expelled compared to Dean still being alive? And she'd thought she'd been selfish wanting to go: now she realised that she'd been selfish in allowing herself to stay.

There wasn't much to be gained from staring mutely at the fire, and once midnight had struck, Seamus and Lavender rose wordlessly, both ascending the boys' staircase. Neville adopted his startled rabbit expression, but Parvati silenced him with an imperceptible shake of her head: "let them be," she whispered, as they heard the door click shut, "they just want to be together..."

Strangely Hermione found she understood: their entire world seemed to have fallen apart, so it only made sense to hold on more desperately to what little remained.

"Bu... bu..." stammered Neville, eyes flicking from the boys staircase to the two girls (Ron was behind his line of sight) and back again, "where... where do..."

"Have my room, Nev," offered Ron, quietly, "I'll be awake all night anyway, so I'll stay down here..."

Hermione locked eyes with her best friend, knowing that he was lying: as soon as they'd gone to bed, he'd be going out. Quite how she knew this, she wasn't sure. What she was absolutely certain of, however, was that he wouldn't be wandering about the castle on his own...

"No," Ron interrupted her thoughts, shaking his head slowly to reinforce the statement.

She could lose herself in those eyes, she reflected. There was something so *open* about Ron - it wasn't as though she was reading him against his will; more that he was explaining, apologising, from the very depth of his soul, with the single look he gave to her. Gave to her, and her alone.

For her part, she returned the look: trying to convey both understanding and yet her wish that he not wall himself off from her.

"G'night," mumbled Neville, morosely, breaking the thick, charged silence that had developed. He raised his right hand in a half-hearted gesture of broken farewell before shuffling towards the staircase, barely lifting his feet enough to clear each successive riser as he headed towards Ron's room.

And then there were three. Ginny, had retired straight to her dorm as soon as they'd returned from Professor McGonagall's office. She hadn't said a word to anyone, and Hermione hoped that the fourth year wasn't going to try and bottle everything up indefinitely. Seamus, Lavender and Neville had all gone to bed. Dean was dead... *dead*, Harry was... they didn't *know* where Harry was, or even if he was still...

Parvati sighed heavily, "and they will come with the moon..."

Chapter 83

Name the only creature to lay eggs through its mouth.

Azkaban.

Dark, cold, empty, desolate.

Fitting, but no good: "translocate."

The familiar surroundings of the Astronomy Tower resolved into focus about him, the clouded moonlight providing just enough light to illuminate the surrounding buildings' outlines, black on black.

The tower was deserted: he'd not expected anything different, but the risk had been there. The night's most significant hurdle overcome, then, Harry let his shoulders droop as he surveyed his surroundings.

It all looked so different at night, naturally enough. Four and a half years previously Hagrid had piloted the little flotilla of boats across the lake, and he'd been brought, wide-eyed, awestruck and slightly afraid into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

He could still remember that first feast. The Sorting Hat's internal debate as to whether he would be Slytherin or Gryffindor. The enchanted ceiling, the floating candles... all that magic. The Great Hall had been suffused with cheer, happiness, wonder.

Not a hint, that first night, that his life at Hogwarts would turn so bleak, so Dark. No-one had warned Dean, Ron, Hermione, Seamus what it meant to share a House with The Boy Who Lived.

Dean was dead.

And now, the Boy Who Lived was back, trailing Death in his wake. The gargoyle sentinels noted his presence, but didn't seem unduly perturbed by a Dark Mage appearing out of thin air. Either they were incredibly thick, or they were completely useless. Neither option gave Harry great faith in Hogwarts' ability to defend itself from the attack he felt sure Voldemort would be planning.

He'd taken Beauxbatons, he'd taken Durmstrang. It only made sense that Voldemort would set his sights on Hogwarts next.

And, Harry realised, Voldemort didn't know that the Hogwarts Key had been drained...

It didn't feel like home - the apparent lack of familiarity with his surroundings, despite the fact that he knew the place hadn't changed materially in his absence, unsettled him. He'd expected to feel the relaxing warmth of sanctuary wash over him on arrival: the knowledge that he'd returned to the heart of *his* world, returned to his friends, returned to his family. But no, he was a stranger here, and this world was alien to him. Lost in such thoughts, Harry stood at the top of the Astronomy Tower longer than was strictly necessary, shivering more from fatigue than cold, but, at length, he shook himself free of the lethargy, and swept his sense through the sleeping castle.

He felt strangely passive as he absorbed the information his mind was feeding him: the five dormitories gleamed their presence in the night - students' patterns clustered thickly together somehow reinforcing his own isolation. He was separate from that world, now: Hogwarts was, and always had been, a School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, it had no place, nor any fondness, for the Magi.

No, Harry was in no doubt that his presence would not be welcomed by most of the school, and, to that end, his feet took him down from the Astronomy Tower, but *away* from Gryffindor. Notwithstanding the fact that he didn't have a password (Parvati had explained about the revised security procedures), and everyone would have been asleep, there was also the small matter that the fifth year dorm in Gryffindor Tower, *his* dorm, had two empty beds in it these days: one for Ron, one for Dean.

How was he going to explain?

As his mind swept the castle, seeking the most shadowed route through the ancient corridors, he came at length to the Hospital Wing. Cho's pattern, that familiar shimmering blue, was there, but before he even had time to register anything more than puzzlement, his brain had locked onto Snape's pattern.

Snape was back, then. So Padma must've made it back safely too, he reasoned, a theory quickly confirmed as he analysed the Ravenclaw dorm. If they hadn't bothered with Snape...

Harry would have liked to have risen above that thought - he'd liked to have been noble enough *not* to feel that Dean's life had somehow been traded for Snape's, but he just couldn't help drawing that conclusion. It had been his own idea, of course, to play the gallant rescuer; and he'd been the one who'd wasted those precious seconds, gloating at his hated teacher's plight.

Snape was right, he had been petty... Every way Harry turned within his mind, he saw new fingers of accusation pointing at him; if he hadn't *asked* the Hat not to put him into Slytherin; if he'd *not* let Padma and Dean accompany him to Durmstrang; if he'd not indulged in the pathetic, small-minded power game with Snape; if he'd *listened* to Dean's warnings...

It wasn't just one tiny slip on his part that had led to Dean's death. No, there was a whole catalogue of actions and consequences, a solid trail of damning evidence that made it clear that Dean's death was on his shoulders.

And after all that, when all was said and done, they still didn't know for sure what side Snape was on in all this. Perhaps the only person the Potions Master had been truly loyal to was Dumbledore; if so, what were they to make of the Potions Master's loyalties now?

What if, at the end of it all, all they'd achieved was to have brought a known Death Eater right into the very heart of their defences? Snape *did* carry the Dark Mark, after all, and even though Dumbledore had vouched for him, in the Pensieve of Karkaroff's trial, that room had certainly had more than its fair share of doubters of Snape's supposed redemption...

It had all seemed so simple back in the Keep, but that had been before the world had been turned upside down. He ghosted silently down the stairwell, his mind maintaining watch on his immediate surroundings as he struggled to keep his thoughts straight.

He was so *tired*, and Dean was dead.

Making his way down to the second floor corridor on the East side of the castle, he sensed an odd presence: strangely familiar, yet, at the same time, slightly alien. The pattern was... well, the best word for it would be 'hollow' - empty, as though devoid of some key component.

Not wanting to cross paths with anyone or anything, lest undue attention be called to his presence, Harry slunk back into the shadows, and sought another route down to the ground floor, all the time monitoring the strange pattern carefully.

There was something really, *really* familiar about it. But familiar didn't necessarily mean good, and the risks of detection were too great to allow him to investigate the issue further.

Having ruled out Gryffindor Tower as a destination, and resigning himself to avoiding Sirius and Lupin for much the same reasons, he only had one person left to turn to.

Harry flitted across the lawn, thankful for the gathering gloom afforded by the thickening clouds, headed towards Hagrid's Hut. Quite why he chose Hagrid he wasn't sure... except he was, really. It had been Hagrid who'd rescued him from the Dursleys. It was Hagrid who'd been the first friend, genuine friend, he'd ever had.

And there was something about Hagrid - not just his overwhelming physical presence, but just his absolutely unshakable trust, that somehow made everything seem just that little bit less bleak.

Of course, it was probably half three in the morning, or some such (he'd really meant to get a new watch, but, somehow, other things had always taken priority), and there was always the danger that Hagrid was either an impossibly heavy sleeper, or, even, that he'd have bought the Ministry's 'Dark Mage' story, hook, line and sinker.

But no: Hagrid would believe him. And, furthermore, Hagrid had dealings with the Ministry's ideas of justice, having been carted off to Azkaban in second year, just to make it look as though Fudge was doing something constructive.

Hagrid and Fang were inside, he noted, thankful that at least Madame Maxime wasn't spending her nights there as well. That could have been embarrassing all round, really.

He paused at the wooden door. How loud should he knock? Somehow, he sort of expected that Hagrid would sleep heavily - that was, after all, how all the fairytales and legends spoke of giants' slumbers. On the other hand, he didn't want to create a racket that might draw unwanted attention.

A short while later, Harry realised that he was still standing on Hagrid's doorstep, unmoving fist ready to knock, as soon as he'd decided how he was going to approach the situation. His mind kept on wandering, he noted, irritated with himself that he couldn't even focus on the simplest of tasks.

Except that his mind wasn't even wandering, as such. Not really: it was more like a kind of mental paralysis, where his eyes took in the world about him, unseeing, his brain too numb to process the information.

And he was doing it again.

Shaking himself awake once more, Harry knocked on the wooden door, startling himself with the unintended force. Fang immediately howled in response, and then there was a dull thud, followed by something crashing to the ground as what could only be Hagrid's massive bulk lumbered out of bed.

So much for the 'cat-like tread' approach, then.

The door flung open, and Harry found himself staring at the business end of Hagrid's cross-bow. "'s me," he croaked, sounding a lot less 'natural' than he'd intended, "Harry."

"Blimey, 'arry," responded Hagrid, letting the crossbow drop until it was pointing safely at the floor, "what're yer doin' 'ere? No, don' 'spect I need to know tha', do I?"

Hagrid opened the door to his hut a little wider, and Harry made his way in, patting Fang by way of greeting. The hut was much as he remembered it - right down to the Tempus summons still sitting, unanswered, on the mantelpiece. Unthinkingly, he slumped onto the footstool as Hagrid lowered himself into his massive armchair, huge, hairy legs sticking out from a massive, chequered nightshirt that would have clothed a carthorse.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light provided by the solitary lantern, Harry noted that Hagrid's eyes were rimmed with red, and his cheeks ever so slightly flushed.

"'e's dead, 'arry," mumbled the half-giant, sniffing heavily, "great man, Dumbledore... great man..." Hagrid sniffed loudly once more, dabbing the cuff of his nightshirt to his eyes, "can' believe 'e's gone..."

"Dean's dead, too," Harry couldn't really think of any way by which the blow could be meaningfully softened, and besides, he wasn't fully convinced that Hagrid's mental faculties were functioning optimally anyway. "And it's all my fault," he continued, morosely, bringing his shivering arms tight into his body as the early morning chill took hold, "if I hadn't..."

"Don' say tha'," growled Hagrid, sharply, "'ain' no-one's fault but You-Know-Who's," he attested, darkly, "'n don' let anyone tell yer different, y'hear?"

"But Hagrid," protested Harry, grateful for his friend's support, but at the same time feeling honour-bound not to delude the half-giant, "it *was* my fault... I should've listened to Dean, I shouldn't ha..."

"Nonsense! I known yer a long time, 'arry, 'n I know you wouldn' do nuffink tha' wasn' necessary... you did what yer had to do; sometimes it ain' pretty, but I *know* you," he repeated, "'n I know you woulda done the righ' thing."

Hagrid's faith was almost heart-breaking. Harry knew that he *hadn't* done the right thing. Worse, he knew that the Darkness was still with him - his mind continually nudged at the presence in his mind, that element of his psyche that gained dark satisfaction from the power he held.

Rather like how he used to wobble a loose tooth with his tongue, the salty discomfort strangely compelling, so it was with his mind's Darkness: he knew it was wrong, he knew it was supposed to be repugnant, abhorrent, and contrary to everything he stood for. He knew all that, yet still the temptation remained and he found himself testing the mental boundaries, again and again, recalling the thrill of triumph as his mind appreciated the violent powers that awaited his command.

No, he most certainly had *not* done the right thing. Arrogant, vindictive, *cruel*, he'd cast aside the carefully honed scruples of the Boy Who Lived, and willingly become the Dark Mage the Daily Prophet so dearly wished him to be.

Hagrid interrupted Harry's internal self-directed diatribe with a colossal yawn, "well righ' n' all there's plen'y a questions I should be askin' yer, bu' I thin' they'll keep till mornin'." Hagrid yawned even more cavernously than before, and stood up, "'yer wan' the bed, or will yer be alrigh' in the chair?" he asked through squinted eyes.

Harry, who felt guilty enough at the thought of having betrayed Hagrid's faith in him, let alone having evidently awoken his friend from what obviously looked like it had been much needed sleep, immediately volunteered to take the chair.

Tellingly, Hagrid didn't even bother to protest for the sake of politeness. This was just as well, in Harry's opinion, since he wasn't entirely sure that he'd actually *want* to sleep in a bed that had minutes earlier contained a slumbering half-giant.

Judging by the light, it was late morning on the Sunday when Harry woke, sprawled awkwardly in Hagrid's armchair, a thick overcoat (thankfully one *without* dormice colonies living in its pockets) serving as a blanket. Hagrid's pattern was outside in the enclosure, presumably attending to whatever beasts he'd deemed fit to terrorise the students with in the absence of his beloved Threshers. Fang was still indoors, however, and on seeing that Harry was awake, came to nuzzle his hand affectionately.

"Morning, Fang," greeted Harry, wearily. He was stiff from the night's half-sleep, drained from the week's events and, if he was honest, he felt somewhat lost. It had seemed so obvious when Bill had given him the Portkey: Dumbledore had clearly wanted him back at Hogwarts.

Well, fine; he'd done that, but *now* what was he supposed to do? It went without saying that he needed to get in touch with the Away Team, not to mention Sirius and Lupin. A dry, inner voice reminded him that for someone on the run from virtually the entire planet, he seemed awfully keen to announce his presence to the world.

First things first, though: time to get up.

He stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror for some time, seeing, yet not seeing. It was almost as though he didn't know the worn-out husk that stared listlessly back; his eyes had dark bags beneath them, his skin was pale, nearly translucent, his face tight after the goblins' regime of systematic starvation: after all, a week ago he'd still been in prison.

A week ago, Dean had still been alive. And Dumbledore. And Charlie hadn't been missing. He wondered whether Mr and Mrs Weasley knew that their second son's whereabouts were unknown - surely their clock would tell them something? And then surely Bill would've checked in with them when Charlie's absence had first been detected? So how could Charlie still have been missing?

To take his mind off such paralysing thoughts, he splashed water on his face, hoping the shock of the cold would banish the fog of lethargy that seemed to be just... *there*, weighing him down. But the listless green eyes that stared unflinchingly back remained those of a stranger.

Again, he remained, staring motionless into the mirror for a long time, conflicting emotions welling up inside. He wanted to be hated for what he'd done, what he'd brought upon his friends. But at the same time, he didn't want to be *alone*... it was weakness on his part, he knew. Indulgence. He couldn't place any more of his friends' lives at risk.

Hatred would be good, though. To be despised as was just, to be brought to account for his weakness, Dean's suffering, Ron's death and Seamus' curse. All those things weighed on his conscience, the costs of his year that he'd been happy to foist onto his unwitting friends.

The burden of responsibility grew and grew: somehow, he had to *justify* those sacrifices through his own actions. Somehow he was obliged to demonstrate that it had all been worth it: the deaths, the pain, the suffering, that those things had not been for nothing.

Nothing would ever provide absolution for the personal costs he'd imposed upon his friends, nothing. But he was bound now to do whatever was *right* in an attempt to make right those wrongs.

Dumbledore had always taken pain to distinguish between what was right and what was easy. In avowing to take the correct path, Harry knew that he was going to be making life difficult for himself. The demands others might place upon him would be nothing compared to the burden he was going to impose upon himself.

He couldn't fix things: life had slipped too far for that, but what he *could* do was carry the fight, prevent the world from falling further into Voldemort's Darkness.

He wouldn't fail his friends again.

At length, Hagrid came bustling back into his hut, clapping his huge hands together as he sought to warm himself up from the morning air. It was a reasonably pleasant day, but it was still mid-February in the Highlands, so it was cold, despite the brightness.

"Now then, 'arry," began Hagrid, as he filled the kettle with water, "why don' ya tell me how it is yer 'ere, at school, when everyone 'n his House-Elf says yer back in prison?"

So Harry attempted to explain as much as he could: his escape from Blackrock, courtesy of Charlie and Akiko (Hagrid, predictably, was very impressed with the Japanese Gothic), meeting up with Dean and Padma, the battle at Durmstrang, Dean's death and ended his retelling with Moody taking him out from the Keep.

Harry didn't relay the whole business with regard to his connection to Voldemort, and seeing Dumbledore's last stand: firstly, it served no meaningful purpose, and secondly it would probably raise as many questions as it answered.

Not that Hagrid seemed to mind, "Blimey, 'arry," he observed, swirling the last dregs of tea in his oversize cup before continuing, "sounds like yer been through the mill a bit, alright..."

He nodded non-comittally back: he'd felt almost numb as he related the week's events, things seeming as though they'd happened to someone else. Remote. It was an increasing struggle, trying to keep his mind focused, and not drift off into nothingness, almost as though he'd been through so much that his mind had finally decided it had had enough, and had chosen to view himself as though he were a third party.

At least that way, when he retold the tale of the descent through the levels of Durmstrang's Keep, he could watch the separate version of Harry succumb to the Darkness without feeling threatened himself.

He'd heard of coping mechanisms, although he'd never really understood exactly what the phrase was supposed to represent. He suspected, however, that he was beginning to get a very precise idea.

No matter: as long as he could hold himself together sufficiently to finally face Voldemort, he really didn't care what happened afterwards.

On the pretext of discussing possible creatures to study in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Hagrid invited Professor Lupin over after lunch (one of Hagrid's stews which, mercifully, had proved to be talon-free). Unfortunately, from Harry's point of view, he'd evidently left Sirius in his quarters; Hagrid didn't know that Sirius was an innocent man, and, somehow, it had never seemed quite the right time to tell him.

And besides, love Hagrid as he did, and even though Harry knew that Dumbledore had trusted the half-giant with his life, he was less certain about trusting the Keeper of Keys and Grounds with *that* particular secret.

It was a week until the next full moon, and Lupin's face carried just the vaguest hint of the toll his lycanthropy would be taking on him in due course. Seamus, too, Harry reminded himself; another friend who'd paid the price for believing in the supposed greatness of The Boy Who Lived.

Having sensed the Professor's approach, Harry had hovered nervously by the fireplace, having to make a conscious effort not to greet his dad's friend at the door lest he be spotted from the castle. So he waited, nervously, wondering how much Lupin *knew*, and how much he was going to have to explain. And, sickeningly, whether he would continue to have Lupin's respect once the tale had been related.

Because that was the thing: Lupin had lived with the wolf since he was at school. He'd managed to keep his own personal Darkness at bay, willingly caging himself up every month so as not to inflict harm upon others. Lupin had managed what he, Harry, had not, and this caused the Mage to doubt whether he was truly worthy to dare to call Lupin, his friend, not to mention Sirius.

Standing in shadow, Harry watched Lupin enter the soft shadows of the hut, the crisp, bright rectangle of daylight standing out sharply against the dim, dark wood of the floor. As befitting one who professed to teach the disciplines required to successfully defend oneself against the Dark Arts, Lupin's sharp eyes immediately picked Harry out, even as he attempted to shrink still further into the shadows. A quick succession of emotions flashed across Lupin's face, worn beyond its years: surprise followed by relief followed by confusion: "Ha..." having spoken much too loudly, the former Marauder dropped his voice to a more appropriate, but no less concerned, level, "Harry!" he almost whispered, "Harry..."

'Hello Professor, how are you?' That would have been a simple, straightforward greeting. Or, maybe, 'Hi, I made it back,' but words had more or less failed Harry at this point, and the best he could do was manage a half-strangled croak before tears started welling up in his eyes.

There'd been so much death around him, *because* of him, and not even for what he *was* so much as what he had been, fourteen years earlier. Who had *really* won that Halloween night, in the end?

Casting aside all professional demeanour, Lupin gathered Harry into a crushing hug, "Merlin, Harry!" he whispered, his own voice dangerously fractured, "Harry..."

Hagrid coughed, discreetly, and then murmured something about needing to keep an eye on the flesh-eating slugs in the pumpkin patch. Heavy, unseen footsteps clumped their way across the hut's wooden floor before the door swung shut, Hagrid's jaunty whistling feeling wholly out of place amidst the overwhelming levels of emotion that seemed to have thickened the air to a paralysing extent.

Lupin eventually took a step back, his hands gripping Harry's shoulders as he looked him directly in the eye, shaking his own head ever so slightly from side to side, "Harry," he almost whispered, "I don't know how much you've been through, but you have to remember that you've got me, you've got Padfoot, and they can throw every *thing* they've got at us, but we won't fail..."

Harry croaked an indistinct murmur of protest: he'd *already* failed. Failed Ron, failed Dean. Dumbledore was dead, Voldemort had taken Durmstrang, and he was practically *wrecked*;

mentally, physically, emotionally, he felt so far gone that the sensation that he was viewing himself from outside his body reasserted itself with increasing intensity.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Lupin's voice was soft, understanding, yet, at the same time, forceful, "but you *have* to tell me. We need to understand the whole thing - it's not over yet; you're too old, you've seen too much for to to pretend it's any other way. And I *know*, believe me, if I could make this any easier for you I would, I *know* this is going to be hard, but we have to know what happened. We have to know, Harry..."

And so, even though his throat was raw from the effort of suppressing further tears, and his body trembled with the effort of maintaining lucidity, Harry related the events of the previous week as best he could, from his vision being restored in his cell at Blackrock to Portkeying into Hogwarts in the early hours of the morning.

Sometimes the retelling of such things helped lessen the burden, served to cleanse away the pain, dampen the memories and ease the guilt. But things were too fresh in Harry's mind, the cuts too recent, the screams too familiar.

Evidently sensing that Harry was on the absolute edge of keeping himself together, Lupin listened attentively, and did not press for details. The werewolf's eyes seemed to visibly sharpen, the hints of lycanthropy swept away as a new, keener instinct took over. From some, distant vantage point Harry watched the Professor listen to the broken, black-haired boy with emerald green eyes, the drawn face and barely enough will to keep breathing.

From that separate viewing point, he watched the monologue draw to its terrible conclusion, and saw the conflicting emotions of horror, disappointment, relief and pain pass once more over the older man's face. Somehow, he even saw Lupin settle the unfamiliar teenager back into Hagrid's armchair, throwing one of Hagrid's coats over the drained figure as sleep claimed it, the green of the eyes growing ever dimmer behind the glasses.

When he woke up, in truth feeling no better than he had before, it was dark. A huge black dog immediately shook itself to its feet, and through the open doorway, Harry could see the massive frame of Hagrid, sitting on his doorstep, crossbow cradled in his hands.

What was coming, Harry knew, was going to come, and they were going to meet it when it did.

Chapter 84

Which breed of owl is the fastest messenger?

The Shrieking Shack was much as he remembered it from the Third Year, perhaps one and a half rungs up from being termed a hovel, it was hardly the most welcoming of refuges. Nonetheless, it was either the Shrieking Shack or Sirius' cave beyond Hogsmeade, and between four walls with a roof versus a ragged hole in the mountainside, there really wasn't much of a contest.

Hagrid had kept watch as Harry and Padfoot had approached the Whomping Willow - a simple lance of force had pressed the hidden knot in the aggressive tree's bark to calm the flailing limbs, and he and Sirius (who'd transformed once out of Hagrid's sight) had made their way through the tunnel and up into the Shack.

As sanctuaries went, Harry considered it to be temporary. He was still puzzling over why Dumbledore had felt it necessary that he return to Hogwarts. Although it didn't take a genius to work out that Voldemort would eventually make a move on the castle, it seemed to Harry that the whole affair might be ended sooner if he carried the attack back to Durmstrang.

Alone: there would be no further deaths on his conscience in the war. Of that he was certain.

To that end, he needed Padma's Portkey back (assuming she still had it). And in order to get *that*, he had to make contact with Padma at least... That, however, was a problem to be addressed the following day: Sirius agreed to get word to the Ravenclaw via Lupin, albeit with the proviso that *he* would look after the Portkey (Harry wondered whether Sirius would remain so insistent on taking charge of the device once he saw it in the flesh, so to speak).

They spent the evening bringing each other up to speed on the year's events, nibbling half-heartedly on the food Lupin had procured for them from the House-Elves. Neither of them had much of an appetite, the day's most recent news, this time relating to Charlie Weasley, doing nothing to lighten spirits.

They could only work with the tools they had available, Harry understood that, but still, it *would* have been better if Padma could have got hold of *his* Firebolt rather than Cho's. He could have made the flight from the Shrieking Shack to Gryffindor Tower in about half the time it had taken Padma, even taking into account the need to ensure they were completely covered by the Invisibility Cloak.

Cho had wanted to come, Padma had explained, but she was banned from flying (not that that would have stopped her) *and* still felt a little woozy following Saturday's crash. So the Ravenclaw Seeker had lent Padma the Invisibility Cloak *and* her Firebolt, and Padma had flown out to the Shrieking Shack to meet him that Monday night, once she'd returned from her detention with Professor Flitwick.

Each of the Hogwarts members of the Away Team (with the obvious exception of the now absent Ginny) had been assigned a different detention, running from 8 until 10. As a result, it was now nearing 11pm - late enough for outside activity to be suspicious, but too early to hope that it might go undetected. Such seemed to be the way of things in the fifth year.

Gryffindor Tower loomed large in the night sky: unsurprisingly, given the huge loss of House Points they had incurred, the fifth years were keeping a low profile, holed up in their respective dorms... more or less. Lavender's pattern had evidently made itself quite comfortable with Seamus in the boys' dorm, although Neville was there too, so Harry doubted that the two could be too intimately involved with each other. After a brief discussion with Padma, they agreed to approach the girls' dorm, and Padma piloted the Firebolt's tip up to one of the tower's windows, rapping the glass gently to attract her sister's attention.

A few short moments later the window creaked open warily, Parvati's face peering out, straight *through* them as she tried to identify the source of the noise. Padma made their presence known, and piloted the Firebolt in.

"Hey guys," greeted Harry, hesitantly, as he shrugged off the Cloak's silvery fabric, stepping from the window to the floor. He hoped he wasn't about to get a repeat of his meeting with Padma - she'd seemed fine enough when she'd arrived at the Shack, but then one mention of Dean and she'd dissolved into tears, leaving him holding her nervously, patting her back and wondering whether she was *ever* going to stop.

"Harry!" shrieked Hermione, the words literally being sucked into her on a strangled, sharp intake of breath. She sat, transfixed, on her bed, homework spread about her, a fifth year island amidst a sea of parchment, books and scrolls.

"Harry," echoed Parvati, slightly softer, but just as incredulous, "you look... *terrible*..."

He was the recipient of a brief, but firm, hug from Parvati before Hermione threw her arms around him, sobbing. "Harry... Harry," she sobbed, "everything's gone so horribly *wrong*..."

He'd faced a lot of things in his fifteen years, but there was something about sobbing girls that *really* floored Harry, and all he could do was nervously pat Hermione's back, fervently hoping that she'd pull herself together quickly.

"Harry?" interrupted Padma, emerging from a huddled, whispered conversation with her twin, "I need to get back to Ravenclaw, like we said... Parvati'll bring the Firebolt back, and the cloak, OK?"

This had been the plan from the outset: Padma couldn't risk her absence from Ravenclaw being detected. Unlike her Gryffindor counterparts, she did not enjoy the luxury of sharing a dorm with friends all committed to the same cause, so Parvati would be handling the return flight back to the Shrieking Shack.

Unless, of course, he could get *his* Firebolt back. He nodded assent to the twins, tracking their combined patterns as Cho's Firebolt, protected by the Invisibility Cloak, swept away from Gryffindor Tower and off towards the Ravenclaw wing. In his arms, Hermione slowly appeared to be regaining some semblance of composure, and, at length, she pulled a step away from him, wiping the tears from her eyes with her jumper.

"Parvati's right," she agreed, "you look *terrible*, Harry; what happened? Are you sleeping OK? Were you hurt? Are you eating properly? Because you *have* to eat, and..."

Harry held up a defensive hand to stave off the seemingly endless barrage of questions. She looked drawn, herself; he should, he supposed, have expected her to be a little emotional at his sudden reappearance, she'd always been the demonstrative one, in that sense. But there was more to her outburst than just over-wrought relief that her best friend had returned.

A lot more.

"Shall I get the others?" she enquired, sniffing once more, "I mean, Lavender's in..."

"The boys' dorm," noted Harry, absently, sweeping his mind through Gryffindor Tower, noting the familiar patterns with the dull ache of separation. Most of them would never be able to know that he was back. A lot of them, he suspected, wouldn't care. But *he* cared, he really did: Gryffindor was his family, just as Professor McGonagall had promised it would be. And to be so near, yet so distant from that was almost worse than never having tasted it at all.

"No, no," he continued, shaking his head gently, "we talked about this on the way over; if you suddenly drag the others up here," he swept his outwards to indicate the girls' circular dorm, familiar, yet different to the boys', "then people are going to notice... questions would be asked. And I'm not staying long, anyway."

"What?! You're *leaving*, already? But... but *where*? *Why*? And... and, *Ron*... he'll want to see you..."

Harry frowned, reluctantly - he could sense Hermione's own discomfort at having brought up the subject, but... it had to be tackled; "Hermione? Why... why did you do that?"

The half-familiar pattern he'd detected upon his return to Hogwarts two nights previously was holed up in a new room in Gryffindor Tower, and it didn't take a genius to deduce that it was probably Ron's presence. Strangely hollow, still, Harry couldn't quite get a handle on exactly what it was that seemed out of place about the energy that comprised whatever had become of his best friend, but, certain that they would meet up in due course, he resolved to leave that issue to one side until a better opportunity to investigate the matter presented itself. As he'd explained to Hermione, the common room was still full of Gryffindors, and any traffic to or from the fifth year girls' dorm would be bound to draw attention, and he couldn't risk detection. Not yet, at any rate.

There was a brief pause, and Harry saw his friend's body stiffen before him, steeling itself to face certain pain. "Because... because everything had *gone*, Harry... Everything. And I *missed* him... is that so wrong? I didn't mean it to turn out like it did..."

She seemed repentant enough that Harry didn't really want to rub salt into the wounds, but still, "but... but it *was* wr... it *wasn't* right, was it... Hermione?"

"You don't know what it was like, Harry! I was *alone*. It's like Ron's the brakes, and you're the compass... do you remember, in first year? *You* were the one who decided *what* we had to do - where we were going..."

"I'd never have survived first year without you two," he reminded her - the events surrounding the chase for the Philosopher's Stone seemed so distant it was almost as though they belonged to another life in another world. They'd been very, *very* lucky that year... things could have been so much worse.

"And," continued Hermione, "I sort of developed tunnel vision: at first I only wanted to try and contact Ron's spirit, somehow... but then I thought of ways of imp... ways of... *new* things, and each step I took I got more absorbed... and *you* weren't there to show the way, and Ron wasn't there to stop me... and it all went so horribly wrong..."

Harry knew all about good intentions going awry... or, at least, he knew all about believing he'd been acting on good intentions. The night's battle down through Durmstrang's Keep would haunt his nightmares for years to come, that much he knew: *Harry, mate, are you sure you're alright?* What kind of question had that been? Only the best, most pertinent question of all.

Under the Cloak's protective cover once more, Harry and Parvati exited Gryffindor Tower on Cho's Firebolt, heading for the window on the second floor corridor. Parvati was a better flier than her sister, but not by much, and Harry wished more than ever that he had his own broom back.

For one thing, it would have meant that he wouldn't have been forced to have put any of his friends at risk in his pursuit of answers. Even as he tried to develop that argument, however, he realised that he needed a witch or wizard to activate the Invisibility Cloak for him: sneaking about Hogwarts fully visible, even in the dead of night, was for the foolhardy only.

"Parvati?"

"Mmm?"

He felt her body twist slightly, presumably so as to better hear him, although the action served more to remind him that he had his hands clasped around her waist, strands of her hair trickling across his face: "thanks for doing this."

She didn't reply, and he felt her turn to face forwards once more, tracking the castle's walls, trying to keep inside the concealing shadows. Invisible or not, it didn't hurt to take precautions.

As the better flier of the two fifth years, Parvati had volunteered to accompany Harry on his mission rather than Hermione, a decision that made sense, even if it did seem contrary to his express intention to stop involving his friends in the ongoing fight.

A gentle wave of his hand, and the window swung open, just large enough for first Parvati, and then himself, to shuffle through sideways. He'd already made sure the surrounding area was deserted, but nonetheless they lost no time in cloaking themselves under the silvery fabric. The Firebolt had been left at the foot of the castle wall, hidden deep in shadow: it would be a simple matter for him to summon it on their return, and the action served to hide the thing from all but the most persistent of spies.

Parvati's hand gripped his, and by the faintest application of pressure to their interlinked fingers, Harry indicated that they should move. The castle was relatively quiet at night, but there were still the patrols: staff, ghosts, Filch and Mrs Norris, not to mention Peeves.

"You really didn't have to do this, you know," Harry tried again to express his gratitude to Parvati as they reached the spiral staircase that would take them down to the dungeons.

"Harry," she replied, in a whisper, "you *know* I'm not doing this because I *have* to... and, we're... we're *good*, aren't we?"

"Yeah," he confirmed, gratefully, "we're good... but I just wanted you to know that I appreciate you. OK? I don't deserve friends like you guys..."

"You *earn* your friends, Harry. 's like Hermione always says."

Of all the scenarios he'd dreamt up over the long, drawn out summer at the Dursleys, probably the last thing that Harry had expected he would be doing in his fifth year was sneaking around the castle at night with Parvati Patil, under the Invisibility Cloak, looking for Severus Snape.

Actively searching the man out. He felt slightly guilty for having 'forgotten' to mention to Sirius that he intended to confront the Potions Master, but Sirius couldn't be relied on to keep a completely level head when it came to Snape. Not many could, and Harry included himself amongst their number, but, right now, he needed answers, and Snape seemed best placed to give them.

And, he reminded himself, Snape *owed* him.

Snape's pattern hadn't moved for the duration of their journey, for which Harry was grateful. Unsurprisingly, the Potions Master was in his private office, just off the Potions Dungeon, and there wasn't another presence anywhere in sight. He looked at Parvati, "keep under this," he whispered, tugging at the cloak for emphasis, "and if anything bad happens, if it all goes wrong or something, get back to Gryffindor Tower, and *then* get word to Lupin, OK?"

"I'm not leaving you," she countered, and Harry knew enough of her mannerisms to know that the point was non-negotiable.

"OK," he muttered, "here we go..." he stepped out from the Invisibility Cloak and waited for the fabric to stop rippling before placing his hand on the classroom door. They were standing in the painfully familiar corridor outside the dungeon, the scene of so many confrontations with the Slytherins. Well, technically, with Malfoy.

Those days seemed distant now, and the rivalry that had, at the time, seemed a massive, deadly serious affair, now seemed nothing more than petty schoolboy rivalry. Not real. Not war. He knew the difference, but, rather than feeling some fond nostalgia for those seemingly more innocent times, he found that instead he looked back in pity at his ignorance.

There was so much more to the world than he'd imagined, and most of it was bad.

The door swung open smoothly and silently, and Harry exerted tremendous care to enter the hated dungeon without making the slightest sound. Behind him, Parvati's pattern slid sideways along the wall; she was keeping close enough to him not to miss any details, but far enough distant to ensure she didn't fall victim to any wayward hexes.

The dim light from Snape's office spilled out into the classroom, creating a rectangle of light that, in a wild moment of Deanism, reminded Harry of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. He didn't yet have a line of sight to the Potions Master himself, and Harry decided that he'd rather announce his presence and *make* Snape seek him out rather than startle him out of his wits.

Balling his fist, he rapped his knuckles three times on a nearby desk in the darkness, the sound cold, hard and abrupt in the stillness of the night.

Immediately he heard the swirl of robes, and then the tap, shuffle, tap of Snape's hampered walk as he made his way to the office door, wand in one hand, walking stick in the other.

If Snape was anything other than extremely displeased to discover Harry's presence, he did a good job of hiding it: "Potter," he hissed, the voice, just as Hermione had told him, barely audible, rattling like rusted knives.

With the light behind him, Snape's face was in shadow. It mattered not; Harry was so familiar with Snape's special look of loathing that he reserved just for him that to be greeted in any other fashion would have been... unthinkable. "Professor," he returned, diplomatically, keeping his eye on the wand. He could mount a defensive shield far quicker than Snape could cast even the simplest of hexes, but it didn't do to be complacent; until he knew which side Snape was on, the man had to be considered at best a liability, and, at worst, just plain dangerous.

"What," enquired the Potions Master, in a whisper that was barely more than a breath, "are you doing here?"

Harry pushed his glasses up on his nose before running his hand through his hair as he contemplated the answer. He found himself wondering the same thing: what *was* he doing there?

Snape stood immobile, the cloaked figure in silhouette against the light seeping from his office. Parvati, remained pinned against the far wall, under the Invisibility Cloak, but perfectly clear in Harry's mind.

"Well?" sneered Snape, the animosity of all Harry's years at Hogwarts coming to the fore once more.

Harry decided to turn the tables: Snape owed *him*, after all. It was a shame that the Potion Master's demeanour gave little hint of this agreeable arrangement. "What were *you* doing in Durmstrang?"

In the darkness, he could just make out Snape's eyes, dark and hard, as they blinked in response to the question. There was another long silence, before Snape returned a question of his own, "and what concern might that be to you?" The wand's tip moved up slightly, as though in preparation to cast, "you would be well advised, Potter, to limit your concerns to

your own immediate self-preservation; I understand there are a lot of people anxious to find you..."

Now it was Harry's turn to blink: was Snape threatening *him*? It was bad enough being caught in the escalation of questions, where each interrogative step was met by a counter-query, but his brain was not so far gone as to miss the implication of Snape's words. "You *owe* me," he hissed, eyes narrowing, levelling a finger at the shadowed figure, "you owe me, you owe Padma, you own Dean. We got you out of that mess..."

Snape exhaled, condescendingly, "Merlin preserve us all from the overbearing nobility of Gryffindors... no-one *asked* you to pull me out of there. And now that you think it suits your purpose, you suddenly decide I might have my uses..."

Harry's temper flared, "*Potter, you've got to help me!*" he threw the Potion Master's pathetic plea back at him. "Remember that? You *begged* us to pull you out of there... and we did."

Snape took half a step backwards, and the wand lowered to a fractionally less threatening stance.

Pressing his advantage, Harry reminded Snape exactly who had asked whom again, "Potter, you called me, you *knew* who I was, and you *begged* us to help. We did, and *now*," he persisted, "you *owe* me some answers..." He moved away from the desk where he'd initially announced his presence, crossing the dungeon's stone floor until he'd reduced their separation to just a few paces.

Snape's face still remained in shadow, although Harry could make out some of the familiar details at the closer range; the same sallow skin, crooked nose and lank, greasy hair. The Potion Master's face was drawn, the skin pulled tight across the bones, yet the dark, mirthless eyes contained the same malice as ever.

"Gryffindor nobility only exists in the mind, Potter, and I would remind you that you are perhaps not best placed to be issuing demands at this point in time..."

"You're one to talk!" countered Harry, emboldened by a combination of Snape's obvious weakness, coupled with the growing frustration of every question posed being ignored, "you're a Death Eater - you've got the Dark Mark on your arm - I still don't know whether we did the right thing pulling you out or not," he continued, desperate to induce some sort of indication one way or another. He *had* to know - was Snape an asset or a liability?

"Excellent," congratulated the professor, "I see your fabled powers of observation have not deserted you permanently... but if I may be so bold as to enquire: since I'm *obviously* the enemy, what made you so magnanimously agree to my request?"

"Dumbledore trusted you," replied Harry, carefully, "he never said why. I don't even know if he was right to in the first place..."

In the dim light of the room, he sensed, more than actually saw, Snape's body tense, almost flinch, in fact, at these words. His whisper quiet retort, however, gave no hint of any discomfort, "then I would suggest that you rely on Professor Dumbledore's judgement, Mr Potter, as I am certain you have in years past."

"Dumbledore's dead," Harry pointed out, "you can't rely on him to vouch for you any more... He's gone."

Clearly thinking the situation through, Harry heard Snape suck the air in between his teeth; "understand, Potter, that I could have killed you already..."

"And I you," countered Harry, coldly.

"Yes," mused the Potions Master, absently, "no doubt you probably could... And in a sense this conversation is academic, anyway - the Dark Lord stands unopposed now, and it is only a matter of time before this castle, too, suffers the same fate as Durmstrang and Beauxbatons..."

"You seem awfully confident in your master's success," noted Harry, coldly, eyes narrowing as he flexed his fingers. Snape's faith in Voldemort's abilities did nothing to put his suspicions about the man to rest.

"I swear no allegiance to the Dark Lord, Potter - of that you can be sure. My loyalty is sworn to Dumbledore..."

"But Dumbledore's dead..."

"...a loyalty that binds me to Dumbledore even through death," persisted Snape in an angry hiss.

"OK," agreed Harry, impatiently "Dumbledore trusted you, and he obviously seemed to trust *me*, so why won't you tell me what's going on?" It was more of a challenge than a question.

The challenge hung in the air between them, and Harry could almost see Snape's mind processing implications behind the beady, disdainful gaze he continued to train at him.

"We were summoned," he whispered, "the night that the Dark Lord took Azkaban." The voice was flat, barely audible, the individual words scraping Snape's throat as he continued the explanation, "I was betrayed by Vellum, whose duplicity I had underestimated... clearly, she had decided to defect to Tempus, and I was taken prisoner there..."

Harry nodded, although his eyes never left Snape's; he offered no response to the information, he wanted the Potions Master to keep on filling in the gaps.

"...I was kept in that cell from that date, but, evidently, my absence had been noted, since Pettigrew found me some time before your own arrival..."

Harry blinked. *Pettigrew?* In Durmstrang? *Weeks* earlier? But Voldemort had been *desperate* to locate Snape...

"...I can only assume that Pettigrew was waiting for further instruction as to how to deal with my predicament. A surprisingly adept man at infiltrating Durmstrang's defences, not a day went past when he wouldn't check in on me... in the end, I think, he was just there to gloat whilst I rotted..."

Snape's voice trailed off, his expression blank and lifeless. Harry suddenly felt, if not quite pity, at least a tiny bit of sympathy for the man's plight: no-one deserved to have Wormtail gloating over their slow death.

"You should have left me, Potter," finished Snape, before lapsing into immobile silence once more.

Harry blinked: they'd risked their necks - and *paid* the price - and *this* was all the thanks they got? "You would have *died*!" he pointed out: it may have sounded extreme, but it was the truth.

"Everybody dies," observed Snape, flatly, unimpressed and recovering his normal persona fluidly, "spare me your nauseating Gryffindor melodrama, I have *work* to do," evidently considering the conversation finished, he spun on his heels, robes swirling about him like some Hammer Film's vampire as he limped back into his office.

Once Harry had remembered to close his mouth, he made to follow the Potions Master into his lair, but was stopped in his tracks by the familiar (and cruel) sound of Floo powder landing in the fire, "Minerva McGonagall?" queried Snape's voice.

He was already pacing backwards, aiming to link up with Parvati, but Snape's voice carried into the classroom easily. Probably, mused Harry, the slimy git had intended it to, "yes, Minerva, it occurred to me that we might think about stepping up night-time security arrangements... I thought I heard something in the dungeons just now, and wond..."

Harry didn't waste any further time waiting to hear exactly what Snape wondered. He knew it wouldn't have either his or Parvati's best interests at heart, and they had to get out before their presence was detected.

Professor McGonagall was on her way to the dungeons as they climbed up the stairwell, and, in a bid to avoid even the remotest possibility of an encounter with the severe witch, Harry led Parvati further into the castle on a more or less circular detour.

However, they'd just reached the western corner of the Cloisters when he realised they were standing by the armoury... not having a wand - the device was useless to him anyway - he'd felt almost naked without a blade to hand. And here was the perfect opportunity to address the problem.

The doors swung open softly enough, thin shafts of moonlight providing the most meagre of clues as to the room's contents. Carefully pushing the door to, Harry stepped out from underneath the Cloak, and conjured up a small, brilliant white ball of energy that provided ample light by which to inspect the room's wares.

The suits of armour that stood, sentry-like, either side of the entrance were completely bereft of any type of magical energy, so Harry quickly concluded their presence posed no immediate threat. A small collection of swords were stored in a rack on the left hand wall - Parvati was already fishing out a likely blade as Harry's eyes swept the well-stocked walls. Pikes, lances, spears, crossbows, longbows, axes, shields...

There weren't staggering numbers of each item, but there were enough. For a wild moment, Harry toyed with the idea of kitting himself out fully - armour, shield, weapons and the like. However, he quickly dismissed the notion - rather than end up looking fearsome and intimidating, he rather suspected the end result would be more comical, and *that* he didn't need.

Instead, satisfied that the room offered nothing better, he joined Parvati by the swords, where she'd already drawn two blades, slicing the cold metal through the still air as she sought to get a feel for the weapons.

"*Two?*" enquired Harry, one eyebrow raised quizzically: the thought of an ambidextrous Parvati leaping into the midst of a pack of Death Eaters, a sword in each hand, didn't seem wholly convincing, even to his mind's eye.

"One for me, one for Padma," she reported, her voice firm with absolute conviction, "if they *do* come with the moon, then we'll be ready *for* the moon..."

In the end, Harry found a sword with which he felt reasonably comfortable - it wasn't like the Song Blade, but then, the Song Blade hadn't exactly been a wholesome influence, when all was said and done, so perhaps his new steel's restraint was a bonus. Snape and McGonagall had left the dungeons, and were patrolling the East wing of the school - Harry wondered whether Snape was doing this just to wind him up, and decided that yes, probably he was.

Still, he'd managed to get *some* information out of the man; he'd been captured by Vellum, the night of Beauxbatons. Evidently, although Beauxbatons had been planned by the Death Eaters, it had marked the point at which Voldemort's supporters' loyalties were finally put to the test.

And Vellum, strangely, had thrown her lot in with Tempus. Snape, then, had been caught unawares (and how Harry wished he'd *seen* the Potion Master's expression when that had happened!), and dragged off to Durmstrang, although the purpose of his abduction hadn't been made clear.

Well, it hadn't been made clear to Harry at least.

And then came the bit that he was kicking himself over. Snape's warning - not 'Petty', but 'Pettigrew'. Wormtail, obviously sent to locate Snape (and Harry had deduced as much from his visions within Blackrock), had indeed tracked the man down to Durmstrang, some weeks earlier. But, rather than immediately return to Voldemort with the prize, and, presumably receive whatever reward was deemed fit, the repulsive man had waited.

And waited.

Snape, not knowing what was going on beyond the walls of his squalid cell, had been puzzled by the lack of rescue, although not unduly so. It made sense that Voldemort would punish his carelessness by not rushing his rescue. But that, Harry supposed, hadn't quite been the full story. Perhaps not even a quarter of it.

Pettigrew's behaviour seemed to fit with Sirius' assertion in Third Year that Wormtail would have waited to see exactly who would be victorious - Voldemort, Tempus, possibly even Dumbledore - before playing his hand. Wormtail had been caught out backing the wrong side once before - he'd be unlikely to swiftly abandon a position of power a second time.

And Snape was power: Voldemort had been desperate for the Potions Master's expertise - presumably, Harry reasoned, in the hope that he would brew some kind of draught to stifle the growing schizophrenia that was accompanying his all-consuming need to acquire more and more energy from the Beauxbatons Key. On the other hand, knowing how highly Voldemort thought of Snape, his capture would also be highly prized by any of the Death Eaters' enemies.

So, inevitably, it boiled down to Peter Pettigrew's self-interest. Had the loathsome man run back to Voldemort immediately upon locating Snape, Harry would be none the wiser as to the circumstances surrounding the past months' events.

Nothing galled quite so much as having to be grateful to Pettigrew, no matter how tangentially.

And, if Snape had been right, Pettigrew had been there, in Durmstrang, the night he, Dean and Padma had entered the Keep. Harry had been *that* close to apprehending his parents' betrayer, *that* close to clearing Sirius' name, and *that* close to bringing Wormtail to account for his part in the events that had followed the Third Task.

Pettigrew, for all his traitorous, pathetic, cowardly wiles, had, to date, been astoundingly lucky in getting himself out of tight fixes. The mock duel with Sirius, faking his own death not once but *twice*, Harry's own misguided nobility seeking to spare the pathetic man's life that night in the Shrieking Shack... but, as Harry could personally attest, luck eventually ran out.

And when Pettigrew's luck ran out, he, Harry Potter, really hoped he'd be there to see it.

"Where the *hell* have you been?" demanded an obviously fraught Sirius once Parvati had disappeared off into the night. The dim light within the Shack accentuated the haunted look that hung behind Sirius' eyes, and Harry immediately felt guilty for having burdened his godfather with unnecessary worry.

However, he was fifteen years old now, he wasn't a little kid any more, and he *could* look after himself; he didn't need Sirius to hold his hand every step of the way. "I told you," he protested, a little colder than was strictly necessary, "I had to see Padma, and then we met up with Hermione and Parvati..."

"I *thought*," interrupted Sirius, through gritted teeth, "that we were keeping a *low* profile. I didn't realise that throwing wild parties with your friends was on the agenda..."

"Hey!" protested Harry, offended, and hurt, "it was *no* party; I *had* to see Parvati because she had a vision..."

Sirius, who evidently held the somewhat imprecise science in the same regard as Harry had in years previous, snorted contemptuously, "if you're going to listen to *that* kind of rubbish..."

"No, no, listen," commanded Harry, "Parvati apparently had a vision when Dean and Padma left Hogwarts last week: *only three will return*, she said. And she said it was a bad thing... and, well, three of us *did* return - me, Snape and Padma... and... and I don't need to tell you about Dean..."

The fire had gone out of Sirius' eyes on hearing these words, although heavy scepticism still remained, "I'm sorry about Dean, Harry, I really am. And I *know* your friends are important to you, but, you have to understand, secrecy is *vital* here." He gave a half-hearted chuckle as he swept his hand out to indicate the Shrieking Shack's four walls: "can you *imagine* the field day Fudge would have if they stormed this place now?"

"The two most notorious convicts in the wizarding world, pretty much *ever* - even if I do say so myself..."

Harry was reassured to see the wicked gleam in Sirius' eyes surface, even if only briefly, at the self-referential observation.

"...and I *know* you trust your friends - Merlin, I trust your friends, but sometimes there are things that even trust can't protect you from. The more people who know where you are, the bigger the risk. And it's not just you, it's both of us..."

Harry knew a guilt card when he saw one. On the other hand, Sirius did also have a valid point, and, when all was said and done, he *was* grateful to have his godfather's company.

"...and Harry, I promised Lily and James I'd look out for you. I promised them I'd keep you safe, be there for you if the worst should happen... and those weren't idle promises, do you understand? I don't know how much Lily knew, but James, certainly, those last few months, he was working on 'when', not 'if'..."

Harry swallowed - it was always the same, whenever he was offered those tantalising glimpses into the lives of his parents, lives that remained pretty much a mystery to him, yet were open books to people like Wormtail, and even Snape. *Where* was the justice in all of this? How could it be that *Wormtail* would forever know more of Harry's parents than Harry himself?

"...and I failed them the first time round..."

"No!" protested Harry, forgetting his anger at Sirius in the light of the man's apparent descent into a new episode of self-loathing and guilt, "no - it was Pettigrew... it was *all* Pettigrew..."

"Yes, Harry, and *which* stupid, over-confident and blind bastard nominated that piece of filth to be your parents' secret-keeper? *Me*," the self-contempt was palpable - twelve years of hatred distilled into a single word, a guilt that lurked deep in Sirius' soul, had done ever since that fateful Halloween night, festering, taunting, mocking...

Harry realised, there and then, that no matter what happened with Wormtail - whether they caught him or not, whether Sirius was cleared or not, nothing could bring back the twelve years of his life he'd lost to the Dementors. Nothing would wipe away the guilt, the shame and

the self-loathing that had feasted upon his despair. The Sirius Black who'd been his father's best friend, Best Man at his parent's wedding and his own godfather, that Sirius Black had, in a sense, died the same night as his parents, to be replaced by the tormented man before him now, taunted relentlessly by what he perceived to be his own failure.

"Anyway," Sirius' anger, if it really had been anger, and not, as Harry now considered more likely, worry, had faded, leaving the man looking gaunt and tired, "you think Parvati's a *Seer* or something?"

"All she said... saw... whatever, is that they will come with the moon," explained Harry, somewhat hesitantly, conceding that it sounded awfully... *cheesy* when he couldn't see the total sense of self-belief in Parvati's eyes when he relayed the words.

"That's *it*?" enquired Sirius, dubiously. "Couldn't she have been a little more... specific?"

Harry shrugged, "that's all she, y'know, saw... but the full moon's next Mon..."

Sirius snorted, "believe me Harry, I know *all* about the moon's phases," he assured him.

"Yeah, well," continued Harry, "as you know, it's only next Monday... so, I was... thinking," in actual fact, he'd *decided*, but he was acutely aware that Sirius was not in a frame of mind remotely suited to being presented with a *fait accompli*, and therefore decided to moderate his deliberations somewhat, "thinking that... that I should stay here, or hereabouts, recover my strength... work on getting to Durmstrang, but anticipate an attack next week..."

Sirius shook his head in bewilderment, "how, Harry, how did you get so... committed to this thing? You're fifteen years old, for crying out loud, you're not supposed to be planning confrontations with Voldemort..."

"It's *my* war," explained Harry simply, before adding, before Sirius could interrupt, "I started it, in the graveyard after the Third Task, and I'm going to finish it. And either Voldemort comes to me, or I go to Voldemort..."

"Harry..." began Sirius, warningly, "you ca..."

"I have to," interrupted Harry, forcefully. And it was as simple as that.

The following days soon settled into something approaching routine. The days were mainly taken up with resting, the trials of the previous week having left their marks on Harry's body. Occasionally he would venture out into the Forbidden Forest, with Padfoot at his side, simply to stretch his legs, and to dispel the feeling that he'd once again become imprisoned.

Parvati had stolen some Dreamless Sleep potion whilst in detention with Madam Pomfrey, enabling Harry to at least get some proper sleep at nights, as the Key draining rituals had recommenced, now using the Durmstrang Key. Each evening, one of the team would fly out to the Shrieking Shack under cover of the Cloak, bearing food filched from the Great Kitchen, and news of the world beyond.

Sirius would keep watch over the Shack during the night, but would frequently return back to Hogwarts during the day, so that he could pick up news from Lupin as to developments as reported by the Order of the Phoenix. One rare piece of good news had been the discovery that the goblins' Blood Trackers remained camped about Durmstrang, the Death Eaters' dragons preventing them from reaching the castle itself. The only explanation anyone could offer for this strange state of affairs was that the Trackers hadn't followed Harry to Hogwarts because they still had a firm trail on his blood within Durmstrang's walls: it ran through Voldemort's veins.

Chapter 85

How long do Puffskeins live, on average?

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," whispered Peter Pettigrew, tapping the wand to the familiar parchment. Spidery black lines immediately started sketching out his surroundings, small, labelled dots giving him all the information he'd needed.

The dull purple bruise that had first spread across the castle's stonework had now faded from view, but he knew that within the very fabric of Hogwarts' walls, the slow-acting curse would be carefully eroding the defensive wards. Wards that had been built up across the best part of a thousand years, wards that had withstood numerous assaults over the centuries, contributing to the fallacy that there was truly no safer place in the world than the sprawling castle in the remote Scottish Highlands. The Muggles would have called it a cancer - a magical signature that preyed on the energy in the host, slowly breaking down their defences, slowly breaching the formerly impregnable walls. Slowly destroying the legend that had once been Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

He checked the Portkey's familiar heft in his pocket. The device had served him well: he could never have constructed his Master's portal through to Beauxbatons without it, but he still felt uneasy that he did not have a ready escape mechanism to hand. His Master had assured him that the anti-Apparation wards would dissolve soon enough, rendering an escape Portkey superfluous. Peter wondered, however, whether a small part of the Dark Lord's reasoning might have been that the lack of any other means of escape would form an incentive to ensure that the Erosion Curse was executed correctly.

It had not gone unnoticed, in the short week that had passed since the fall of Durmstrang, that the Dark Lord appeared to have shrugged off the disturbing lapses of sanity that had so afflicted him during the days of draining the Beauxbatons Key. Clearly, then, the duel with the famed Albus Dumbledore had been good for his Master, if not perhaps quite so good for Peter; with the restoration of the Dark Wizard's intellect had come, it seemed, an increase in his Master's suspicion of himself, he, his Master's most loyal servant...

His fingers continued to trace the outline of the Portkey, a smooth, oval pebble carved from the corner of a dungeon corridor. It had been a long summer's work with the year's preparations, flitting between the two magical schools as he acted upon his Master's instruction, with only the resources available to a miserable House-Elf to help him.

But he'd risen to the challenge, as he'd risen above adversity throughout his life. Oh, he knew he'd always been considered the weak one... people's eyes were drawn to the three stars, Sirius, James, Remus. Their eyes would pass over him - noticed but not *noted*, but what had that mattered, in the end?

As always, when he thought back to those final months, he wished it had turned out differently. Lily hadn't had to die - it was only James and Harry his Master had needed, and he'd been *promised* Lily in the aftermath.

That was what Remus and Sirius, his so called *friends*, had failed to understand... it was *hopeless* to resist the Dark Lord. Well, it *had* been hopeless, and would be once more. So he'd done his best to ensure that Lily would be alright - he'd have taken care of her, the way it

should have been from the start. It was only James and Harry who'd had to die, but it hadn't worked out like that.

He'd taken the long term view, and could honestly say that he'd only had Lily's best interests at heart. After all, who would willingly choose death over life? Not when they could have had so much to live for, together...

The full-moon was half-hidden behind the heavy cloud, its pale light illuminating the castle's masonry, slick from the night's rain. Shafts of weak light fell through the narrow leaded windows punctuating the corridor's wall as it led the way to the dungeons, the patter of rain on glass and the soft flicker of torchlight the only sounds this deep in the castle. Already fortune was smiling upon him: Remus was in the dungeons, but Sirius was nowhere to be seen. A beautiful creation, the Marauder's Map - they'd all had a hand in its construction, but it would have been *nothing* without the input of the rat's explorations and discoveries.

And it was his name, second in the list, Moony, *Wormtail*, Padfoot and Prongs. Well Prongs was dead; when faced with the choice of his own death or James'... well, one had to take the long-term view in such matters. If he'd died, it would only have delayed the inevitable. The Dark Lord was not a man taken by passing fancies - James would have died soon enough, and then who would have been there to take care of Lily?

Lily with the red hair, the bright smile and the mesmerising emerald green eyes. Lily, the one person who *didn't* seem to think that he was just some second-rate hanger-on, clinging to the coat tails of Remus, Sirius and James' much lauded brilliance.

Lily, who should have been *his*.

It was a hard thing, to lose everything you had ever lived for in a single week. Harder still to see everything that you had dreamed might *be* vanish in an instant: his future wife and then his Master both dead, and his so-called best friend quick to leap to virtuous judgement.

But, he reminded himself, Sirius had underestimated him in the end. History had shown who was the greater wizard that following week, had it not?

He waited, body tense, senses alert for the signal that would start it all. Start it all and end it all. End the years of waiting that had passed so slowly, end the torture of having to mask his presence in the world - living as a *rat* in the care of those blind, trusting Weasleys (after all, *what* kind of rodent lived for twelve years?).

The Dark Lord's reign would be renewed, and he, Peter Pettigrew, was, quite literally, his Master's right hand. The Dark Lord would have been nothing without his assistance: it was *he* who'd found Bertha Jorkins, *he* who'd cared for the Dark Lord in those long, cruel, bodiless days. *He'd* been the one to restore the Master's flesh and bone, his own sacrifice to be rewarded with power beyond imagining.

Power brought respect, *absolute* power absolutely so.

It was almost ten o'clock when the shrill, piercing scream of the first attack cut through the night. In response, all the corridors' torches leapt to full-flame, the increase in brightness causing Peter to squint momentarily until his eyes adjusted. Twelve years of living as a rat had conditioned certain mannerisms into his being, and his nose quivered as he scanned his surroundings one more time before heading deeper into the dungeons.

The attack would be three-fold - that much the Dark Lord had shared with him. In possession of an almost unrivalled knowledge of the castle itself, thanks to the return of *his* map, Peter had been assigned the duty of breaking the wards from the inside. The main attack would arrive at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, with a wing of Chinese Fireballs sweeping in from the East.

And by your friends hands shall you die. The irony was inescapable, he thought, as his hurried, furtive steps led him deep into the castle's underbelly. The Marauder's Map the tool that would, in part, lead to two of its creators' own deaths that night. It had been a marvellous stroke of good fortune to have discovered the device on Ron Weasley's body, that night when the first plan had gone awry.

Quite how Harry had managed to track down the two girls' absence so quickly still puzzled him. The Dark Lord had not been impressed with the mission's apparent failure, but Peter had managed to evoke the wizard's mercy once he'd demonstrated the power of the Map. He'd seen the hunger in his Master's eyes as he'd demonstrated how the non-descript parchment revealed not only the Potter boy's whereabouts, but Dumbledore's too. Not to mention the enigma that was Severus Snape.

His mind prompted, he scanned the Map for his schooldays' adversary. In his dungeon (where else?), one of the Gryffindor girls, Brown, was also there, no doubt serving detention. Peter smiled - he remembered well the Weasley boy's - Weasley boys', in fact - he remembered well their rants on Snape's legendary favouritism, and the Potion Master's evident hatred of all things Gryffindor.

There was reason enough for that, he reminded himself, allowing a small smile of triumph to flicker upon his lips. They'd all had their rivalries with the Slytherin - it had been hard to say which had burned the fiercest. Great days, great days...

He cut off the reflection before it became nostalgia; the world had become a different place, and a place in which he wasn't sure whether Snape could be trusted. Yes, the man had returned to the Dark Lord's side, paid the traitor's penance, made all the right noises... but there was *something* about the man that Peter didn't trust, and, when it came down to it, he was normally right about people.

As it happened, the Vellum witch had neatly scotched that particular hurdle. When the Dark Lord's madness had been at its most intense, it was Snape that had been required, and it had been Snape who'd disappeared completely. Sent out, once more, to protect his Master's health, trusted with yet more of the Dark Lord's secrets, Peter had followed the trail across Europe, winding up in the Carpathian Mountains, and the castle of Durmstrang.

And there he'd waited, watching Snape rot before his eyes as he tried to fathom why the Dark Lord seemed to value the pathetic, traitorous Potions Master above his own, *unsurpassed*

loyalty. It hadn't hurt to wait: the Dark Lord would have no means of knowing how quickly he'd have been able to lock onto Snape's trail, and as the rat had scurried about the castle's corridors, watching the Tempus campaign advance on all fronts, he'd begun to wonder whether he'd been backing the right side.

Life had taught Peter that loyalty, whilst important, should never be the ultimate, ruling force in his life. What use was friends' gratitude to a dead man, after all? You could hardly take it with you.

So he'd waited, watching the balance of power shift, Tempus extending its influence across Europe, spreading from the East, as his Master had established his own stronghold in France and moved Northward, across the Channel and into Britain. And he'd still been waiting that night, when *Harry Potter* had walked virtually straight into his lap.

The second Peter had seen the way the battle was going, and the extent of the Harry's powers, he'd known what he had to do, and he'd Disapparated to break news of his discoveries to his Master.

The Dark Lord, who had long had his eye on Durmstrang, had immediately launched an attack of his own: the prospect of gaining not only Snape, and the Durmstrang stone but *the Potter boy as well* had proved too strong a lure.

He should have known. The moment he entered the cell-block, and saw the prostrate, bound bodies of the two werewolves he was reminded of Remus' *tiresome* nobility about the whole thing. He, James and Sirius had worked out that it was no ordinary malady that incapacitated their friend every four weeks... At first he'd been impressed, strangely in awe, even, of the stoic manner in which Remus had borne his curse.

He'd even gone along with James and Sirius in the Animagus research (it amused him greatly that Sirius had been the one to present him with the perfect means of escape from that November duel), despite his misgivings. Yes, yes, it was all very *noble* of them all, but, at the end of the day, Remus Lupin was a *werewolf*.

Somewhere, Peter felt, looking back on his last three years of schooling, somewhere they'd all lost sight of that basic fact, too caught up in schoolboy vendettas and pretending to be clever. Nothing gave one perspective quite so acidly as the passage of time, and now, as he looked upon the sedated form of the beast, he wondered whatever had possessed him to think of it as a friend.

"*Alohamora*," he murmured to the cell's door, pushing the bars open with his silver hand. The werewolf, pathetic, docile, *trusting* gave no indication that it was aware of his presence.

Finally, a contest on a level playing field. The wolf was secured with magical ropes binding hands and ankles to the bed, steel chains around the midriff and the legs. Vacant eyes blinked stupidly, the Wolfsbane having dulled its mind so much that it couldn't comprehend the threat it faced.

"Oh Remus," sighed Peter, sadly, running the silver tip of his finger along the creature's jaw. The fur singed in the motion's wake, and the stupid beast's eyes blinked a little more urgently.

Peter shook his head, "you never gave me a chance to put my side of the story, did you?" The night in the Shrieking Shack two years previously still cut deeply: that his best friends would be so *quick* to turn against him. So eager to dismiss the possibility that he'd been acting in *everyone's* best interests.

"Oh, no," he whispered harshly, as the wolf tried to evade the metal's touch, a pathetic, whining, whimpering plea forming in its throat, "you couldn't think that poor, pathetic *Peter* had done the right thing, could you? A bit *quick* to take Sirius' side... but you always were, weren't you?"

They always had been. Except Lily: she'd always listened to him. She'd understood him. She hadn't been meant to die.

Peter lifted his hand from the wolf's fur, twisting his arm so that his thumb hovered over the wolf's bristling fur, right between the eyes. "Sirius thought he could best me, *old friend*, but he failed then, and he'll fail tonight also. And you? Don't think I've overlooked your part in our little showdown the other year in that pathetic hovel of yours..."

The wolf gave no indication that it could understand the explanation it was being offered, but he was not a malicious person, and he felt it only fair to ensure that Remus had fair opportunity to understand why he had to die. One did not take one's friends' betrayal lightly.

"You had your chance that night, Remus," he explained, pityingly, "but you backed the wrong side. You would have let Sirius *kill* me... after *everything* we did for *you*. Well, *old friend*, if that's the way you want it..."

Peter slammed his hand down onto the wolf's skull, the flesh burnt at the silver's touch, the skull's bone crumbling as he increased the pressure. The stupid, dull, uncomprehending eyes suddenly snapped wide open, and the beast's body flexed and strained against its bonds as the pain hit.

His Master's gift was truly magnificent. Peter had marvelled at the silver hand's wondrous powers on many occasions throughout the month's since the Dark Lord's return to power the previous June, but the current contest was beyond anything he'd dared dream. Finally he could compete against Remus on equal terms. Finally he was stepping out of the Marauders' shadows, putting yet one more ghost to rest. With Remus gone, there were only three more people whose knowledge of his Animagus form constituted a threat to his safety: Sirius, Harry and the Granger girl.

No-one knew where Harry was, but that was really Macnair's problem: he was the one who'd promised to deliver the boy to the Dark Lord. Peter, a born survivor, had thought Macnair's promise rash at best - it did not do to incur the Master's displeasure, still less where the Boy was concerned. And nothing incurred displeasure quite so quickly as failing to deliver on a promise. As for the other two, well, Sirius had to be approached with caution: the man quite simply wasn't stable. It would be a simple matter, however, to deal with the girl.

The wolf's distressed howl cut through the cell's air, the body convulsing hard as the silver burnt through the bone and then, fingers plunging into the brain, the beast suddenly went limp, shuddering spasmodically. Hardly anything remained of the skull: the bone had crumbled to dust between the hand's silver fingers, the flesh boiling away at its fatal touch.

The rest of the wolf's body, untouched, sagged limply on the bed, no longer a threat to innocent people's safety.

One less werewolf in the world was not exactly a grieving matter. Remus had made his stand that night in the Shrieking Shack; he'd made his position absolutely clear, so he should have known that Peter would, one day, call him to account.

Pulling the cell door shut behind him, Peter stepped back into the corridor that separated the two cells. Across the floor, the Finnigan boy was bound in exactly the same manner as Remus had been. Peter found the concept of Remus' self-pity and abject self-loathing being echoed by the Irish boy slightly nauseating. If they were *that* repulsed by themselves... well, braver people would have ended it all.

They wouldn't have tried offloading their guilt onto their friends, dressing up their foul disease under layers of cloying humility and martyrdom: 'oh woe is me, I am but a poor, helpless victim: a slave to the cycles of the moon...'

Peter narrowed his eyes at Seamus' docile form. *Werewolf*. Savage, untamable beast. A Dark monster, not fit for *anything* much, really. He flexed his silver fingers as he considered the loathsome creature's bound form: he'd be doing the world a favour, after all - no-one *wanted* the things about. All it would take was one slip of the bonds, and then someone else might be afflicted with the same curse.

Peter wondered what sane person knowingly ran the risk of inflicting the curse of Lycanthropy on others, on innocents. If Remus had been half as noble as he pretended to be, he'd have done the decent thing *years* ago. Every month that he'd continued to live, he'd put the lives of others at risk. Yes, he mused, preparing to unlock the Finnigan boy's door, he'd be doing the world *two* favours that night.

Hurried footsteps announced her presence long before she could see *him*, and Peter had ample time to train his wand at the turn of the corridor. The map, still primed, had warned him that this was Lavender Brown, approaching, alone.

"Seamus! Seamus!" she called, before she'd even reached the corner, causing Peter to marvel at her ignorance: the boy was in his werewolf state, and would have no knowledge of her presence, still less understand her words.

A flurry of black robes and blonde hair finally made it into his section of the corridor, and immediately the girl pulled herself to a stop: "you!" she hissed, aghast, "Petty... petty... *Wormtail!*"

"*Stupefy!*" commanded Peter, in response, slightly unsettled that this girl knew his Animagus name. That was a further problem that would have to be dealt with, he realised, as she collapsed into a puddle of black robes on the floor.

Checking to verify that the werewolf was firmly bound, Peter left Seamus' cell to cover the short space of ground between himself and the girl. There could be no knowledge of his

presence within these walls, that much was certain, he reminded himself, training his wand between her eyes.

His intention had been to Obliviate her memory - that, certainly, was the quick option. But memory charms could be broken. He'd seen it done, and whilst the process wasn't pretty, it was certainly effective. He looked back at the open cell door: why should *he* be the one with her blood on his hands?

"*Mobilicorpus*," he murmured, and Lavender's body lifted from the floor.

The floor shook with a deep, resonant rumble, the stonework seeming to transmute into marbles momentarily - everything slipping, sliding, collapsing about him. The moment passed almost as soon as it had begun: *that*, he assumed, had been the Astronomy Tower.

"*Finite Incantem*," he concluded, and watched the puzzled girl pull herself up from the floor, amusing himself with the slowly dawning realisation that was written clearly across her face as she took in her surroundings.

"You!" she cried, again, "what... what have you done?"

He'd been surprised to discover she didn't even have her wand on her - not, in his opinion, an intelligent oversight. It didn't do to wander about Hogwarts unprotected, even in times of peace... and tonight, of all nights, to be so vulnerable was very ill-advised indeed.

Obviously realising that he wasn't about to answer, Lavender's head snapped around to look at the bed, where her darling werewolf lay, still bound. Her obvious affection for the monster made him feel unclean, unwholesome. It just wasn't *right* to befriend filth like these... *beasts*.

Blue eyes locked back onto him once more, and Peter was mildly impressed to see fierce, but futile, anger behind them, "why have you put me in here with Seamus?"

"Well," he observed, ignoring the question, and taking his time to rake his eyes up and down the girl's body, "*you're* a pretty thing, aren't you?"

The eyes widened in surprise, and then... was that revulsion? "Get away from me," she hissed, taking a couple of nervous paces deeper into the cell. Not that it would do her a scrap of good.

"Now, now, pretty girl, that's not very nice, is it?"

"I know all about you," she countered, although the tremor in her voice gave away her fear.

He noted with grim satisfaction that she patted her wand-pocket in her robes, as though, by some miracle he might have neglected to ensure that she wasn't armed. "Have you now?" he murmured, raising his wand. "*Crucio!*"

The girl *screamed*, and Peter sighed, wearily: no imagination.

The wolf, on the other hand, moaned dully as it flexed its body against the restraints.

Lavender, who had evidently now worked out that he hadn't cast the Cruciatus Curse upon *her*, turned to look from the wolf, to him, and back to the beast once more, "Seamus! Seamus!"

It was a shame, really. So pretty (although he preferred red-heads), and yet so stupid, "he can't hear you," he explained, releasing the wolf from the curse's hold, "that's not your precious Seamus, my dear, *that* is a werewolf... Your Seamus won't be back until the moon has set."

"Then... then... what... why?"

Tired of waiting for the girl to pose even a simple question, Peter hit the wolf with *Crucio* once more, whipping the wand furiously as he watched the beast flail blindly. The dull moans of pain grew louder, soon drowning out the girl's pathetic protests.

Suddenly, the wolf's muted howls snapped into a snarling roar, and the beast's limbs started flailing against the bonds. Even with the protection of the cell's bars in front of him, Peter still took half a step back. A loud, triumphant snarl heralded the wolf managing to free its right arm... or leg... or whatever one was supposed to term a werewolf's front limbs.

The girl had thrown herself against the cell's bars now, knuckles white as she gripped the iron in sheer terror. Peter again released the wolf from the curse, it having served its function and broken through the docility.

"Please!" she cried, suddenly desperate, pulling at the bars as though her puny arms could bend them apart, "you've got to let me out of here... the Wolfsbane hasn't worked properly..." the whites of the girl's eyes were clearly visible, and all colour had drained from her face.

A second rope snapped, this from the wolf's ankles, giving the beast more purchase against which to struggle against the remaining bonds. Peter smiled, inwardly - it was now only a matter of time before the monster was free. He returned his attention to the girl, "what's it worth?"

"What?"

Peter rolled his eyes; she was certainly slow on the uptake, "what's it worth, to *me*, to help you out of there?" he enquired, suggestively.

"No... no," she actually shook her head at him, evidently failing to appreciate her plight.

The metallic clatter of chain-links falling to the floor told them both that the wolf was continuing to make good progress in freeing itself from its restraints. The pain inflicted by the Cruciatus Curse had succeeded not only in breaking through the drug-fuelled stupor, but also in goading the beast magnificently. She'd come round, Peter knew it, but it was already too late.

Lavender, however, was doing her best to backtrack. She swallowed, nervously, before delivering her pathetic offer, "please... please," she cried, tears starting to form in her eyes, "I'll do... I'll do *anything*... anything you want... just get me out of here..."

The girl's sobbing was actually quite moving, but Peter managed to feign his disappointment quite well, "oh, but you're just *saying* that," he protested, sadly, "you don't *really* want to..."

"No!" screamed Lavender, frantically, "I *do*, I *do*, just *please*... Please, please *please* let me out! I'll do *anything*, anything at all... But you've got to help me!"

Pitiful.

The wolf continued to thrash about on the bed, ropes and bonds loosening ever further as the blind fury of the beast's colossal strength took its toll. And as the restraints grew looser, so each successive bout of thrashing was offered more purchase, freedom beckoning with increasing speed.

Peter savoured the horror in the girl's eyes, watching silently as she alternated between checking on the wolf, behind her, and pleading with him to release her.

But it was too late for that. And besides, she *knew*. And he couldn't have that. He couldn't have that at all.

Remus always had been a stickler for details, and Peter had been unsurprised to note a silver short sword propped carefully against the corridor wall. That had been Remus: thoughtful, to the last.

Literally.

He turned his back on the girl's desperate screams, and kicked the weapon across to the cell bars, where it clattered to a stop.

"You can't leave me here!" begged Lavender, horror-struck, "no, no... no..."

He ignored her, "that blade is silver; if you know what's good for you, you'll kill your dear Seamus before he breaks free of those bonds. Sadly," he continued, "I have to leave now. Good luck..."

He took a few paces down the corridor, before hesitating as he heard the scrape of metal, the girl having picked the sword up through the bars. He hoped he hadn't underestimated her: surely she didn't have the nerve, let alone the strength, to best a werewolf?

A clatter of metal, deep throated snarls and the scabbble of claws on stone told him that the wolf had finally broken free.

"Seamus..." pleaded the girl's voice, "Seamus! No... Seamus, no, it's me, Lavender... Seamus!"

Next there was a high pitched scream, which ended abruptly, a brief gurgling mixed with the sound of tearing flesh and the wolf's snarls. He'd known she hadn't had it in her: too attached to the belief that it really had been her precious *Seamus* inside the monster.

And as for the boy? Well, he'd have no recollection of the night's events - they'd find him in the morning, no doubt, a werewolf, a dead girl, blood on his hands... it wasn't hard to leap to the obvious conclusion. The Ministry had an excellent track record in that regard.

The cell's savagery became muted as Peter hurried away from the dungeons, and on towards the North Tower. The Dark Lord had explained that the Astronomy Tower would be dealt with, but the North Tower might still provide any misguided defenders some small measure of an advantage, however briefly.

Outside, he could hear the battle raging and, as he neared the staircase to the ground level, he transformed back into the rat - there was, after all, no point in making his presence *obvious* to the world. Sticking to the few remaining shadows in the overlit corridors, Peter scurried onwards, the silver paw glinting in the torchlight.

The rat's senses, so attuned to subtleties in environment, picked up the presence first. An unnatural chill creeping through the stone towards him, like some kind of frosted wave. And then heavy footsteps, a palpable wall of cold before, looking up, panicking, the rat saw the image of Ron Weasley.

The approaching figure came to an abrupt stop, and flung out his left arm across the corridor; his right hand held an immense broadsword, cool vapour boiling off its blade in the torchlight. The moment the feet stopped moving, the creeping frost took hold, pools of white seeping outwards.

Peter looked up into the face that had once been so familiar, dreading that he might see a look of recognition returned. Despite the chill, the Weasley boy's eyes burned with hostility, the flame red hair tipped with ice.

And yes, he *had* been recognised: "Wormtail!" spat the monstrously cold creature before him, conveying both aggression, malice and triumph.

The rat attempted to retreat, legs scrabbling backwards in the hope that he might find protective shadow somewhere, for one thing was certain: no pity lay before him. Ronald Weasley looked positively *murderous*.

Chapter 86

The stewardship of the Hebridean Black species of dragon is entrusted to which wizarding clan?

Dusk had fallen, and the Shrieking Shack's interior was lit by the feeblest of Harry's mage-fires, a precaution intended to limit the possibility that their occupation of the supposedly haunted, ramshackle building went undetected. Such precautions were fine, but the dull lighting did nothing to improve the building's ambience.

It had seemed unwelcoming, run down and vaguely unclean back in the third year, and the intervening years had hardly been kind. Still, between them, they'd managed to spruce the place up a little bit, and, as Harry kept on reminding himself, it was only temporary.

Very temporary: tonight was the full moon. *If* Parvati's vision had been accurate, and, more pertinently, *if* it had meant what they all *assumed* it had meant, then one way or another things would be coming to a head at some point during the next three nights.

He swept his sense outwards, brushing the outskirts of Hogsmeade, past the Whomping Willow, across the lake and into the castle, the clusters of presences in the five dormitories accentuating the Away Team's remoteness, spread out as they were across the castle, each serving their detentions.

Cho had drawn the Astronomy Tower, Hermione the greenhouses. Lavender was stuck with Snape in the Potions dungeon, and Neville had been assigned to Professor McGonagall. Parvati was assisting Madam Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing, whilst her twin had been landed with Professor Flitwick.

Seamus would, ordinarily, have been filing ancient tomes under Madam Pince's beady glare, but, it being a full moon, he was locked up in the dungeons, along with Lupin. Seamus and Lavender, acting every bit the married couple, just as Parvati had warned they would, had been the last people to visit the Shrieking Shack, and although Seamus had been facing up to the following night's imprisonment with his customary, unfazed indifference, it hadn't been hard to spot the haunted look in his eyes.

No Ginny, of course. Harry exhaled, shakily, not so much in recollection of what the fourth year had done to herself so much as *why* she'd done it in the first place. It had been a bad enough year for the Weasleys already, but to find out that Charlie had been Kissed was...

He looked across at Sirius, who was shuffling the dog-eared playing cards, playing the part of escaped convict to perfection. Harry shivered simply at the memory of that night during the third year; his Time-Turnered self standing by the lake, watching the Dementors swoop in - out of nowhere he'd conjured his Patronus, but it so nearly had been too late. Barty Crouch, Jnr, was the only other person Harry had known to be Kissed by a Dementor: the black, hooded creatures sucked their victim's soul from their body, leaving behind an empty shell neither living nor dead.

"Cut," offered Sirius, interrupting Harry's increasingly morbid thoughts as he held out the stack of cards.

Mechanically Harry split the deck as instructed, and then left it to his godfather to deal; Gin Rummy. Not having a chess set, it had been the best diversion they'd been able to come up with. And there was *something* right about his godfather teaching him card games - as though, somehow, they'd slipped back into the proper world, a world not tainted by death and Darkness, and he was just another ordinary teenage boy being taught card games by his dad's best friend.

Tonight, however, Harry's heart simply wasn't in the game: his mind anxiously scanned the castle, the Forbidden Forest and the skies around Hogsmeade for any evidence of, well, what else would it be but an invasion? The alarm clock's hands slowly moved onward, its gentle ticking almost the only sound apart from the rattle of rain as it thrummed against the shack's thin, wooden walls.

"How can you just sit here like this?" he demanded, finally, amazed that Sirius could calmly study his cards, apparently unaffected by the imminence of Voldemort's attack.

Picking up the queen of diamonds from the table, and frowning at the resultant hand, Sirius looked up with an infuriatingly calm expression, "we just have to sit it out, Harry," he explained, for possibly the hundredth time, "if, and I repeat, *if* they come, then we make a move." He shrugged as he flicked the five of clubs onto the table, discarded, "worrying about things doesn't change them, and it doesn't bring them here any quicker... Your turn."

Harry reached out for the five of clubs before changing his mind at the last second and taking a fresh card from the deck. Not a good move, as it turned out, and Harry discarded the two of spades straight onto the pile without even *pretending* to put it into his hand. "But how?" he persisted, "how can you just be so *calm* about it all? We could be out there... closer to hand when it all starts.. they *need* us, Sirius. Really..."

The waiting was driving Harry absolutely insane: he'd always considered himself a 'doer', acting on a course of action the moment it had been decided. Normally, this worked out just fine, not least because he seemed to find himself in desperate situations with disproportionate frequency, but every now and again a situation arose that required him to wait. Just wait, doing nothing; he wasn't designed for that kind of fight.

Sirius exhaled, and repeated his explanation with a voice that sounded as though it were on auto-pilot, "we've gone over this, Harry, *many* times. We're best off, all things considered, waiting here, hopefully undetected, so that we can move in to a known situation in the battlefield."

"But if we just, I dunno, how about we crawl along the tunnel and wait by the Whomping Willow? We'd be a lot closer then, y'know, on hand..."

"And find ourselves trapped in a tunnel, or discover that Voldemort ordered an attack on Hogsmeade first, or spend an entire night, bent double underground for no reason whatsoever... all most compelling arguments Harry, I must say..."

Harry knew it was pointless arguing; Sirius was right, they *had* agreed, and it really did make the best sense, in the long run. But still; "well how about we just move to the edge of the Forest, then? We could stay above ground... but at least we'd be a bit closer..."

"We stay put. I thought you could sense what was happening at the school from here anyway?"

Harry nodded, resignedly, and tried to concentrate on the game once more. He was losing. No surprise there, then; he *always* lost - there was probably a deep and meaningful message in that somewhere, although quite what it might be, Harry had no idea.

It was half-past nine when he first noticed it. At first he thought it was nothing, just, as Dean might have put it, a small tremor in The Force, but it persisted, a purplish bruise to the castle's perimeter charms, seeping through the magic, modifying it, adapting it, eroding it.

From his mental vantage point, the castle itself lay in grounds protected by layer upon layer of wards, charms and protections. The complexity of the network was breathtaking, encompassing everything from thin, spidery filaments of magic to almost tangible walls of nearly impenetrable power. Not knowing the true history of Hogwarts' defences (he must have skipped that section of *Hogwarts: A History* in Blackrock), he could at least make an educated guess that the spells had been built up over centuries, existing defences shored up with ever newer charms.

But now he could see a discolouration tainting the various auras, and as he watched, it seemed to grow, spreading ever more quickly, sapping the energy out of the castle's defences. And yet, he knew, to the naked eye, there would be no evidence that anything was amiss.

"Sirius," he whispered, getting to his feet, "it's happening."

Sirius' head snapped up to lock eyes with Harry: dark, intense eyes in a gaunt, hardened face. All of the man's earlier studied indifference had slipped away, leaving a resolute expression, determination and anger etched sharply in the hut's dim light. During the previous week, living in the Shrieking Shack with his godfather, Harry had almost forgotten how crazed the man had looked when they'd first met. Here, then, was a living reminder: they'd said that Black was crazy, savage, dangerous, and, if appearances were anything to go by, 'they' were right.

"Where are they?" whispered Sirius, a steely edge to his voice, and Harry could almost envisage the man imagining tearing his adversaries apart with his bare hands if he had to.

Harry frowned, closing his eyes to enhance his sense's focus, "I can't see anyone yet... wait, well maybe - there's something I don't recognise in the castle... but it's the wards. They're being attacked, somehow. Dissolving," he re-opened his eyes to gauge Sirius' response.

"*Something* you don't recognise, or *someone*?"

He shrugged, "Well, it looks like a person, but... but I don't know *everyone* in the school," he apologised, "on the other hand, though, people wandering about the castle on their own this late... it's kind of unusual..."

"And the wards are being broken," nodded Sirius, extending the train of thought, "so obviously *something's* being planned." He paused, evidently juggling various scenarios in his mind's eye. At length he fixed Harry with a sideways glance, "OK, we go..."

Harry immediately made a start for the door, but Sirius hand grabbed his arm before he'd even taken a step, "no heroics, Harry. I promised Lily and James I'd look out for you, y'know... and I'm torn. Really I am - I shouldn't be letting you wade into battle like this... but," he let out a frustrated sigh, "but what... *who* you are, now, it could make *the* difference. It really could."

Harry did his best to shrug apologetically: he hadn't *meant* any of this to happen. In an ideal world he wouldn't be attempting to seek out the most feared Dark Wizard of his generation for a duel to the end... But they didn't live in an ideal world - that message had been delivered loud and clear ever since the night of the third task. So, if he *could* tip the balance of the coming battle, then he *would* tip the balance of the coming battle. He owed it to everyone to do so; the living *and* the dead.

"Be safe, Harry," urged Sirius, finally releasing his grip.

"You too," returned Harry as they descended the steps into the tunnel, headed towards the Whomping Willow, towards Hogwarts, and towards what was certain to be a colossal battle.

As they moved, Harry's mind extended probing tendrils into the depths of his personal Darkness. The power still lurked there, deep within his mind and soul: he wouldn't succumb to it, that much he knew, but he *could* tap it. He could skim the surface of the malevolent energy, and entertained thoughts of risking calculated immersion into the raw power; not enough to corrupt, but he was certain that he'd easily be able to draw more than enough energy to bolster his abilities.

Vellum had had a point there: to an extent, Darkness was defined not by the act, but by the intent. The danger within himself, the threat that had been amply demonstrated within the Keep at Durmstrang, was that he could get carried away by his own abilities. The ready ease with which he could inflict pain and suffering upon his opponents should have been its own warning: *choose between what is right, and what is easy* implied pretty clearly that what was easy was usually what was wrong.

Great man, Dumbledore.

The castle's wards were dissolving ever more rapidly by the time they reached the Whomping Willow, and yet still there had been no sign of an aggressor, nor, indeed, any evidence that the breach had been detected from within the castle itself. So they waited, hunched up within the dampening confines of the pitch black tunnel (Sirius had suggested that Harry extinguish his mage-fire once they'd reached the end so as to preserve any night-vision they might need once they made it back out into the open).

In the blackness, Harry could *just* make out two bright points of light - Sirius' eyes, sharp, focused, alert. He suspected he must look as much on edge as his godfather, if not moreso; he'd been building up to this moment for a week, now, and for the hour of battle to be so near, yet still have no clue as to what he was supposed to *do* was utterly frustrating.

The shrill cry carried clearly, even through the night's rain. It didn't have the chill Harry associated with the Trackers, nor the majestic power of Charlie's dragons. This was something different again: cold, cruel, almost *withered*, it seemed.

Instantly Harry swept outwards, trying to place the source of the call, but was immediately distracted by a blazing cordon of energy that had erupted at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. A gently curved, brilliant arc seared its image into his mind, with energies and patterns pouring outwards, towards the lake, towards the castle.

"Move!" he hissed, urgently, nudging Sirius with his elbow. Sirius pulled back the trapdoor, the wind whipping cold rain into their faces. It was just the wrong sort of rain, too: not sufficiently heavy to be inescapably drenching, but too heavy to ignore. In short, typical, bleak, Highlands rain.

Harry had flicked the Whomping Willow's secret knot, thereby stilling the violent tree's branches, at least temporarily. This was fortunate, as Sirius had frozen, almost rooted to the spot as soon as he'd scrambled to his feet. "Merlin..." he breathed, eyes fixed on the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Harry followed his line of sight, and underwent a similar reaction: a huge arc of the Forest appeared to be on fire, small shadows scurrying out from the flames, and disappearing into the darkness beyond the fire's immediate glow. It was not, however, any ordinary kind of fire: there was no depth to this conflagration - end to end it probably spanned fifty feet, but the front to back depth was... well, it practically *wasn't*, the flames seemed to be dancing along a gently curving, razor thin arc of a line, the end points sharply vertical. When all was said and done, the whole thing seemed strangely like....

"A portal," confirmed Sirius, bringing himself to his senses. "They've built a portal... but where from?"

Well, if the flames were anything to go by, thought Harry, it looked like the very gates of Hell. But that was wizards for you: they couldn't resist a little showmanship, every now and again.

As if in answer to the weird, piercing cry that had announced the attack, the lights of the castle had suddenly leapt in intensity, the torchlight from the mullioned windows burning fiercely in their defiance. Harry couldn't take too much heart from the image, however, since his mind's map of the castle's defences assured him in no uncertain terms that all Hogwarts' strength was being drained.

The bruising had become epidemic, and large sections of the defences had now completely dissolved, the aura having transmuted from purple through to black, until the magic itself could be seen decaying, folding back on itself. Charms and wards that had stood for centuries were simply melting away, leaving acutely vulnerable openings that presented whatever corrosive agent had been unleashed to an ever greater surface area of the castle's remaining defences.

Belatedly, Harry remembered to move, following Sirius as the elder man had transformed into Padfoot, wincing as the rain stung his face. They still hadn't developed anything that they

could honestly call a plan: it seemed obvious enough, however, that the Fire Portal was as likely a place as any to engage the aggressors, and that seemed to be where the huge black dog was heading.

As they grew nearer, Harry could make out some of the shapes that were pouring through the flames: Crawlers amongst them, scurrying across the grounds, making their hideous chattering noise, segmented armour reflecting the flames' orange tongues, glistening slightly against the night.

Obviously intent upon taking a direct line to the castle, the Crawlers plunged into the lake, whereupon Hogwarts demonstrated that it wasn't entirely without some means of defence. Harry heard, more than actually saw, the lake's waters whip sharply as the Threshers engaged this new prey in the shallows. There were brief electric flashes as battles were joined; Spark, he felt sure, would be amongst them. Hagrid may have had a slightly one-sided view of his babies, but, for once, Harry was glad that the half-giant had apparently left no stone unturned in his efforts to find a nice domestication project for his fifth years.

In the half-light of the clouded moon, the lake's edge was a mass of frenzied thrashing - sparks, hisses, brief tongues of flame were pitched against the Crawlers persistent, slightly disturbing chatter as their mandibles snapped and quivered. The Threshers were outnumbered - at least, Harry assumed they were, since Hagrid couldn't have managed to procure more than 40 eggs or so, and the Crawlers continued to pour out of the portal, intent, it seemed on subduing their opponents by sheer weight of numbers.

He would have liked to analyse the situation in the lake further, but several things happened at once, forcing him to direct his attention to the night's other battles. A thunderous series of roars echoed across the skies, the clouds overhead suddenly lighting up from within, a diffuse, glowing orange: *here be dragons*.

Larger beasts were now stumbling through the Fire Portal - smallish creatures that were probably goblins, and colossal patterns that could only be giants amongst them. The giants, Harry noted bitterly, had certainly not lost any time in realigning themselves to Voldemort's cause after the Fall of Tempus.

Other things were happening too, but these registered as background, since it was at that precise moment that the Astronomy Tower dissolved completely.

One second it had been there, the next it had, quite simply, *become unmade*. The stone had appeared to fold inwards, collapsing and collapsing into itself, each successive stage smaller, more fragile, and, put simply, just *less* than what had been before. Finally the entire structure had been reduced down to a single point of light, oddly reminiscent of how the picture on Dudley's old, second television had used to die when it was turned off. And from that tiny, fleeting point of light it was then gone. Nothing left of what had been the tallest part of Hogwarts.

Nothing left of Professor Sinistra's domain, the landing point for Dumbledore's Portkey, and location for many an illicit post-curfew rendezvous.

Nothing left of one of the principal symbols of Hogwarts itself: without the familiar, tall tower punctuating the night sky, the castle looked unbalanced, *broken* somehow. *Look*, the attack seemed to say, *this is what we can do*.

A split second after his brain had registered the tower's dimensional collapse, his feet detected the shockwave - a single ripple, spreading out from the castle, bucking the ground underfoot as it swept outwards, apparently gathering pace. Through the soles of his feet, Harry felt as though the ground had temporarily turned into a sea of marbles, glass rubbing against glass in unimaginable chaos.

And at that point he knew, somehow, that wherever the Astronomy Tower had gone, it wasn't *ever* going to be coming back.

Cho...

Perhaps it was that moment that convinced Harry to step into the *melée*; up until then he'd been observing the onslaught, trying to see best where his powers could be most effective, and anxious not to reveal his hand too early.

All the time the contest had been centred about the lake's shoreline, Harry had been content to wait. This was a different type of waiting to the seemingly endless hours of waiting, not knowing whether something was going to happen or not. Now they knew: Hogwarts *was* under attack, the threat *was* real, and, bizarrely enough, Parvati *was*, indeed, a Seer.

Waiting for a possibility was infinitely more frustrating than waiting against certainty. Possibility bred doubt: doubt that Voldemort might not have been planning to attack Hogwarts, and that he, Harry, had wasted a week, sitting around, in hiding, when he could have used The Thing to launch an attack on Durmstrang.

Such doubts were now removed, however, and now the wait took on a different tone. He hadn't wanted to play his hand too soon: all the time Hogwarts hadn't seemed in *imminent* danger, he'd been happy to see how the castle's physical defences countered the aggressors.

Unfortunately, the attack, if that was what it had been, upon the Astronomy Tower changed things. Changed them wholly: Hogwarts was no longer safe (if, indeed, it ever had been) - not remotely safe at all. Voldemort's forces had demonstrated that they had the power to completely destroy the castle, and all those within it, and the time to watch from the sidelines had passed.

He scanned the castle: Ron's hollow pattern was moving out from Gryffindor Tower, alone and quickly. The Astronomy Tower's collapse must have been felt throughout the castle, so it was no surprise to see his friend (or the reincarnation of his friend) make his stand. Other energies were also on the move, but the activity was too frantic and distant at that precise moment for Harry to invest too much effort into deciphering the mental pattern. He couldn't detect Cho's pattern within the castle, but with the chaos that had erupted the moment the shrill cry had signalled the attack, Harry wasn't certain that she wasn't somewhere in the midst of one of the crowds in the castle, moving back to safety.

He *knew* that she'd been in the Astronomy Tower at the start of the evening, but surely... surely she'd have got out from there the second that Voldemort's intentions had been made clear? Anxious, uncertain and not a little fearful for Cho's safety, Harry endeavoured to concentrate his mind on more pressing matters, but it wasn't easy.

Uncertainty, in its many forms, was a horrible thing, and something Harry found difficult to cope with. Uncertainty bred hope - sometimes false, deluding hope that promised much and then delivered nothing, magnifying loss in that moment of crushing realisation. It had been like that with Charlie: no matter how logically he'd tried to argue mentally that the dragon-enthusiast had probably fallen in the battle at Durmstrang, a slender ray of hope had persisted, suggesting that maybe, just maybe, he'd be OK. It was *Charlie*, after all... and, if anyone could survive in the wilderness, who would be more likely to than Charlie, who'd spent years living in a remote wilderness amidst packs of dragons?

But in the end it hadn't been so: Remus had relayed the news from Bill, and every single one of them had been crushed. The secret hopes they'd all harboured, but not dared whisper, ripped from beneath them, leaving them to face the cold, hard truth that Charlie Weasley was no longer dead or alive. He'd been given the Dementor's Kiss at Durmstrang, reduced now to a lifeless husk, a mocking, lifeless echo of the man that had once been.

So that had been Charlie: despite their best hopes, the uncertainty had eventually been put to rest in the most terrible of ways. And now Harry's mind worried frantically about Cho, about Hermione and the rest of the Away Team, scattered as they were, isolated and wandless, across the castle under their various detentions. About the only consolation he could come up with was that at least his friends were all in close proximity to teachers...

Outside, in the grounds, Voldemort's Army (for what else could it be?) continued to pour through the Fire Portal. The lake was home to two distinct sets of confrontations: the shallows were the focus of the battle between the Threshers and the Crawlers. What few Crawlers made it past the Threshers, however, were then being engaged by fast moving predators lurking in the deeper parts of the Lake. Nothing, so far, had come *close* to making it across the water.

A group of energies were taking the land route, circling the Lake *away* from Harry and Sirius. Beyond them, however, five patterns were emerging from the Forest by Hagrid's hut. Hagrid and Fang Harry recognised, naturally, but the three other patterns, huge and lumbering, were new to him. Nonetheless, Harry could make deductions: it looked like it wasn't just the Death Eaters who had giants to their name.

The clouds overhead glowed orange again, and with a thunderous roar, a dark, huge winged beast swooped down from the cover, on a course that seemed lined up directly with Hagrid's group. Harry didn't bother waiting, sending a bolt of brilliant white lightning across the night, the traces reflecting in the inky black waters of the lake.

There was a brief scream of pain as the bolt hit the dragon, the beast's hide fluorescing in the rain as the electricity crackled across its skin. Its attention caught by this new adversary, the dragon dipped its wing and wheeled about in mid-air, determined, it seemed, to attack the nuisance that had just announced its presence. Clearly, it seemed, the dragon assumed that it could return to Hagrid's group later.

Harry smiled grimly: the dragon thought wrong.

He shook the rain from his fringe, puffing out his cheeks as he exhaled. Eyes narrowed, he reached over his left shoulder to draw his sword, and let his mind ghost across the Darkness that awaited its bidding.

He would *not* succumb, this time. He knew the reality of the threat from within, and it would not catch him off guard a second time. On the other hand, he had no intention of leaving such power untapped in the coming fight.

The dragon was halfway over the lake when Harry launched his attack, focusing his power with the point of his sword, a stream of lacerating energy slammed into the beast, stripping the hide from its body and tearing the flesh from its bones. The dragon's death-cry spoke of confusion, bewilderment and disbelief before all life-force was extinguished from its pattern, and the carcass plunged, still smouldering, into the dark, violent waters of the lake beneath.

He didn't see what became of the rider.

Hagrid's group continued its progress to meet the first advances of the invaders. A cluster of patterns were starting to congregate at the top of the North Tower, Flitwick, Fleur and Vector amongst them.

A few Crawlers had managed to straggle out from the far side of the Lake; the things continued to pour out of the Fire Portal, and though the Threshers and the Lake's deeper guardians were doing their best, the overwhelming numbers in the segmented beasts' favour meant that at least some of them would reach the Castle.

Harry looked at Padfoot: they'd made their presence known, now, and battle had been joined. With more and more opponents arriving by the second, the night's first objective seemed obvious: "we've got to destroy that Portal."

He closed his eyes, and stretched his arms out wide, willing himself inside the maelstrom of energies that lived within the Portal. It was an incredibly complex structure, vast in scale, but, Harry suspected, like all intricate creations, it had to be inherently fragile. He plunged his fingertips into the brilliant colours of the aura, teasing strands of magic apart as though he were kneading dough.

It was at moments like this when Harry felt most vulnerable. Not so much the threat posed by the beasts and minions that continued to pour through the portal, nor the aerial menace of the dragons (although, granted, neither could be dismissed as trifling concerns), but the simple fact that whenever he fully invested his energies into a specific task, his mind had to release its watching brief on the rest of his surroundings. The Portal now occupied Harry's mind completely, and he would simply have to rely on their position not being detected too swiftly if this was going to work.

The Portal's energies seemed to reform about him as quickly as he pulled them apart. Thick, fibrous strands of differing colours twisted, deformed and recoiled as he wrought whatever damage he could. The field itself seemed strangely resilient - almost malleable - and there was a certain type of elasticity to the construct; he would attempt to shred a cornerstone of the structure's power, only for some guiding presence to then reform the bonds once Harry had moved on.

It was a bit discouraging, all told, and Harry snapped his head back for a moment, feeling strangely like a swimmer who'd just reached the ocean's surface after a protracted, lung-burning dive. Padfoot's massive bulk swirled about him, hair matted from the rain as the dog attempting to keep a watch on all directions. Across on the other side of the Fire Portal, the first elements of the invading party had met with Hagrid's group. The Lake, frankly, was now a confused jumble of patterns, and Harry didn't even attempt to investigate what the state of play was, there.

Two dragons were swooping along the castle's battlements, with the gargoyles' battling silhouettes standing out against the brilliant orange flames. There were a further four dragons still above them, circling, and waiting...

He'd seen enough, and had wasted precious time as it was; soaked to the bone, Harry flung his arms out wide, sword extended, and plunged his mind back into the Fire Portal, this time digging deeper into his powers, cajoling the Darkness to lend him just a little hand. He felt strangely ungallant, yet also slightly sharper as he drank deeply from his body's reserves. Emerald green eyes narrowed in the weak moonlight, and Harry leapt back into the battle with a vengeance.

This time he was able to detect a path of weakness, pursuing a ragged tear that had formed along the boundary of two different components within the Portal.

At first the tear had seemed inconsequential - the plasticity of the construct seeming to compensate for the rift. Something, however, told Harry to keep going at this, to twist the knife violently in the magic's wound, and in so doing he saw that the patterns had not been able to reknit themselves after the intrusion quite as effectively as they should have done. It was all the encouragement he needed, and clamping his eyes hard shut, to assist in bringing maximum focus to the attack, Harry tore into the teetering construct, uprooting the magic's foundations, breaking apart the guiding constraints that appeared to be keeping the Portal's own focus true.

As the damage built up momentum, the energies, formerly acting as a single whole, had started to disintegrate into separate, fluctuating groupings. The collective presence started to flicker and wobble, and, just like watching spinning plates topple, Harry had seen the Portal begin first to flicker, and then to die.

The razor thin arc that had at first burnt itself into his mind in brilliant fire had dimmed, lost its focus, and began to contract. Still Harry tore furiously at the air, his arms and sword flailing in the darkness as they sought to tear apart the physical construct his mind had associated with the magical reality. The last patterns through the Portal, before the gateway evaporated, were a pair of giants, large, hulking auras that moved lumberingly, but with heavy menace.

Pulling his arms back, and spinning the sword into a new hold, Harry exhaled slowly in recognition of one job having been done, face upturned slightly to catch the cooling rain. Unfortunately, the situation as a whole had not improved noticeably; Hogwarts' defences had been eroded completely, and even though the Fire Portal may have been closed, Harry reasoned that nothing now prevented the invading forces from Apparating directly into Hogwarts itself, and it would almost certainly be a simple matter of time before the battle opened up on innumerable fronts throughout the castle.

As if to confirm this point, a sudden flash of green light illuminated the night sky over the North Tower, swiftly followed by the appearance of the Dark Mark, the green skull's sinister grin leering down at them from the castle's skies.

Chapter 87

Name three spells listed in Chapter 6 of Miranda Goshawk's Standard Book Of Spells, Volume I

Mudblood.

"He hates me," whispered Hermione to herself, as she pulled one of the flower's petals from the stem.

Buckbeak.

"He hates me," she repeated, snapping a second of the lilac petals away, letting it spiral gently to the floor below.

Rita Skeeter.

"He hates me." Another petal dropped raggedly to the floor, the remains of the flower now looking somewhat the worse for wear.

It was Monday night, and she was serving her detention in Greenhouse 4, under the supervision of Professor Grubbly-Plank. The Greenhouse was only half-lit, the replacement Herbology professor having explained that plants needed their rest too, and the diffuse light of the full-moon was just visible through the clouds massed over the glass overhead.

Professor Grubbly-Plank had wandered off to Greenhouse 1 to look at the Shrivelfigs, leaving Hermione to attend to the Diacynthanias. Shredding the poor things probably wasn't *quite* what the teacher had had in mind, but Hermione was confused, and had chosen to fall back on one of the most elementary decision-making tools there was.

She spun the remains of the mutilated plant between the thumb and forefinger of her left hand, her right hand poised to continue pruning the remaining petals. He was so *hard* to read, that was the thing.

She *thought* that she'd got to know him over the course of the year, and she thought she was making progress. Draco had had a hard childhood, and a cold, love-less upbringing - she knew that if he just opened up to her a little bit, she'd be able to bring him round. Heal him - not, of course, that he'd thank her for pointing out that he was, somehow, defective, or incomplete. One had to temper one's critical observations of Draco quite carefully.

And all that was very well, but a second, inner voice had been arguing with increasing tenacity that she didn't *trust* the Slytherin. Never had done, and never would do. She continued to shred the luckless flower, the lilac petals collecting in a small heap by her shoes in the hard dirt of the floor, soft flashes of colour against the drab earth.

"They'll be the first to go, now the Dark Lord's back! Mudbloods and Muggle-lovers first!"

"He hates me." He hated her, he hated Harry, he hated *Ron*. He hated everything she believed in, everything she stood for.

But he'd *changed*. He really, really had, and she'd seen a side to Draco that none of them had ever imagined might exist. Thoughtful, challenging, vulnerable: she had it within her to save him, to help him make something of his life...

Hermione looked at the final petal, mournfully, feeling desperately alone: who could she talk to about it all? Not Harry: no-one could really talk to Harry these days, and even if hadn't been *Malfoy*, there was something *wrong* about telling Ron about other boys.

Draco had kissed her. She'd kissed him back. They'd shared confidences, connected at a meaningful level, and, somehow she just *had* to believe that it meant something. She'd *invested* honestly in their relationship, and even though Draco's... values were slightly different to hers, even though he might seem callous, or indifferent, or...

Gently teasing the last petal from the flower's head, Hermione bit her lower lip as she wrestled with her conscience. Half of her didn't trust Draco, but the other half *wanted* to.

"He hates me *not*," she breathed, uncertainly, letting the final petal fall, watching its path as she stood, motionless, lost in thought.

She blamed Parvati, and the others, for her jumpiness. Really, it was no different to any other evening she'd spent in the Greenhouses; unlike the rest of the Away Team, she'd been prepared for an assault against Hogwarts ever since Harry had returned, and hadn't blindly assumed that an attack would *only* come with the full moon.

Parvati herself had willingly conceded that she didn't really know what her supposed vision actually meant, and although Hermione was prepared to concede that, with hindsight, *only three shall return* had appeared to fit what had happened at Durmstrang, she remained convinced it was just that: appearance. It had been well documented that prophecies and visions had long been couched in the most generic language to ensure that interpretations could be moulded to fit events after the fact.

Her dorm-mate's 'vision', coming as it had hard upon the shock of learning of Dean's death, hadn't actually told them anything *useful*, yet the others appeared to be treating it as gospel. Even Harry was taking it seriously, although she was glad in his case - it had prevented him from dashing off to duel He Who Must Not Be Named when her friend barely had the strength to stand unaided.

Harry: Hermione had made no secret of the fact that she was worried about him - the raw, drained shock that had been evident on his face that night when he'd made his way into Gryffindor had dissipated a little, but not in a good way. He came across as remote, walled off, preoccupied...

The others had commented on it too - the impression that even when he was talking to them, his eyes were fixed on some distant point, as though he was looking straight through them.

Being one of Harry's best friends, Hermione had been used to expending a fair amount of worry on his behalf over the time she'd known him. He *could* have died in their first year - she'd taken the potion to return back to Professor McGonagall's chess-set, to help Ron, and Harry had taken the other potion, the one he'd thought would take him to Snape.

As things had turned out, it had been Quirrell, host to You Know Who's disembodied presence, but even in the first year, Hermione had known there was something about Harry, something that told her that he'd make it out of there.

The way Ron told it, the second year had been worse: the tunnel underneath the school had collapsed, and Harry had gone on ahead - a twelve year old boy against a Basilisk. But backing down hadn't been an issue - not then, not in the third year, when all three of them had feared for their lives that night in the Shrieking Shack.

That was the thing about Harry: he did the *right* thing - selflessly, in the most absolute sense of the word, driven by some internal moral compass that unerringly seemed to point the correct course of action to him.

In hindsight, the ending to the Triwizard Tournament had placed her best friend in the most acute mortal peril, and yet, ironically, it had been the occasion when they'd thought that they'd had the least cause to fear for him. Fear for him on that level, at least: the evening's worries had, instead, been focused on such mundane issues as whether he'd remember the Four Point Spell, and whether Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts would get him, and whether he might actually *win*. Well, they hadn't *known*, at the time... Hadn't known how that day would end.

No doubt about it: Harry *could* have died in each of his first three years at school, but at the end of the third task, he *should* have done.

And yet, against all that history, Hermione had never feared for her friend's life quite so much as she had done since his return from Durmstrang. He was obsessed with facing You Know Who, to the exclusion of all else, as though he fully expected the confrontation to be mutually fatal.

It was in the eyes: emerald green, a slightly unfocused cast to his expression, as though his mind was constantly on something that he alone could see. Something only he could see, and something he couldn't see *beyond*, either.

As the hour grew later, Hermione scowled upwards as the rain's patter grew more insistent on the glass overhead. The Greenhouses were set apart from the rest of the castle, which meant that although it was universally agreed that she'd got the better draw in terms of detentions (Professor Grubbly-Plank was not what one might call a harsh task-mistress), she was also the only one who would be getting wet on the way back to Gryffindor Tower.

The fact that the Away Team were confined to their respective common rooms for most of the day had meant that she and Draco had spent very little time tog...

A wholly alien, piercing cry cut across the air, shrill enough to be heard through the glass, and all thoughts of enigmatic Slytherins were cast aside. Hogwarts was not without its share of surprises: staircases moved, paintings talked, there were trick steps, hidden doors and a

poltergeist that had absolutely no respect for a person's dignity. Nonetheless, Hermione felt her eyes widen, the breath catching in her throat as the sound penetrated: quite how she knew for certain she would never be able to say, but the sound did not *belong* to Hogwarts.

All the torches within the Greenhouse suddenly leapt to their maximum flame, forcing her to squint against the dramatic brightness, temporarily. Professor Grubbly-Plank's hurried footsteps were accompanied by an equally hurried command that Hermione should return to Gryffindor Tower, immediately.

"Bu..." started Hermione, pulling herself together with a brief shake of her head, "what was that?"

"The castle's defences," explained the Herbology professor, her head twisting left and right, anxiously scanning their surroundings, although there was no immediate evidence of any intruders. "The defences," she repeated, "they've been triggered..." The elderly witch blinked rapidly, obviously disconcerted, before repeating her instruction to Hermione, "you must get back to your common room, *now*, child, *now*!"

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but by that time the professor had grabbed one of her arms and was steering her rapidly towards the Greenhouse's door.

So they *had* come with the moon, then. Coincidence.

Probably.

It was miserable weather outside: the Greenhouse door banged shut behind her, and Hermione squinted into the rain at the castle's black form, surprised at just how brightly the torchlight shone through the windows and doorways. Taking heart from the castle's defiant mass, Hermione set off towards the nearest entrance when a shadowed figure scurried into the edge of her vision.

Not for the first time, and probably not for the last, Hermione reached instinctively for the wand that wasn't there. Defenceless, alone...

"Granger! Hermione," Draco's voice was urgent, pitched just loud enough to cover the short distance between them.

He'd used her first name again: so maybe he *did* like her. Like that. She tried to remind herself that she wasn't supposed to be touched that he knew her name; "Draco... Draco? What..."

"The castle's coming under attack," he hissed, finally coming to a stop next to her, hair matted from the rain, wand at the ready in his left hand, "we have to get out of here..."

Hermione could feel her heart beating in her throat: *they* had to get out of there, he'd *come* for her...

Her other self, however, was not so easily won over, "but.. but... what do *you* know about it?"

Draco, who'd been anxiously scanning their surroundings, as though expecting adversaries to leap out of thin air any moment (so, evidently, it wasn't just Ron and Harry who hadn't read *Hogwarts: A History*), directed an incredulous look at her, right hand outstretched in invitation. "We have to get out of here," he persisted. And he really, really meant it.

"But... but," Hermione's eyes narrowed from behind the soggy elements of her fringe, "I still don't know if I should trust you."

"We haven't got *time* for this!" hissed Draco, and, oddly, pulled his robe's left arm up, to display his forearm to her. Pale, unblemished skin.

She looked up, questioningly, "and...?"

"Look, I haven't got the Mark... You know about the Mark, don't you?"

She nodded confirmation, "but... but you're too young to take the Mark..."

"Check Pansy's arm sometime, then," he muttered, darkly, "look, the castle *will* fall tonight... it's not *safe* here... c'mon... or do you *want* to die?"

"Professor Grubbly-Plank told me to get back to my common room," relayed Hermione, hesitantly. She wasn't supposed to go against the word of a teacher, but Draco had *come* for her. He'd expressly made his way across the castle to warn her. Above them, the clouds suddenly glowed orange, thunderous roars reaching them a moment later.

"Dragons," Draco informed her, reaching out to grab her hand, and the Slytherin set off, dragging her behind him until she stumbled into the half-jog sufficient to keep up with the pace he was setting.

"Where are we going?"

"Hogsmeade; there's a secret tunnel we can take..."

"You're not going to stand and fight?" Hermione was slightly affronted by the apparent... no, not cowardice, that wasn't being fair to him. Still, it was hardly Gryffindor to desert the castle.

"This isn't my fight," he explained, hurriedly, "I don't care overly much for this place," he elaborated, indicating the castle's walls with a vague sweep of his wand.

Hermione opened her mouth to protest that he *couldn't* say that, when she realised that he was telling her the truth. He *was* being honest with her, but that just made it all the more bewildering that he'd sought her out, rather than just making his escape alone. More bewildering, *and* more special.

"And," he continued, turning sharply to ensure they remained in shadow as they moved further away from the Greenhouses, "I'm not interested in *their* side either..."

"I thought you bought all that Pureblood stuff?" queried Hermione, interested now in her boyfriend's motivation. He was *so* much deeper than people gave him credit for.

"Blood counts," he replied, absently.

Hermione didn't know what to make of such simple honesty. For him to be so unguarded with her was... touching. It meant that she'd really reached him, and that she had been right. Unfortunately, he also seemed to hold views that she herself considered abhorrent. Still, she'd made a start, and she didn't doubt that she could continue to reform him.

"The Dark Lord... c'mon, keep in the shadows... serving the Dark Lord... that's not loyalty, that's servitude. I'm a *Malfoy*, and I'll never be anyone's servant..."

Hermione frowned, unhappily; here she was, on the threshold of absconding from school, *hand in hand with Draco*, but he kept on saying these horrible things. And yet she was able to take comfort from the fact that he *could* be so unguarded with her - that, obviously, he trusted her. And cared for her - she was *important* to him: why else would he have come to fetch her from the Greenhouse?

Her alternative inner voice, the annoying, sceptical one as far as matters Draco were concerned, asked her why, indeed Draco had come to fetch her from the Greenhouse. Her fate was in her hands: she could choose to trust him, or she could risk the consequences of rejecting him. She reminded herself that he was undoubtedly the stronger, physically. And then there was the trifling detail that *he* had a wand, and she did not. And finally, he'd *come* for her. He really had.

It was a calculated risk. She knew that she was putting herself into the hands of someone who hadn't fully demonstrated that he was deserving of her trust, but Hermione tried to convince herself that she was in control of the extent of her exposure. Yes, she would take this step - she could always retreat at a later date. She was still in control of things, and that was important.

They were scurrying along in the castle's shadow, the wet grass soaking through Hermione's shoes as she followed Draco's lead. Disturbing noises were coming from the far side of the castle - the lake and the Forbidden Forest were hidden from view, but she could tell that *things* were happening. Up on the castle's roof, the gargoyles pounced about the crenulations, casting shadows onto the dark grass, their grotesque forms distorted further by the perspective shift.

Abruptly, Draco froze, and Hermione followed suit: four figures had materialised a few feet in front of them, hoods up, faces masked behind the leering image of a skull. Death Eaters. In Hogwarts... but they *couldn't* have Apparated in, surely? There were wards, protections, enchantments against that sort of thing...

Before Hermione could process any further thought, however, Draco, tightening his grip on her hand further, had yanked her forward roughly. As she stumbled to keep her footing, he steered her in front of him, locking her arm against her back. The tip of his wand stabbed against her neck as Hermione's entire world collapsed about her: he'd *betrayed* her. It had all been an act.

And she'd been so *stupid*...

"Malfoy!" the lead figure spoke, nodded his head briefly in Hermione's direction, "what is the meaning of this?"

"This," crowed Draco, the old triumphalism back in his tone, "is Potter's Mudblood bitch..."

Hermione went weak at the knees, her blood had run completely cold, and her heart hammered painfully against her ribs. Her sense of humiliation was so acute she was half convinced she was actually going to physically sick. She opened her mouth to protest, to appeal to Draco, to say *something*, but she could barely force the air from her throat.

"You *promised* me Potter, Malfoy," returned the masked speaker, evidently displeased. "I trust that you understand that the nature of our deal is not negotiable?"

The words were like a punch to the stomach, and Hermione's vision swam: Draco had cut a *deal*? With Death Eaters? But he'd *said*... And so it had all meant nothing, she realised, brokenly. She'd been *used*, and shivered, reflexively, feeling unclean and unwholesome.

"...come for her," Draco was assuring the man of something.

"You promised me Potter, Malfoy," warned the man, whose voice Hermione had belatedly placed: Walden Macnair; third year, Buckbeak. Macnair was still speaking; "not some worthless, Mudblood tart..."

The rain continued to fall, but Hermione was past caring. Draco's grip on her arm hadn't relaxed at all, and her arm ached from the hold. It was cold, it was dark, she'd lost *everything*, and she was completely alone.

It was a completely alien world to her, that night: eyelashes matted from both rain and tears, Hermione could still make out the castle's outline as it was illuminated by brief flashes of glowing orange, the dragons' roars reaching her ears a split second later. Distant chattering crackles filtered through the night, and there was an unshakeable *wrongness* to the entire proceedings that she could almost taste: a cold, foreboding lump of apprehension had settled at the bottom of her stomach as Draco and Macnair negotiated some form of deal.

Quivering in the darkness, all too painfully aware of Draco's wand still planted firmly at her neck, and her shoulder burning from the fierce twist the Slytherin's lock had applied, Hermione hadn't really been following the conversation. In a daze, then, she found herself being thrust into a pair of the Death Eaters' arms: a fist grabbed her hair, to clear a path to her neck, and a different wand tip was now pressed, more sharply still, against the exposed flesh.

Her captors spun her round, so that they were at her back, and she could see Draco nod briefly at Macnair before making to turn away, and head off into the darkness: "Drac..." she started to call, still not wholly believing that he really had been playing her all along. She would have *known*...

The call was lost, anyway, as Macnair delivered a sharp, back-handed slap across her face: "you'll keep your filthy mouth shut," he hissed, "*if* you know what's good for you."

Hermione bit down hard on her lip to prevent herself from crying aloud, but her ears still rang from the shock of the blow, legs buckling beneath her. She tried to convince herself that everything would turn out alright in the end, that somehow she would get out of this mess, although quite how this would happen was beyond her.

Macnair nodded at his two subordinates, "Malfoy will meet us at the Key with Potter," he reported, "let's go."

The group set off towards the castle, back the way they'd come, Hermione's mind in a whirl. It seemed obvious, with hindsight, that Draco, clearly, had promised Macnair that he'd somehow 'deliver' Harry to the Death Eaters. The odd thing was that she couldn't quite bring herself to believe that Draco actually *would* keep to his word (he didn't have a spectacular track record in that department). No, Draco would look out for one person, and one person only, she reminded herself, bitterly: himself.

That didn't actually matter, however: Harry would find her, no matter what. Even when he'd be better off not doing so.

"*Impedimenta!*" commanded Macnair, immobilising a trio of gargoyles that had deigned to step into his path. The stone creatures' movement slowed down to the speed of treacle, another obstacle passed.

They walked unimpeded straight into the school via the 'Herbology door', black robes flowing behind the Death Eaters, obviously dismissing any potential deterrents the castle may have employed against them. Hermione couldn't understand how they'd managed to Apparate into the grounds in the first place; it was supposed to be impossible, yet she'd seen further cloaked figures emerge in the Darkness, the soft 'pop' of Apparation almost lost in the continuing rain.

And the school, she reminded herself, was supposed to have its own protections in place, yet the Death Eaters seemed to be able to move through the grounds at will. The dragon riders in the sky above were strafing the battlements with bright bursts of orange flame, and the click and swish of the gargoyles' futile efforts at staving off the attack carried through the night air.

It was all going horribly wrong, everything. As they marched through practically deserted corridors, the sounds of intense fighting on the far side of the buildings started to become more pronounced - either they were getting closer to the battle, or the battle was getting closer to them.

Hermione had briefly attempted to struggle free, but against two much stronger men she hadn't stood a chance. Her neck was sore; the wand tip felt as though it had bored a hole deep into the flesh, whilst the other man held a clump of her hair in his fist, pulling it firmly downward, painfully. They were obviously headed towards the central quadrangle with the Hogwarts Soakstone; that much she'd deduced from Macnair's briefing in the rain, but as to what they were going to do with her once they reached their destination, she had no idea.

And then the temperature dropped. Hermione flinched against the cold, her soaked school robes amplifying the chill. The Death Eaters had slowed their pace to a halt by the time the cause had swung into view, blacking their path.

"Let her go," commanded the presence, standing in the middle of the corridor, feet planted firmly on the stone, frost seeping outwards as the chill took hold.

Ron! Hermione's heart leapt: Draco may have betrayed her, yes, but Ron Weasley would *always* be there for her. The tips of his hair were again flecked with ice, and he held a huge

sword quite lazily in his right hand, the point resting on the floor, ice crystals glinting in the torchlight.

Ron's eyes met hers, questioning; was she alright? Was she hurt? He'd take care of this...

"Another Weasley," noted Macnair, dismissively, and flicked his wand; "*Crucio!*" The mask hid Macnair's mouth, but Hermione could *hear* the sneer in his tone as he hurled the spell at Ron, who'd taken half a step back before he seemed to remember something, and stood his ground.

Hermione winced, inwardly, as she saw the spell connect. Ron's eyes blinked, but aside from that he made no indication that he'd just been hit by an Unforgivable. What was it he'd told her? That spells just went straight through him?

"*Crucio!*" cried Macnair, "*Crucio! Crucio!*" the latter incantations more hurried as the Death Eater took half a pace backwards, unnerved by his favoured spell's ineffectiveness.

Ron took a pace forward, the cold intensifying as he did so. His lips carried upon them the ghost of a smile, although his eyes remained cold and serious. Hermione could feel the balance of power in the exchange shifting to the Cold Wraith, and she could sense her captors' nerves.

"Let her go," Ron repeated his command, gently, but in a tone of warning that invited no form of negotiation.

"Stay where you are!" hissed the Death Eater to Hermione's left, as she felt the sharp tip of a wand pressed against her neck, "or we kill the Mudblood."

"You *touch* her..." stalled Ron, his eyes narrowing.

"What, like this?" sneered the right hand captor, ripping a mass of her hair out with a sharp tug.

Hermione screamed in pain, desperate for a way out the mess to present itself. In truth, Ron couldn't do much - if he got any closer, the cold would take its toll on her as well as the Death Eaters, and she knew that he'd already worked that out.

Macnair made his move, throwing himself forward, "*Corpus Inflammare!*" he roared, lunging at Ron's frozen form, wand outstretched.

Hermione conceded that she might have tried that spell herself, had she been in Macnair's shoes: Ron's presence was obviously rooted in cold, so it would make sense if he were vulnerable to fire. The new incantation proved just as ineffective as the Cruciatu Curse had been, however, and Macnair's momentum carried him deep into savage cold.

Ron caught Macnair's wrist in his left hand, the Death Eater screaming as the freezing cold bit. The wand clattered to the floor as the wizard slumped to his knees in pain, frost creeping across his flesh, the sleeve of his robe stiffening as it cooled. "Let. Her. Go," instructed Ron for the third time, apparently disinterested in the convulsing form of the Death Eater slumped before him.

The remaining three Death Eaters looked at each other.

Ron twisted his grip on Macnair's arm, and there was a grotesque, sickening crunch as something gave. Releasing his grip on the Death Eater, Ron stepped over Macnair's convulsing form, bunched up as it was in the foetal position, moving closer to Hermione and her captors.

He brought the sword up in a calm, deliberate motion, but before he could repeat his command for what Hermione suspected would be the final time, the corridor's walls reverberated with a thunderous sound like rolling thunder, and she felt the ground disappear beneath her feet momentarily.

The entire world *swam*, and was then restored. Ron's eyes locked onto hers, evidently as perplexed as she was as to the nature of the disturbance.

The remaining three Death Eaters took advantage of the distraction and Disapparated, letting Hermione drop to the floor, unprepared as she had been for the sudden freedom.

Behind Ron, Macnair's body was now covered in a thick frost, and was shuddering tightly, but Hermione was more concerned with Ron, the emotional warmth fighting the physical cold of his proximity.

They stood in the corridor, facing each other, unable to get any closer. Ron had come for her, *truly*, as she'd known he always would do, because he was *Ron*, and they were joined by a bond stronger than friendship, deeper than blood.

Ron looked at her nervously, "are... are you alright, Hermione?" he asked.

Hermione was too tired, too exhausted and too *ashamed*, to give the enquiry the withering reply it deserved: she'd been so *stupid*, Draco had handed her over to the Death Eaters, for use as bait in a trap for Harry, the castle was under attack, *Hogwarts: A History* had been *wrong*, and Ron had to *ask* if she was 'alright'? Instead, she attempted to tell Ron what had happened, how she'd been so criminally naive, but although she managed to open her mouth to form the first word, all that came out was a string of broken sobs as tears clouded her vision.

"C'mon, Hermione," he pleaded, uncomfortably, "you're OK now... right? He hesitated, apologetically, eyes flicking up and down the corridor; "we've got to get the others, though." There was another brief pause, as he appeared to consider her, slightly nervously, "c'mon, you're OK now: I'm here."

Wiping the tears from her eyes with the sleeve of her robe, Hermione blinked miserably before pursuing Ron's statement, "the others...?"

"I came for you first," he shrugged, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

She hurried after him as Ron set a quick pace through the castle, headed down towards the Potions dungeon: they'd decided the best route would be loop down through the dungeon to collect Lavender, and then go up to the Hospital Wing to fetch Parvati. That would only leave

Neville unaccounted for of the Gryffindors, and he was with Professor McGonagall, so they'd reasoned that he was about as safe as any of them might be.

Hermione had gathered her cloak tight about her in an attempt to ward off the biting cold that surrounded Ron - even so, she was still forced to trail in his wake by a few metres, and was therefore taken by surprise when Ron suddenly flung his left arm across the corridor, forcing her to stop in her tracks.

"Wormtail!"

Ron took a pace forward, and she caught a glimpse of Scabbers before the rat transformed into a short, balding man. A man she'd seen before, looking, it had to be said, about as terrified, "Ron," he stammered, "Ron... thank Merlin I found you!"

Ron said nothing - or nothing Hermione caught, at any rate - and, instead, took a menacing step forward. Wormtail, who had been wringing his hands together, nervously, took an involuntary step back, evidently sensing the wall of cold before him.

He tried again, "now, now, Ron, it's me... your Scabbers. You remember me, don't you? Your pet..."

"Oh yes," whispered Ron with wholly uncharacteristic control, "I remember you alright..." the sword's tip scraped along the stone floor as Ron advanced a further, deliberate step.

"Ha, ha," stammered the balding man, nodding his head a little too eagerly, whilst simultaneously taking a further half-shuffle back. His eyes, nervously flicking around his surroundings, alighted on Hermione; "you! I remember you, clever girl, you were the one... that night... You believed me, didn't you? It *wasn't* my fault! I di..."

"You killed me," interrupted Ron, softly, but levelly, the single statement enough to transfer Pettigrew's attention away from Hermione and back to the more immediate threat.

"No, no... Ron... I would never... I mean, how was I supposed to know? It wasn't me! You have to believe me - I didn't know! How could I have known? Ron... R.."

Hermione heard, more than saw, the blade's tip flick across the stone before Ron swept at Wormtail with the weapon. The man was flung back against the corridor's wall from the impact, before slumping with his back to the floor, arms just managing to prop his body up as Ron advanced again.

"Ron!" screamed Hermione, shocked: he *couldn't* kill Wormtail... well, he *shouldn't* kill him, anyway. It wasn't right, "Ron, don't!" she cried, tentatively following her friend's advance.

"Flat of the blade," returned Ron, never once moving his eyes from Wormtail, who was attempting to retreat backwards, crawling upside down, as it were, his legs scrabbling against the stonework as he tried to distance himself from his aggressor.

Ron swung the sword again, only this time Wormtail seemed ready for him, and he flicked his arm upwards to intercept the blade's sweep, the silver hand trapping the steel almost effortlessly.

For a moment, Pettigrew's mask slipped, and Hermione saw a repulsive grin of gloating triumph pass over the man's face as he savoured his new found advantage. The expression faded almost as soon as it had arrived, however, to be replaced by one of consternation. In the momentary stillness of the corridor, she could hear the crackle of metal freezing, the silver hand dulling as the frost took hold.

"My arm!" screamed Pettigrew, frantically, looking back towards Ron with openly terrified eyes, "my arm!"

It was a pitiful sight, the spectacle only made slightly more palatable when Hermione reminded herself that this was *Wormtail*, the man who'd sold Harry's parents to You Know Who, and who'd framed Sirius. The man who'd been instrumental in resurrecting He Who Must Not Be Named at the end of the Triwizard Tournament, and the very creature responsible for killing *Ron*.

"What," enquired Ron, in his most hostile tone, "were you doing *here*?" he hissed, taking a further step forward, propelling his opponent before him with the sword, the silver hand frozen fast to the blade.

Wormtail, who was hopping backwards on his remaining arm, feet pushing ineffectually across the floor, opened his mouth to say something, and then, and very obviously, looked over his own shoulder, before stopping completely, looking plainly terrified.

Ron looked over his own shoulder, to Hermione, questioning. She shrugged back, not quite sure what it was that Pettigrew could possibly fear *at his back*, when he had Ron Weasley in front of him.

Ron Weasley, with the famed Weasley temper, a sword in his hand, and a quite legitimate bone to pick with him. There was nothing behind Wormtail that Hermione could think of apart from the dungeons... No, it seemed wholly apparent to Hermione in what direction Wormtail's fear ought to be directed.

In the split second that Ron had turned his head to check with Hermione, Pettigrew attempted to free his hand. He was nowhere near quick enough, nor strong enough, however, and Ron twisted the blade around from his shoulder, causing Wormtail to be thrown against the wall like a rag doll. The moment the silver hand hit the masonry, however, it shattered into a thousand glittering pieces, brittle from the Cold Wraith's chill.

Freed from the sword's connection at least momentarily, Wormtail threw himself away from Ron, howling in what sounded more like grief than pain. Hermione could see him trying to rifle through his robe pockets with his remaining good arm; in truth, she was surprised he hadn't tried to draw his wand earlier. Not that it would have done him any good. Not against Ron, she thought, strangely proud.

Ron attempted to close the gap between him and the writhing heap on the floor, but he'd barely taken half a pace forward when they both heard Wormtail's frantic, pained, hoarse voice: "*Veloce!*"

There was a small 'pop', and Pettigrew vanished from the corridor.

Ron swore loudly, and brought the sword crashing down, pointlessly, upon the spot where Pettigrew had been lying just moments before. He'd escaped *again*.

They looked at each other in relative silence for a few seconds, the distant sounds of battle filtering through the castle's stone even at this point, deep within the fortifications, before Ron spoke, "Harry's going to *kill* me."

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, although she understood what Ron was getting at...

"I had him," protested Ron, "I sodding *had* him, and I let him get away!"

He swung the sword into the wall, violently, to punctuate the final syllable, the clatter of the impact echoing off the castle's dark, stone walls.

And then, as though prompted by the echo's path into the darkness of the corridor, the two friends looked in the direction from which Wormtail had come. "Ron," ventured Hermione, tentatively, "what do you... think he was... afraid of? Afraid of down... there?"

Chapter 88

Which Quidditch team wear robes of deep-purple, with a gold star on the back?

More patterns were now materialising within the Hogwarts grounds - wizards and witches, easily circumventing whatever defences the castle had employed against Apparation. Loose batches of energies rushed about the school itself, although, if anything, the five clusterings that represented the Houses seemed to knit themselves tighter still.

With the Fire Portal gone, Harry decided that the next step had to be to meet up with Hagrid's party, to lend whatever hand they could there. He indicated as much to Padfoot with a brief, sharp flick of his head in that general direction - Padfoot indicated agreement with a curt nod of his own, and they broke into a light jog, eyes narrowed against the rain.

Overhead, the dragons continued to circle, swooping down from the cloud's protective cover every now and again to strafe the castle buildings and the more exposed windows, the Hogwarts gargoyles flailing within the crimson flames. Neither side were damaging the other in these exchanges, but Harry noted that the dragons were, at the very least, preventing any Hogwarts staff from manning the castle's battlements. Not that he was sure, entirely what good it would have done - the odds seemed to be stacking up remorselessly in Voldemort's favour.

"We'll take it at the same time. It's still a Hogwarts victory." And way back, on that long distant June night of the previous year, Harry had believed it. He'd really thought that he would be sharing victory with Cedric, and, instead, the seeds for the school's destruction had been sown that very night.

With *his* blood, Voldemort had been resurrected, and the following year of terror had begun to unfold. The genuine poisoned chalice - and he'd been foolish enough to blindly drink from it, and inflict the subsequent year's misery upon the world. It had all stemmed from that moment, and Harry was fully aware of the enormity of the debt he had to repay to the world to atone for his error.

But, with good fortune notable for its rarity, he was now in possession of sufficient power to make a difference, and right the catalogue of wrongs as best he could. He let his bones thrill to the sensation of absolute Darkness over which his mind skimmed its ghost-like tendrils, brushing the surface of an unfathomably deep, black ocean.

Power: *lots* of it. And all at his command...

Padfoot growled and sprung into the air, bared teeth glinting white in the semi-darkness of the moonlit grounds. Blinking, Harry pulled himself back from... wherever his mind had been, to meet the onrushing aggressors.

Goblins - four of them. Three of them: Padfoot's jaws had already clenched around the throat of the leader, who'd been bowled over by the massive dog's overpowering momentum. Blood

seeped darkly from the ripped throat as the creature's sharp, angular limbs convulsed with the abrupt system shock as Harry brought his guard up.

His mind was split three ways - immediate concern was given over to monitoring the remaining three goblins' movements. The creatures had fanned out, two spears and an axe held at the ready as they inched forward, wrinkled skin glistening under the night's cold rain.

The second part of his mind was attempting to discern the broader picture about them by means of his sense. Harry had no idea how the creatures had almost stolen the jump on himself and Sirius, and he was immensely grateful that Padfoot's canine senses had detected the danger within the forest's shadows. Immensely grateful and acutely guilty - he should have detected the troop long before they'd posed any sort of realistic threat.

The final portion of his mind was tracking his godfather's Animagus form, making sure that there had been no damage inflicted upon the huge dog in the opening exchange. Echoing Dean's wolf's attacking stance, Padfoot had already gathered himself into a highly strung stance once more, ears pressed flat back against his skull, fierce eyes flicking across each adversary in turn.

The sword was no song blade, Harry mused, as he spun it roughly in his hand, but that was not entirely a *bad* thing. And he could still fence, he reminded himself, stepping forward with his leading foot and engaging the left-most goblin's spear. Inside his mind, a thousand glowing patterns were rapidly resolving themselves within the mental picture of the Hogwarts grounds.

The heaviness of his sodden cloak hampered his arm's swing as he parried with the goblin, blinking to clear the heavy droplets that formed over his eyelashes as the rain continued to soak him. Padfoot was alternately lunging forward and pulling back, trying to tempt his two opponents to make a move, and step forward into his jaws' range.

A clumsy backhand sweep dealt a jarring blow to the goblin's own leading arm, but Harry suspected that he'd probably caused himself equal damage with the move, his elbow seeming to almost fizz as the nerves jangled.

The goblins, unencumbered with heavy, sodden cloaks, were able to move much more freely, and Harry found that he was being forced to retreat ever so slightly as the goblin exploited the spear's greater reach.

Above, the cloud glowed a fierce orange, illuminating their immediate surroundings briefly. As the flames died, the forest was plunged into an ever greater darkness than before, Harry's eyes taking their time to adjust to the shift in lighting.

Not that it mattered. He'd fully resolved his mind's map of their environment, and secure in the knowledge that no further opponents lay in the immediate vicinity, Harry levelled his sword straight at the goblin's chest.

The goblin seemed flummoxed by this strange move, neither thrust nor parry, and shifted on to its back foot as it tried to process what move it would have to fend next.

Utterly pointless: the sword tip flicked to the left, and Harry's mind ripped the creature's skeleton apart, shredding the carcass in the blink of an eye. Without stopping to draw breath, a

twin-pronged fork of lightning slammed into the remaining two beasts' chests, sparks cascading across the rain-soaked bodies as the electricity earthed itself through his hapless opponents.

Padfoot relaxed his stance, slightly, to give Harry a glare more searching than any true canine could ever deliver. Wincing slightly, Harry acknowledged the rebuke with his sword hand, and promised himself that he would not let his mind wander again.

A powerful roar carried through the trees: three patterns, a little distant, with increasingly denser conglomerations following. Harry looked back at Sirius, nodded briefly at his companion, and then set off purposefully into the rain, eyes narrowed, sword drawn, mind sweeping the area constantly as the huge dog shadowed his every step.

"You sick, *sick* bastard," breathed Ron, from the end of the corridor, where it turned right to reveal the werewolves' transformation cells. Hermione tried to edge closer, so that she could see what had caused this reaction, but, annoyingly, Ron had stretched his free arm out across the corridor, forming an impenetrable barrier of cold he *knew* she couldn't pass.

And although part of her was touched that Ron could be so... protective of her, the more inquisitive side of her nature wanted... no, *demand*ed, that she see too. She inched forward on tip-toe, wincing against the deep, deep chill as she craned her neck left and right trying to catch a glimpse of whatever it was that Ron could see and she couldn't. Snarls and scratches echoed off the stone walls in an alarming fashion - it almost sounded as though the Wolfsbane hadn't taken...

Her attempts at inspecting the scene first hand proved futile, however; the tips of her fingers were already burning with the intense cold, and the frost from Ron's feet was slowly spilling outwards like some kind of inverse ink-stain - white against the black parchment of the corridor's tiled floor.

"You sick, *sick*..." Ron choked on the words, and turned very slowly, very deliberately around on his heel to face Hermione. She could see his jaws were clamped tightly shut, and his *eyes*...

Whatever she'd been fearing they might find, Hermione now understood that it was worse than that. Whatever lay beyond the corner clearly had to be very bad indeed.

She looked at him, questioningly, pleading for confirmation that she'd misjudged the situation, and that, actually, it wasn't bad at all. She was sure that there would be a perfectly rational explanation...

Ron, however, simply returned her look with one of his completely open gazes: '*trust me*', the eyes said, '*it's bad. Trust me,*' they repeated, '*it's terrible...*'

And with that knowledge, a further part of Hermione's world crumbled.

Harry was absolutely *wired*, snarling and shouting as he and Padfoot cut a swathe through the forest. Sweeping the sword about him, Harry had found that shouting helped concentrate his

focus further still - it also lessened the freezing chill the rain had inflicted upon his skin as they edged closer to Hagrid's side of the battle.

A whip-like filament of pure, silver energy coiled and spun from his sword hand, flicking into the dark shadows in staccato bursts. Padfoot's fur bristled, despite the rain, and Harry drew a fair amount of strength simply from having the huge dog at his side.

A large, airborne pattern plunged down from the clouds, strafing the forest canopy with crimson fire that incinerated the leaves and branches before it.

"Down!" yelled Harry, checking on Sirius as he threw himself towards the grass, rolling as he did so, to end up flat on his back sword drawn across his body as he marshalled his shield.

The flame's boiled against the Mage's silver web, the dragon's roar mingling with the sound of splintering wood as Harry marshalled all the strength at his disposal as he slowly brought his arms together, folding the shield completely about the Chinese Fireball.

First just the wingtips caught against the shimmering membrane, sharp points in Harry's mind, until the combined inward force snapped the wingbones, and the constricting cocoon of force compressed still further about the maimed aggressor, now caught, completely helpless, in the Mage's web.

With a beast as powerful as a dragon, stifling the energy out of it - suffocating its magic, in effect - was a strenuous business, and Harry's entire body quivered with the intensity of concentration the operation required. Abruptly, though, the dragon's pattern was extinguished, the exit signature a small burst of power that sparkled, briefly, like some fierce, red planet, before all was black in Harry's mind.

Harry came round from the attack, staggering to his feet as he attempted to re-assemble his mind's map of the surroundings once more. In the split second that it took to do this, a goblin had leapt out of the shadows at him, and raised its axe above its head.

Still struggling for breath, Harry half-heartedly raised his sword, resigned to buying time through blocking the initial skirmish.

Instead, however, the axe raised at the swing's peak, the goblin suddenly slammed backwards in the air, and collapsed in a mangle of limbs, a metal bolt glinting darkly, embedded in its throat.

"Alrigh' there, 'arry?" boomed Hagrid, striding through the trees towards him, already loading a new bolt into the crossbow. Behind him, one step back on each side, lumbered two huge, black giants, wearing thick, heavy armour with white plumes of feathers marking each shoulder blade.

"But what did you *see*?" badgered Hermione, not one to give up easily in such matters as information collection. Ron had seen 'it', after all, so it was only fair that he told her...

They were backtracking. One look at Ron's face had told Hermione that there was no way they would be going *through* the dungeons. Instead, they were now headed towards the main entrance, and Madam Pomfrey's domain, to collect Parvati.

"Lavender," Ron reminded her who else they had to collect, ignoring her question *as usual*.

"Lavender's in the dungeons," confirmed Hermione, "with..." her eyes widened, "she's with Snape!" she concluded, horrified. They still had no clue what side the Potions Master was on - he'd professed loyalty to Dumbledore, but, really, Dumbledore was dead, and what if...

"No," interrupted Ron, who stopped and turned to face her, reluctantly. "No," he repeated, hesitantly, "Lavender... she's... she was..."

There was a short, awful silence, as Hermione attempted to convince herself that she was leaping to conclusions (again). "Bu..."

Ron interrupted her protestation almost before it had left her lips; *he could read her so well*. With the tiniest shake of his head - left, right, left, his eyes never leaving hers - he confirmed her fears.

Hermione clung desperately to fast dying hope; "But sh..."

"No."

And so they stood, separated by the insulating barrier Ron's form demanded, alone in a corridor in a school under attack, attempting to deal with the knowledge that they'd lost another friend. If she had thought it might help, she'd have screamed, or cried, or railed against the injustice. But none of those things *would* help: not at that moment.

"Promise me, Hermione," croaked Ron, his upper body quivering tightly as he attempted to keep control of his emotions, "promise me, if I don't kill him, *promise me* you will..."

She understood him perfectly: "Pettigrew," the name seeming to acquire fresh layers of revulsion upon each telling: she could feel her lips curling into a distasteful sneer simply *thinking* the name.

"Dark times, 'arry, Dark times," observed Hagrid, who could be said to have possessed a certain talent for stating the obvious. "What'cha doin' 'ere, anyways?"

"Looking for you," replied Harry. He decided to omit the 'waiting for Voldemort' part of the plan; he suspected that Hagrid might take a dim view of that particular strategy. "Who're the giants?" he asked, anxious to deflect the inquisition away from himself.

"Ah," beamed Hagrid, proudly, "'s Massif," he indicated the right hand giant, who grasped a huge, rough spear in a hand roughly the size of one of Hagrid's infamous Halloween pumpkins.

Harry nodded, to convey his comprehension, hoping that Hagrid would move quickly on: giants and spears carried bad associations, but better to have them on their side than be fighting against them.

"n tha's LuaLua," continued the gamekeeper, gesturing towards the second ally.

LuaLua, whose name was pronounced 'Lou-Ah-Lou-Ah', evidently favoured a stone mallet as his weapon of choice. The thick, tough hide of his forearms (Harry couldn't bring himself to think of it as skin, it being on another scale entirely) rippled with muscles as he swung the colossal mallet absently, letting the weapon's shaft land repeatedly in the palm of his left hand.

Massif, for all his size, was scanning their surroundings intently, the armoured helmet spinning left and right on the thick, squat neck. Giants managed to convey a threat just through sheer presence alone - huge, powerful beasts, seemingly purpose built for war. Built for real, proper, blood and guts war, the ground shuddered under the heavy, hobnailed boots as the augmented group headed, by unspoken consensus, onwards towards the castle.

A thought struck Harry: "he's going to try and get the Key!"

Hagrid looked puzzled, "yer wha', 'arry? Don' know which key tha'd be, do yer? 'e'd 'ave to come through me to get it..." Hagrid's tone had become increasingly darker, and more resolute, as he'd processed Harry's deduction. Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts, he took his role seriously.

Harry shook his head, "no, no, the Hogwarts Key... the Soakstone - in the quadrangle! We should try and head him off there..."

Harry had only belatedly realised that, even though *he* knew that the Hogwarts Key had been drained, Voldemort didn't. Judging from the attacks at Durmstrang and Beauxbatons, then, it seemed clear that the Dark Lord would follow a similar pattern at the castle.

Only this time, he'd find Harry Potter waiting for him.

A shrill, chattering noise reached them as they worked their way up from the dungeon levels, accompanied, Hermione discovered as she tuned into the sound, by a slightly creepy scuttling sound. It seemed reminiscent of lobsters, or crabs, perhaps.

The sounds were getting louder, and then the first of the beasts appeared: black, low slung, and about the size of a cat, the thing scuttled towards them, pincers snapping, six legs scabbling forward across the tiles, their sharp points seeming more suited to more forgiving terrain, or, at least, things offering softer purchase.

Like flesh, perhaps.

Ron wasted no time in marching towards the beast. Hermione watched, half horrified, half fascinated as the waves of cold overwhelmed the thing, the motion becoming spasmodic as the muscles slowly froze. By the time Ron brought his blade to bear on the immobilised creature's carapace, it had clearly frozen solid, and the Crawler shattered with the impact.

A collection of similar sounds seemed to be getting closer, however, and the two friends edged a little further along the corridor, wary of what they might next come across.

The first Crawler had clearly been the vanguard of a much larger force - a few steps further on, Ron had to dispatch two of the beasts, and then a second pair, before it became abundantly clear that the concentration of the things was getting denser.

They were in one of the outer corridors on the ground level: chancing a glance through the mullioned windows that looked out towards the Forbidden Forest, Hermione saw little but thick raindrops, and the occasional indistinct flash of magic in the distance. The clouds overhead flickered a deep orange, briefly, the leaded windows leaving a latticed afterimage that glowed purple, partially obscuring her vision.

Taking a left turning, Ron led the way through to the cloisters, causing Hermione to freeze, mid-step: "Ron!" she called, breathlessly, "the Key!"

Ron had stopped a few paces on, turning back to look at her, his inquisitive frown seeking elaboration. That was Ron: so emotionally *open* that, despite their much mocked 'discussions', it was the non-verbal communication between herself and Ron that had always told her more about how he was feeling.

"Think about it," she urged, "what did He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named do when he got to Beauxbatons?"

Ron, who, although evidently listening, was also anxiously scanning their immediate surroundings for danger, looked as though he was on the verge of delivering a flippant, *and no doubt inappropriate*, comment, so Hermione decided to fend off that digression by providing the answer herself: "the Beauxbatons Key! *That's* why he took Beauxbatons... and then, what did Harry say about Durmstrang...?"

Ron had stopped the active watch now, and, instead, narrowed eyes considered Hermione carefully as he joined the dots, "he... drained... the Key. The Durmstrang Key." Ron nodded just the once, very, very slightly.

"*And*," continued Hermione, "I think it'll be the same here. Do you see? He doesn't want the school, he wants the Hogwarts Key. The Soakstone..."

"And even though Harry's drained it..." supplied Ron.

"...You-Know-Who *doesn't know that*," she completed, feeling her eyes brighten as the plan took hold. Finding Parvati was a secondary concern at that precise moment.

"And *Harry*," mused Ron, who'd taken half a step closer, the frost crackling on the stone as he broke the hold it had taken, "Harry'll *know* that that's what... what You-Know-Who is after, and he's going to..."

Hermione could feel the alarm building in her throat, "he's going to duel him by the Key! Because... because he can guarantee that, eventually, the Death Eaters are going to get there..."

And, because she *knew* Ron, and his mannerisms, his body language and the whole kaleidoscope of expressions that made him who he was, she could see his objections die before he'd had a chance to mouth the words.

She was *right*. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was attacking Hogwarts because he wanted the Key, and what he assumed to be the power it offered. Harry, of course, would be well aware of the Dark Lord's motivation, and since her best friend's entire purpose in life seemed, temporarily, to have been reduced to confronting the Dark wizard, it was a safe bet that, somehow, it would all come down to a meeting within the inner quadrangle that housed the Key.

"C'mon, then," Ron's voice interrupted Hermione's internal monologue, "we'll leave Parvati - she should be safe enough with Pomfrey." To his credit, Ron did manage to look a *little* sheepish at the somewhat convenient rationalisation, but he moved on quickly, "we've got to get to the quad, and help Harry..."

And suddenly, from being *reactive*, and wandering about the school trying to catch up with a situation that had been spiralling ever deeper out of control - first the castle being attacked, then Dra... *Malfoy* handing her to the Death Eaters, and Lavender...

Tears welled in her eyes as she remembered Ron's ashen face when he'd broken the news about Lavender. Was Seamus alright? Or would he be? And what about Professor Lupin? Something had gone dreadfully, dreadfully wrong in the dungeons...

Hermione shook her head sharply to clear her thoughts, suddenly conscious of how the rain had made her hair even more cumbersome than usual. But that didn't matter, really: what *mattered* was that she and Ron had a *purpose*. They had something to put their will to, and they were going to make a difference in the fight, just as, right from Halloween in their first year, she'd always known they would.

Soaked to the bone, cold and tired, it didn't take much thought on Harry's part to conclude that he really didn't like fighting. He closed his eyes, and let his soul thrill to his power's burning touch. It was a sort of Dark thrill, in a sense - something like leaning over the edge of a tall building, seeing the ground far, far below, and knowing that all it would take was one slip, or even just a single, deliberate leap...

Harry quashed that line of thought before it could develop any further, and pulled the filaments of his mind away from the Dark core of his being. Well, almost away - squinting once more into the rain, the huge bulk of Massif leading the way, he kept a sort of 'watching brief' on the Darkness. Just to know that it was there, in much the same way he'd once put his hand across the flame in Potions, just to see what it was like. Just to make sure it was real. Just to...

Aware that he was drifting, again, and on possibly the one night above all others that he could not afford to expend anything less than complete attention upon the matter at hand, Harry quickened his pace to catch up with Massif, only vaguely registering Padfoot's shadow-like presence at his side.

A swooping dragon lit up the castle's battlements - the buildings still looked dreadfully incomplete without the Astronomy Tower, the momentary silhouette looking more like a partially built child's toy than a castle proper, and a chill of unease shivered down his spine as the brutality of Voldemort's attack was graphically demonstrated. The Astronomy Tower: completely *gone*. Not destroyed - not reduced to rubble, or crumbled to dust. There were no charred remains to tell of malevolent conflagration, no shrapnel as legacy of explosive attack. No, the Astronomy Tower had been completely *unmade*, and its absence was more troubling than Harry dared to admit.

And to add to that, he still didn't know about Cho. She'd been assigned to detention with Professor Sinistra - his fault, of course. If it hadn't been for him, she'd never have got mixed up with the Away Team's battles, and wouldn't have been sucked into layer upon layer of subterfuge and risk. But she had done, and now... now he couldn't find her at all. He hadn't been able to resolve the shimmering blue pattern's location anywhere within the castle, and the activity outside was too chaotic for him to be *sure*, but...

They marched onwards: all the patterns in the Hogwarts grounds were converging upon the castle by whatever means were available to them. The dragons continued to swoop from beneath what the riders clearly assumed were the covering clouds, strafing the castle's battlements periodically. They left the North Tower alone, however; the leering grin of the Dark Mark still hung in the night sky, the detail slightly softened by the rain, but unmistakable nonetheless. Harry remembered the strained, slightly helpless tone of Arthur Weasley's voice when he'd tried to explain to them, in the summer before their Fourth Year, just what effect seeing the Dark Mark had had upon people, back in Voldemort's first campaign: *everyone's worst fear... the very worst*.

Personally, however, Harry felt that maybe the Dark Mark was having exactly the opposite effect to that intended. Far from cowering him into submission, or burdening him with shock and grief, the image of the floating skull, the snake creeping out of its mouth, simply served to reinforce his determination to make his stand. *That* image, and all that it represented - killings, torture and torment, all springing from deep, malicious prejudice - that image served as a focal point, a call to arms.

A vivid reminder that there were wrongs in the world that needed righting.

The few intruding Crawlers that had made it through to the castle's inner corridors were swiftly dispatched by Ron as they headed towards the Hogwarts Key with a renewed sense of purpose. The simple presence of the Cold Wraith was enough to send delicate cobwebs across the creatures' armour as the residual rain froze, then, as the suffocating frost hardened, and Ron raised his sword arm, the creature beneath would judder to a halt, the malevolent pincers the last to die, as though trying to tear into the oncoming wall of cold. And then the sword would come scything through the air, and the flesh and bones, brittle from the freezing, would sometimes tear, sometimes shatter, but, always, the Crawlers broke, and body parts that Hermione would, at another time, have found interesting, would be strewn across the floor, thick with encrusted ice glistening in the torchlight.

It seemed that a long time had passed since Vellum's intriguing introduction to the Soakstones, back in what had only been September. The Key, as Hermione now preferred, *more properly*, to think of the device, looked as unchanged as one could ascertain in the

dimness of the night, and through the sheets of rain. Not that she was expecting any different: it was a Key of the Magi, after all, and even though Harry had drained the stone of all its power some time back, even *he'd* been unable to affect any material change to the thing's appearance.

"So now what?" enquired Ron. Aside from the Key, sitting blackly against the manicured lawn of the quadrangle, the area was deserted.

"Well," hedged Hermione, "we know that, eventually, the Death Eaters are aiming to end up here, right? And so if we guard the doorw..." She tailed off, because Ron was *looking* at her; "*what?*" she snapped, irritably.

"Um, Hermione," he ventured dubiously - or gently, perhaps - "they can Apparate," he explained. Then, evidently sensing that further elaboration was called for, "once wizards can Apparate, they tend not to bother with doorways and things... Remember Percy at the Burrow?"

Hermione reminded herself that, of course, she *had* known that, and recovered, masterfully, "well, anyway... I think we should keep watch on the Key, and wait for Harry... What *now?*"

Ron had turned his attention to the quadrangle's lawn, peering at it with a mixture of curiosity and concern; "what do you think'll happen to me?" He turned to face her once more, "you know, if I step out into the rain?"

"Well," she marshalled her thoughts, "clearly, the water's going to freeze. I suppose it depends upon how far out from you the rain reaches freezing point as to whether or not you get hit by hail, and I suppose that once your clothes get wet they'll freeze solid." She frowned, lost in thought; "you might get buried alive under ice, I suppose, if the rain's falling fast enough..."

Ron blinked: "cheers Hermione; I needed cheering up..."

With a spearhead comprising two giants and a cross-bow toting half-giant, the group's onward progress was never likely to be seriously impeded by the few goblins that dared wander within range of Massif's spear of Lua-Lua's mallet. Hagrid had about him that air of supreme resolve that Harry normally detected when the Keeper of Keys and Grounds was talking about Dumbledore; just by *looking* at the huge man, he could tell that Hagrid would stand and fight until his final, dying breath to protect Hogwarts from the attackers. Not in some kind of martyred sacrifice, but through absolute and total commitment: Hagrid's belief in the rightness of things was contagious, and Harry felt himself buoyed by the half-giant's indomitable spirit, a spirit that dwarfed his physical presence ten-fold.

"They won't take Hogwarts, 'arry," Hagrid assured him, slamming another bolt into the crossbow. "Tha' there castle's stood firm for a thousan' year," he continued, gruffly, "'an 'll still be standin' fer another thousan' year af'er..."

"We have to get to the Key, Hagrid," Harry reminded him, "the Soakstone, remember? Voldemort's after the Key... I have to stop him..."

Padfoot glared pointedly on the last words, but Harry pretended not to notice.

Their passage across the grounds ended slightly to the left of the school's main entrance, where a discreetly hidden flight of steps descended into the school's foundations. Intense flames, violet in colour, had suddenly erupted at the base of the Hufflepuff wing - more vandalism than actual assault. Nevertheless, time was becoming increasingly short, and it fell to Harry to end things as quickly as they had started. To do that, he needed to confront Voldemort, and to do *that*, he needed to get to the Key's quadrangle.

"Massif an' LuaLua 'll stand guard," Hagrid relayed, "'n we'll take the wine-cellar to yer quad, 'arry..."

Harry nodded assent, one small corner of his mind noting with interest that *that* was what the purpose for which the chamber space had originally been intended. It was immediately apparent, even with the imprecise scaling of his mind's sense, that the wine-cellar would be a tight fit for Hagrid, who would have to bend almost double to get through to the far side. The two giants proper wouldn't have a *hope* of squeezing through. Besides, with two giants at their back, their chances of being ambushed from behind were significantly lessened.

Padfoot led the way - Harry surmised that the Marauders would certainly have known all about the wine-cellar, and although they made quick, silent progress through that deserted section of the castle, the sounds of the assault filtered through the stone, the air and through magic itself. They could hear stone burning, cracking and splintering under the fierce heat of the flames they'd seen earlier. The ground heaved and shook, the castle's foundations reverberated, and the walls trembled to the touch.

The air held a heavy thickness to it, much like the precursor to a thunderstorm, and Harry's blood sang to the increasing build up of magical tension in the atmosphere. Where once had been balance and harmony, all of Hogwarts' spells, wards and enchantments designed as part of a whole, there was now escalating tension and conflict within the fabric of the construction itself. Spells and counterspells struggled against one another as they tried to keep their world whole, yet each correction resulted in a more exaggerated counter-correction being required, until the whole system was lurching from one extreme to the next, spiralling further and further out of control.

The torches, placed few and far between in the less-frequented parts of the castle, such as the wine-cellar, had started to pick up on the energy fluctuations in their immediate environment. Some raged madly, too bright to look at as they fed off the chaos, whilst others flickered, pitifully, before being extinguished completely, as though drowned by a rising tide.

At length, Padfoot led them back up to ground level, the coolness of fresh air welcome relief after the long slog through the castle's foundations. Harry felt his shoulders relax as he tilted his neck back to savour the sweet taste of fresh, damp air once more. They were nearly at the quadrangle now, and, as he'd somehow expected, Ron and Hermione's patterns were already waiting for them.

"Alright?" asked Ron, standing a careful distance away from Harry, sword dangling loosely from his right hand, the blade's frost just visible in the moonlight.

"Alright," replied Harry, before enquiring himself, "alright?"

"Alright," confirmed Ron, in turn, playing out the dutiful exchange of lies.

Tight grins on both faces confirmed they both appreciated the absurdity of the greetings. They both knew that neither was, in truth, 'alright'. But the language available to them just wasn't equipped to deal with the situation they found themselves in at that time. Physically, emotionally, *conceptually*, the two friends were completely on the edge, and, quite possibly, the only thing that was keeping them from flying apart from the internal stresses was the refusal to accept how bad things were.

As long as they didn't look the parlous situation straight in the face, as long as they played the game of pretending everything was alright, and not allowing despair a foothold in the psyche, they stood a chance, walking the fragile line that separated denial from hope.

Hagrid gave Ron a brief nod of acknowledgement, before his eyes lit upon the third member of their trio, "alright' there, Hermione?"

After the round of introductions had been completed (Padfoot remaining Padfoot, since Hagrid was unaware of Sirius Black's innocence, and it wasn't really the time for detailed explanations of such things), conversation died.

"So what do we do now?" enquired Hermione.

"We wait," replied Harry, firmly, in a tone inviting no negotiation.

Hagrid had settled down on the stone bench built into one of the quadrangle's walls, and was checking the cross-bow's alignment, Fang at his feet. Padfoot had chosen to lie underneath the protection of the open-corridor's roof, forelegs in front of him, and eyes trained firmly on the Hogwarts Key.

Harry, Hermione and Ron took the third of the covered walkways surrounding the quadrangle, and waited in uncomfortable silence, the sounds of battle all around serving to heighten the surrealism of the occasion.

Clearly deciding that waiting would be easier if they talked, Ron attempted to start conversation; "so Harry, then, how've you been?"

"Tell me you're joking," teased Ron, smiling gleefully as he cast a wicked look at Hermione.

Hermione for her part, shot a superior look back, "*Hogwarts: A History* is an excellent, and very informative book, and Harry liked it very much, didn't you, Harry?"

"Yes, *she* really did, and yes, *I* really did, Hermione," confirmed Harry to each of his friends in turn. "Honestly," he added, feeling the pressure of Hermione's withering glare challenge his assertion, "I really, really liked it. A lot."

After a haphazard back and forth recap of the events that had led from Beauxbatons to that night's vigil at the Hogwarts Key, Ron was taking the opportunity to seek clarification upon the nature of Hermione's Christmas gift to Harry whilst at Azkaban. And even though the Cold Wraith that stood a little way off from him was obviously not the real, living Ron that

had died that night after Beauxbatons, just recounting the whole tale, with Ron's trademark quips and Hermione's sharp ripostes, had reminded him just how much he'd missed them.

It was good to be back.

Harry's mind suddenly registered four patterns materialising within the quadrangle at about the same moment as his scar exploded with near incandescent pain. His knees buckled as he fought to regain breath, one hand grasping a nearby stone pillar for support as his lungs screamed dryly. Fortunately, he didn't need his eyes - his sense mapped out the Key's quadrangle in more than sufficient detail, and the vivid, burning presence next to the Key could only be one person. Or presence, being entity, whatever... that *thing* was no 'person'. Not any more.

Dimly, Harry was aware of his two friends taking position either side of him. A part of him had always believed, ever since Halloween in their first year, that when the final confrontation with Voldemort came, he'd have Ron and Hermione at his side, and so it would prove to be. What *did* surprise him, however, was that now that the moment finally *had* come, they would be facing Voldemort *without a wand between them*.

Further rumination on the irony was cut short, however. The Dark Lord had turned to face the Trio as soon as he'd Apparated into the quadrangle, and the cold, cruel voice cried the curse into the night's bitter, driving rain before any further thought could be processed: "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Pain assaulted Harry from all sides, his senses suffocating as his brain struggled against the onslaught, the scar on his forehead burning so intensely he was convinced his skull had been cracked wide open.

But the strange thing was that the accompanying flash of light that engulfed Harry wasn't green, it was blue.

Dumbledore blue.

Chapter 89

Which wizard famously survived a Lethifold attack while holidaying in Papua New Guinea in 1782?

Drowning in blue, flaming pain, Harry could feel his eyeballs burning up with the energy transfer, intense fire pouring outwards from the very marrow of his bones. His lungs, all air expelled, seemed to be trying to make an early escape from their host, and, judging by feel if nothing else, had made it as far as his throat.

All this was registered simultaneously, a relentless sensory assault on his mind: the primitive instincts - fight or flight, the adrenalin rush and the plain terror - conflicting with the schooled rationalism that was attempting to analyse the situation he was being confronted with.

Pain. Physical, crushing his life-force, tearing his body apart from the inside out, eyes skewered with white-hot lances of energy. But also within the mind, his scar's ferocious burning a mere shadow of the full-scale torture Voldemort's presence was inflicting upon Harry's mental state.

But there was something else, too: it was no longer just himself and Voldemort in that mental connection - the Mage on the one side, and the deluded Dark Wizard on the other, accompanied by a backdrop of screaming, tortured psyches spread across that desolate mental landscape. This time it was different.

The mind he was inextricably linked to seemed as bleak and desolate as ever, but now, instead of the momentary flashes of conflicting intelligences attempting to challenge Voldemort's hold upon them, there was a wall of immense power being marshalled from within, and as the curse's tendrils snagged hooks across Harry's entire being, that wall crashed down across Voldemort's mind, suffusing everything therein with an aura, a presence and a wisdom that Harry recognised instantly.

Dumbledore.

Harry's physical and magical instincts were in conflict. On the one hand, the physical systems were screaming under the assault of maximal pain - no matter how momentary, this was pain beyond coping, and the only acceptable response was to flee. Anything else had to be suicide.

The magical instinct, however, was hitting Harry with the same messages through which he'd drained Amaraletta's Serpent. Don't run, *take* the power, bleed the aggressor dry. *Absorb* the hit, *feed* on the current, rip the man's life source from him...

Like some immense, coiled spring, Harry felt the Dark core of his being unwind, slowly at first - not in a hesitant fashion, but simply, as was the manner of immense things, a slow ponderous start to something that, once set in motion, would be near unstoppable.

He was certain that his skin would have all burnt away by now, and that all that would be visible to the other combatants would be his skeleton's magnesium-like glow as the curse ate him away. The curse; not *Avada Kedavra*, no matter that that was the incantation. No, although Voldemort had clearly fully intended that the Killing Curse be cast, somehow the Will had been subverted. What Harry was up against now was probably no less lethal, but it wasn't *Avada Kedavra*.

Harry felt his own Darkness gather momentum as powers were marshalled to meet the curse's attack head on.

The Killing Curse was constructed on a foundation of absolute hate. Eternities of agony, wrong and injustice marshalled into a split-second's thought, and launched upon the victim. As with all attacks, however, the necessity to create an opening in the defences to allow the blow to be launched also presented an opportunity to the victim to strike back at that very spot.

Harry's mind, which was vastly more mobile than his paralysed body at that point, leapt into the energy stream, and sunk its claws deep into the Will's source, located at the very heart of something monstrously grotesque, a Darkness beyond anything that could possibly be called human.

And there, amidst the burning pain of his physical self and his mind's scrambled suffering, trying to disentangle both his own emotions and those of his adversary, *there* his energy took its feed. *There*, on the core of Voldemort's being, Harry's own Darkness made its feast.

It was all happening so quickly. One moment, Harry and Ron had been sparring, just like the old days, about Quidditch and books and... just *things*, and the next...

Hermione had seen the three figures materialise in the quadrangle, initially facing Hagrid's wall, but He Who Must Not Be Named had obviously detected Harry's presence, because almost the first act had been a sharp, swift turn on the heel, and those six dreadful syllables had rung through the night air.

Agonising blue fire had engulfed Harry's body, but both she and Ron had immediately seen what they had to do before the ramifications of that sight could be processed by her brain. Leaping into the night air, the rain immaterial to her rapidly forming feathers, her sole concern was ripping that wand from You Know Who's grasp.

One of the two henchmen crumpled to the ground, and then, in the strange way that the senses' individual messages arrived at the brain in the wrong order at times of stress, she heard the crossbow's 'zing', and the 'thunk' of metal landing on flesh as Hagrid hit his mark.

The bird wheeled about, claws outstretched, before being repelled bodily into the castle's stone walls. Heavy, lidded eyes, thick black hair and a cold glance registered briefly as Hermione tumbled downwards, but not enough to spark recognition.

Ron's form, crackling as ice formed a thin, permanently disintegrating crust, had stepped forcefully into the quadrangle, sword at the ready. Padfoot, on the other hand, was eyeing a snake, carefully - although Hermione couldn't hear anything, just by looking at the huge dog's

throat, and the fur standing bristled along his spine, she could tell that he was uttering a low, warning growl.

And the snake? Nagini: it had to be.

Drink, drink, drink.

Take it, and take it all. At the moment their two Wills had connected, Harry's brain had been able to discern Voldemort's own emotions upon realising that *something* had happened. At first it had been surprise, then confusion, and then...

Yes! A grim thrill had coursed up Harry's spine as he placed the feeling. *Fear*. Voldemort was as scared of the unknown as any mortal. In effect, he was afraid of Harry, the Boy Who Lived. Neither of them might not yet know what the actual outcome of Harry's near-suicidal defence strategy might be, but just the possibility was enough to sow the seeds of doubt into Voldemort's mind.

Doubt was a tremendously dangerous agent to contend with in the magical world: when power was so firmly rooted in the absolute conviction of the Will, any doubt, any suspicion that things might not proceed as pre-ordained or instructed introduced fear into the mechanism. Magic depended on absolutes: when doubt arrived, so did power depart.

As the uncertainty took hold in his adversary's thoughts, Harry was able to discern that what had previously been an immense, single wall of power within Voldemort's mind had been allowed to collapse, seemingly by design. Rather than crumbling, though, the form appeared to deliberately transform into a thousand malevolent tendrils, that immediately set about burrowing into their host's psyche, a co-ordinated attack that swept across the black chasm of Voldemort's unprotected mind.

Oh Tom, be careful what you wish for...

Quite where that sentiment had come from, Harry had no idea. It certainly hadn't been spoken. He didn't *think* it had been 'thought', as such, either - not at that precise moment. But every single action that was taking place within the tortured mental space he shared with Voldemort seemed suffused with that sentiment. A sense that an unheeded warning was coming home to roost.

Be careful what you wish for.

With a hunger he had not known he felt, the Darkness drew deep upon its feed from Voldemort's spirit, filling Harry's lungs with liquid magic, saturating flesh and bone with usurped power. Gagging on the sensation, Harry nonetheless knew, just as he had with the duel at the graveyard after the third task, that he could not back down at this point.

Once battle had been joined, he had to see matters out until the bitter end, or else all would be lost.

In the meantime, a thousand psyches feasted upon the fractured remnants of the Dark Lord's utterly destroyed mind.

The robe's hood had fallen back, and the heavy-featured witch's expression hadn't been at all improved by the change as her wand tracked Hermione's animagus form, struggling to right itself at the base of the quadrangle wall.

Unaccustomed to the owl-form she had adopted, Hermione was acutely aware that it was taking her new body dangerously long to recover from the first blow - obviously *Expelliarmus*, or one of the combative variants - and in that time, she was, somewhat appropriately, a sitting duck.

Dark, cold eyes and a cold, thin smile barely registered as the Dark Witch raised her wand, but a warning growl from Fang caused the woman to pivot on her heel with staggering speed: "*Impedimentia!*"

Hagrid's dog appeared to almost freeze in mid-air, jaws agape, front legs stretched out as it had pounced forward, obviously intent on mauling the witch. The surreal sight was rendered sharply visible - Harry's body was completely consumed by a fierce, white blaze that was painful to look at. Hermione could only imagine the pain Harry would be enduring inside it all - assuming, of course, he could even survive...

Following up on Fang's attack, Hagrid had just levelled his crossbow at the woman when she launched the next curse, a string of syllables too complex for Hermione to catch, at least in her animagus form. The effect was dramatic - Hagrid dropped the crossbow, slapping both hands to his face, palms covering his eyes as he sank to his knees in all too obvious pain.

Perhaps it was the sight of Hagrid stumbling to his knees, hopelessly lost to whatever curse the witch had inflicted upon him. Perhaps it was the knowledge that Harry could not possibly take any more of a battering - no matter how self-inflicted - than he was taking. Perhaps it was the realisation that it was, indeed, boiling down to their trio, and she had to make her contribution count.

In truth, the catalyst itself was irrelevant, what mattered was that Hermione had fully regained control of her bird-form, and with a brief, sharp shuffle of feathers, she took wing, claws outstretched, heading towards the Dark Lord, who himself was wreathed in tumbling filaments of burning energy.

Beneath her, she saw, and felt, the form of the Cold Wraith march purposefully towards the witch who, having stilled Fang and felled Hagrid, returned to fix a disdainful gaze upon him. Claws outstretched in the bird of prey's stoop, Hermione's heart felt a momentary judder of dread, before her rational mind reminded her that the witch posed no threat at all to the Cold Wraith.

Not knowing from whence it came, Hermione felt her body quiver to a deep, primal screech as talons dug deep into the soft, pale flesh of the Dark Lord's rain-slicked face.

Harry's senses had become so intermingled, nothing made sense: his lungs were filled with liquid flame, his flesh was peeling away from his body in great, burning ribbons of dazzling white fire. Disembodied screams echoed within his mind: screams of both aggressor and

victim competed against one another, until all that registered was a continuous, pained wailing, whilst his brain shivered at the deep, heavy chill of connecting to a presence so far consumed by evil all humanity seemed to have deserted it.

And beneath all this rose a thickening tide of all-encompassing darkness, smooth, implacable and without depth, swamping all emotion as it devoured hungrily all the energy that it could siphon from Harry's connection with Voldemort.

Twin set of gouges left searing tracks across the Dark Lord's face - Harry felt the attack as though it had been his own body to bear the assault, and felt the distraction it caused manifest itself in a weakening of his opponent's defences. The disembodied psyches of Voldemort's earlier victims took heart from the instability, and the mental feeding frenzy intensified.

To Harry's mind, the scenario appeared to be echoing the classic model of a breaking dam - where a trickle became a stream became a flood, so did Voldemort's fractured mind unhinge, the shattered, lost components easy prey to the host's victims turned parasites.

Disturbingly, however, connected as the two minds were, whatever Voldemort went through, Harry was put through a dim echo - every now and again, he was aware of distinct intelligences following the energy's connection, as though spying fresh meat upon which to feast, before such hunger was redirected by the tireless, wise presence of the great wizard Harry had seen die barely a week beforehand.

Focus.

He was hot. He was cold. Whether the shivering he imagined his body to be consumed with was actually visible to observers, he knew not. What he did know was that it had been impossibly long since he'd last been able to draw breath: from standing tense, alert and upright, he'd somehow slumped to his knees, but despite his body's manifest protestations, Harry refused to let his back bow.

Blinded by the magical onslaught, and the sheer savage intensity of the mental connection, Harry had only his Mage sense to inform him as to how the battle was progressing. Voldemort's pattern, at first a sharp, insistent energy, dazzlingly bright, yet tangibly fragile, had shattered like glass once the attack had begun; layers of power had been stripped away from the mind's core, will and command irrelevant as whole sections of Voldemort's stolen power were set free.

From being a single, coherent whole, the individual fragments of the Dark Lord's mind had rapidly acquired their own unique characters - he saw dull red transform into greens, blues and swirling mixes of lilac and silver. Across the wasteland within which the battle raged, the smaller fragments had been quick to regroup, quick to add their own weight to shore up Harry's main attack.

Distracted and confused, the host mind was struggling to maintain hold on what it still possessed, yet the tighter the grip exerted, the more fragile the extremities became. Harry had no time to study the awful beauty of the process: instinct compelled him to focus solely on maintaining the drain - bleeding all the energy from his opponent's mind, taking it for his own.

The Darkness within himself, for much of the evening a passive presence within his body, had begun to assert itself, sensing easy feeding from such a conquest. *Take it - take it all... you will be Great, you know...*

As though floundering in a sea of tar, Harry could feel the darkness swell and rise, coursing upwards through his body: soft, soothing, cool. Allowing eyes he'd not realised had been open to close, he surrendered to the promise of release as the tide of blackness engulfed him completely.

Triumph competed with revulsion as the talons dug deep into You Know Who's face: the human within the owl's mind was sickened by what she was doing, but the bird of prey's own instincts were as compellingly jubilant.

Rain continued to fall, the light from the two burning figures casting rainbows as she squinted down towards Harry, who'd slumped to his knees, ribbons of burning... substance peeling off his body. Energy poured from his outstretched arms, waterfalls of magical energy, liquefied, pooling about The Boy Who Lived as he remained locked in battle with his true mortal enemy.

He Who Must Not Be Named was not in a good way - face torn from the bird's attacks, she could see what had been a man actively struggling to maintain balance, jaws clamped shut underneath ribbons of blood red fire as he met Harry's attack full on.

Pivoting about her left wing, Hermione prepared to stoop once more: the bird's supreme peripheral vision confirmed that Hagrid remained out of the fight - he had returned to his feet - albeit in a half-crouched position, sweeping his arms before him, blindly, snarling into the damp night's air. The last Death Eater, the witch, was retreating slowly before Ron's measured approach, casting a series of ineffectual spells.

Ron could handle *her*, she thought, contemptuously.

The wind's roar built up in the bird's sensitive hearing once more as Hermione dipped into the dive, talons outstretched, her body ready to pivot about as she found her mark, when suddenly the flames engulfing both Harry and Voldemort were extinguished, and the quadrangle was plunged, momentarily, into darkness.

"Fool!" cried Voldemort - the voice was scratchy, hoarse and obviously pained, but carried to the tone of triumph. "The folly... of Dumbledore... is finally exposed... for the world to... see..." he wheezed, evidently still struggling to regain complete control of his body in the aftermath of the battle.

Had Harry been able to speak, he might have warned him - there was something so pathetic about hearing the Dark Lord's deluded, and hopelessly premature victory celebrations that it almost inspired pity. Pity, for he could feel the power rising, drawing from everything about them, and even though he knew he had no control over what his body and mind were about to unleash, he knew what the outcome would be.

Their minds still connected, Harry could tell by the moment of hesitation in the Dark Lord's thoughts that he, too, had suddenly registered the inevitability of defeat.

Perhaps Voldemort had time to form the single word 'no', or perhaps Harry imagined it: but before that thought had fully registered, a colossal wave of Darkness had crashed upon the Heir of Slytherin. Harry had expected light: the old cliché of Voldemort being consumed by the light of a thousand suns. What he got, instead, was acute, utter black - the emptiness of the void absolute, and the ground trembling under the force of the transfer.

Perhaps he screamed. Perhaps they both did. Or perhaps, with no breath upon which to draw, the battle ended wordlessly. His ears registering the pressure drop, Harry found himself thrust back into his physical self, and immediately grabbed huge lungfuls of the cold, damp air, his charred arms just managing to brace his body against the ground as he collapsed forward.

But one did not shake Darkness off so easily. As though being smothered by a thick, heavy cloak, Harry felt the power return back to his body, a body too exhausted to resist. Power continued to seep into his being, Dark, majestic power, absolute and crushing. *Be careful what you wish for...*

Feeling impossibly weary, Harry had started to slump still further to the ground, wanting nothing more than to feel the cooling embrace of slick grass and cold stone to soothe the charred flesh of limbs, when he heard the incantation.

The battle, of course, had continued on whilst he'd been locked in the confrontation with Voldemort. His sense told him Hermione's form was plummeting back down to Earth, in the direction of the final Death Eater, who was facing Ron in some form of mismatched duel. Mismatched, until "*Lumos Solem!*" rang all too clearly through the deafening silence that had greeted Voldemort's downfall.

An owl screeched in obvious distress, the witch allowed herself a half-chuckle of triumph, and Harry heard Ron's sharp intake of breath, stunned and shocked. A shaft of sunlight leapt from the witch's wand and plunged deep into the Cold Wraith, and even from the opposite side of the courtyard, Harry knew that it was over.

He didn't bother to focus, he didn't even attempt to raise himself from his prone position, face down in the quadrangle. Black thoughts engulfed his mind as he simply channelled his still-recovering power, and hurled his entire soul at the witch with his sole intention being her complete and utter annihilation.

Sunlight: horror-struck, Hermione wheeled about in mid-air, altering her trajectory to bring her as close to Ron as she could dare. The witch was crowing her triumph into the night, but Hermione couldn't bring herself to care: she'd killed *Ron*: the sunlight had hit him square in the chest, and the look of confident determination had vanished in a heartbreaking blink of an eye, to be replaced first by confusion, and then by... defeat.

At the edge of the physically possible, Hermione transformed back into her human self before her talons had touched the stone. Behind her, she was aware of the witch being consumed by power of unimaginably terrifying magnitude: Harry remained lying face down on the quadrangle's flagstones, but she thought she detected a definite relaxation of his poise as his

attack had found its mark. As though he'd set out to do what he intended, and his work was complete.

She didn't dwell on what that latest act might have cost him.

The Cold Wraith - Ron - was burning up with increasing rapidity, as the sunlight took hold and spread across the impossibly cold form like an ink stain in reverse. The sword fell to the ground with a horribly abrupt clatter, his physical form no longer granting him sufficient command over other the common objects of mortals. Horrified eyes met hers with a single word: "Hermione..." he breathed, in a voice that sounded like the sea drawing breath as it drew the tide back across the pebbles.

With words stuck in her throat, she could only look on, helplessly, as the Cold Wraith's form reduced even further, eyes locked with hers as the rain lashed through the mist-like form.

And then he was gone, no trace left within the dark night inside the quadrangle of one third of her perfect triangle: feeling perhaps for the first time in her life the true inadequacy of words to express herself truly, Hermione collapsed to the ground herself, wanting nothing else but to howl with grief until her throat bled.

Chapter 90

Name three African Quidditch teams.

The way it was told to Harry, there hadn't been much of Voldemort's body left by first light. The Blood Trackers had descended upon Hogwarts some time in the early morning, as the Ministry's Aurors had done their best to sweep up the debris from a conflict the like of which most had never seen.

By the time the reptilian sentinels had arrived, Hermione and Sirius had managed to carry him up to the medical wing, leading Hagrid, blind now, along with them. As far as the Trackers were concerned, however, they'd found their prey - and had torn into the flesh as they slaked the programmed thirst of Harry's blood. Blood that Voldemort had forcibly taken from him at the end of the Fourth Year...

Oh Tom, be careful what you wish for...

Despite the warmth of the June sunshine at his back, Harry shivered, as though someone had walked across his grave. The grounds were practically deserted: it was double Transfiguration for the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, and even though Professor McGonagall's demeanour towards him had softened slightly, she had still insisted, most firmly, that Transfiguration held no relevance to the Mage, and he continued to be unwelcome in her lessons.

Lessons were depressing, anyway. Everywhere he looked, there were empty chairs and desks, testament to the night when Voldemort had launched the most savage attack Hogwarts had ever faced. The castle had, in the end, been up to the challenge, but only barely. The wall Harry faced slammed home the guilt with the authoritative weight that only cold stone could supply.

Cedric DIGGORY (Hufflepuff)

Harry traced the letters with the index finger on his right hand, somehow affronted, still, at how smooth and perfect the monument was. Words, dedications and monuments alone couldn't convey what it had meant to be there that night a year before: *Kill the spare!* Three words, and an entire world had been brought to its knees.

But where was the ragged pain in that smooth, chiselled channel in the stone? What indication of the struggle, the despair and the suffering did the immaculately straight lettering convey? None: none at all. It wasn't right that so much should be reduced to so little. It wasn't right that he had to dredge his own memories to conjure the guilt: the monument was supposed to supply the accusations for him... a neat, referenced list of what the Boy Who Lived had cost his world, set in stone to attest his failure for all eternity.

They said, of course, that Good had prevailed, that the right side had won, and that the Darkness had been defeated, once again, by The Boy Who Lived. The words felt bitter on Harry's tongue: The Boy Who Lived had been turned into a killer. Nothing more, nothing

less: he'd sought out Voldemort, actively sought him, singlemindedly, with the sole purpose of ending a life.

Was *that* action the path of the Light? Was it noble? Was it what he had believed he was? No, it was none of those things. Lucas had warned him about revenge and vengeance. Hermione, who was the only surviving, presentable witness to the final conflict had insisted that Harry had acted out of self-defence, and no amount of protestation had been able to shake her conviction in the matter.

But, Harry reminded himself, accusingly, as he traced the second 'F' of Justin's surname, the one thing Hermione had forgotten was that he'd actively set out that night to confront Voldemort. One could not legitimately pick a fight and then claim self-defence.

Orla QUIRKE (Ravenclaw)

They'd said - Neville, Parvati, Padma and Hermione - they'd tried to convince him, as he'd spent the week laid up in the Hospital Wing, regrowing the flesh and bones that had liquified in that final assault, that had he not succeeded in overcoming The Dark Lord, then the Wall would have carried a far lengthier list of victims.

That was scant consolation: they didn't see how the path could be mapped all the way back to the Third Task - perhaps even before then. *They* weren't the ones who'd given presence and substance to Lord Voldemort. *They* hadn't picked wands with cores common to the Darkest threat the wizarding world had seen in the past half century.

Majella McCOURT (Ravenclaw)

He didn't even *know* what year she was, let alone what she looked like. Had she been a first year, perhaps Muggle born, overcome with awe and wonder as she'd discovered the fantastic world that had been her birthright, only to find herself betrayed by her new home in a conflict she had no say in?

Or maybe she'd been a seventh year, perhaps planning her life as a witch? Harry didn't know, and this distressed him deeply. That completely innocent people had been wrapped up in the conflict. Completely innocent people had *died* whilst the world waited for him to do what he was supposed to do.

Harry's finger paused above the stone as he contemplated the next line. Well, not *all* of them were completely innocent: *Pansy PARKINSON (Slytherin)*. The Killing Curse had accounted for Pansy, and although the Dark Mark on her forearm had made the legitimacy of the Slytherin's inclusion on the memorial debatable, at the very least, Professor McGonagall had been adamant on the matter: The Wall would list *every* Hogwarts student who had fallen during the second reign of Voldemort.

There were a lot of names - he knew this, as he'd counted them many, many times already across the summer term, vowing that he wouldnt forget a single one. His responsibility, his burden to bear...

Draco MALFOY (Slytherin)

They'd not found Malfoy's body: in itself, this was not so surprising - there were many names on the Wall where no body had been recovered. But it didn't seem quite... believable, somehow. Missing? Yes, most certainly. Unaccounted for, of course. But dead? No, not dead. Not Malfoy.

Professor McGonagall had weathered the Away Team's violent protestations that the Slytherin ferret did not deserve to be immortalised in stone, but had remained unmoved. To have left Malfoy *off*, when all others were listed, would have sent out 'quite the wrong signal', and that, apparently, had been that.

It was fortunate, perhaps, that the castle's wards were so depleted: had any of the staff got wind of just what the Away Team planned to inflict upon one Draco Malfoy, should he ever resurface, Harry was pretty sure they'd all have been in detention with Filch for the remainder of their academic lives...

Cho CHANG (Ravenclaw)

No, it didn't get any easier.

His peripheral sense registered the end of the morning's lessons, as the clusters of patterns dotted about the castle all began to stream towards the Great Hall, and Thursday's lunch. It was the penultimate day of term, and the final day of lessons proper, the Friday being given over to packing up and boarding the Hogwarts Express. The fifth years, having endured the O.W.L.s spread across the previous fortnight, had been aghast to learn that they were expected to attend *more* lessons once the exams had finished: preparatory lessons for the N.E.W.T syllabi that they'd be studying as sixth years...

Harry grimaced as he recalled his most recent conversation with Professor McGonagall, on that precise point. His sixth year - as a Mage, it was far from clear whether he would even be allowed to return to Hogwarts. Certainly, there were subjects he *could* study (lamentably, Potions was amongst their number), but there were also subjects that he couldn't (his Head of House had been quick to point out that Transfiguration, for example, was *not* an appropriate subject for a Mage to study, even from the wholly theoretical perspective).

But the curriculum itself was not the issue. He was. Or rather, as a thin-lipped Professor McGonagall had explained, "this is a school of witchcraft and wizardry, Mr Potter." The teacher's lips had compressed into a razor thin line on the ending of that statement, and Harry had mentally already tagged on the additional, unspoken clause, *we don't like the Magi*.

Before he could get too despondent, though, help, or hope, at least, had come from an unexpected source: "matters of admission to Hogwarts, however, do not rest with me," Professor McGonagall had explained, in a tone that had managed to convey just how academic the conversation would have been were such decisions hers to make, "and as such I must conform to the wishes of the Founders."

Harry had frowned, and looked up at his Head of House questioningly: what wishes of the Founders pertained to *him*?

"You will be Sorted, Potter, before the rest of the school, at the Leaving Feast, and, as such, the decision as to whether you are entitled to return to Hogwarts School of *Witchcraft and Wizardry*," Harry was almost sure that his professor's stress of the school's disciplines was wholly unintentional, "to continue your education at N.E.W.T. level."

Harry's mind had spun. Sorted? *Again?* "But... but Professor," he protested, "I've already *been* Sorted. I'm a *Gryffindor*..."

"It is not so much the House that houses you so much as whether the Sorting Hat deems you worthy of admission to Hogwarts itself, Mr Potter. The Founders poured their intellect, their wisdom, their visions... the Founders poured the very *ethos* of this school into the Hat, to ensure that the principles laid down a thousand years past would be held to, would be cherished and... *respected* in the ages to come..."

Harry opened his mouth to interject an appropriate observation, but found that his brain was struggling to come up with a salient objection. Professor McGonagall's emphases hadn't been lost upon him, and although the reasoning behind the establishment as laid down in *Hogwarts: A History* was somewhat lacking in certain details, the Away Team had long since come to the conclusion that none of the Founders had been any friend to the Magi.

As Dean might have put it, Harry had a bad feeling about this.

The stone was cold against his forehead: eyes shut as he leaned against the Wall, Harry was attempting to either feel nothing whatsoever, or feel everything all at once: quite which he wasn't entirely certain. What he aimed to achieve never seemed to matter: events whirled around him, out of control. Wars began, friends died and families were destroyed.

And they were still *grateful* to him for inflicting it all upon them.

"Harry..." Parvati's voice had been expected; he'd absently tracked her pattern as she'd left the school's steps to walk over to the Wall. Neville, Hermione, Parvati and himself were all that were left of the Gryffindor fifth years. Lavender, Ron and Dean were dead, and Seamus was confined to a cage of silver in Blackrock, the Ministry quick to convict the werewolf for Lavender's murder.

He ignored her: perhaps she'd take the hint and leave him alone, although, in truth he didn't want that. He wanted to be hated, he wanted to be loved. He wanted to be left alone with his grief, and he wanted people around him who *understood* what had happened, and who would neither praise nor condemn, but who were just... there.

"You have to eat, Harry..."

He exhaled, slowly, and slowly pulled his neck back, standing away from the wall, although still keeping his eyes closed. Every move, these days, was a considered move, all actions whittle down to the barest minimum, economy of motion, economy of speech. Economy of *being*.

"They should have a Wall of the Survivors," opined Parvati, suddenly, breaking the meditative silence.

Perplexed at the statement, Harry's self-imposed seclusion was broken as he opened his eyes to peer questioningly at her.

"You did a good thing, Harry. A *great* thing..."

In fairness, it wasn't Parvati's fault that her choice of words sent shivers up Harry's spine. You didn't get to choose greatness - in an ideal world, Harry would have chosen anything *but*. Greatness chose you, and it delivered with it burdens the rest of the world either didn't see, or chose to ignore. But they were still there.

Parvati continued to elaborate on her theme as they headed, slowly and carefully, Harry placing each foot just *so* on the grass, a slight upward lift as the sole of his shoes landed to minimise all evidence of his presence. And actually, as she outlined what there was to be grateful for, and reminded him of what had been accomplished, he almost started to believe she was right.

Almost.

Fortunately, however, he caught himself just in time, and sat down beside her at the Gryffindor table without having uttered a single word.

Seamus had been found in a bad way, curled up in a foetal position on his transformation cell's floor, one hand clutching the silver blade, the metal having burnt away the fifth year's flesh down to the bones. The 'evidence', as the Ministry had seen it had been both damning and conclusive, and all protestations that it *couldn't* have been Seamus' fault had fallen on predictably deaf ears.

Hermione, in a move that, with hindsight Harry felt he should have anticipated, had thrown herself into clearing Seamus' name with an absolute passion that would more properly have been classed as a frenzy. In addition to practically drowning herself in studying for the O.W.L.s, she spent *days* in the library, looking up legal precedents and writing reams and reams of notes in a rushed, scrawled hand that only bore passing resemblance to the immaculate assignments she'd been (rightly) famous for in previous years.

Her assertion that Peter Pettigrew had been responsible had not fallen on fertile ground, running up against the Ministry's predictable refusal to accept anything other than history's recorded version of events: Sirius Black killed Peter Pettigrew, and twelve innocent bystanders, and it was Sirius Black who'd placed both Harry *and* Hermione under a Confundus Charm in their third year.

When challenged to explain how it was, then, that Professor Lupin had been killed apparently by silver, that night, Hunter Carpathia, the same, somewhat sceptical Ministry agent who'd interrogated Harry in the autumn, had observed that clearly Ms Brown had elected to rid the world of the two savage part-humans - hence the presence of the silver sword. Obviously, she'd succeeded in 'dealing with' the elder wolf, but, regrettably, had fallen victim to the savage butchery of the younger variant.

Lavender BROWN, Order of Merlin (Third Class, Posthumous) (Gryffindor)

Oh yes, the Ministry recognised its heroes.

Hermione had suggested an alternative explanation of events, that involved Pettigrew attacking Lupin, being interrupted by Lavender, and somehow breaking the Wolfsbane's hold over Seamus so that the werewolf would do his dirty work for him. Carpathia had nodded, condescendingly, to the hypothesis, and observed that should they find this mythical, silver-limbed man, they would most certainly be questioning him.

Unfortunately, Hermione was then forced to concede that Pettigrew's arm had been destroyed. Carpathia, who clearly believed he could see a line when he was being fed one, had summarily dismissed Hermione and her 'delusional fantasies' with withering contempt.

This whole episode had stoked Hermione's fires still further, and none of the fifth years had managed to maintain a conversation of more than a couple of sentences with her before she'd thrown herself back into her studies with frightening intensity.

And as they sat down to the Leaving Feast that Thursday night, Harry looked across the table at Hermione to be made keenly aware of how much the summer term had taken out of his best friend. Her face was pale, the skin stretched tightly over drawn features, and even the best efforts of her dorm-mates' makeover (Padma had moved into the Gryffindor dorm, unopposed, immediately after That Night) couldn't hide the dark rings under her eyes, nor restore the vitality to her eyes.

Harry's scrutiny went unnoticed by his subject, however - she was determinedly scribbling notes at the table as Professor McGonagall rose slowly to her feet, the chime of the glass stilling the muffled conversations that had broken out across the Great Hall.

"It has been a... 'difficult' year," announced Professor McGonagall with what Harry considered to be world-class understatement. "We, as a school, have suffered many painful losses, and there are none who sit in this Hall today untouched by the past year's events..."

Although he wanted to listen to Professor McGonagall's speech, and knew that she would be saying important things in an important way, Harry found that he was unable to prevent himself from tuning out the words, concentrating instead on his sense's map of the Hall's five great tables, the clusters of students along their length quite different to the packed rows that had attended those same tables at Halloween.

So many missing, so many dead.

Up at the high table, Hagrid tugged briefly at the ragged white bandage that covered his eyes, in an exaggerated pantomime of adjusting the cloth's fit. The half-giant's blindness had so far resisted all attempts at reversal, but he'd insisted on carrying out his duties as best he could, a huge black dog his constant companion about the school grounds.

The spaces were more telling at the staff table, a product of both the High Table's relative prominence in the Great Hall, and also the smaller numbers of teachers versus pupils. Professors Sinistra and Vector were missing - the former had vanished with her domain, the Astronomy Tower, whilst the latter had fallen defending the Away Team's haunt, the North Tower.

Fleur Delacour had chosen the wrong moment to start the Death Eaters' attack from within - perhaps no-one had told her that Professor Flitwick had been a duelling champion in his earlier days. Or perhaps she'd just misjudged the diminutive, and seemingly irrepressibly cheery Charms teacher. Either way, it was Flitwick who'd avenged Vector's death, and it was Flitwick who'd done much to hold the North Tower, despite the Dark Mark glowing in the sky over his head.

Percy Weasley sat, importantly, upon Professor McGonagall's left, nodding approvingly at the acting headteacher's rhetoric. He held a scroll - an expensive, important looking scroll bound with a black ribbon - in his left hand, and was obviously desperately keen to share its contents with the school, but for now was contenting himself with obviously seeming to bestow his approval upon his former Head of House's closing speech.

Snape sat impassively on Professor McGonagall's left. His voice had not recovered from Durmstrang, and Potions lessons were conducted under a reign of terrified silence as the class struggled to catch every syllable of the Head of Slytherin's hissed instructions. The Potion Master's own role in the final battle remained unclear to Harry, although Professors McGonagall *and* Flitwick had both personally vouched for his loyalty and commended his (unlisted) actions.

As though feeling Harry's scrutiny upon him, the hook-nosed Professor's cold eyes turned on the Gryffindor table, and Harry quickly resumed his casual sweep of the top table, not wishing to openly meet the malice of Snape's stare with a return volley of his own.

At length, Professor McGonagall's oration was concluded, and she sat down to a suffocating silence in the room: you didn't applaud death, and even though the speech had, undoubtedly, hit all the right 'we move forward' notes, the necessity of the message served as a further reminder of what the year had cost.

Taking his cue, Percy got to his feet, and ceremonially unfurled the scroll in his hand: "I, Percival Weasley..."

"No relation," stated Fred Weasley, flatly, but distinctly, in a tone that cut through the Hall to land upon the ear of everyone present.

Percy faltered, blinking twice as he searched for the location of the heckler. At the far end of the Gryffindor Table (as far from Percy as they could get, as it happened), Fred and George returned blank stares back at their disowned brother. Conjuring up a politician's smile, Percy returned to the subject at hand, although he shot nervous glances at the twins throughout the rest of his text.

For their part, the Twins simply kept an expressionless gaze fixed upon the Ministry representative. There was no trickery, nor mischief in that look; nor was there any trace of familiarity or family. Percy Weasley was, Harry could tell, truly no relation to Fred or George Weasley.

"...and I am therefore pleased to announce that, in recognition of Mr Potter's contribution in defeating the Dark Lord..."

Harry heard several whispered protests over the word 'contribution' in that statement, but despite his better instincts, he found himself wondering what the 'recognition' might consist of. Parvati had gripped his forearm, lightly, as a gesture of both support and, he suspected, restraint.

"...the Ministry offers its word that it will not pursue extradition of the Mage once he has left the Warlock boundaries."

Percy beamed at the stunned silence that greeted the proclamation as though he'd just announced that Christmas was going to arrive early. In triplicate.

Hermione, who hadn't stopped scribbling frantic notes throughout all the speeches, whipped her head around to face the High Table: "*What?*" she demanded, icily.

Percy, who wasn't quite as thick as he acted, caught on to the warning tones remarkably quickly, and did his best to placate the fifth year as she rose carefully, and purposefully to her feet: "well, Miss Granger, as I'm sure you..."

"Don't you 'Miss Granger' me," warned a quivering Hermione, as she shrugged off Neville and Padma's attempts to get her to resume her seat, "you miserable, pathetic *worm* of a sycophant..."

Percy's shock at these words was palpable - he almost looked as though he'd been slapped in the face. Meanwhile, Hermione was doing a very creditable impression of the way Mrs Weasley appeared to swell with rage, whilst Neville looked on in trepidation, and Padma (a refugee from Ravenclaw ever since the battle) buried her face in her hands.

Hermione, however, was on a mission, and stalked purposefully towards the High Table as she launched a tirade of accusations at the hapless Percy: "you lying, conniving, self-serving, dissembling *excuse* for a man..."

"You," interrupted Percy, finding his voice once more, "are insulting a Ministry official..."

"Oh go on and throw the book at me, why don't you?" hissed Hermione, murderously. "Hide behind your laws and your conventions... take peoples' liberties away and pretend its in the public's best interest. You mis..."

"But he's a *Mage!*" splustered Percy, losing composure, "we can't just allow him free run of this land. We have a *responsibility*..."

"*I'm not just talking about Harry!*" shrieked Hermione, causing Percy to flinch backwards at the strength of her outburst.

"Seamus," whispered Parvati from Harry's left.

"I'm talking," continued Hermione, in slightly more controlled tones, "about your treatment of everything that isn't *you*. Werewolves! House-elves! Even Muggles! You treat everything that isn't a witch or wizard as though its beneath you..."

Percy was non-plussed, "but they *are*..."

The Away Team, well aware of Hermione's feelings on this particular set of subjects, drew in a collective intake of breath, bracing themselves for what promised to be a truly incandescent outburst.

Instead, however, the broken, scratched voice of Professor Snape filled the expectant silence that was forming as Hermione drew herself up to challenge Percy's assertion. "Miss Granger," hissed the Potions Master, the sound something like the rattle of a collection of rusted knives, "I would sit down if I were you."

Despite himself, Harry found himself marvelling at the manner in which Snape could command complete and absolute attention with a voice that was little more than a whisper. The entire Hall hung upon every syllable the Head of Slytherin House uttered, and the weight of authority behind Snape's diction was unmistakable. "Miss Granger, kindly return to your seat."

Harry could see Hermione slowly close her mouth, evidently swallowing whatever comeback she'd intended to hurl at Percy, and watched apprehensively as she turned to face Snape's malicious glare. Her lips parted once more, as though to begin her protestations, but Snape cut her off with a single, hissed syllable; "*Now*".

Knowing she was beaten, for that moment at any rate, Hermione flung one last, filthy glare at Percy before heading back to the Gryffindor table, glaring at all and sundry.

"Thank you, Prof..." Percy had turned towards Snape, his politician's mask slipping effortlessly back into place, but clearly found his former Potion Master's stare every bit as hostile as Hermione's had been.

"Thank you, Mr Weasley," intervened Professor McGonagall, before he could return to reading from the scroll once more. Ignoring the stammered protests from the former Head Boy, she continued, "you will, of course, be aware that Hogwarts lies outwith the Warlock Boundaries?"

The puzzled look that gave way to dawning, horrified comprehension told the audience that this minor detail was, in fact, news to Percy, and, in the way of such things, it was only after processing Percy's response to Professor McGonagall's disclosure that Harry realised fully what she meant: Percy had given the Ministry's word that he wouldn't be arrested outside the Warlock Boundaries. In other words, all the time that he was at Hogwarts, he was *safe*.

Professor McGonagall looked rather pleased with herself, whereas Snape looked as though he was chewing a wasp. It was only when Professor McGonagall confirmed that Slytherin House had won both the Quidditch *and* House Cups that the Potion Master's mood improved.

Some things in life were just plain wrong, in Harry's opinion, and he considered a smiling Snape to be definitely amongst them.

Harry had no appetite for the feast itself, despite Parvati's repeated, and increasingly sly attempts at tricking him into eating. Opposite, a teary eyed Hermione was working herself up into a deeper and deeper frenzy of injustice, sandwiched between an alarmed, but awestruck, Neville and a concerned, but wary, Padma. Harry had a deep suspicion that no good was

going to come out of his friend's barely contained anger, but he really had no clue as to how to forestall the impending explosion, so did the only thing that seemed sensible under the circumstances, and braced himself, mentally.

As the dessert dishes were cleared away, Professor McGonagall rose once more to announce the evening's final item of unfinished business: "as you all know, Mr Potter is a Mage - the Last of his kind, if accounts are correct..."

Harry wondered if she had intended to sound so hopeful on that last part.

"...in a school of witchcraft and wizardry, and so, as is right and proper, I have asked the Sorting Hat to re-evaluate Mr Potter's eligibility to continue his Hogwarts education. Thank you, Professor Flitwick."

The Charms professor had set the three-legged stool in the middle of the space before the High Table, just as in the real Sorting at the start of term, and Professor McGonagall ceremoniously placed the tatty, weathered Hat upon it: "Harry Potter."

Parvati squeezed his hand briefly in a gesture of good luck as Harry rose to his feet and walked the long distance to the sorting stool, acutely aware that every single eye in the room was upon him. Acutely aware that many in the room wanted him to fall at this final hurdle, and be cast out of Hogwarts, never to darken the castle's walls with the blood of a Mage again.

As a first year, the Hat had completely covered half his face, obscuring from him the sight of hundreds of eyes greedily watching the scene before them, fascinated at the spectacle, but safe in the knowledge that they'd all successfully passed the test.

This time, however, the Hat, although a little large, simply sat low across his forehead as it was placed upon him. And he *felt* it flinch as it attempted to explore his mind.

"Well," hissed the Hat, darkly, "what do we do with *this*?"