

# **Harry and the Six Founders**

By

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## **Prologue**

*Hogwarts,*

Albus Dumbledore was sitting, alone, in his Headmaster's office. There was no trace of the mayhem caused by the passage of the boy who still was his favorite pupil. Everything had been repaired, not because he wanted to forget what had happened, but because he couldn't bear to be reminded of the pain the boy had showed.

Everything had been repaired except for one thing. Dumbledore's trust in himself.

*I cannot do it alone, Harry cannot do it alone. I am not even sure how I can help him anymore.*

The war against Voldemort had been going on for more than twenty years. They had won many battles, but they had lost many friends.

*And we are losing the war.*

He was barely able to contain the one he still called Tom Riddle. He had known for a long time that only Harry could win that last battle, and he had tried to give the boy a chance to prepare himself. To survive and grow strong so that he could fulfill that destiny.

The boy was strong, but he was being destroyed with too much hardship. Every trick of protection that the Headmaster could devise had a way of turning into more torture for him.

*I cannot protect him anymore. I must arrange for him to protect himself.*

He looked grimly at a beautiful silver object on his desk. The moving metal part catching the lights of the candles and the lamps. It was supposed to be a divination device, a gift from a friend who believed in such things. Of course it had never worked, but it was pretty to look at, that was why he kept it.

*I will gamble that he is capable of it.*

The Headmaster didn't like gambling, but he had tried to control everything and it hadn't worked very well. Going on with that strategy seemed more dangerous than trying something else. Resolution showed on the old wizard's face, as he began to formulate a new plan.

Even a gambler could hedge his bets.

## Chapter 1 - Reflections and Resolutions

*Krum Manor, Bulgaria : Early July, morning*

Krum Manor was an old and peaceful looking mansion, gracefully placed at the center of a large park. A gently rolling lawn separated the main building from a small lake and several groups of trees. Here and there, well trimmed flower beds added touches of colors. The estate was situated on a small plateau and the visible horizon displayed a distant mountain range. The scenery was peaceful and well ordered.

The south wing was topped by an open terrace where a long table had been set up for breakfast. Empty cups and half filled baskets of cakes and rolls were still scattered on it. The hour was late, and most of the house members had already finished and left, except for a young girl with long bushy brown hair.

After a last sip of tea, Hermione Granger sat back and admired the view before her.

*It's really a very beautiful place, she thought. Being there can make one feel that the troubles of the world are far away and not important.*

*But that's not true,* added a little voice in her mind.

Hermione and her parents had been staying there for a week, after being invited by the Krum family for a family vacation. The adults got along quite well considering how little they had in common. The Krums were one the oldest families of the wizard world, while Hermione's parents were 'Muggles', non wizard folks, and dentists to boot. Each barely understood the workings of the other's world.

Hermione and Viktor were the only ones who bridged the gap between them.

It was easier than it might have been. They were all such decent peoples that, despite their differences, they could live together, and even have a very good time - united by nothing more than a common appreciation of such simple things as food, wine and music. And the fact that their son and daughter were friends.

With maybe something more in the future.

*Damn it, she thought. This is moving too fast, and I never really planned anything. It's not so simple any more.*

Viktor was a famous Quidditch player here in Bulgaria. She had met him two years ago, during the Tournament of the Goblet of Fire. He had been one of the contestants, the champion for his school, and he had asked her to be his dancing partner at the Yule ball given in honor of the Tournament. She'd been surprised at first but they had gotten along very well. He was quite older than her, and she had been attracted by his maturity. In truth she had always found most boys of her age too interested in games and foolish things, just as they had thought her too *serious*. Despite his celebrity Viktor was actually very quiet and withdrawn. He had found in her an attentive and intelligent audience, and she in turn had learned a lot of things about wizard life, small yet important things that no one at Hogwarts thought to teach to a muggle born witch.

Since that time they had written regularly and seen each other briefly. Several times he had invited her, and her parents, to visit his family. This year they had accepted.

*Viktor is nice. He may look strange to others, but he's one of the few people who don't think I'm an intellect crazy freak. He's smart and he actually likes me like I am without any jealousy or scorn.*

The previous evening they had walked together in the park, holding hands and making small talk about books, the concert Viktor's parent had organized for the neighborhood village, what Hermione wanted to do after graduation. Several times he had made some remarks which, without being explicit, hinted at what they could do together in the future, living here.

*Living here with him. I am ready for that?*

She had to admit that things could be a lot worse actually. The Krum family was an old and respected wizard line. Her parents would be protected here. That was not a thing to be taken lightly in this world.

*In Harry and Voldemort's world. Where rogue wizards kill muggles for fun.*

Viktor had not said a word about the war with Voldemort. He could have. It was big news in England since his official re-appearance, and even here in Bulgaria the papers had talked about it. Voldemort was a terrible, evil and powerful wizard. So terrifying that few people dared to even speak his name. Viktor knew about Harry, who had been one of the contestants in the Tournament, and had actually won it and almost died when Voldemort had turned the trophy cup into a deadly trap. The other winner had been a friend of Harry, a boy named Cedric whom Voldemort had killed.

*Funny that I should think about Harry. What is he doing right now?*

Harry had confronted Voldemort again only a few weeks ago. They had been caught in a deadly battle inside the Ministry Of Magic in London. Hermione had been with him, and with their other friends, Ron, Ginny, Luna and Neville. Hermione had almost been killed. Harry had saved her life but she had been badly wounded. She was all right now but she still had some ugly scars. Someone else had died. Harry's godfather, Sirius. She knew it had been a terrible loss for him.

*If anyone deserves the kind of vacation I'm having now, it's him. But he has to stay with that monstrous family of his. No friends, no evening walks, no concerts.*

She felt a great wave of sadness coming over her. It was so unfair. When thinking about the future, her future, she wanted Harry to be happy, to have a family. To be with his friends.

Instead he had to spend his vacations alone in that dreadful house because it was the only place protected by a strong enough magic to block Voldemort. Magic conjured by his mother before she died.

There was a lot of death and tragedy in Harry's life. It touched her deeply because he was one of her dearest friend.

She felt tears coming. She couldn't help it. With her mind she pictured him brooding in his room, alone or probably talking with Hedwig, his pet owl. Or reading a book or...

The sadness of it overwhelmed her. She couldn't get away from that awful image and tears started streaming down her face. She broke up completely for a while and only came back to the world when she felt a hand touching her shoulder.

She looked up to see her mother standing over her.

"Hermione, my darling what's the matter?" She took her daughter in her arms. "Why are you crying? Is something wrong?"

"It's nothing, nothing...." she said, shaking her head and trying to stop herself. She looked up to her mother's face, fumbled for her napkin and wiped her eyes.

"I'm sorry. It's stupid, it's a beautiful day, and we're all so happy here. I don't know what's the matter with me." She blew her nose. "It's all right now."

Her mother looked at her carefully.

"I'm not sure it's all right, dear. Don't you think you should talk about it?" She caressed her face gently. "Maybe I can help you."

Hermione nodded. *Yes help. I want to help Harry too. We should all help each other.*

But what could her mother understand about the situation? Usually she didn't even try to explain what happened in her *other* life. Besides most the time her parents didn't really want to know. It was

too strange, too *irrational* for them.

"It's okay Mom." She tried to smile "Don't worry about it. I'll just go and clean up. I'm really fine." Her mother wasn't convinced but she didn't press it.

"All right dear. Whatever you want but if you need me I'll be by the lake." Jane Granger looked on with some concern, as her daughter went back inside the house, moving quickly.

She reflected on how fast she had grown up. In the beginning she had been a very bright, lively girl, but as her intelligence developed, it had estranged her from the other children. She became introverted and bookish until she went to that strange school of *magic*.

It had been a tremendous shock when it had been explained to her, and to her husband, that wizards and witches really existed and that her daughter was destined to be one. For Hermione it had been a revelation. She'd returned from her first term with an enthusiasm that they had never seen in her before. She'd talked of new friends, fascinating knowledge and extraordinary teachers. They had been disoriented by her new life but they could see that she had found a place in it. They had gone along with her choice.

That had been five years ago but she had changed lately. She didn't talk as much to them and when she did they sensed a dark side to her world. And sometimes they didn't understand her at all.

*Privet Drive,*

At the same time Harry Potter was effectively talking to Hedwig, and detaching a note from her leg. He was seated in the small room given to him in his uncle and aunt's house.

"Thank you Hedwig. Here's a treat for you." He gave the owl a piece of biscuit and after flying around him, the bird went to perch in its cage.

*It's from Remus*, he remarked and his expression brightened. Remus and Hagrid, as the last surviving friends of his parents, were practically all he had left of his family.

Dumbledore could probably be included in that, but it was difficult to consider so powerful a wizard as a parent. And the last time they had talked, Harry had been very upset and angry.

*I'm not really being fair. He did take care of me during all these years.*

He didn't want to think about Headmaster Dumbledore right now, it brought painful memories.

Harry waited a moment before opening the letter, savoring the instant. His life at Privet Drive was so boring and miserable that distractions and small pleasures, like a letter from a friend, were to be hoarded like jewels.

The first days had been the worst. He had brooded over the awful events of the ministry battle, the death of Sirius, and the terrible revelations of Dumbledore. For a while all he had been able to do had been to relive the last year and wish for things to have been different.

After a while he'd tried to distract himself in books and magazines, *Quiddich quarterly* and even *Hogwarts - a History*. Still, everything seemed futile and he just couldn't keep interested. *Hogwarts* was lying on the bed table and looking at it reminded him of Hermione and how she was always quoting that book. *If you'd read Hogwarts - a History you'd know that...*

Harry smiled at the memory of the energetic, bushy haired girl who was the top student their school, whose appetite for reading had become legend, and who had been a close and dear friend for the last five years. He allowed himself to remember the wonders of that first year at Hogwarts. When he, she and Ron had discovered the magical world of wizardry.

His present situation was a far cry from those happy days.

*I've been wallowing in self pity for too long*, he thought, remembering the remarks of the old Headmaster Nigellus in Dumbledore's office painting, complaining that teenagers were always so

self centered.

With friends such as Ron and Hermione, whatever else happened, he had something beyond price.

*Perhaps I should write and say it to them? Yes that's a thought.*

He opened the letter.

*Dear Harry,*

*I'm sorry not to have written to you before this. I figured you might need to have some time alone. I know I needed it myself, because although Sirius was very important for you, I loved him too and you must believe me when I say that I share your pain.*

*I've been thinking about you every day Harry and even though I will not be able to replace Sirius I want to help you like he would have. Please let me do that.*

*Terrible things have happened, to the world, to us and to you most of all, and however unfair this is, it's not over as you well know.*

*You must know that you are not alone Harry, that you have friends and they love you. Remember that love has protected you before and it can do so again. This is important.*

*We must not wait for more terrible things to happen. We will fight this menace. All of us together and we will win. I know we will.*

*So don't give up.*

*Harry, I would very much like to talk to you. Can we do that? Let me know when I can come and visit you. I suppose it would be best to do it when your uncle and aunt are not around.*

*Remus Lupin*

*P.S. Remember his last to you.*

Harry's first reaction was anger, as whenever he was reminded of Sirius or when he felt someone had pity on him. Then gradually his emotion subsided. He knew that Remus, professor Lupin, meant well.

*What's the date again? Yes the full moon was two days ago. He's just recovered.*

Remus was a werewolf. He had been bitten by one as a child and every month he transformed into a wild creature. It was a terrible thing. For him it was a chronic and painful disease.

And yet Remus was always a pleasant and cheerful companion. Fiercely loyal and caring.

He looked at the letter again.

*We will fight and we will win.... don't give up.*

That kind of martial phrase made him feel better at least. It was more like what a Gryffindor would say.

*We certainly have not been doing much winning lately. It would be more correct to say that we haven't lost everything!*

Something was funny about that letter.

*What did Remus mean by "Remember his last to you"?* The phrase evoked only one thing to Harry, the howler that his aunt Petunia had received a year ago.

*"Remember my last Petunia!"*

It had happened last year when his uncle had been getting ready to throw him out the house. A howler, a magical screaming letter, from Dumbledore had arrived to remind her of her pledge to keep him in her house, so that he could be protected as the Headmaster had explained later. What a

shock it had been to his uncle, who hated all things to do with magic, to learn that his wife had made a pact with wizards!

*But Remus is not talking about Petunia here. This has to be about me.*

It sounded like a puzzle. Despite his current funk he was starting to be interested.

*Could he be referring to the last conversation I had with Dumbledore?*

Harry reviewed the old wizard's words. So many things had been said that night. He had never really tried to analyze what Dumbledore had told him. He'd been so angry and distressed at the loss of Sirius.

*Way to go Harry! He's only the most competent wizard in the world. What could you learn from him? How much better to feel sorry for yourself!*

He stood up and started to pace in his room, annoyed once more but mostly at himself. *Remus is telling me something and that letter has a hidden meaning. What could it be?*

At least it had started his mind working again, and that was nice.

There were some obvious reasons for using a round about way to communicate. It was suspected that owl post could be intercepted. *Even though the Ministry is on our side now and Voldemort and the Death Eaters would be on the defensive for a while.*

Harry re-read the letter carefully, searching for clues.

*"... you have friends and they love you ...love has protected you... This is important."*

*Well ok, it's nice to be loved but what does it have to do with my problem?*

Harry didn't see what good that was going to do against Voldemort. Against an enemy who was able to kill anyone with a word, and who had corrupted so many people into becoming Death Eaters - devoted to him and to inflicting pain and death on innocents.

There was a war going on and in a war the most important thing should be to fight, to build up power to use against the enemy.

*But Dumbledore never seems to do that. Things are always so often about defense with him.*

When he thought about love he thought about his parents. Did this have something to do with the magic that his mother has used to protect him from Voldemort before he killed her? The same that made it necessary for him to stay at Privet Drive in the summer?

These spells were sixteen years old and they still worked. Although actually only the Privet Drive haven remained effective since Voldemort had used Harry's own blood to regenerate himself.

Still in his first year Harry had almost destroyed Voldemort, simply by touching him. And Dumbledore had said several times that it was because of his mother's love.

*Could this kind of magic be used as a weapon?*

Harry began to feel excitement. He remembered Dumbledore saying that Voldemort was unable to understand the power of the heart. *And to be honest I don't either. It's nothing like the magic spells we're taught at Hogwarts.*

Dumbledore had also said that at the Ministry it was his feeling for Sirius which had forced Voldemort out of his mind. He shivered as he remembered the terrible pain and despair of his possession by the dark wizard.

*Maybe there's something behind this. Maybe I do need to listen to Remus.*

He took out a quill and started to write an answer. Yes. They would talk, maybe even start planning so that at least there would be hope and something for him to do. *And maybe there is someone else I could discuss this with.*

Harry stood decisively. He took out a piece of cake lying on his table and gave it to the owl which was looking at him in expectation.

"Take this Hedwig. I'll have more work for you tonight." He started to write.

*Dear Remus,*

*Thank you for your message. Yes I would like to talk with you. As it happens, the Dursleys will be away tomorrow afternoon so why don't you drop by, around half past two?*

*Respectfully yours.*

*Harry*

He rolled up the note and attached it to Hedwig's leg.

"This is for Remus but I need you to come back quickly because I'll have another letter for you."

*I'll write one to Hermione. I wonder what she's doing with her vacation.*

He took out another blank piece of paper.

*Krum's Manor, Bulgaria,*

Hermione went up to her room, splashed some water on her face and started thinking, trying as she always prided herself, to deal with her problem 'logically'. *What is it with me? Here I am, perfectly happy, on vacation, and just thinking of Harry and Viktor makes me lose it like if I were a stupid empty headed bimbo girl, like Cho crying all the time.*

*Cho.*

*Harry's girlfriend.*

*Ex-girlfriend,* she corrected.

At the memory of Harry's entanglement with the pretty Ravenclaw, she couldn't help smiling. He had been so helpless, especially at that time in Homestead when he and Cho had a row because she, Hermione, had asked him to meet Ron and her in the middle of their date. Harry had complied at little too literally, and completely messed up with Cho as a result.

*That was a lousy trick I played on him.*

Hermione was startled by that thought. She hadn't played any trick. Poor Harry just didn't know how to handle the delicate intricacies of romantic relations.

But she did.

She was honest enough with herself to question her attitude on that particular occasion. Was it possible that unconsciously she had tried to disrupt the relationship between Harry and his girlfriend?

But she hadn't been jealous. She remembered being happy for him when he started dating Cho. And she'd been dating with Viktor.

She *was* dating Viktor. Yesterday they'd kissed, for the first time. Under the moonlight, near the lake.

*Very romantic, exactly as I'd planned it.*

It had been nice but it hadn't made her head turn. She'd been *in control* of things. As usual.

*But is it what I really want?*

She remembered the way Harry had been when he'd kissed Cho for the first time. He'd been walking on clouds, so happy that even she had been moved by his dreamy face.



*Damn it! Why do I keep thinking of him?*

What were her feelings for Harry? She needed to define that.

*He and Ron are my best friends. We learned magic and faced dangers together. We shared so much that we are like brothers and sisters.*

*Do I want more?*

What did she want actually?

Deep inside her she realized that she yearned for what she had seen in Harry's eyes that day. Intellectual games were not enough. She wanted passion.

*Harry might not understand girls, but he knew how to fall in love.*

Was she in love with Harry?

How much of her affection for him was simply pity for his troubles? Pity would not be a good basis for a romance. Viktor and she treated each other as equals. If she just wanted to help Harry maybe she could do it better as a friend.

*I would give my life for him. Would I give it for Viktor?*

Inside herself she knew that she would, but not for the same reasons.

*Giving your life for someone is not the same thing as being ready to spend it with him.*

Hermione realized this was the crux. She began to imagine life, *adult life* with someone, a *man*, and what that meant.

It got her nowhere. There were good and bad arguments on both sides. All she had was doubts and she was confused.

*I need to make a choice. I need to talk about it with someone.*

It looked like she might have to take her mother's offer after all. She waited a little more and finally stood up, left her room, and started down the stairs.

In the hall she met Viktor and his father. Mr. Krum was a very dignified gentleman, exactly what she imagined a nineteenth century lord to be. Once again she reflected of the curious preference of wizard folks for older traditions and ways of life.

"Good morning young lady. Is everything fine?" asked the older man.

"Hello Hermiony," said Viktor pleasantly. He'd made a lot of effort to learn to pronounce her name.

She took Mr. Krum's hand and gave him her brightest smile.

"Yes thank you, it's a beautiful morning and I'm having a wonderful time in your lovely home. Hello Viktor." She gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Would you like to walk to the village with me this morning Hermiony?" he asked her. "There are some things we need to buy at the general store."

"I'd love to but I have to discuss some things with my mother. Can it wait an hour or so?"

"Of course. I will wait for you. Later then."

*He's really a nice boy. All in all, I don't think we've ever disagreed on anything.*

She couldn't say that about Harry, who could be the most difficult person she had ever met. She sighed as she found herself once again comparing the two boys.

*It's not that easy. Some things are more important.*

Hermione left the hall and went for the garden. She spotted her mother sitting on one of the benches near the water, and she walked toward her.

She knew basically what she wanted to discuss but part of it depended on a lot of stuff, about Voldemort and the wizard world, which her parents didn't have a clue about. That could complicate things.

*And maybe they shouldn't know too much. There's always a chance that they would stop me from going back to Hogwarts. Of course they might also simply not believe me.*

Her mother smiled at her.

"You look much better dear." She looked at her carefully. "Now, do you want to tell me what was making you sad?"

Hermione sat down and started to explain how she liked Viktor and hadn't really considered long term commitments until recently and then found that she was questioning her feelings for another one of her friends.

"Harry. He's that boy you've told me about at your school? The one who's an orphan?"

"Yes. Me, him and Ron, that's Ronald Weasley from another wizard family, we're always together and we've had a lot of...adventures." Hermione gave her mother a defensive glance. "I mean seriously, it's not always kid's stuff and making up mischief. I can't detail everything but believe me when I say that the wizard world is very different from the muggle... from the *real* world."

She went on to explain that Harry had suffered a lot of troubles the previous year and that she was wondering if she was really attracted to him or if she only felt a kind of motherly feeling to help him.

Her mother smiled at that. *Motherly feelings indeed.*

"You seem to be taking this rather seriously Hermione. At your age it's normal to hesitate between boyfriends."

Hermione jumped.

"Mom! I would not bother you if it was just... fooling around with boyfriends. I feel very seriously about this." *That's really you girl. God forbid that you'd do anything frivolous.*

She grimaced and continued in a low voice.

"I don't want to play games with any of them. I respect them too much for that."

"I'm sorry my dear. Of course I can only approve completely," said her mother. Inwardly she was rather pleased by her daughter's attitude. She had certainly matured.

"Have you been dating this Harry before?"

"No... I mean it really wasn't an issue up till now. I don't even know how he feels about me. He probably considers me more like a sister. He had a girlfriend last year but they broke up..."

*Fifteen year old boys never consider fifteen year old girls like their sisters, my dear daughter,* thought her mother.

"What do you feel when you think about him?" she asked in a neutral voice.

Hermione took a deep breath, looked away and launched herself.

"Well he's the bravest and the most gallant person I know. He's really been hurt a lot and because of that I want him to be happy. I try to comfort him, but he keeps a lot of things inside himself, and he can be very stubborn, but sometimes he relaxes, and then he's the most wonderful companion and we have a great time together ..."

"And how do you feel about Viktor?"

Hermione paused and she smiled at her mother, guessing at the technique she was using. *Well medical people probably have to take courses in practical psychology.*

"Viktor is nice, he's intelligent, and Harry is very smart too by the way!" *Damn it! Keep to the point girl!* "With him I had a lot of good discussions and I learned a lot about how adult wizards live. Viktor is always pleasant company and I feel, well ... secure with him."

She stopped. Was that all she could say about a boy she'd been seeing for more than a year? And compared to that she felt she could talk about Harry for hours. She felt a lump in her throat. Her mother said nothing for while.

"You're not in love with Viktor," she stated flatly. "He would make a good companion but you're afraid that life wouldn't be challenging enough with him."

Hermione nodded, she thought exactly the same thing.

"But you can make your life interesting all by yourself, even if you don't share everything with your partner."

Hermione considered this. It felt like a default choice and she had more ambition for herself. *I want to make my life a success as a team.* She shook her head.

"On the other hand it's obvious that you are very attracted to Harry. The way it looks, the choice seems to be easy. Unless there is something else I should know?"

*Yes she's right. It ought to be a simple decision.*

"I'm afraid," she answered, lowering her eyes.

"Of what?" came the puzzled response. "Of him? You do make him sound somewhat formidable."

Hermione shook her head.

*Of what am I afraid the most? That he'll say no and reject me? Am I that vulnerable? No. If he really doesn't love me we'll still be friends. It will hurt a lot to be rejected but I'll deal with it.*

*What else could happen? One of us could die in this war and the other would really suffer.*

Hermione imagined herself being killed, or tortured into insanity like Neville's parents, and how Harry would react. Or if it was the other way around.

She realized that it could happen quite easily. She shivered and paled at the thought of it.

The hard fact was that death, or terrible injuries were things that were never going to be far from Harry's life until Voldemort was defeated. It was bad enough to consider that for oneself but when it concerned loved ones it was unbearable.

She suddenly realized something.

*Harry must be living with thoughts like that everyday since Cedric died. No wonder he's changed.*

Her face became hard as she considered what her choice implied.

"Hermione! What is it?" her mother asked anxiously.

She ignored her as she realized something else too.

*How can I believe that I pity him? He's the bravest and strongest person to bear such a burden and not crack up completely.*

A new feeling swelled up in her. It took a moment to understand what it was. She was proud of him.

"Hermione! Did I say something wrong?"

*No you said the right words. I love him, I admire him, but he's alone and he needs someone. I want to be that person. No matter what the consequences might be.*

"Hermione? Talk to me please?"

She looked up at her mother and wondered what to say. *How could I explain all of that to her? It's*

*impossible but it's not necessary anymore. I've chosen.*

"No it's ok. I just... can't say anymore." She stood up, confident once again.

"Thank you Mom, you really did help me, and don't worry I know what to do." She forced a smile.

Jane examined her daughter's face closely.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." There was no trace of indecisiveness in her voice. She'd returned to her usual confident self. "And now I have to go in town with Viktor. It will not take long and we'll be back for lunch." She kissed her mother and they smiled at each other. "See you later Mom."

*Viktor. He's the next step in this. It's not going to be easy, but I have to make him understand. I just hope I won't hurt him too much.*

She began to marshal her thoughts on what to say to him as she turned back to the house.

"Hermione!"

She stopped. Her mother was looking at her.

"Yes Mom?"

"Are you going to speak to Viktor?" She marked a pause. "And then, are you going to be leaving us?" she continued in a soft voice.

*She understands. That's a good thing. And she'll speak to Dad.*

"Yes. I want to take care of this as quickly as possible."

*Even if I don't know exactly how I'm going to do it.*

"Darling, if I can give you a word of advice for Viktor?" Hermione frowned then nodded. "Don't tell him too much. Just that you need time to think." Then, as one woman to another. "It will be easier for him if he has time to understand it by himself." Another pause. "Even the kindest words can be blunt and cause a lot of pain."

*Yes she's right. I'll have to remember that.*

"Thanks Mom, good advice."

Viktor was waiting for her in the lounge reading the Bulgarian equivalent of the *Daily Prophet*.

"Are you ready Hermiony?"

He looked at her, interrogative. She tried to keep a neutral composure but it was not easy. He stood up to take her hand.

"Is everything all right? You look a little strange."

She shook her head. The house was not a good place for what she had to say.

"No. I'm ok. Shall we go?"

They walked in silence for a while, hand in hand. Hermione felt her heart beating fast, and she was trying to calm herself as she took in the soothing scenery of the countryside. Viktor shot several looks at her, sensing her trouble and trying to understand what was happening.

*She seems so serious today. She's always serious when she's working but never when we are just... together.*

"Hermiony? What is it? Something is not right I feel."

She stopped walking, released his hand and a gentle smile formed on her face.

"Yes Viktor, there is something I have to tell you."

An icy feeling came over him, and the look in his eyes changed from puzzlement to alarm and fear. Seeing this Hermione hated herself for what she was going say.

"Viktor, I like you, I really do, but beyond that, I'm not sure of my feelings... And I think that I ought to tell you that, and well..." *Better stop here and see how he reacts.* She considered him carefully.

Viktor swallowed a heavy lump in his throat. *Is she saying that she doesn't love me? Is it already over between us?* Things had never gotten very far, and he had never really thought about the future until a few days ago, when he'd realized that she could become very special for him.

Seeing her right now he found her more desirable than ever. She was so vital with her beautiful earnest face, and the bunch of brown hair which always seemed excessive for her small size.

"Hermione, I..." he stammered, "I do not know what to say. I thought that we were doing all right you and me. Did I do something wrong?"

Her heart cried out from the pain she heard in his voice. She rushed forward, but stopped before touching him.

"No! Of course not! You've been fine and I was really happy with you. I am still... happy." She took in a deep breath. "Viktor I am really glad that I meet you, and I really think you are great guy, and whatever difficulty exists lies with me, but I need to... do something, to make sure..." she broke off.

"And you need to have a girl who will be with you, without any afterthoughts," she finished in a rush as she felt the tears coming once again.

"Viktor I'm so sorry!"

Desperately she willed herself to keep looking at him, to stay in control despite the hurt she could see on his face.

They were silent for a long time. Then Viktor turned away and started down the way, without looking back. After a while she followed, trying not to make any sound.

They were not very far from the village. He walked on without looking at her. Hermione couldn't bring herself to accompany him when he went to purchase the supplies they had to bring back. She sat on a stone near the village sign, knowing that he would have to come back by that way, unless he decided to apparate back at the manor. *No he won't do that. I'll wait for him at least for while.*

Half an hour later she saw him coming back and she imagined that he stood a little straighter. She didn't move and practically stopped breathing until he came to her level. Then he sat down next to her and turned toward her.

"It is all right Hermiony. I cannot say that I can take in everything yet. It hurts a lot. But I think I understand what you feel, and maybe you are right to have... doubts about us." He forced a sad little smile. "As you said, I do like you and I hope we will still be friends. Whatever happens I want you to be happy. And I want you to know that I will always be there for you if you need help."

Hermione's tear streaked face broke into a smile.

"I'll always be your friend Viktor!" She took his hand and kissed it. "And I will be glad to call on you later."

She wiped her eyes.

"You know I've done more crying today than in the last two years. I'm really turning into a silly girl."

"You are not silly Hermione. Never." He stood up and extended her his arm. "Shall we go back now?"

Molly Weasley was in her kitchen cooking dinner. At the Burrow, the house of the Weasley family, this was usually a collective activity between the cook and a number of magical inhabitants of the kitchen.

Around her, pots, spoons and ingredients whirled and did their stuff. At the moment a selection of vegetables and meats were being cut and boiled, while a lineup of spice bottles and condiments competed for her attention, dancing in the air, waiving miniature hands, and accompanied by various recipes and utensils.

Tonight 'Curry' was most anxious to play a part. The yellow box was forcibly pushing the others away and had formed an alliance with a cookbook entitled *Delicious meals from India*. The competition team was a wine bottle and a French recipe labelled *Poulet à la bordelaise*.

Molly judged the French dish too heavy for an evening meal.

"Not tonight Claret, but I promise we will do something together next Sunday".

The Curry bottle stuck out its tongue to the wine, who attempted to hit it with its cork. The rest of the magical denizens joined in the fight. After a moment of pandemonium Molly intervened and eventually order returned to the kitchen and she finished planning the rest of the dinner.

When the various pots and pans could be left to simmer by themselves, she joined the rest of her family in the living room.

Arthur and Ron were playing a game of Wizard chess. Ginny was quietly reading a book. Fred and Georges would not be home until the weekend and Percy...

Molly's happy mood disappeared. They were still at odds with Percy.

*Great Merlin! Percy, when are you going to realize what you've done and come back to us? Don't you understand how unfair the Ministry has been to Harry and to us?*

Thinking about the young orphan she became even sadder.

*Harry. That poor boy. Dumbledore has his reasons for not letting us keep him here for the whole summer, but there's really got to be a better way than sending him to those bandits. He can't even practice his magic as he should.*

The realization that someone as young as Harry (well he's almost sixteen actually, not really a boy anymore) should have to practice fighting for his life against deadly enemies, changed her feelings to anger. As a mother she valued the importance of having a happy childhood, and Harry had certainly been cheated of that. *Responsibilities and the hard facts of life come soon enough. That boy deserves more, and we should be able to give him the bare minimum of family life.*

Looking at Ron and Ginny she reflected on the fact that, because of their friendship, her children were more exposed than most in the deadly war against Voldemort. The only upside is that it had given them all more maturity than they should have at their age. As a member of the Order of the Phoenix, she knew the necessities but also the risks, and she was both proud and fearful.

*We do what we must.*

As if reading his mother's thoughts, Ron looked up with a questioning expression on his face.

"Dinner smells delicious Mom. How about inviting Harry over?"

"You know what professor Dumbledore said. That we had to wait."

"Yes but look Mom. At his place he's probably got nothing but a lump of old bread and tepid water. He'll end up weak as kitten and if something happens, he..." Ron choked off at the thought of Harry being attacked by Voldemort at his uncle's house.

Ginny turned a weary face to her brother.

"Ron we explained to you that he's safe there," she said. "He can't be harmed unless he leaves the place, which he won't because he's got more sense than you."

"And we sent him some food last week and yesterday, so he's not starving," added Molly.

Ron knew all that but he missed his friend and he knew that Harry was unhappy. It was wrong to keep him away.

"What about Quiddich?" he insisted. "What about defense training? There's so much that we should be doing together."

He got up and moved around to vent some of his frustration.

"This is stupid! Last year it was the same thing and it almost got Harry killed, it got..." Ron stopped when he saw his parents' sober faces. Everyone remembered the events which had led to the death of Sirius.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. I mean, I trust you and things but..." he stammered.

Arthur stood up and put his hand on his son's arm.

"It's ok Ron. We understand how you feel and how hard it is. But you can trust us. It's not going to be like last year. A lot of things have changed." *Yes a lot has changed, some good and some bad but we're stronger now and we don't have the Ministry against us.*

For an instant he debated against telling them of Dumbledore's plans. Knowing that the Headmaster was preparing something would make them feel better, but it was too soon and he didn't want to raise false hopes. They were ready to grasp at anything, and disappointment would hurt them more than frustration could.

"Come on Ron. It's your move..."

## Chapter 2 - Commitment

*Privet Drive, next afternoon*

Harry was fidgeting around the house while waiting for Remus. The Dursleys had taken their son Dudley to a movie and left him alone with the usual list of things not to do. At least since Moody's threat they didn't persecute him like they used to and they had simply replaced nastiness by indifference.

He didn't care about them. However petty they might be, they had no real importance in his life. They were merely annoyances to avoid or to ignore.

Yesterday he had finally written a letter to Hermione. It had taken more time than he'd thought.

*Dear Hermione,*

*How is your vacation going? Well I hope. For myself I'm mostly bored but I hope to see Remus soon. It will be nice to have a visitor for once. This place really feels like a prison.*

*I miss you, and Ron. I never really did thank you for support last year but it helped a lot. And especially your brilliant idea of the DA group. That was the best thing I had and it was because of you. So thank you.*

*I hope we'll have some time together before school starts. I swear to you I'm going to make an effort not to be grumpy like last year. Keep this letter. If I break my promise you'll just have to show it to me and I'll shut up.*

*A big hug to you and please give my regards to Viktor.*

*Forever your friend, Harry*

He wondered how she was doing with Viktor. Better than he had with Cho certainly.

The bell rang. *Remus!* He rushed to open the door and found himself confronted with a rather elegant muggle couple reminiscent of bible tooting witnesses. After a moment of surprise, he recognized Tonks and Remus.

"Hello Harry. How are you?"

"Hi Tonks. Hi Remus, please come in."

He had expected Remus to come alone and raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Tonks has guard duty this afternoon," said Remus.

"And I wanted to say hello to my comrade in arms," added the young witch with a cheerful smile. "Anybody else in the house?"

"No we're alone. The Dursleys should not be back before six." *Comrade in arms, yes she can say that now.* Harry felt a swelling of pride at being called that by a member of the elite Auror force. However Remus had said something else which was troubling him.

"What do you mean guard duty? You're not watching over me are you?"

"Of course I am. Didn't Dumbledore explain how you are protected here? This is a war you know and we need to have soldiers and guards."

"But I thought it was just spells and stuff like that. How many of you are out there?" Suddenly Harry was both glad to realize that he was not alone, and horrified at the idea that Tonks could be hurt because of him.

"There's just me but if there's any trouble I'll have time to sound the alarm and stop them from moving in too quickly. You'll be safe inside long enough for the rest of the team to arrive," she answered, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.



Harry couldn't believe it. She was doing this *alone*. He knew what Death Eaters could do. *This is madness. Don't they ever learn?*

"Tonks I don't want you to be killed because of me!" he cried.

Remus was surprised by his reaction and put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Harry this is not just about you. You're an important asset and it is normal to protect you."

Harry shook him off angrily and glared at them.

"It's not normal! She's alone and if there's really some danger it won't be enough. I can't stand it! How many more people are going to die protecting me?" All the frustrations build up from the past days seemed to overwhelm him.

"HARRY. STOP IT!" yelled Tonks in a sergeant master's voice. He froze and she continued in a stern tone. "Harry, I'm sorry but I must tell you that you are badly wrong about this." Her face showed anger and disappointment.

"If a bunch of Death Eaters attack there will be a fight and I or others may die. It will not be your fault but that of those monsters and of Voldemort."

*Amazing how she doesn't hesitate in any way to say his name.* Remus thought in admiration.

She pressed her point mercilessly. She was more incensed as they had ever seen her.

"Whatever might happen this is my duty and my honor and if it helps even in a little way to defeat these bastards then it will have been worth it," she continued proudly. "I will do it because *you* are important in that fight. I would also do it because of *who* you are, but it is not your responsibility in any case."

She showed a feral grin.

"And there's a good chance that I will take a number of them with me before I go down."

"What's more all the Aurors and all the members of the Order would do the same thing," she continued, "and you know Harry that you yourself would do the same. So what's the beef?"

He was astonished at being the target of such a violent outburst. And he couldn't find the words to argue with her. He tried to shake his head.

"There's no beef Harry! This is the way it must be, but if you keep on trying to prevent us fighting then you might as well help Voldemort win!" she added viciously.

The boy reeled as if he had been slapped. *How can she say something like that!* He took a step backward and collided with the lounge table. He didn't even notice the vase which was on it, fall and burst into pieces upon hitting the floor. He was mortified and his eyes filled with tears of shame.

In a softer voice Tonks added,

"Harry I know this not easy for you but it is important that you get over this fear for others. Your friends are not innocent bystanders to be protected. We are all fighters who care for each other but the most important thing is to win."

"Because if Voldemort succeeds then millions of innocent people will effectively suffer and die." As she said that she looked at him squarely then turned around, opened the door, and left him standing there.

Harry swallowed. He was so devastated by her assault that he couldn't utter a sound. It was all he could do not to burst out crying. He couldn't even bring himself to turn around to Remus for support.

*She's right. I know it and what can I say? That it's too hard for me? That I want to give up? How*

*can I say that to her, to anybody.*

*But don't they understand how painful it is for me to see my friends die?*

He heard Remus do a *Reparo* spell on the broken vase. Remus was surprised at Tonks' reaction and had almost tried to stop her, but then he realized that she had really put her finger on a major spot: Harry's pathological attitude toward death.

*Merlin knows that the kid's got good reasons for being sensitive but Tonks made a valid point. Did he understand it?*

He turned to look at Harry who was still reeling from the impact of the outburst which had been directed at him.

*I knew that Auror training was tough but I didn't follow all the implications. Tonks might look like a nice girl but she can certainly be brutal when she wants. I will have to remember never to annoy her.*

He had come to appreciate the company of the young Auror, and he couldn't say that he was not attracted to her, but it was the first time he had witnessed that particular aspect of her personality. He replaced the vase on the table and hid a smile.

*I can see that my job is to pick up the pieces now.*

Gently he touched the boy's shoulder,

"Harry?"

Harry didn't answer but he seemed to relax a bit at the contact. Remus guided him to the sofa and they sat down.

"Harry, I'm terribly sorry. This is not exactly what I wanted us to talk about."

Harry exploded a laugh that was half a sob as he released the tension inside him. *Yeah that was a good joke!* He managed to crack a smile.

"Well it's not what I expected either." He sighed loudly, removed his glasses and wiped his eyes.

*Well, the boy's resilient I'll say that.*

"Harry?"

Harry sighed again.

"I know she's right Remus and I know I'm being stupid acting like that. I keep telling it to myself but whenever it becomes real I just can't stand it." He clenched his fists. "I can't stand the thought of people dying because they're near me, and not being able to do anything about it."

"You are doing things. You've done a lot already. You should know that." As Harry started to object, he raised his hand. "Don't say anything about Sirius. Dumbledore has repeatedly said that he was the one most to blame, and whatever the reason it's the kind of thing that was bound to happen."

Harry nodded. He didn't really know what to think about that anymore, and he didn't want to argue, certainly not with Remus.

For a moment Remus thought about Sirius, his friends for so many years, and made a decision. He looked at the boy in front of him.

"Harry, last year you were kept in the dark and I know that you resented it. I think even Dumbledore regrets it now but at the time most of us felt that it was the right choice."

"Most of us?"

Remus gave a wry smile,

"Well Sirius was adamantly against it, and very vocal he was, and I had misgivings myself but I kept my counsel," he paused, "I'm sorry that I did, I guess you could say that I chickened out."

Harry shook his head. Remus had the courage to face an awful werewolf transformation every month. He ran dangerous missions for the Order all the time. He was anything but a coward.

"It's not your fault but I do think it was a bad thing. I felt abandoned and then I acted on my own but I didn't have all the information..." He shrugged.

Remus acquiesced,

"The thing is, it's somewhat a bit awkward for a member of the Order to disagree with Dumbledore about you and to disobey him," he continued. "But I've got a proposal for you, actually two."

He paused and looked a little embarrassed while Harry wondered where this was going.

"The first one is that, if you accept, I would like to take custody of you." He raised his hand as Harry started to speak. "It's not that easy because of the special properties of your present home and the fact that I'm a werewolf, but I talked to Dumbledore some times ago and he said that Privet Drive wouldn't as important as it once was. He needs some time to prepare another place - it could be Headquarters I don't know - but he's working on it."

"I'm not kidding myself that I can replace Sirius but I really care for you and..."

Remus stopped because Harry was smiling and nodding furiously. *Remus yes it would be almost as good as being with Sirius.*

"I take it you're ok with this?" Remus asked hopeful.

Harry found his voice.

"Thank you Remus. I would like that very much," he said sincerely.

"This is good but you do realize that as your guardian I'll be responsible for your conduct and education," he continued seriously. *Is this the ex Marauder who's talking? James would be laughing and rolling on the floor if he was there.*

"But since these are not normal circumstances and because you're not a child anymore, then maybe we could have a special understanding." He paused and Harry's expression was interrogative.

"I will pledge never to keep anything from you, which is not saying much, if you promise that you'll do the same and that you won't do anything... hem foolish before at least talking it out with me." Harry grimaced but he couldn't really argue the point. "I will keep your secrets and I will teach you and your friends all I can and help you. Even in areas not recommended for young wizards."

He smiled ruefully as he said that. *Responsible indeed!*

Harry's smile turned mischievous.

"Won't that get you into trouble?" he asked.

"Well I don't think I could have a worse influence on you than Fred and George. Of course I'll have to come clean with Dumbledore so he doesn't tell me any secrets he doesn't want you to know."

Harry chuckled.

"Did you talk to him about this?"

"I, hum, described a hypothetical situation and I think he understood perfectly. He didn't tell me not to do it so I guess its ok."

His expression became serious again.

"Please think about it Harry. I'll always be on your side, we all are, but if you agree to this you'll have to share some private things, which is not easy for anyone and for you least of all. In exchange

I won't judge you and I will be able to help you more."

Harry thought about it. He had always trusted Remus who had been his most supporting teacher and then a close friend, as he had been for his father. *What would dad do in my place?*

The answer to that was evident.

"Remus, does that mean I could call myself a Marauder then?"

"You're very welcome to the title Harry."

*Krum's Manor,*

It had been a very quiet day. Viktor had gone to a Quidditch practice with some friends while Hermione had stayed in her room thinking about several things. One of them being how to get back to England as fast as possible. Yesterday after exploring various possibilities she had written a long letter to Dumbledore explaining that she wanted to use the summer to do some research and help Harry (and Ron too) prepare for the next year.

She knew it was not very convincing but she felt he would understand what she was asking. *Let me come to help and let me see Harry.*

A letter from Harry has arrived this morning which had sent her heart fluttering. She read it quickly. Nothing new there and she knew he was anything but a prolific writer. *But he was writing nice things about me!* It was a good thing for Remus to visit him. If anybody could talk sense into Harry it would be the gentle and soft spoken werewolf.

By mid afternoon she was trying to read a book in the park, hardly able to concentrate on anything, when a flashing speck in the sky caught her eye. A beautiful red and golden bird was flying right at her. When it came closer she recognized it as a phoenix. *Fawkes! This is Dumbledore's answer.*

Her hands were trembling as she unrolled the message. A small paper-wrapped object fell at her feet.

*Miss Granger,*

*I cannot help but appreciate your wanting to come back to Hogwarts after only your second week of vacation. Such devotion to the faculty is to be commended, alas the school is closed and even (or especially) our teachers need their rests.*

*However I do believe your presence could be of help to me in one of my current projects, and this should also fit with your plans. If you can manage to pack a minimum of your things before six o'clock today, the accompanying Portkey will take you to me.*

*Kind regards*

*Albus Dumbledore - Headmaster*

She unwrapped carefully the object that had been included in the letter.

It was a white rabbit's foot.

*Privet Drive*

Harry and Remus had spent the rest of the afternoon together. Harry had made some tea and they had returned to his room. He was never very comfortable in the Dursleys' living room.

He came back to the subject of the previous day's correspondence.

"Yesterday you referred to the magic protecting me here. How does work exactly? Isn't it something I should know about?"

Remus took a sip of tea.

"Yes Harry it is." He took a moment to organize his thoughts. "You see all magic comes from the

same source, which you can consider to be a kind of raw energy, but it has to be shaped by human, well actually wizard, minds."

"So when you cast a spell you use your mind to process this energy?"

Remus was happy to be back to teaching. It was really a shame he'd had to stop.

"Yes it's a channeling effect and the working of the wizard's mind is very important. The classical spells rely on mental processes common to all wizards. Everybody can learn them, although some people will cast more powerful spells than others because they can channel more energy. A similar phenomenon occurs when wizards seal an agreement with magic and it then becomes binding."

"But some wizards have special minds and thus can use the magical energy in unique ways."

"You mean people like Death Eaters and Voldemort?"

"Yes. Part of Voldemort's power is that he can do things no other wizard can, not even Dumbledore, because his mind is so warped. Specifically he can use the energy which comes from evil deeds such as killing and torturing peoples."

"But you need to understand that the opposite is true," he added, "in particular the Headmaster believes that you can do things that others cannot, by using positive emotions. That's what I was referring to in my letter and that's also how your mother was able to protect you."

Harry tried to digest this. The same excitement he had felt yesterday was coming back to him.

"Dumbledore said that at the Ministry, when Voldemort possessed me, he couldn't bear to stay in my mind." He closed his eyes and recounted what happened. "It was horrible, I was ready to die and thinking of at least rejoining Sirius and how much I loved him and then the pressure stopped and he went away."

"Exactly Harry. This magic is a weapon we can use against Voldemort and in fact it's probably the only one powerful enough to defeat him." Despite the *theoretical* explanations of Dumbledore, Remus only realized their deep truth when he saw the positive reaction in Harry's face.

"There is more. Love or goodness or honor, whatever you call these feelings they are also things that hold us together, as Tonks has demonstrated," he winked at Harry who winced at the memory, "while the Death Eaters will only use selfish means such as fear, and thirst of power, and thus can never work as a team."

"Voldemort thinks that Love is inferior because it promotes weakness." Harry grimaced. *That's what I've been doing. Weakening myself with emotions.*

"Believing this Voldemort will always underestimate what we can do," replied Remus.

In a small voice Harry brought out his deepest fear.

"Remus how are we going to *use* this power? I love my friends but all I can imagine is how Voldemort can use this to get at them and hurt me. My mother protected me but she died for it. Is that the price to pay?"

*So this is what he really fears.* The man moved closer and spoke gently.

"No Harry there are other ways. Loving someone can make you stronger. It's possible to use the magic to reinforce each other and that's what you have to learn to do."

Harry gave him a hopeful but puzzled look.

"How?"

Remus was somewhat embarrassed.

"Well at that point I must confess that I don't know," Harry's face fell, "but Dumbledore is sure of that. He was very clear about it."

The forceful statement made Harry feel better. If the Headmaster believed it then there was hope, something could be done.

*And I can play a part instead of waiting for the adults to do something.*

Remus looked at him carefully. He was almost time to go and he wanted Harry to think about what they had discussed.

"We will talk again about this Harry. I have to go now but I'll return soon."

Harry was deep in thought. He nodded absently.

"When can you come back?"

Remus shrugged.

"Whenever you want. Are the Dursleys going to be away some other time?"

"Day after tomorrow they'll be eating outside, and I'll be alone for the evening. You can drop by around 8 o'clock. We could have diner together."

Remus smiled at him.

"We'll do that Harry. In the meanwhile please don't brood about what happened and do take hope. Things are going to get better. I'm sure of it."

Harry tried a brave smile and stood up to embrace his new guardian.

"You're always so optimistic about things Remus. I envy you." He sighed but the smile became more sincere. "I'm really glad that you came. Thank you."

Remus smiled back.

"I enjoyed speaking with you Harry. Take care and see you soon."

He Disappeared.

Harry sighed and stretched out on his bed. He thought back upon their discussion. *Yes. It had been nice speaking with Remus. And if he's right we do have reasons to hope.*

For a moment he allowed himself to fantasize that they could find a way to protect themselves from Voldemort, and to destroy him.

*Somewhere in England,*

After activating the portkey Hermione had expected to arrive at Hogwarts, presumably in Dumbledore's office, but instead she found herself in a house she didn't recognize.

She was also extremely nervous.

"Good afternoon Hermione," said Dumbledore.

"Good afternoon sir," she replied. *He's calling me by my first name!* She appreciated the honor. She knew that the school protocol reserved it for those students which the professors deemed worthy of special attention, and those were very few indeed. "Thank you very much sir for allowing me to come."

Dumbledore noticed the tension in her. He took her gently by the arm and led them to a pair of comfortable chairs.

"Please, your offer of help was most generous, and as I wrote, it is possible that you can help me with my current plans."

She sat down, intrigued. *His plans! What could I possibly do that could play a part in them?*

He sat in front of her and smiled kindly. On a little side table there was a selection of sweets and he offered her some, selecting a bright green marshmallow which he gobbled up with evident relish.

"I see that you are wondering what I am talking about. I will tell you of course, but first of all I want you to know that I have followed your work at Hogwarts with great interest. Professor McGonagall is most impressed by your talent and so am I." He paused. "I can testify that you are one of the most brilliant students to have attended this school in the many years I have been there."

Hermione squirmed at the compliment. She knew she was good but never would she have hoped for such praise, especially from the Headmaster whom everybody considered the most powerful wizard in the world.

"I say this in truth so that you do not think that what I will suggest is easy, or that I do not take you seriously." Hermione took this to mean that he was really going to give her a difficult assignment and her anxiety returned.

"Before we go into my project I must ask you a very personal question which you must answer truthfully. It is very important." Dumbledore paused again and Hermione now felt extremely uncomfortable. *What did you get yourself into girl?*

"You implied in your letter that you care deeply about Harry. I need you to tell me exactly what your feelings for him are," he asked in a very kind voice.

*Oh my God! Why does he want to know about Harry! What can I say?* She felt like at the doctor during an embarrassing examination.

*I will just say the truth.*

"I think I'm in love with him," she said in a little voice. She elaborated. "He's been my closest friend until now but now I feel that he is the most important person in my life and I would do anything for him and to be with him."

As she spoke Hermione sensed the absolute truth of her words. She had no doubts now. She loved Harry.

"And does he know what you feel for him?" continued Dumbledore gently.

"I didn't tell him, I don't know..." her voice broke. What would she do if he didn't love her back? Of if Dumbledore had reasons to keep them apart. *No! Please dear God not that! Please I could accept Harry not wanting me, but if he did and we couldn't... I think I would just want to die.*

"I was planning of speaking with him... If it was possible... I mean I wanted to ask you if I could..." her face pleaded to him. "Is there anything wrong with me loving Harry? Is something the matter?" *Get a grip on yourself girl!*

Dumbledore raise a hand and replied soothingly.

"Have no fear Hermione, you will see him soon and there is nothing that should keep you from each other if that's what you both want." She fell back in her chair, relieved but with her heart still beating fiercely.

"I am very sorry to have caused you such evident distress my dear. I sense your feelings, and although I cannot predict what Harry will do, I can tell you that I would approve your pairing without any reservation."

"Let me tell you why the question, and your answer, was so important." Dumbledore explained how Harry's mother had provided him with a vital protection against Voldemort, and how Privet Drive was necessary to him, and how he wanted to use a similar magic to enable Harry to be safe here.

More specifically he was trying to arranged things so that if Harry and someone declared their love for each other in this house, the power of commitment would provide the same kind of protection.

Hermione was fascinated. *Commitment magic! What an extraordinary thing, I'll have to look into that later.* But suddenly she realized something.

"But professor, Harry's mother *died*. Does that mean..."

Dumbledore reassured her.

"No Hermione, I do not believe that someone has to die for such a spell to be effective. If that was the case I would not even consider it."

"Harry knows about his mother's protection," he continued, "but I have not told him what I am planning."

"I have prepared this house so that it can become a new home for him but I will need your help to get a better understanding of this kind of magic... and to work the actual spells."

Hermione gasped.

"I would be honored sir, But I'm not sure I would know enough to be able to help you?" she exclaimed. "It must be something very complex."

"Complex no, but very difficult yes, I'm afraid," replied Dumbledore. "I have consulted the usual archives and I found very few records on this subject so it is more a question of pure research and theoretical analysis than of knowledge of magic. And because of this few people would be more qualified than you. It might even be an advantage not to have the preconceptions which usually come with extended knowledge."

Dumbledore stopped and waited for her to think about it. She stayed silent, conscious of the implications of any decisions at that point, and forced herself to consider all the possible consequences.

*What if Harry doesn't love me back? Would the magic still work?*

She voiced her concern.

Dumbledore nodded gravely.

"You are correct to point this out. In truth I don't know but I am fairly certain that the spells can only be cast by someone who loves him deeply. If Harry returns the commitment then the results should be very powerful. If not then there should at least be a significant effect."

"True love cannot be controlled or hastened. I could only be ready for it to happen but I have great hopes."

He paused.

"You see, Harry received several important things from his parents. James Potter was a very powerful and brilliant wizard while Lily possessed an enormous amount of life energy and love. Harry inherited all of that and it shows in his resilience to pain, his craving for affection and in the importance he attaches to his friends."

"Sirius's death was a terrible tragedy for him because of this. He loved him more than he loved Miss Chang, which was more an infatuation than anything else."

He looked at her with his kind face.

"I know that I am asking something very unusual of you Hermione. I realize that you will feel a great deal of emotional pain if this doesn't work right. I am not going to force you to do it and you should take your time to think it through."

"Harry certainly likes you a lot. Can it blossom into love? I don't know. I would not be surprised."

Hermione's mouth was dry. The stakes had suddenly gone much higher than what she expected.

*But what this means is that there's even more of a reason for doing what I want. And even if it fails I won't be worse off.*

She turned a calm face to him.



"I want to do this professor, I am ready."

"That is good Hermione," he said, smiling. He stood up. "Let me explain to you what I have prepared."

She followed him around the house and the layout of the rooms looked vaguely familiar. *It reminds me of... But it can't be!*

"Sir what is this place?" she asked him. "It almost looks like..."

Dumbledore's grin was that of a little boy who had managed to pull a particularly spectacular practical joke.

"Yes Hermione. This is 12 Grimauld Place. Headquarter of the Order of the Phoenix, formally owned by Sirius Black and now the property of Harry James Potter."

"But everything changed! It was awful before, all those nasty things on the wall."

"Sirius had made me the caretaker of this place," he explained. "In case... something happened to him."

Hermione saw a twinge of pain in the old wizard's eye. He stayed silent for a moment and she didn't interrupt him. Sirius' death had really been a tragedy for all of them.

He shrugged and continued.

"Anyway it gave me more direct control of the house. I enlisted the help of Dobby and professor Flitwick and we managed to... redecorate most of it."

*Redecorate indeed.* She could imagine how hard it must have been.

She had one more question.

"Where is Kreacher?" The wretched House Elf had betrayed them but he was as much a victim of his former masters as their enemy.

"He's not here, and we don't have to worry about him anymore."

She was horrified. "You didn't...?"

He shook his head.

"No, of course not. We didn't hurt him but he had to be neutralized. You see once Sirius was gone he would have been free to betray the secrets of our Headquarters to Bellatrix Lestrange and the Death Eaters."

"I couldn't bring myself to kill him and Elves have a lot of resistance to memory spells, but I managed to place him in a suspended state. A timeless prison if you will. When his knowledge will not be able to hurt us anymore then I will release him."

Hermione was very relieved to hear that. She was shown around the rest of the House, and greeted effusively by a very excited Dobby who made a point of describing every little change made in the house until Dumbledore gently shut him up.

That night in her room Hermione wrote a letter to Harry. She knew that she had to keep silent about what they were doing but she wanted to give him something to think about.

*Dear Harry,*

*Thank you for your nice letter. I'm glad I was able to do something for you last year. I'll do even better this year. Just wait and see. And I will hold you to your promise.*

*I'm sorry that you're still stuck with your uncle and aunt but I'm sure it's not going to last too long and we'll be able to be with each other soon.*

*I'm as impatient as you for it. Until then take care.*

*You're very special to me too Harry. It breaks my heart to see you sad so please think happy thoughts. Imagine I'm giving you a big hug. Imagine playing Quidditch with Ron.*

*Thinking of you always.*

*Love, Hermione*

*P.S.*

*Just to set things straight about Viktor. I know you like to rib me a lot about him but as I said before he's really just a friend. He sends his regards by the way.*

*She reviewed it. There. I'm telling him the minimum without giving the game away. It should help to put him into a proper state of mind.*

She felt a little guilty about Viktor but she reasoned it really was a case of the ends justifying the means. She didn't want Harry to think she was involved with someone else. He was so loyal that if he did he wouldn't want to even *think* about dating her.

She read the letter once again. *Actually girl you're coming on a bit thick. No matter, but if it doesn't work then it's really hopeless.*

She sealed it and gave it to the house owl. It should be delivered in the morning.

*Meanwhile I'd better go to sleep. I've a feeling that tomorrow is going to be a busy day.*

And it was. She and professor Dumbledore pored over countless descriptions of spells and pacts to try and extract the features that they would need. It was fascinating work for her even though she didn't think she was helping him all that much, but he assured her that she did.

"Discussing these things with you makes it much clearer in my mind, my dear, often the way you react suggests possibilities which I might have missed." He smiled at her. "We are doing very good work together, and the fact that we are doing it for Harry makes it even better."

She certainly agreed with that.

*Privet Drive,*

Harry read Hermione's letter with some surprise, but it gave him a warm feeling. The energy her friend always projected could be felt in every sentence she wrote. He couldn't help but smile at her exuberance.

*She's really a great gal.*

He did imagine her hugging him and it made him feel pretty good.

*I better get a hold of myself before I start imagining things.*

Still if he was thinking of dating girls, which he wasn't, he couldn't help but think that he would prefer a girl like Hermione to one like Cho.

He spent the rest of the day reading and thinking of what he would do when would be able to do magic. The discussion with Remus had given him back some energy and he had to spend it somewhere. He vowed to take up Occlumency training seriously and, besides reading and doing some of his regular homework, he practiced the meditation exercises Snape had given him.

*Grimauld Place,*

After two days of intense activity, Dumbledore and Hermione were in Harry's room ready to finish the protection spells. They had determined that it was the best place to work from. It was even situated in the center of the House.

Hermione had been driving herself tirelessly, and she put all of her concentration in the final incantations. When it was done she couldn't detect any effect, but Dumbledore told her that as far as he could sense it was working properly.

He surveyed the room and turned toward her.

"I think that we did everything we could my dear. Now all that is needed is to bring Harry here and for you to talk to him."

Hermione's heart began to beat faster. *It's going to happen! I'm going to see Harry and ask him, Oh my God!*

The Headmaster took out his complex watch and after a quick consultation he continued.

"In a little while, Remus has an appointment with him. If you are ready I'll go with him and we should be back in an hour's time."

Hermione couldn't trust herself to speak so she simply nodded. Dumbledore gave her an encouraging smile and left.

*Privet Drive,*

Harry went down to answer the door. This time again Remus was not alone.

"Professor Dumbledore, sir!" he cried.

"Good evening Harry."

Harry was quite unprepared for this encounter. He just looked at them, his mouth opened without saying anything.

"May we come in?" asked the old wizard pleasantly.

Harry realized with a start that he was blocking the way and keeping them out in the street.

"Uh. Sorry! Please do enter." He stumbled backwards to make room for them and then closed the door.

"Can I offer you something?" He remembered that the Headmaster had a taste for sweet things. "There's some chocolate cake in the fridge if you like." Dudley would be mad at him for giving away his rations but Harry didn't really care.

"With pleasure Harry," answered Dumbledore with a large smile.

Harry led them to the kitchen where he cut a piece for each of them, along with some fruit juice to wash it down. He had to smile at the gusto with which the Headmaster attacked his portion. Even Remus was trying hard not to laugh.

When he had finished Dumbledore turned toward the young man.

"Thank you very much for this little snack Harry. It was delicious," then changing the subject, "and how are you doing now?" he asked gently.

"I'm fine sir," replied Harry guardedly, "but it's not a lot of fun sitting here".

Dumbledore nodded absently. He glanced at Remus and then back at Harry.

"I understand that you have discussed the subject of guardianship with professor Lupin."

"Yes sir. And I agreed to his proposal." He grinned at Remus.

Dumbledore nodded again.

"That's very well. However there remains the problem of you having a place to live in. I'm afraid it is not possible for you to stay in professor Lupin's current home."

Harry's face fell. And even Remus looked alarmed. *Had it been too good to be true?*

"However," continued the Headmaster, "we have just finished transforming our headquarters at Grimauld Place into an acceptable place for both of you and for your friends."

Harry couldn't believe his ears. *I'm going to be able to leave this awful place.*

His heart filled with gratitude for the great wizard who had once again provided for him. Then he felt shame as he remembered the havoc he had caused in the Headmaster's office, and the harsh words he had said the last time they had met, when he'd been sick with grief about Sirius. *I wrecked his office and he's rebuild me a home.*

He swallowed and looked up to him.

"Professor Dumbledore?"

"Yes Harry?"

"Thank you very much for this sir, I don't know how to say how much I appreciate what you've done, and I wanted to tell you that I'm terribly sorry for what I did and said that last time. Please accept my apologies, I was a..."

Dumbledore raised his hand.

"No Harry. What happened then is the past and there is no need to come back to it. Your reaction was quite understandable."

He put his hand in his pocket and held out a rabbit's foot.

"This portkey will take us to your new home where we can continue our discussion. We'll just need to leave a note for your uncle and aunt, saying that you will not be coming back. What do you need to pack?"

*The Burrow,*

An owl burst in the Weasleys' living room.

"A message!" cried Ginny.

Arthur handled the bird with gentle hands and detached the note. He glanced at it then read it aloud. *You are all invited to dinner at Headquarters tonight. Come ASAP. D.*

"Dumbledore's calling us! What's happening?" asked Ron. "Was this expected?"

He turned to his father who smiled.

"I would not say expected exactly but let me say that maybe I'm not totally surprised," he surveyed his family, "and I think we'll hear some pleasant news."

*Grimauld Place,*

The portkey transported Harry, Remus and Dumbledore in the living room. Harry marveled at the way that the house was completely changed. He could hardly recognize it.

Gone were the dark paintings and heavy atmosphere. The ancient oppressive house of the Black family had become a luminous and comfortable dwelling.

"Harry Potter sir!"

*Dobby!* The house elf rushed to embrace Harry.

"Dobby! How are you?"

"Dobby is fine sir, Dobby is proud to be the first to welcome Harry Potter in his new home. Dobby and Harry's friends have been hard at work preparing it for him. Does Harry Potter like it?"

"It's magnificent Dobby," Harry turned around and Dobby was basking in his appreciation. "Thank you very much, this is an amazing job."

"Hi Harry."

He turned and framed in the doorway was Hermione, breathtakingly beautiful in a blue summer dress. Before he could say a word her arms were around his neck and his face was lost in her hair.

It felt wonderful.

"Hermione how did you get here?" he asked. "I thought you were in Bulgaria?"

"I was until a few days ago, and I came the same way you did," she turned to the Headmaster, "thanks to professor Dumbledore."

Harry turned toward the two adults. He could see they were positively beaming with pleasure. He realized that he was still holding on to Hermione and blushed and released her.

"Sir, Remus, this is fantastic. I don't know what to say."

"Harry, it is the least we could do, and I am glad to say that there is more to come," Harry's eyes opened even wider, "the Weasley family will be there shortly and we will have a pleasant evening together."

He turned to Hermione.

"My dear, may I suggest that you show Harry around while we organize ourselves?"

She took him by the hand and led him to the other rooms. He noticed with relief that the portrait of Sirius's mother had been removed from the hall.

"Dobby told me that it took Dumbledore and him more than two days to do that," said Hermione, "and they had to research very ancient spells to find the right formula."

The sleeping rooms were on the second floor. She showed Harry the one they had prepared for him. It was decorated with Quiddich posters, pictures of Hogwarts and of his friends. There was a desk, several chests and another bed. *For Ron of course. Oh boy this is going to be great.*

Harry was seeing all this as if in a dream. Then he realized he was standing very close to Hermione and that she was silently looking at him with a strange look in her eyes. He turned toward her. *How lovely she was.*

"Hermione, this is the most wonderful day of my life, and I'm really happy that you're here. You look...terrific." He swallowed and suddenly his stomach seemed to be doing strange things. *What's happening? I don't think I've ever felt like that before.*

And then it occurred to him that he had actually, once with another girl...

"Did you have a hand in this?" he managed to ask her.

"For this room yes. The Headmaster and Dobby took care of most of the rest of the house."

He looked around.

"I'm very impressed Hermione. Thanks a lot, you did a wonderful job." He hesitated and half extended his hand toward her, "I'm very happy to see you."

"And I'm very happy to see you too." She took a deep breath. *This is it girl! This is your big move. God please don't let me mess up!*

"Harry, I want to tell you something very important." She looked straight at him and she detected the stirring energy of her spells as they were activated. He seemed to feel something special too because he had a funny questioning look on his face.

She spoke what she thought were the most important words in her life.

"I love you Harry."

She saw the surprise on his face and felt the magical energy rise and flow around them.

The words rushed out of her.

"I didn't know it before but now I'm sure of it. I came back because of this. I want to stay with you and share everything with you. I love you."

Harry could hardly recognize the girl before him so intense she was. *Hermione loves me! What do I say?*

"I didn't just decorate this room Harry," she continued, "Dumbledore taught me the spells that were used to protect you in your aunt's house and I used them here." She paused to give him the time to understand, she saw that his eyes grew wider. "By telling you of my love I'm activating them." *Please don't be angry with me. Please say that you love me too.*

"I hope you'll love me back Harry. I wish it more than anything in the world, but even if you don't it will help a little." She couldn't go on. She'd done all that she could and now it was up to him. She just stood there looking at him with desperate passion.

Harry was overwhelmed by the gradual realization of what she had done. He'd always admired her, and he felt more than simple affection for her, but this was more than he'd ever imagined.

In his heart he realized he did love her but uppermost he wanted to protect her and that meant keeping her away from the danger he represented. Then he remembered what they had talked about with Remus. *I want to love her back. Could that be the right thing to do? I want to do it. I want it so much.*

Something clicked in his mind, and he felt the *rightness* of his decision. His heart was beating very fast and the only thing that existed was the girl in front of him. His girl.

"Hermione, I..." He couldn't speak but maybe there was no need for words.

He approached her slowly and gently took her face in his hands and kissed her on the lips. She moved against him and he felt her warm body touching his, her arms around him, her perfume in his head.

Time stopped.

When he released her, they looked at each other. Hermione's face was glowing with happiness and Harry's smile was pure tenderness.

*It doesn't get any better than this,* he thought.

Hermione was exhausted. The nervous tension of the past days had been high and now that she'd found Harry, and that they were finally together, the release was draining her. She staggered and he caught her.

"Hermione! Are you ok?"

She nodded.

"It's ok, I'm fine. In fact I've never been better, but it's been a strain, and I think I need to sit down."

She sat on the floor and closed her eyes.

"Can I get you something?" he asked anxiously. He kneeled down next to her and she let her head rest against his chest.

"Yes! I guess it's funny but I'm suddenly very hungry, and very tired." She looked at him "I knew you were a good kisser Harry. I didn't know you were that good."

"I don't think it was just me. And I thought that today was the happiest, I didn't imagine something could top it but I was wrong." He held her gently and she pressed her cheek against his hand.

"Hermione...?" he savored the words, "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Now I understand some of the things you wrote me."

"I meant everything I wrote. I just couldn't say it directly."

He nodded.

"I feel a little stupid anyway," he continued, she shook her head, "it's like you said. I feel that I've loved you for a long time but I didn't know about it."

He looked around at the room, *their* room, which would forever be a special place. He looked back at her.

"You are the most wonderful girl in the world do you know that? What you did is simply amazing."

"I'm the happiest girl in the world too."

He bent down to kiss her again.

After a moment they remembered that the others would be waiting for them.

"We'll have time to talk later but perhaps we should come down. They must be wondering why we're taking so long." He stood up and extended his hand to help her up. "Shall we tell them?"

"I think the question is rather how we could we possibly hide it?"

"I don't want to hide it," answered Harry. "I think I want the entire world to know."

They left the room and, hand in hand, they started down the stairs. When they entered the living room, they found that the Weasley family had arrived.

Harry spotted Ron and felt a pang of guilt to be holding Hermione's hand. What was Ron going to think about this? Before it had been the three of them, as equals. Would he resent the new situation? *No! I will not be embarrassed, and Ron will have to accept this.* He caught his friend's eyes and pleaded silently.

No one said a word.

Ron was thunderstruck by the vision of his two friends together. He had never really fully examined his feelings for Hermione, and while she was with Viktor he wasn't going to intrude. *And why do I think I'm good enough for her?*

His first reaction was a pinch of jealousy. *Why is it Harry again!* But it was mollified by the realization that his friend had also gotten some very raw deals. And truly he approved of anything that made him happy.

They were both looking at him and their eyes were clearly asking for his approval. *At least they're still interested in me. What can I say? We can still be together. Isn't that the most important thing?*

Ron swallowed and walked toward them, his face grave.

"Harry, Hermione," then when he came closer his face suddenly broke into a bright smile, "good for you mates!" and he rushed to embrace them. They returned the gesture and the three of them held each other for a moment.

It was another moment of strong emotion. Harry didn't think he could stand any more. When they disengaged he turned to greet the others guests.

Ginny was looking at him with bright eyes. *Thanks God she wasn't interested in me any more.*

"Hi Ginny, good to see you."

"I'm so happy for you two." She kissed Harry and hugged Hermione.

Molly Weasley embraced Hermione. For a time she had been somewhat reserved about the young girl, alternating genuine affection with bouts of suspicion about her morals. *Those stupid stories!* Lately however she had come to appreciate the qualities on which the strong friendship she shared with Harry and Ron was built. Harry was almost like a son for her, and she was now unreservedly prepared to welcome Hermione as a daughter. *Her parents are both muggles, so she's almost an orphan in our world.*

"Hum..." Dumbledore cleared his throat. Everyone turned toward him.

"My dear friends," he began, "I have called you here tonight to welcome Harry in his new home, and to confirm the position of Remus as his guardian," he turned toward Hermione, "and it seems that we have another happy event to celebrate."

Everyone cheered and Harry, grinning widely walked toward Remus who placed a gentle arm around his shoulders. Harry returned the gesture awkwardly. Both were a little embarrassed but there was no mistaking the feelings between them.

They dined in the equally redecorated kitchen. Dobby had provided an abundance of food. Hermione was ravenous, she had hardly eaten anything in the last days, and what she had done had consumed a lot of her energies.

Afterwards Harry took Dumbledore aside. He was still a little light headed as he faced the old wizard

"Sir, please tell me. Did you plan all this?"

"Including Miss Granger?" he replied with a smile. Harry blushed a little but his eyes still questioned.

"No Harry," he continued, "I would never interfere in such private a matter. However I had prepared for such a thing to happen." As Harry's face became interrogative, he added. "You see Harry I had planned for you to live here but there remained the difficulty of providing the same protection that you received from Privet's Drive."

Harry nodded his understanding.

"When Hermione contacted me, and made plain her feelings for you, I knew that a bond between you two, declared in this house, would create a magical protection that, combined with other more conventional spells, would be very powerful," he paused and added, "and your friend Ron strengthened that magic by adding the seal of his friendship, when he accepted your pairing."

Dumbledore looked at Harry seriously.

"What the three of you did Harry, and which had to come from your hearts, has made this place an almost invulnerable haven for us all. No Death Eater and not even Voldemort can harm anyone you care about while they are in this house."

Harry was both immensely relieved, and deeply touched by this. *I can love Hermione and keep my friends close, and it protects them. This is what I wanted all along.*

"Hermione worked the spells but does Ron know about this?"

"Ron doesn't know yet but you can tell him. In fact you should as the three of you will play a very important role in the future."

"What about my link with Voldemort?" he asked. "I haven't felt much in a while."

"I believe it is highly weakened while you are here. It is also possible that, at the Ministry, the circumstances in which the last contact you had with him was broken may have altered it in some way." Dumbledore was pensive a moment, "I do not yet understand everything about these matters Harry," he looked at him, "but I ask you to let me, or Remus, know of any change, however trivial. Will you do it?" Harry nodded.

"We will talk about this and other things tomorrow and during the next days. Be assured it will be a most active summer."

Meanwhile Hermione was seated next to Ginny and Ron and recounting the past events from her perspective.

As she talked about Viktor, Ron snorted.

"I never saw why you went with that guy," he said.



"Ron!" protested Hermione. "You're unfair. He's very pleasant when you go beyond that cold attitude he shows. I tried very hard not to hurt him but I did and despite that he reacted very gallantly."

She turned to Ginny who was porting a mocking smile.

"Yes Ginny, I don't have your talent for switching between boyfriends, and I don't plan to need it."

Ron nodded vigorously. It was clear he had completely accepted his friends' decision.

When she told them of writing to Dumbledore, and having Fawkes bring back an answer with a portkey they were properly impressed.

"Fawkes! That's grand!" exclaimed Ron looking at her with admiration, "and what happened afterwards?"

She described her discussion with the Headmaster, without going into too many details, and the work they had done on the house.

When everything had been ready and Dumbledore had gone to Privet Drive with Remus, she had gone to talk with Dobby in the kitchen, and tried to calm her nerves.

And then Harry had arrived.

Ginny and Ron stayed silent for a long moment as they digested what had happened. By that time Harry had joined them and sat down behind Hermione. She snuggled up to him, her head against his shoulder, and closed her eyes as his arm enclosed her. Ron grimaced at the sight and Ginny glared at him, *I'm bloody well going to have to get used to a lot of that I guess*, he thought.

"Tired?" asked Harry, oblivious of the exchange between brother and sister.

"Exhausted," she replied, "I'm going to bed and sleep till noon tomorrow."

Harry turned toward Ron and Ginny.

"Will you all stay here for the night? And the next days?" he asked.

They accepted enthusiastically. Molly agreed to leave them there and she that she would come back tomorrow with things for them. In the meanwhile there were enough odds and ends of shirts and gowns in the house for one night.

Remus had his room of course. Ron would share Harry's and the girls would take Hermione's.

Hermione had fallen asleep, and Harry looked helplessly at her, not wanting to wake her, and clearly embarrassed at the idea of taking her in his arms. *And I'm probably not strong enough so I'd look completely ridiculous if I try*. Ron looked equally unsure of what to do until Ginny muttered something under her breath about stupid males who evidently had a lot to learn, and took out her wand,

*"Wingardium Leviosa,"* she called, and Hermione's body raised itself in the air. "Now get out of the way Harry, and go to bed both of you."

"You used a *spell!*" exclaimed Harry in alarm. As underage wizards they were normally not allowed to do magic outside of school.

"I checked with Remus," she replied. "It's ok here because the house is actually outside the muggle world, like the Burrow. It also means that we'll be able to practice." Both boys looked at each other, clearly pleased at the idea.

They went up the stairs, with Hermione floating before them, and turned to their respective destinations. Harry paused a moment by the girls' room but Ginny firmly sent him on his way.

"No. You'll wake her up and she needs her sleep and so do you. You'll have time tomorrow. Good night." And with that she closed the door.

Harry and Ron exchanged a glance, Ron shrugged.

Ron whistled appreciatively at the arrangement of Harry's room. As they prepared for sleep he reflected upon the changes that the day had brought. *Harry and Hermione together and a new house for all of us.*

"Ron?" Harry was sitting on his bed.

"Ron, I want you to know that tonight... I'm very happy and proud that you're my best friend and that you're here with me... And with us." Ron turned his head, a little embarrassed but evidently pleased.

"Aw Harry. I'm very happy too."

In a quiet voice Harry told him what Dumbledore had said about the protection spells, and the importance of his approval.

"You mean I'm part of that too?" he asked, awe in his voice.

"Yes and it means a lot to me."

A smile of pride appeared on Ron's face. The two friends fixed each other for a moment, and then Ron exclaimed.

"Harry, mate you're really the best!"

"You're not so bad yourself, Ron."

They climbed into bed and turned off the lights. But Ron needed to talk some more.

"Harry? You know, about Hermione."

"Yes?"

"Once or twice I said to myself that maybe she would take up with one of us," he paused. "Last year at one time I almost asked her out. But I didn't have the guts... and she was with Viktor so..."

"Yeah."

"She's a great gal."

"Yes!"

"You don't mind taking about it?"

Harry considered it.

"No, I think I could talk about it all night. I expect it would bore you!"

Ron chuckled.

"Yeah right. All night, I guess it would annoy me."

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"I didn't know you'd been thinking about her. If I had... Well I don't know what I would have done."

"We could have played for her at wizard chess."

"No way! You'd have won too easily. It wouldn't be fair. Why not a duel with wands?"

"Not fair either. How about Exploding Snap?" Both laughed.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Had you been thinking about her... before?"

"Well not really. First there was Cho... How I made a proper fool of myself with her!"

"Harry! You deserved better. She was just a silly tease."

"No, not a tease. But you're right it wouldn't have worked....and it didn't. Well then afterward there wasn't time to think." Pause. *And Sirius died.* "But these last days I was feeling down under and you two were just about the only happy thoughts I had... And I was often thinking about her... But not really in that way. I guess it was kind of subconscious."

"What about me?"

"Well I didn't consider asking you out!" They laughed again.

"When she told me how she felt and what she had done," he continued, "I was well... I was not surprised, but it was like waking up and I knew I loved her... and I couldn't speak... so I kissed her."

"Whoa! That must have been something."

"Yeah!"

"I wish I'll have a moment like it someday."

"I'm sure you will Ron. I can't imagine it won't happen to you too." He paused. "And when it does Hermione and I will be around."

"Thanks."

"Good night Ron."

"Night Harry."

## Chapter 3 - Catharsis

*Grimauld Place, next morning*

Harry woke up slowly, sensing a quiet presence close to him. There was the smell of a sweet perfume and in the background the far off sounds of people talking and eating. He opened his eyes to find a large fuzzy shape standing over him.

Then the shape came down and kissed him. *Hermione!*

"Good morning Harry."

He smiled and reached for his glasses.

"Hi Hermione." He put them on so he could see her clearly. He reached out his hand to her cheek.

"Did you get a good night's rest?"

"Never better. You look sweet when you're asleep you know."

"You're welcome to come and see me sleep anytime... love." *How strange to use that word.*

She smiled and kissed him again, he responded eagerly.

"Harry I think we should come down now," she said after a while.

He grinned and pulled her in closer, she kissed him back.

"Harry I love this but really!"

It took a few more minutes until he agreed, breathless.

"Yeah you're right but it's really because I have to go the loo, then we can go back to this."

"Harry!"

"No I'm kidding, we'll go down. Did you have breakfast?" he asked.

"Just a cup of tea, I'll join you."

"In the loo?"

"Harry!"

"Just kidding." He smiled at her. "This feels so good. You know it really reminds me of my first day at Hogwarts. Coming in from the Dursleys, everything there was new and pleasant, I was in heaven. It's the same feeling I have now."

"I know what you mean. I'm very happy too."

"I love you."

"And I love you too!" She stood up. "But I expect you downstairs in five minutes if you want to have breakfast with me."

Harry jumped out of bed and made a go for the bathroom.

"It'll be down in less than three."

He found that his clothes had been stored in the various chests and drawers. There was a remarkable amount of socks in most of them. He suspected Dobby to spend half his nights worrying that Harry Potter would run out of socks.

He dressed with the first things he found and rushed out of the room. When he came down there wasn't anybody in the house, except Dobby in the kitchen who told him everyone had wanted to have breakfast in the garden.

"There's a garden in this house?" he asked. "That's new".

"Yes it is something Master Dumbledore felt would be useful. A very nice one too, even with a Quidditch practice," Dobby winked at him.

"What!" *Was there no end to the surprises in this place?* "Dobby, please show me the way."

The Elf led him through a set of doors he didn't remember seeing before, and suddenly Harry was bathed in sunshine and walking on the grass of very real looking garden. It could not possibly fit in the normal space of the Grimmauld property, so it must be a magical extension. Harry had never imagined however that one so big was possible - it was one thing to add two or three seats to a car, but this was almost a park, there was even a swimming pool.

At a table on a small terrace he found Remus and the others having breakfast. Ron waved him over. Harry greeted everybody and sat down in front of Hermione. Ron was highly excited.

"Harry, did you know that there's a Quidditch field over there!" he exclaimed. "And Dumbledore brought back your Firebolt. How about a little game after breakfast?"

Hermione started to say that maybe the morning could be the occasion to organize the tasks that awaited them for the summer. But Remus put his hand on her arm.

"Let them have a little fun Hermione, there's a time for everything and now Harry's like a kid in a candy store. You will not get him to concentrate on anything."

She wasn't so sure but as she turned to Ginny for support she found her friend shaking her head.

"Sorry, I'm going with them. It's been too long since we played together."

Hermione looked at Harry who couldn't stop grinning at everybody. *Well I can see that he's going to be useless until he's had his fill.*

Ron jumped in.

"Hermione, Harry hasn't played Quidditch since Umbridge punished him." And then he added the final argument. "You know, when he defended you against Draco."

*Well, she thought, there's nothing I can say after that.*

Dobby brought Harry his mug of tea and fussed around them, offering more drinks and toasts. Hermione looked at the Elf and frowned.

*Uh uh, Harry thought, now she's ready to start on House Elves. I better do something or we'll have our first argument soon.*

He sighted inwardly remembering how hard headed she could be about things. *And so can I actually. Well it was too much to expect that being in love would change that.*

He decided to at least try and smooth things, and reached out his hand toward her.

"Hermione," he said gently and she turned her head, "let me just do a couple of passes with Ron and Ginny and then we'll have a more serious discussion." She nodded. "And we'll also talk about Dobby," he continued, "I don't want to have a fight with you over this. Ok?"

She nodded and felt a pang of guilt as she realized that there would have to be a number of compromises between them and she had clearly missed her opportunity for the first one.

"You're right. I'm being a spoilsport as usual." She smiled. "Go over there and play with them."

Remus had stayed silent during the exchange. *I'll have my hands full handling these kids,* he thought.

He took a sip of tea. *I'm not going to worry about it,* he decided.

The weather was perfect. Plenty of sunshine but not too hot. He stretched his legs and settled more comfortably in his chair. Harry finished his breakfast quickly while exchanging light hearted

remarks with his friends. He was certainly in a very good mood.

"I think I will enjoy seeing how the two of you are going to manage each other," he said teasingly to Hermione when the others had left. "Concerning Quidditch I believe you will have to cooperate with the inevitable, he's never going to give it up."

Hermione nodded absently, and followed Harry with her eyes, as he ran with the others, clutching his broom.

"Yes I can see that, and honestly it isn't going to bother me. Each of us will have side interests. I'm more worried about us having too so many differences and ending up arguing about all kind of things." *That's a problem I never had with Viktor.*

She kicked herself mentally for comparing the two again. It was fast becoming a bad habit.

*I've chosen rightly and I don't regret anything.*

"There are differences between you two Hermione," said Remus gently. "You should accept them. Especially when you consider what they are."

She turned toward him.

"What do you mean?"

Remus selected his words carefully.

"Both of you will play major roles in the future. You have a tremendous drive, will and power to engage problems and solve them. This makes you very important, not only in the present situation but after we'll have dealt with Voldemort." He grinned at her. "In fact I'm confident that one day you'll find yourselves on chocolate frog cards among legendary wizards and witches."

Hermione made a face at him, but inwardly she smiled at the thought. *Actually I would like that very much.*

"More seriously," he continued, "the differences between you are best considered in the way you handle challenges. You will want to use your intellectual capacities to solve problems, and I don't mean using knowledge taught to you, or read from books. I know you can be very creative and that you are very good at pure research. Harry on the other hand will prefer a direct approach, using his raw courage and power to battle against obstacles."

"Aside from that I find a lot of similarities: being true to your friends, moral rectitude, resourcefulness and vitality to say a few."

Hermione considered that.

"So, you think we're not only compatible but that as opposites we attract each other?" *Why not. Viktor is very logical like me, and while that was nice, maybe it didn't attract me?*

"I don't really believe that opposites attract each other in human relationships," he answered. "I believe that initial attraction is a volatile, random thing, where hormones also play a part." He winked at her and she blushed. "But this doesn't last unless both partners can *build* something together."

"For instance," he continued, "I believe that Cho and Harry had no real goal they both wanted to pursue. Not to mention the fact that Cho is basically a weaker person than either of you. I'm not surprised that Harry couldn't stay interested very long in her."

"I think I see what you mean." Hermione recalled her summing up of Viktor for her mother. "There was something like that about Viktor and I."

"Possibly. Now, what I think can justify that 'opposites attract' impression is that it is easier for people to distribute roles than to do share them. Sharing is liable to beget frustration, especially if one is more competent than the other, or especially," he grinned at her again, "if both have rather

strong personalities."

She smiled, ignoring his friendly jab.

"I think I understand what you mean Professor." *He's right we're not so different Harry and I. We start from the heart and then we use separate talents to do things.*

"And consider also," added Remus, "that Lily and James were as different as you and Harry, and although they were as great a match as I ever saw, I can bear witness that they had some impressive arguments in the beginning of their relationship."

"Harry's mother," said Hermione pensively. "I would have liked to know her."

"She was a fine woman, strong and generous. She was a very good thing for James," he thought back on the wild kid that had been James Potter. *Master prankster of Hogwarts, arrogant bastard and extraordinary friend.* "Yes," he whispered, "she transformed him into the most gallant wizard you can imagine."

"Transformed him? What was he like before? I thought he was like Harry?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. He *looked* like Harry but his personality was much more assertive - with a dark side to it. He was powerful with magic and he didn't hesitate to show it." He paused. "Harry has been paying the price of it with Professor Snape."

Hermione remembered the prank Sirius had played of Snape, which had nearly resulted in his death. She gathered that there had been other incidents.

"James amended later," Remus continued, "but when he was Harry's age he was very arrogant." He marked another pause. "Harry is not like that at all, and I'm glad he inherited the kindness of his mother."

She looked at him and nodded pensively.

"Thank you Remus. I will remember this and think about it."

He shrugged it off.

"Don't mention it. It's really a pleasure to talk with you kids. It certainly beats sulking alone and thinking about old memories."

He took on a somber expression and Hermione realized that this man had suffered a lot too, almost as badly as Harry. *The rest of us don't really realize how easy we've got it compared to some others. Harry, Remus, Neville...they're among the victims in this war. They survived and they're still fighting.*

She placed her hand on his.

"You lost Sirius too, he was your friend. I'm sorry."

He looked in the distance, and his voice sounded far away and wishful.

"When we were with James it was like the three of you, Hermione. We did do many things together, nothing as dramatic as yours but it was pretty strong stuff sometimes... We felt so *alive*."

He paused and she held her breath, not wanting to interrupt.

"After James and Lily died, and Sirius was taken away and even I thought him a murderer - I was more dead than living." He shuddered and she felt a pang in her heart at the thought of the lonely werewolf's pain.

"Then I came back to teach at Hogwarts where I found Harry and I began to live again, and then Sirius returned and we had each other for a while. After all that had happened he became more a brother to me than a friend."

She was deeply moved, and, as she emphasized with Remus' pain, she also imagined Harry's. *And*

*he never talks about it.* She grasped the man's hand tighter.

He shook himself and tried to smile at her.

"I'm sorry Hermione I should not be rambling about the past like that. It's really much better to live in the present. I do have some good moments too, you know." *Yes, care to name a few perhaps?* He ignored the inner voice.

Hermione face became serious. *He deserves happiness, and so does Harry. I should never begrudge them any fun.*

"No Remus, I think I needed to hear that." She paused. "And maybe I will also need to hear Harry tell me all that has happened to him. He never has. Did he speak with you?" she asked him.

He shook his head.

"Not really, and you're right in thinking that he should," he grinned sheepishly, "because it does help to confide in someone."

"But," he added more determinedly, "Harry is extremely resilient. He's been through a lot, more than anyone I know." Hermione winced and he nodded at her reaction. "Most people would be a basket case after that, but he's still capable of loving life and laughing with his friends." He gestured toward the practice field. "I don't know what's inside him but it must be very strong. Be careful when you let it out."

She stood up, her eyes were serious.

"I'm very glad that you're here with us Remus. We need you and you've made me realize a lot of important things." She turned toward the house. "I'll be in my room writing to my parents."

Remus followed her with his eyes. *They're a great bunch, Dumbledore is certainly right in placing his bet on them. When they'll be ready we'll have a formidable force.*

He laid back in his chair relaxing. *It's really going to be a fine summer I think.*

Just at that moment, his eye caught an unusual movement by the trees. Intrigued and a little alarmed he turned toward it, and started to take out his wand when something moved very fast and blocked him.

*What the...* The indistinct presence transformed into a familiar female shape.

"Tonks!"

"CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" she yelled, laughing at his distress. "Caught you sleeping didn't I? What if those protections spell failed?"

"You Imp! You scared the daylights out of me!" he exclaimed. "And you're unreasonable about the spells."

"I know, but it was too good an occasion to pass by," she answered unrepentant.

*Mad Eye Moody has turned the Auror force into a bunch of paranoid daredevils,* he thought. Then he reflected that it was probably the best thing he could have done.

"How long have you been there?"

"Long enough to appreciate your talents," she answered. "You're really tuning up these kids like a fine psychologist. I'm impressed and I expect Dumbledore will be too."

"I'm doing it for *them* more than for him," he grunted, "even though I fully agree on what is needed. And you didn't make a bad job of it the other day as I recall." *She almost broke the kid's heart! But it worked.*

She grinned then spoke softly.



"Yes I know how you feel about them. You couldn't hurt them even if it was for their own good, so I had to do the dirty work." She touched his arm. "You're such a nice guy, and you've been lonely so long, that you care about others more than anyone."

He looked at her. She was standing very close and he was acutely aware of her perfume. *Nice one, a touch of musk and then something flowery.*

"Yes I am lonely sometimes." He shrugged. "Aren't you?" he added without really thinking.

She looked at him silently for an instant. He was suddenly embarrassed and kicked himself for letting his guard down.

"I'm *alone*, most of the time, I'm not really lonely," she replied gently, moving a little closer. "But I miss company now and then."

He felt his skin shivering. His wolf enhanced senses took in other details of her, the texture of her skin, the smell of her body. *She's beautiful, even if she can't decide what color to use for her hair.*

"My company?" he said very quietly, almost in a whisper.

"Yes your company Remus," she answered in the same voice. "I would like that very much."

*God his heart was beating so fast. It had been a long time since he had felt those emotions.* He brought her closer in his arms and his mouth found hers. She responded eagerly.

Harry, Ron and Ginny were still playing when Harry spotted the couple from the air. He stopped and held out his hand for the others.

The three of them observed their guardian clearly preoccupied by something other than their security.

"It's Tonks," exclaimed Ginny. "How nice. I was wondering when they would come clean about each other."

Ron was making disgusted face.

"There must be a bug around this place what with all the snogging going round. *And it would be great if I could catch it.* Then he blushed when he caught Harry's grin directed at him and tried to throw a punch at his friend.

"I'll advise you to be careful when making funny remarks about Tonks," said Harry, "unless you want to end up like a pretzel. That girl can be hard as nails."

"What'd she do to you?" asked Ron.

"She chewed me out good a couple of days ago when I said... something stupid," he answered.

"Talk about an unforgettable lesson!" He grinned at them. "Actually she reminded me of your mother," Ron grimaced and Ginny stuck out her tongue. "But if you ever get into a fight she's the best partner you can hope for."

Ron and Ginny remembered the battle at the Ministry and agreed.

"Let's leave them alone," proposed Harry after a moment. "What time is it? I think I'll go back to the house."

"Yes, maybe Hermione's reading up on advanced snogging techniques," baited Ginny.

"She doesn't need to," answered Harry firmly, "and you can keep your dirty thoughts to yourself."

They stored the Quidditch equipment and started toward the house. By that time Remus and Tonks were simply holding hands and looking at each other.

Remus jumped when he heard them coming and looked a little embarrassed, but Tonks was characteristically self assured.

"Hi Harry, Ron, Ginny. Perfect weather for Quidditch isn't it?"

The three of them greeted the young Auror and shot happy grins at Remus who tried gamely to keep his dignity, and when he found he couldn't, he broke into the biggest smile they'd ever seen on him, and deliberately placed his arm around Tonks' waist.

They cheered the new couple, and they all walked back to the house.

As they came to it, Harry took Tonks aside.

"Er... Tonks, I wanted to apologize about what I said the other day..."

She stopped him.

"Harry, I know I was very hard on you but I think it was something you needed to hear." He nodded. She lowered her voice and grinned. "And if you think that was bad, let me tell you that it was a love song compared to some chewing out I saw Moody give to trainees. He really has the right touch for reducing someone to a tear soaked rag and then wiping the floor with it."

Harry swallowed as he imagined the formidable Auror veteran becoming mad at him. *Hum. Maybe I'll think a little more before applying for Auror school.*

She laughed at his expression and punched his arm.

"Never mind that. I'm very proud of you Harry. Keep going the way you are and you'll be fine. And my congratulations about Hermione." Harry's face lit up.

"Thanks Tonks, I'm glad we talked, both times." Then as an afterthought, but trying not to smile too much he asked. "Should we tell Dobby to prepare for a new guest?"

She looked at Remus, then back at Harry.

"Hum, I wouldn't want to presume on your hospitality."

"Tonks, this house may be officially Remus' and mine, but in my mind it belongs to all my friends which includes you," he said with sincerity, "and if you pair up with Remus, then you're practically my godmother," he added.

Tonks raised her eyebrows. She evidently hadn't thought it out all that far.

After Quidditch they needed a shower, so they removed their shoes and went up to their rooms. Ginny won the toss for the first go at the bathroom, and Harry stopped by the girls' room to check up on Hermione.

He found her writing a letter.

"Am I interrupting?" he called.

"No, I'm just finishing a note for my parents, please stay. I'll only be a minute."

Harry sat down on one of the beds. *Her's or Ginny's?* He looked around. The two girls had just started to adjust the room's decoration to their personal styles, and it only showed by one or two items here and there.

The other bed must be Ginny's. There was a big poster of the Burrow above it.

*So I'm in Hermione's bed. That's nice!* He stretched on it, laid his head on the pillow, and softly breathed in the lingering smell of her.

"How do you know it's not Ginny's bed you're in?" asked Hermione.

"The picture of the Burrow over the other one," he replied. "Then I'm not sure about the perfume but this clinched it." He held a book he had found under the pillow.

"How dare you!" Hermione threw him the first object she found within reach, "not be sure about my perfume," she cried in mock outrage.

"I need more practice."

She threw herself at him and they struggled together. He nuzzled his face to her neck and closed his eyes. *This is really good. Too bad Ginny's going to barge in on us in a moment.*

"I forgot to tell you," he said after a while.

"What?"

"Tonks is here, and ten minutes ago she was kissing Remus half to death."

"And what was he doing? Kissing her back I hope?"

"That's right." Harry was grinning again.

"Good! I was talking with him and he was so sad about..." She paused unsure about broaching the subject with Harry.

"About Sirius?" Harry's grin disappeared, and Hermione immediately pressed her cheek against his.

"I'm sorry. I know this hurts you terribly too." *Stupid! Why did I bring that up now?*

He shrugged.

"Don't be. I have to live with it, and with other things too."

She looked at him earnestly.

"Harry I want you to tell me about those other things, about everything. I only know some parts of the story and I want to share it with you. "

He shook his head. There was no way he was going to dump everything on her. Maybe when things would be better, when it wouldn't seem so despairing.

"There are other things aren't there? Stuff you've been keeping to yourself?"

He turned away. He couldn't bring himself to lie to her.

"Later..." he murmured.

"No!" He cringed and she went on in a softer voice. "Harry I opened up my heart to you. The fact that you don't want to talk about it, it's proof that it's bad and that it's hurting you. Tell me everything. I'm sure it will help."

He looked at her, saw her love and caring, and then he turned his head toward the wall and let his attention drift. *Yes maybe it could help. I've never actually told the whole thing to anyone.*

"It's a long story."

"We have time. I want to hear it all Harry. I think it's important. Start at the beginning." Behind him Hermione saw Ginny coming back from her shower and grimaced frantically. Ginny raised her eyebrows and nodded, she grabbed the first set of clothes she could find and left the room quietly.

But she wanted to hear what Harry had to say, so she didn't close the door and just sat in the hall, wrapped in her soaked towel, and listened in.

Harry didn't notice anything. He forced himself to recollect the details of his life that Hermione did not already know. He talked in a quiet voice and started with the Dudley's nastiness, and the joy of finding his first friends in Hogwarts, of discovering the wizard world and Quidditch. He went on to the events of the Philosopher's stone and the Chamber of Secrets when he faced Voldemort as his possessed teacher, and then as Tom Riddle. As he talked Harry felt the tension building up inside him. He was reliving his memories, and confronting once again the terrible fears. His breathing became rasping.

Outside the room, Ginny was captivated. Ron stumbled upon his sister and she shushed him, and tried to explain with hand movements what was happening. She was so frantic that her towel fell

open, and Ron's eyes grew to saucer size. He attempted awkwardly to re-adjust her clothing. Ginny didn't seem to care and closed her eyes, the better to hear. Ron sat next to her and did the same.

At each terrible event unfolded, his friends became more horrified. When he described his discovery of Ginny's lifeless body and the fight with the Basilisk, she whimpered at the memories it evoked, and Ron held her against him.

His voice broke when he described the effects the Dementors had on him. Hermione couldn't believe such evil was possible. *Blind and hearing nothing but the dying screams of his mother!*

It took all of Harry's energy to go on. For him it was like climbing a hill, one step at a time in an agony of exhaustion. He dropped down on the floor but he continued talking, and after a while the story was coming out by itself.

He got to the third task of the Goblet of Fire. He talked about the shock of being teleported to the graveyard, among Voldemort and Death Eaters. He described the death of Cedric, the ordeal that followed climaxing with the duel with Voldemort, and the vision of the ghosts of his parents helping him in a narrow escape.

Hermione's imagination was showing her every terrifying detail of that night. *It's even worse than what I thought! How can he stand it?* She wanted to scream, but she willed herself motionless so as not to interrupt him in any way. She put her hand to her mouth and bit on her knuckles.

Outside the room Ron and Ginny could only stare at each other in horror.

Harry then spoke of the Dementors attack last year, the trial of the Wizengamot, the burning pain in his head when the link with Voldemort intensified and the vision of Sirius being tortured. At last he came to the battle of the Ministry and the death of Sirius, then to the duel between Voldemort and Dumbledore and the terrible pain of Voldemort's possession.

He paused. The others became gradually aware of the frantic beating of their hearts and of their heavy breathing. The air in their lungs felt thick. Blood ran from Hermione's hand. Harry closed his eyes, and tonelessly he ended with a recollection of the extensive conversation with Dumbledore and the revelation of the prophecy.

And then he stopped. He was trembling with the tension brought on by these recollections. He turned to a white faced Hermione and tears finally flowed from his eyes.

"So you see, it's going be him or me," he sobbed. "We're linked together but if I don't want to die I'll have to kill him, I'll have to become a murderer."

Ron couldn't stand it. He barged into the room and rushed toward his friend.

"Harry, mate. Oh Harry you're not alone in this, you'll never be alone again, we'll work it out together."

Harry looked up, startled, as he realized they had heard every word he'd spoken. *Why not. We're all in the same story now.* His vision was blurred, it was hard to concentrate.

Ginny was crying against him, and Ron was staring anxiously at his face. Harry took in their affection but it only made him lose the little control he had.

"Hermione, Ron, Ginny..." He burst into raking sobs, and they pulled him close trying to ease his pain with all their love. Then they were all crying, holding on to each other in a desperate embrace. Gradually Harry felt the tension drain out of him, and peace came as he drifted into oblivion.

Slowly the three friends emerged from their trance and returned to the world. Harry seemed to be sleeping peacefully, but their own thoughts were anything but peaceful.

Hermione stood up and wiped her eyes. She'd bitten her hand so deeply that blood was all over her dress and face. She felt the throbbing pain of it now and ignored it.

Ginny was still wrapped in a disheveled mix of towel and clothes. Ron couldn't take his eyes from Harry's face. His fists were clenched and his expression was set into an angry scowl.

Hermione felt anger rising too. *How could they!* She thought of the adults who should have acted to preserve Harry from such things.

The three of them looked at each other.

"Let's have a talk with someone," said Hermione in a hard voice.

Ron nodded vigorously.

"Yes, Ginny you get dressed, we'll put him to bed, and then we'll go down."

He picked up Harry in his arms. He was quite strong enough to do it. Hermione followed them to their room. They placed him on his bed, and she covered him with a blanket and kissed him tenderly.

Ginny pulled on her rumpled dress, not bothering with anything else, and she joined them in the corridor.

When they entered the living room, Remus and Tonks were talking with Dumbledore, Arthur and Molly who had just arrived.

"Ron, Ginny we've brought a set of clothes for you," greeted Molly pleasantly. Her expression changed when she took in their hard, tear streaked faces, and the blood on Hermione's dress.

"Hermione! What happened?" she cried in alarm.

"Harry's been telling us his story. HOW COULD YOU LET THAT HAPPEN TO HIM!" screamed Hermione. She had never been so angry in her life and she had to strike out at something.

"We should have been told!" Ron added. "We didn't even know he'd been told of the prophecy."

Ginny didn't say anything, but she stared at the adults with a mix of anger and loathing.

"Children please!" Arthur started to say.

"WE'RE NOT CHILDREN ANYMORE!" Ron yelled. "Harry isn't. No one can be after that kind of horror." He choked a sob.

The adults were petrified by these outbursts, except for Dumbledore who kept his calm and kind face toward the young group.

Hermione turned to him and spoke in a biting voice.

"Harry's a wreck after talking like that. YOU could have spared him the horror!"

"How?" replied Dumbledore calmly.

"You could have told us everything so Harry wouldn't have had to relive it," answered Ron.

Dumbledore's voice stayed level.

"I could only have given you a diluted rendering of these events. The impact would have been less real than what you just felt and Harry would have kept the memories inside him," he explained reasonably.

"As it is you have shared these terrible experiences with him," he continued. "It has helped him and you are closer together as a result. You should understand that Harry can only heal fully by ridding himself of these things."

Hermione started to speak but found herself hard pressed to find valid arguments. *Damn it! He's always right and so sure of himself!*

"He was kept in the dark throughout last year, and so were we," she said finally.

"That may have been a mistake, and I admitted as much to Harry when we talked afterwards." Dumbledore lowered his head. "In hindsight I was probably wrong but at the time there were good reasons for what was done. If you can show me a better analysis of the situation, as it we knew it *then*, I will be glad to hear of it."

They were silent. Hermione thought desperately for a flaw in the old wizard's words but she couldn't find any.

After a moment, she acknowledged it by shaking and lowering her head. *Maybe he's right but Harry's been hurt!* She felt powerless and started crying again.

Dumbledore walked up to her and gently raised her chin with his hand. Hermione looked up to him, tears running down her face.

"Believe me when I say that I care for Harry as much as you do and that I tried to spare him all I could. I know I failed, several times, because too many things were beyond my control," he said in a sad voice.

"Destiny has selected Harry for a terrible task," he continued, "and all I can do is to help him face it as best as possible, and that means he needs to be strong, not weak."

"Every times he survives an ordeal he grows stronger, despite the scars. If I had preserved him too much he would not have lived through the last of them. What I can do, and what I am doing, is making sure that he will face his ultimate challenge not alone, but with strong friends at his side, and that they will also help him heal the wounds he is bound to receive."

He turned to include Ron and Ginny.

"And that is what you are doing. I know that it is painful, and it is so for us also, but it is a price that must be paid."

He paused to let them digest his words.

"I agree with you that because of this you are not children anymore, but you have yet to become adults with your full potentials. That is why the present is a time for building your strength."

The room stayed quiet for a long time. Hermione, Ginny and Ron were beginning to feel somewhat ashamed, and they didn't dare look at anybody. The other adults, for their part, were becoming aware of the true pressure which had weighted on the young wizards and witches.

Only Dumbledore seemed serene.

Molly ached to hold her daughter in her arms, but everyone seemed to be waiting for some kind of signal before making a move.

They heard steps coming from the stairs and turned to see Harry coming down with a puzzled frown on his face. Hermione ran into his arms.

"What's all the matter?" he asked. "Did something bad happen?" They all looked at him with frozen expressions.

It was Remus who answered.

"No Harry, something happened all right. But it wasn't bad."

"Come my friends," Dumbledore said. "Come and let us sit down together around food and drinks, under the sun, and we will talk about lighter things." He led the way out to the garden.

Molly gathered Ginny in her arms, and Arthur put his hand on Ron's shoulder and talked to him softly.

They all went outside. Ron and Ginny stayed close to Harry and Hermione, as if ready to protect and comfort them. Remus was deeply moved by this, and he nudged Tonks who nodded.

*Dumbledore is right. It's a painful method but it works.*

They placed themselves around the garden table and felt their tension slowly diminishing. A number of sheepish grins were exchanged, but the seriousness of the past moments was still with them.

Harry was very calm and almost dreamy. He noticed Hermione's bloody dress and hands and started to speak, but before he could do so, Dumbledore took out his wand.

"Allow me," he said.

He whispered an incantation, and the stains and marks disappeared, as did the tear streaks on her face. Even her hair arranged itself into an elegant shape.

"Neat!" said Ron.

"A simple spell I learned long ago," he shrugged with humility. "I once was in love with a very emotional girlfriend, and this proved very handy." Hermione couldn't help chuckling at that while he corrected Ginny's appearance as well.

Harry's face broke into a smile once again. The old wizard turned to him.

"How are you feeling Harry?"

The boy paused and seemed to consider this.

"Better," he replied softly and looked at his friends. "I feel very good sir, a bit tired but I really feel better now." Relief showed on their faces and Hermione squeezed his hand.

They all relaxed while Dobby arrived, surrounded with floating pitchers, glasses and plates. A light lunch was served and conversation turned on practical matters. Arthur and Molly had brought some clothes for Ginny and Ron but it was decided that they would all return to the Burrow for other things that afternoon.

Dumbledore had also brought their OWL results. Hermione had top marks, as everyone but she had expected. Harry and Ron weren't so bad but nothing to brag about, except in Defense Against the Dark Arts where Ron had an Outstanding, and Harry had the only Superbly Outstanding mention. The only subject where he topped Hermione.

The Headmaster then explained that he had installed a permanent portkey system between Hogwarts and Grimmauld Place. They could use it to visit the school library, or to consult him.

"Will we be able to see Hagrid too?" asked Harry.

"By all means," confirmed Dumbledore. "The only limit is for you Harry not to leave Hogwarts, or this place, without proper protection - as defined by myself, Remus or Tonks." Harry nodded gravely.

"I can also tell you that professor Snape has agreed to hold a remedial potion class during August, for those students whose OWL grades are deemed insufficient for his sixth year course." Harry and Ron groaned. They didn't get an Outstanding in Potions.

"Oh no. Things were going so well," said a dejected Ron.

"I thought you wanted to be an Auror," said Tonks. "You need a NEWT in potions for that, and Snape is the best teacher there is."

"I believe that Remus and Tonks will be able to tutor you in that and other subjects," continued Dumbledore. "I also think a dispensation for an Apparition exam could be arranged for you all, due to the special situation." *That* cheered them up considerably. "Of course I would ask you to be discrete about it with the other students."

"As you know it is impossible to apparate here, or at Hogwarts, but circumstances might require a quick retreat to a safe location, so you will have to use your best judgment. Until you are able to do it however, you can use this re-usable portkey which I prepared. It will only work with one of you."

He showed them the device which was, of course, in the likeness of a rabbit's foot.

"To use it a simple contact is not sufficient. You have to twist the bottom part," he explained them. "Then you, and any mobile object or person you are in contact with, will be teleported inside this house."

"Neat!" said Ron, whistling his appreciation.

They discussed the general schedule of the summer and everyone wanted to know what was planned but Dumbledore made it plain that he wanted them to profit from the house and practice their magic more than anything. Short visits outside would be arranged, and friends could be contacted and invited but that was all. Harry made a special note of calling up on Neville and Luna.

"I want you to have some fun and prepare yourselves for what is to come," he encouraged them. "Nobody knows what that might be, or when, but it will come soon enough."

"I will be available should you need me. But I don't expect anything to happen until the end of the month." All understood that he meant Harry's birthday, which this year would be certainly be particularly well prepared.

They all thanked him, and with a last blessing for all of them, Dumbledore left.

Once his powerful presence was gone, the full impact of what had happened was brought back to them. Harry felt very tired and decided to take a nap in his room. The Weasleys would be returning shortly so he took his leave of Molly and Arthur. Molly hugged him fiercely.

"You'll be back tonight?" he asked of Ron and Ginny. They confirmed that they would.

Hermione took Harry's hand and they went back inside together.

When the Weasleys had left, Remus and Tonks found themselves alone in the garden.

Tonks turned a mischievous face to Remus.

"Harry indicated that I could move in anytime. Of course it would be a bother to prepare another room for me."

Remus managed to keep a straight face as he replied.

"Well mine is rather large. I imagine you could squeeze in... Somewhere."

"What don't we check that right now?" she asked.

Remus saw the promise in her eyes and extended his hand.

"Yes why don't we?"

They stood up and he led her inside.

Hermione was very much aware of Harry at her side as they went to his room. Not really thinking about it she followed him inside. He paused for a moment then went to close the door. She started to protest, but he put his fingers to her lips.

"Shss, I just want you to be with me, alone." He kissed her gently. "We'll want to take our time learning about each other, one step at a time." She nodded fiercely. "Let me just go to sleep next to you, dreaming of you my beautiful, sweet, caring, love."

She kissed him back with passion. *Harry my brave, magnificent, gallant love.*

They took off their shoes and installed themselves on the bed, snuggling against one another, her head on his shoulder, his arms around her.

Harry gently caressed her face and then let the back of his hand move delicately over her chest. She shivered and pressed closer to him. He smiled, laid back his head and closed his eyes.

Hermione listened to Harry's heartbeat and breathing as he slowly drifted into sleep. She closed her



eyes and followed him.

Tonks entered Remus' room and looked around. It was, she reflected, a typical bachelor's place. There wasn't much more than a bed, a chest and a table. *I could certainly improve the decoration.*

He pulled the curtains, and darkness reduced the details to him and the bed. She turned and reached out to him. He came into her arms, and they fell rolling on the bed, kissing and caressing each other. Desire led to passion, release and then to tenderness.

As the lovers fell asleep, the only remaining sound in the house was Dobby happily preparing a knitting pattern for a matched set of socks he planned on offering to everyone in the household.

## Chapter 4 - Rest and Recuperation

Grimauld Place

Remus woke up first. He sensed the warm presence of Tonks against him and closed his eyes, he felt more peaceful than he could remember being. *Why did I wait so long?*

He knew that he had refrained from looking for love for many years. One major reason had been his werewolf condition but there had been another deeper one, linked to James and Lily Potter's death. *I was disgusted with life, and with living.*

And now he had another chance, although to be honest Tonks had not hinted at any long term commitment. *I'll have to be careful of that. Accepting the present and not hoping for anything beyond.*

At one time he would have proudly rejected such an arrangement. *When I was young, foolish, and stupid.* Even now it smacked of desertion toward Harry to think about himself when... *When Harry probably has his own girl in his arms. He's not a child who needs a parent anymore. He's becoming a man who needs friends and partners.*

*I'll be more help to Harry with Tonks at my side than alone. No moral dilemma at all. What more could I ask?*

He felt her shifting in the bed next to him. A smiling face suddenly appeared under a green shock of hair.

"Hmm, that was good," she winked at him. "Wouldn't you say that it was exactly what was needed?"

"You will get no arguments from me woman," he replied grinning. He kissed her and she came into his arms.

They held each other silently for a moment. Gradually their thoughts returned to the outside world.

"I missed some action yesterday," she asked. "You'll have to tell me what happened."

"It was a big moment. Dumbledore's plan worked faster than we could hope. He only took me into the confidence at the last minute, but the bet with Hermione paid off big."

She nodded, aware of some details he hadn't known. The plan to reconstitute the protections around Harry in Grimauld Place had been discussed within the Order in her presence. It had remained theoretical because the key ingredient, Harry's potential partner, had been unknown at the time.

"What happened was more powerful than anybody expected, except Dumbledore probably," explained Remus. "Everybody else seems to underestimate these kids. He told me that this place is now better protected from Voldemort than Hogwarts."

Tonks whistled in admiration. Then she had a side thought.

"It'll nice to have a fall back position if things go real bad, or an escape route if one of us is captured."

"I'm amazed to hear you speak of falling back," he teased her. "I thought you Gung Ho Aurors never retreated."

She shot him back a cool look.

"Would you like a demonstration of my Auror offensive powers?" she menaced.

"Please no, I'm still recovering from the last assault. It's lucky that a werewolf can regenerate," he replied laughing.

She hit him with her pillow and jumped on him. He fell back on the bed and they rolled together in

a mock fight.

"Did you notice how the others grouped around Harry?" he said, going back to what happened this morning.

"They've been through fire and hell together," she acquiesced. "It builds a bond that never goes away." Her voice expressed awe and longing. *They'll be a unit now.*

Remus looked at her and wondered.

"You sound as if you yearn for some of that yourself?"

She nodded.

"Yes, you can call it warrior's mystic but it's very strong. Sometimes when a combat unit suffers a terrible battle, some of the survivors will stay together, and become a powerful fighting force. They will defend better, destroy more enemies and rally others around them." She turned to him.

"Dumbledore knew what he was doing, and *he* can probably control them, but basically they belong to themselves now."

"And they will look up to Harry," he added.

"I think that we are expected to help train Harry as a leader," she said. "This is only the first step."

"Yes. Dumbledore's Army and then something more," acquiesced Remus.

They reflected for a moment on the alternative training group, which the three students had initiated last year to replace their failing Defense Against The Dark Arts teacher. It had shown an unexpected appeal to students from several houses, a rare instance of cooperation, and for Harry it had been a good occasion to develop leadership skills and win direct respect from his peers.

The group had also been Hermione's idea.

She smiled.

"I saw them going up together."

Remus frowned.

"Surely you don't think..."

"No," she reassured him. "They will come to it slowly. That's normal for sensitive kids." She grinned "Not like us, my lecherous wolf."

He reacted in mock indignation.

"What do you mean lecherous! I was shamelessly seduced, that's what happened."

"And you loved it."

"And I *love* it."

*The Burrow*

The Weasley family arrived at their home in a subdued atmosphere.

They hadn't talked much, each one of them digesting the morning's events in their own way. For the first time, Ron and Ginny felt much closer to each other than to their parents. Arthur and Molly sensed this, and it bothered them, especially Molly who had always been very emotionally involved in her children.

"Before you go and get your things, would you care to talk for a moment?" asked Arthur. He glanced at his wife who took the hint and went upstairs. Ron and Ginny looked at each other and nodded.

Their father led them into the living room, and he made a point of looking at the clock which

showed the location of every member of the Weasley family. It showed the four of them At Home and the others At Work. He noted that, as they followed his gaze, their expressions softened a little. *Yes you're part of a family, kids. We're not your enemy. Remember this no matter what else you may think.*

In addition to being a senior member of the Order, Arthur was also one the most trusted confident of Dumbledore, and privy to many of his plans. *And plans within plans.* As they had often discussed Harry, he had been less surprised that the others by the morning's events.

But he had not anticipated the violence.

He decided that truth was now the better approach with his children.

"Dumbledore had warned me, more or less, but nothing he said could have made me understand Harry the way you do now," he admitted.

After a moment they acknowledged this, but they still held themselves distant.

"I'm sorry about the way it happened, and however things turn out, I want you to know that I'm very proud of you, and that I will respect your decision." He paused. "And of course, I still love you."

As Ron's face twisted awkwardly, he knew that his words had achieved the desired effect.

"Dad, please, we don't really blame you for... what happened," he said. "We understand the situation a little better now. But one thing that was said still stands. You can't treat us as children anymore," Ginny nodded in confirmation.

"We'll make our own decisions, and live by them," she added, ready to argue with all of her considerable stubbornness.

Arthur sighted. *Well, let's call it peace but not surrender. I expected as much, and to be truthful, I feared worse.*

"And we love you and Mom. We just need to get away a little."

Ginny went up to her father and hugged him. Then they went and made up with Molly, which was a much more emotional scene, but in the end the Weasley family was whole again.

Except for Percy.

*Grimauld Place*

Harry and Hermione woke up in each other's arms, and they savored it as another little step of their new life. They felt deliciously relaxed and at peace with the world. They looked forward to many such pleasant and exciting discoveries in the coming days, and they were determined to make the most of it.

"Hello love," he said softly.

"Hello my love," she replied, smiling.

Hermione's hand caressed Harry's face and brushed a lock of hair away. She traced his scar gently.

"Does it still hurt you?" she asked.

"No. I had some of the usual twinges these past days. Nothing since I'm here."

"So the house does protect you?" *Fascinating.*

"Dumbledore implied that it could. That would really be nice, also..." his voice trailed, and then he chuckled.

"What is it?"

"I had this crazy thought. You know that the scar hurts most when Voldemort is angry or feels a strong emotion." She nodded uneasily. "Well maybe there could be a reverse effect." He looked at

her. "Maybe when I'm kissing you in ecstasy, I can make him feel a terrible pain."

She barely smiled at that. It was funny, but she couldn't yet make herself laugh at their arch-enemy. Full of energy, he got up and walked around the room.

"You know I haven't had a chance to really explore this place." He went to look at the desk. *My desk, in my room, in my house.*

Someone had thoughtfully arranged it. On the side was a picture frame with a moving display of his parents waving at him. He took it and looked at them pensively. *Mom, Dad. How I wish you could be here with me now.*

He replaced the frame. There was a box of quills, ink pots, a blotter and a very old looking book. On the book was a letter marked *For Harry*. He recognized Sirius's writing.

He opened it.

*Harry,*

*I found this while cleaning up the attic, and I think that it will interest you. Read it and we'll talk about it with Dumbledore.*

*Sirius*

Hermione got up and went next to him. He showed her the letter and examined the book. *One last gift from Sirius.*

The title was written on the first page: *The Sword and the Snake - The Gryffindor-Slytherin Legacy.*

It seemed to be a book about the lives of Gothic Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin, placed around the time Hogwarts was built.

"You will want to look at this too," he said to Hermione. "It should make an interesting addition to your favorite book."

Hermione examined the volume and agreed. She gave him back Sirius's letter with a sober face. "Are you all right?" she asked, concerned about his possible reaction.

"Well I'm a little sad, but I'm done breaking up whenever I think about Sirius," he replied. "I guess I've finished mourning him."

He looked up decisively.

"We haven't had a real discussion about our plans, you and I. Why don't we make a cup of tea, sit down somewhere and talk?"

"I'd like that."

They went to the kitchen to assemble a nice snack, and they transported it to a spot on the grass, near the pool. Hermione looked around and reflected that the house was very quiet.

"I guess we weren't the only ones taking a nap," Harry said looking at her with a toothy grin. "I really think this is going to be a great summer." *I wonder if she's going to blush.*

"Don't let your imagination run out of hand Mister Potter," she replied coolly. "We were supposed to talk seriously."

"Yes Hermione." He managed to keep a straight face for about four seconds.

They burst out laughing.

*This is really going to be a great summer.*

Harry wanted to get one particular item out the way as quickly as possible.

"Let's talk about Dobby first," he proposed.

"Right," she replied. "What's your position on the subject?"

*My position is that I wish I'd never heard of House Elves.*

"Dobby is a free Elf and currently employed by Hogwarts," Harry stated carefully. "I don't know how he came to be working here." *But I can guess.*

"He is my friend," he continued. *After all I'm the one who freed him.* "I want him to be happy, and that means being free to do what he wants, within reasonable limits. If he wants to be paid for his services I am quite ready to participate."

"He's paid a pittance by Dumbledore!" protested Hermione.

Harry opened his mouth then closed it. *Dobby is simply a case in point. I have to come to an understanding with her about Elves in general, and then we'll apply that to him.*

"Can we consider the situation of House Elves in general?" he asked her. She nodded.

He reviewed his thoughts, took a deep breath and launched himself.

"First of all, I agree that holding intelligent creatures in bondage is immoral, and when mistreatment is added it becomes despicable." Hermione nodded vigorously.

"Second. I was practically in that situation with the Dursleys, so maybe I have some rights to a moral stand on this too." *That was a good argument.* He paused and looked at Hermione who nodded again after a moment.

"Third. I commend your commitment to improve the situation of House Elves. I know that you do it for highly ethical reasons, and I love you for that, as well as for other things." They both smiled but Hermione's was guarded.

"Fourth. I think you should ask yourself several questions and I'm not sure that you have. Namely:"

"Why doesn't Winky, or the other Hogwarts House Elves, adhere to your plan?" Hermione lost her smile and frowned.

"What is your goal exactly? Do you want them to be happy or do you want to impose an objectively fair social organization, whatever the actual consequences to those concerned?" *I'm going to get burned on this but I have to say it.*

Effectively Hermione's eyes flared and her mouth tightened into a thin line, but she said nothing. *For now.* Harry swallowed and continued.

"What is the best strategy to attain your goal? It may not be the most direct." Hermione stayed put.

"Did you consider creatures other than House Elves, such as Centaurs and Werewolves?" She nodded.

"Fifth. If you can convince me that you have a goal with a *reasonable* chance of doing some good, I am willing to fund SPEW *more than reasonably.*" Her face became kinder.

"Sixth. Until this thing with Voldemort is done with, I think you should enlist the help of someone to handle the day to day operation of SPEW." The frown came back immediately.

"Seventh. I suggest that we talk to Dumbledore about this. He once expressed to me some sentiments similar to yours. We should also talk to Hagrid, Remus and of course to Dobby."

Harry stopped talking and proceeded to pour himself a cup of tea and drink it quickly. *Now I'll know if I've ruined the day by starting a major fight with her.*

Hermione reviewed Harry's arguments silently. *At least he's not indifferent to the subject,* she thought.

*I'm ok with most of his points, and I have to at least think about the others.*

Harry was still waiting for her response. She was taking her time, and he was beginning to get nervous.

"Thank you Harry," she finally said. She couldn't help smiling as he let out the breath he'd been holding.

*Well maybe we're not going to have that fight after all.* Harry thought, keeping his expression guarded.

"I accept some of your arguments, but I have some counter points for you," she pursued.

"First. The attitudes of Kreacher, Winky and even Dobby, are proof that the current system alienates House Elves, and that it does something to them which is akin to brainwashing. The fact that magic enters into it makes it even worse."

"Second. The history of slave liberation, in the muggle world, supports the need for a moral stand to push for reforms. Simple common sense is not enough. SPEW will provide that moral stand."

"Third. I agree that the most important thing is to define a more precise goal for SPEW," she continued. "So I will think about it and stop badgering you with this for now." *He wants to use logic to debate with me, fine. I just need to refine one or two things, and then I'll corner him like a rat.*

Her smile was unsettling. It was the kind she showed when she was playing chess, two or three moves before calling out a checkmate.

"Fourth. I'll take your position as being supportive of mine, as soon as I find a working strategy for improving the situation of House Elves and the other magical minorities."

Harry's expression was both relieved and wary.

*Well I think I won the first round, barely, but I'm not very confident for the second,* he thought. *Better move on to lighter matters.*

He closed the subject in the best manner he could think of. He bent his face toward hers and kissed her lips.

"So, aside from that project, what do you plan to do after graduation?" he asked her, pouring another cup of tea for both of them.

"I haven't decided on a specific career," she answered. "Although I would want to be a very powerful and respected witch."

"Someone like Dumbledore?"

"Well I don't expect to be as powerful as him," she said. *Like hell you don't,* "But I would like to be someone to whom people would turn to for help in difficult situations."

He pondered this.

"To be really efficient, you would need to anticipate those needs, and not simply wait for people to come to you," he said after some consideration.

The same thought occurred to both of them. *And from that the next step is to start influencing people. And since you're very powerful you can do it you will do it more and more and end up manipulating them, unless you restrain yourself.*

Hermione realized that the problem was a bit more complex than she'd thought, and she said so.

"I understand Dumbledore's attitude a little better now," Harry agreed. "And I realize we don't know much about his strategy."

"He manipulates us all. At least a little, but maybe not as much as he could have," she said. *Does it bother me?*

"Yes, do you resent it?" Harry's expression made it plain he didn't. Harry seemed to have total confidence in the Headmaster.

"No, like you, I trust that his intentions are good. For now". *We should still expect other surprises.*

"And it didn't turn out too badly."

He extended his hand to her. She took it and smiled.

"No. It didn't."

They looked at each other for a moment.

"And what about you?" she asked him. "What will you do after graduation?"

"Marry you!"

"Harry!" *Do you really mean it?* "It's too soon to talk about that!"

He laughed.

"No. Of course you're right. I probably should date other girls. To make sure, you know."

"Harry! You're exasperating!"

"I love it when you react like that." He kissed her and continued in a serious voice. "To answer your question, well I had planned on becoming an Auror, but I don't think that's all that I want."

"What about Quidditch, as a professional player?"

It was his turn to show a malicious smile.

"Like Viktor you mean?"

She refused to be baited.

"Yes Mister Harry Potter, like Viktor Krum, who is a very good friend of mine and nothing more."

Harry roared with laughter.

"Touché!" he said, and sobered. "Ok, professional Quidditch might interest me, but I doubt it. I'll probably just play as a serious amateur."

"Why do you want to be an Auror?"

He thought about it for a moment.

"Actually it's a bit like you. Being powerful and defending others. I suppose the fact that Dad was one also makes it a natural choice." He gave an embarrassed smile. "And like you there's also the *glamour* of it."

They stayed silent a moment once more.

"Presented like that our plans do look a bit childish," said Hermione. "I think we'll have to find better goals."

"It's lucky that we have two more years to go, and Voldemort to defeat, before having to make any decision," he said and chuckled.

She was astonished. *Voldemort! He's making jokes about Voldemort when most people can't bear to hear that name, let alone speak it. Now I know he's really all right. But maybe he's overdoing it a little.*

She told him so and he agreed.

"You're right. Call it over compensation to my previous attitude." He smiled at her. "And euphoria because of you. But there is also a sense of having passed a stage where he's not going to frighten me any more." He became serious. "He may yet hurt or kill me, or others, and I really hate him, but



I don't fear him anymore."

Hermione was uplifted by his determination, but she wasn't as confident for herself. *I however, still feel fear, for me, for him, and for others.*

She hadn't really faced danger like he had. During the last battle they had fought as a group, caught up in the immediacy and heat of the action. She knew she had enough basic courage to do well in such circumstances, but what would happen if she had to face up, alone, to the kind of evil they were against? How would she react to terrible pain, against her or her friends? Would she be able to go beyond her fear and act decisively? *I don't know. All I know is that I'm not as strong as he is.*

The doubts and fear showed in her face, and she didn't want Harry to see them. She didn't want him to be ashamed of her. She hid into his arms, partly for comfort, but also to hide her weakness. But she couldn't prevent the trembling.

"Hermione?" He was concerned.

She spoke in a little voice, quite unlike her usual forceful manner.

"I'm afraid - Harry I don't know. I'm so frightened of what might happen." Her imagination replayed some of the horrors which had already happened. It conjured variants of those things happening to her, or to her parents. "Harry - I'm sorry but I don't think I'm as brave as you. I'm sorry. I'll try but..."

"Love. I'm not brave just by myself. It's something all of you are giving to me. Even if I were alone you'd be in my heart and that would help. I will give you the same thing."

She tried to reason herself, but a terrible thought came into her mind. *I will only be able to overcome my fear after facing, and surviving the same kind of ordeal as he faced.* She was terrified at the idea of physical pain or injury, but she knew that it was something she couldn't hope escaping. *I have to steel myself for this. When it comes I must be ready.* Harry had done it, but he hadn't had to think about it beforehand. She would also have to fight against the fear of anticipation.

Harry realized some of what she must be thinking. He remembered the terror of looking at Voldemort in the graveyard. He took her by the shoulders and forced her to look at him.

"Hermione. Look at me." She met his gaze, desperately trying to control herself.

"Hermione!" She nodded.

He spoke with as much conviction as he could muster.

"Whatever happens, you must never give up." She looked at him and tried to extract strength from his eyes.

"Remember this. I will never abandon you Hermione. I will always find a way to help you. Never lose hope. Promise me that," he said earnestly.

She would cling to that. To the knowledge that he would be there for her. She nodded and tried to smile. He took her in his arms and caressed her hair, speaking soft soothing words while she clung to him.

More time passed in silence and then he spotted Remus and Tonks coming out of the house.

"We're going to have company. Our guardians are back." Hermione followed his gaze and they waved at the adults to join them.

"Wipe your eyes," he teased her, "or they'll think we're already having arguments."

"By the way, I think Tonks is looking radiant," he whispered maliciously in her ear while his hand caressed her lower back. She laughed and wrestled him to the ground.

"Harry! Don't you think about anything else?" she accused half seriously. He didn't resist and looked at her confidently without saying anything.

She found it annoying, until she spotted a trace of seriousness on his face.

"I think mostly of you," he answered softly, "and I will only fight against the things I don't want."

*He's telling me that he accepts things now and that I should do the same.* She realized he was both talking about her fears and her attitude to other things.

*I'm not hung up about sex! Well ok, maybe a little. But it's not something trivial! Am I unconformable about physical things? Like pain and pleasure?* She was sitting on top of Harry. She didn't mind touching him, she liked it but she wanted to control the pace. *But I won't always be able to do it. Is that what I really fear? Being overwhelmed by something physical that I can't control?*

The old reflexes came back. When she had questions about something, she wanted answers, and if she couldn't find them out by herself then she consulted books, or other people.

"Are we interrupting anything?" asked Tonks pleasantly. She was still holding Remus' hand.

Hermione turned her head. *It's true that she looks lovely, and I'm very happy for Remus.* She remembered their morning conversation and smiled at the couple.

"No, actually we were talking about the future," she replied.

Remus' right eyebrow moved up.

"And what about it?"

She turned to look at Harry again.

"I don't know about everyone, but I will need some help and training - in several subjects."

"That's what we're here for," answered Remus, smiling.

"We'll make the most of it. Would you like some tea?"

A little later, Ron and Ginny arrived back from the Burrow. Ginny had a thought to share with them.

"I was thinking that it might be a good thing to invite the entire DA group to a party here for your birthday Harry."

Yes," added Ron, "It would be fun and we could also discuss about how we're going to run it next year."

Everyone agreed. Owls would be sent as soon as possible. It was decided that the best meeting place would in front of the Fred and Georges' shop in Diagon Alley.

"And from there we'll all jump here, using the portkey Dumbledore gave us."

A number of practical details about the organization of the house were discussed. Eventually this led to what Remus and Tonks would need to teach and train them in during the summer.

"What subjects were you considering?" asked Remus returning to the previous conversation with Hermione.

"Well." She had been taking notes. "The main thing we need is combat and defense but that was expected, and you two will review what we did during the DA classes."

"Yes. Tonks and I have started a list."

"I also think that some physical training would be useful," Hermione continued and Harry nodded emphatically. He felt particularly weak after two weeks at the Dursleys.

"Dumbledore also mentioned Apparition. How long will that take?"

"I'm confident that you will learn that in little more than a week, if you're as motivated as I imagine," answered Remus.

He considered the youngsters' earnest faces. They nodded eagerly.

"Harry, and maybe some of us, will need to practice some Occlumency and Legimency." Hermione checked off another item in her list.

Remus and Tonks exchanged a look. Legimency was normally reserved for adult wizards, and even then its use was rather restricted.

But they could certainly use it.

"I'm okay for it," replied Remus guardedly, "but this is something I will have to check with Dumbledore."

Harry nodded then he thought about something else.

"Will I have to work with Snape again?" he asked anxiously.

"No. You'll have enough of him during the year," answered Tonks.

"But your relations with Snape," said Remus with a grimace, "and mine as well, are something that we'll have to resolve sometime. Especially if I'm going to be around as a teacher this year, which I hope. We'll have to think about that."

"And in addition we need to define a better strategy concerning the Slytherins and on handling the provocations from the likes of Malfoy," added Hermione.

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"You remember that every year the Sorting Hat goes on that the four Houses should work together."

"Fat chance of that!" exclaimed Ron.

"But it must be important or it wouldn't say it every time," insisted Hermione. "I wouldn't be surprised if Hogwarts was somehow *weaker*, in some magical sense, when the Houses are disunited." She turned to Tonks and Remus. "Does that make sense to you?"

Remus thought about it and nodded. "Yes it would. Of course the best person to ask about this is the Headmaster." He looked at her with curiosity. "Are you thinking about something specific?"

"Well," she answered, "I was wondering that Hogwarts has been strangely passive in the fight against Voldemort, and yet it *is* involved, and not just because of us."

"But I'm missing some information," she went on. "I'm muggle born and there are too many things that I don't really understand about the Wizard world, and especially about the current social organization."

They were all looking at her with serious faces.

"There's a ministry, there are several important and ancient wizard families," she continued, "there are schools, not just Hogwarts, and Hogwarts itself is divided into four Houses, to which some families seem to be closely associated."

"And then we have Dark wizards, who also tend to run in specific families."

"I'm wondering if there are not deeper links with all this. Links that we should perhaps take into account."

She looked at the four pure-bloods.

"Am I talking about things that are obvious to you? It's certainly not among the subjects covered in History of Magic classes - unless I missed something."

Ron, Ginny and Harry exchanged grins. History of Magic was taught by the most boring teacher of the school, a true ghost even, and it only dealt with ancient Goblin rebellions. Nobody paid much attention during classes except for a few fanatics like Hermione.

"You're talking about power structures," said Remus.

"Well, yes. I guess that what I mean."

"All right. In the muggle world, as I understand it, power depends a lot on economic resources and on the size of communities. Money, land, people."

Remus was going into lecture mode.

"In the wizard world there are too few of us for things to be like that."

"Money counts a little but not that much." Ron and Ginny looked embarrassed, as they did whenever that subject came up - the Weasley were not rich. "It is mainly used to pay directly for things and services. The only financial organization is the Gringotts bank - one bank for the entire wizard world."

"What we have is magic, and that's the basic of our power structure. It's not only a matter of *individual* wizards being more or less powerful, but also of alliances and rituals which go back to the first wizard communities."

"These rituals and alliances are an important source of magical power. A lot of them are jealously guarded secrets. Some depend on particular locations or artifacts."

"Schools like Hogwarts, and organizations like the ministry of magic, are fairly recent developments. Actually Hogwarts is the oldest school and its four Houses system is unique. The other schools are both more homogenous and smaller."

"Concerning the ministry of magic, it has an *official* organizational chart which represents a superficial repartition of responsibilities which only really applies to mundane day to day business. Underneath that there are a number of interest groups which normally cooperate but only up to where their special interests begin."

"And these interest groups are basically alliances of old families. I am not familiar with the subject but it is possible that the original Hogwarts Houses were an attempt to re-organize these communities."

"As regards the dark wizards, it is a fact that some families are much more likely than others to produce them. The official line is of course that there are no connections, and these occurrences are only separate cases of individual deviations,"

Remus paused.

"I would not be surprised if there was something more, some *intrinsic* vulnerability, but even if it could be proven, there's probably no way that a family could renounce its heritage without destroying itself."

"In that respect, one reason for the fuss about pure bloods and muggle born is not so much the magical ability of individual wizards, as the fact that pure blood wizards will usually be integrated with the family rituals and both empowered by, and engaged to, the associated heritage."

"Draco!" cried Harry.

"Yes, there's a good chance that the Malfoy family uses dark magic rituals and that Draco is, or will be introduced to them."

"But Voldemort is not a pure blood," remarked Ginny, "and yet he allies with them."

"Well, we know that Tom Riddle is the heir of Slytherin so he can claim that inheritance," answered Hermione. "I think it would be interesting to research some specifics about Dark Wizards and some family lines."

"And we know who the right person to do it is," said Ron grinning at her.

"Yes," she replied. "But I think it would go faster if I could delegate some books reading and note

taking to others." She gave him a charming smile. "Thank you for volunteering Ron."

He grimaced as they all laughed at him.

Harry explained that he wanted to start by reading Sirius' book, and therefore he would not be able to assist them immediately. That got him a disgusted look from Ron who nevertheless agreed to help Hermione. Ginny would go with them to the Hogwarts library tomorrow and until then they would make a survey of what books were already at Grimmauld Place.

The three of them got up and went into the house.

Harry started reading his book. Tonks announced that she was going home to bring back her things. Remus installed himself comfortably, and he started to take notes to prepare for the Defense and Apparition training.

After a while Hermione, Ginny and Ron came back with a mass of books, quills and notes and organized themselves on the terrace table. For a while the only sound that could be heard was that of pages being turned, and the scribing of notes.

Remus was feeling extremely content. A lot had changed in the last two days and he could look forward to a prolonged period of teaching and special assistance to his friends, and a new love. He reflected that Harry must be in the same disposition.

He looked at the boy, who was engrossed in the life history of ancient wizards. Sirius had talked a little about the book but Remus had not had the occasion to read it yet, beyond skimming a few pages. One thing that Sirius had mentioned was the similarity between the present situation and the time just before the establishment of Hogwarts. It would be interesting to look into the details of that.

Harry looked up to see his guardian looking at him. They smiled at each other in shared complicity before returning to their tasks.

Time passed in quiet activity. After an hour or so Tonks returned, and the sound of trunks and various equipments could be heard inside the house, including some swearing and the sound of something fragile hitting the floor.

"Damm it! *Reparo!*"

After finishing the third chapter Harry took a break and reflected about what he had read. *This is fascinating stuff. I'll have to discuss it with the others.*

He got up and approached the table where his friends were studiously going through an impressive pile of volumes taken from the former Black family library. He noticed that Ron was doing a very serious and methodical job of jotting down references. To Harry who had memories of him loathing this sort of 'homework' and usually rushing it sloppily, this was nothing short of amazing.

Ginny was as serious as Hermione but that was less of a surprise. Seeing them work like this Harry was filled with a sense a pride and camaraderie. It was the same feeling he'd had during the DA defense classes. These were his friends, and together they were working as a group, and with him, toward an important goal.

He stood behind Ron and Ginny and placed his hands on their shoulders. They looked up toward him. He was ready to tease Ron about his unusual studiousness, but somehow he knew that it wouldn't be the right thing to say. They would banter about it later, but now he showed his appreciation by squeezing his friend's shoulder lightly and nodding in encouragement.

He caught Hermione's eyes.

"You've been working for more than two hours. Why don't we take a break and try out the pool?"

"Yes!" agreed Ron. "And then it should be time for dinner." Hermione threw him a disgusted look.

"I mean, so we'll be in good shape to continue this during the evening," he hurriedly added in a sheepish voice.

Hermione frowned at him, but her mouth was twitching. Suddenly she couldn't help bursting into laughter. She marked her page, closed her book carefully, and stood up.

"All right Ron, we'll do that and afterwards we can just synthesize quickly what we've got. I won't put you through doing too much homework on our first day."

"That's really nice of you Professor Granger," smirked Ron.

"Especially since you can't borrow her notes like you usually do," mocked Ginny. She ran into the house before her brother could hit her.

Harry followed her in. Ron turned to Hermione.

"You know it's funny but I don't mind doing that kind of work. It certainly feels more useful than the assignments we usually have at school."

Hermione hadn't missed the unusual application of her friend.

"Well actually it's exactly the same thing, except that now we're doing this for ourselves," she replied.

"And for Harry."

She looked at him carefully.

"We haven't had a chance to be alone and talk about this. Everything happened so fast. I hope that you're... all right with Harry and I being together?"

Ron swallowed and didn't look at her directly. *Should I tell her what I'd hoped for? What would be the reason for it?*

"Ron?" She reached out and took his hand. "You and Harry have been my two closest friends, and you still mean the world to me." She marked a pause. "We've never lied to each other."

He turned to her and then to her hand. *She's never held my hand before.* Actually no girl had ever held his hand. A fact that was bothering him a little now.

"Well we don't always tell each other everything either," he replied in a low voice, not looking her in the face.

Hermione was what to him? Friend for sure. Older sister? Confidante? He knew he could bare his heart to her about other people. But what about the half hearted feelings he'd had about her?

Hermione sensed some of Ron's trouble. And she could understand how delicate this was. She didn't want to pry, but she really wanted to be sure that nothing would be lurking inside him. Things which could turn into resentment later.

"Ron. There's something I want to say," she spoke softly and he turned his face back to hers.

"The three of us. We grew up together all these years. We discovered the world together. When you're young your feelings are not always clear cut. Friendship, affection, admiration... desire and love."

"I didn't know I was in love with Harry until a few days ago, but I think I've always had special feelings about both of you, even if I didn't understand them."

She placed her other hand over Ron's.

"And I know that there was some of this with Harry... and maybe with you?"

He swallowed, looked away and then back to her. *Come on man. She said it. Can't you admit the same?*

"Er, maybe. Kind of." He felt very uncomfortable, but he also realized it was a rare chance to come clean with her.

"I think I could have loved you too," he added in a rush, looking at her defiantly.

She looked back with a gentle smile.

"I'm sorry," she said. "And now I know that you hurt a little, and I'm sorry for that too."

He shrugged.

"It's all right. Well it's not exactly pleasant, but you don't have worry about me." He squirmed in his chair. "Childish really," he continued, regaining some of his usual bluster.

She wasn't fooled.

"I'm not worried about you. I care about you."

"I'm really happy for you and Harry," he said feelingly. *It's true, I really am.* Saying it even made him feel better. He knew it came from his heart.

She saw the truth in his words and was relieved.

"So I owe you one now."

"Meaning what?"

"I'd like you to have a girl of your own. When the right one comes along I'll be there to help you."

"Because I need help?"

He feigned indignation but in truth he welcomed the idea and he couldn't stop a shy expression coming to his face.

She smiled back.

"Yes you do! You have the biggest heart in the world and you're adorable, but you'll need me in this unless you are prepared to waste a lot of time in trial and error. Remember Harry and Cho? Not that I'm an expert but at least I'll be neutral." She grinned. "Unless you'd rather enlist Ginny's assistance?"

He twisted his face in a grimace.

"No, I'll take your help." He was sure that he'd rather spend the rest of his life in celibacy rather than submit to the humiliation of asking his own sister about dating.

"Then it's settled. Shall we go swimming now?"

"Too right!"

They got up, and impulsively, Hermione put her hands around his neck and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek. He was surprised and embarrassed. Actually it was the first time she'd kissed him. It certainly felt pretty good. *Lucky Harry.*

"Too bad you don't have a twin sister." He meant it as a joke and it almost was one.

She was flattered.

"Sorry. I have a cousin somewhere but I can't recommend her."

"Why?"

"She's a muggle, married, even has a first kid."

Ron made a face then grinned at her.

"Let's go swimming before anybody sees us and gets the wrong idea."

After swimming Owls were sent to the DA's members then they dined. Everyone discovered

Dobby's gifts under their napkins and the House Elf was warmly congratulated and thanked, which pleased him no end.

The rest of the evening passed quickly in games and light discussion. They had a very good time and finished the evening listening to some of Tonks' old records. Hermione and Ginny even taught Harry and Ron some basic dancing lessons.

The summer was truly beginning.



## Chapter 5 - The Mark

*Somewhere in England, late July, early morning*

Severus Snape was lying, panting and in pain, on the bloody floor of a cold stone room.

*At least I'm still alive, and not too damaged. For now.*

Next to him Bellatrix Lestrange was whimpering. What was left of her dress, stained by blood and sweat, was matted against her body. In other circumstances he might have found it somewhat exciting.

*Not a bad looking bitch, but she really can't keep silent worth a damn.*

Several times during that long night, she had burst out and said something which had enraged Voldemort and caused him to lash at them with Cruciatius or blow dealing spells. Not even Vormtail had escaped his master's wrath. He lay curled up in a corner, not far from the broken remains of the young Death Eater who had made the incredibly stupid mistake of accusing Dark Lord of underestimating the Hogwarts students.

*So much more unforgivable as he'd been right. Well, stupidity and insolence are a bad mix in this company.*

Voldemort was the only one standing. He paced angrily across the room. Most of his rage had been spent, but he was not finished with them yet. He was now asking more precise questions to the surviving members of the ministry raid.

*Now comes the really dangerous part, thought Severus. If he suspects something then what happened before will seem like a pleasant conversation between friends.*

He tried to relax and regulate his breathing.

*Fascinating how pain is the favorite mean of expression in these people. There must be some kind of psychological reason for it.*

Over the years Severus had developed his own method of dealing with an unconformable situation. He was a Death Eater, who had turned spy for the Order of the Phoenix, and who was officially nothing more than potions master and head of House Slytherin at Hogwarts.

Taking refuge in intellectual discourse had always been his solace in a cold unfriendly world. He had few friends, Lucius Malfoy had been the closest, and fewer loves. The only person who had ever shown him genuine affection had been Dumbledore.

*Damnably old man. He saved me and now I can't refuse him anything.*

In truth Severus did not have any choice. He'd made the initial mistake of joining the Death Eaters, for what he now accepted to be a number of bad reasons, and there was no escaping the consequences while Voldemort was alive.

*I'm trapped in this, just like that damn Potter boy. How ironic that he's possibly my only chance.*

He knew that his loathing for the boy was irrational, but he was under too much pressure of guilt, pain humiliation and anger. He needed to vent it, and Potter had the misfortune of being the perfect target.

*Stop that! I need to concentrate of what I must answer.*

By necessity, Severus had become a master at Occlumency, the art of hiding one's thoughts and lying without detection. He wouldn't last a minute against a determined and forewarned Voldemort, but he knew that, if he kept to what the Dark Lord wanted to believe, he had a chance.

Pain was a distraction he could put aside.

"Where is Potter now?" asked Voldemort in an icy voice.

"Isn't he at his uncle's place?" replied Snape. Dumbledore had planned something for the boy but he had not confided in him as to what it was exactly - aside from that ridiculous remedial potions class that he'd forced down his throat.

"I don't think so anymore. We don't have close surveillance, but he hasn't been seen outside for several days, and there has been a reduction in the number of Aurors patrolling the area."

*That was a mistake. They should have left at least a pretence of surveillance. We might have gained a few days.*

"Is he at Hogwarts?" Voldemort looked directly at Snape's face.

"I haven't seen him since the students left for the end of school year," he answered truthfully.

"What about his friends?"

"On vacation here and there I suppose. The Weasley boy should be at his parents' house."

Voldemort stayed silent for a moment. It was not yet time for an assault on secondary objectives. The first goal was to regroup and rebuild his power, and he needed a plan to destroy the only wizard who could stand against him. *The boy is less important in the short run. Whatever powers he has are still immature. The Headmaster however is something else.*

"What do you know of Dumbledore's plans?"

"He hasn't mentioned anything to me. We haven't even talked about what happened at the Ministry."

Bellatrix choose this moment to intrude the conversation.

"You could ask him."

Voldemort raged at her.

"When I want a suggestion from you, I'll ask for it. *Crucio!*" The spell was directed in the witch's general direction, but Snape was caught in part of it. They writhed on the floor.

*Curse that stupid woman! Does she have a brain?*

Voldemort turned toward him.

"I want you to go back and to get me more precise information on Dumbledore's plans and movements. I expect to hear from you in less than a fortnight."

He tossed him a portkey and disappeared. Severus waited a moment to recover his breath, and then he clutched at the object. Immediately he was pulled into the void and found himself in a clearing near Hogwarts.

He was still in a great deal of pain. Prolonged *Cruciatius* caused internal damage, which needed to be healed. He had a number of potions prepared for that. All he had to do was to get back to the school and to his laboratory. Still there was almost a mile of forest to cross. *And I'm not in my best condition.*

He gritted his teeth, stood up and started walking.

*Hogwarts*

Harry and Hermione were leaving the Hogwarts library, when they spotted a huddled, bloody figure limping in the courtyard.

They had finished a general survey of the known wizard families and communities. Harry had learned more interesting facts about the origin of the school and the roles of its Founders. This morning, an appointment had been planned with Dumbledore to discuss all this.

The past few days had also been filled with advanced coaching by Remus and Tonks. Harry and Hermione now had a good enough grasp of Occlumency and Legimency to be able to practice together.

"It's Snape," gasped Hermione. "What happened to him? He looks like he's wounded. He must have been attacked."

Snape had not seen them. He was coming to the Hall's main entrance when Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey met him. He collapsed at their feet.

"Albus. I need to take him to the infirmary right now," Madam Pomfrey said, as she was running her wand over his body. A soft light engulfed the man. In several places it glowed deep red.

"In a moment Poppy," he replied. "Severus. Can you speak? Tell us what happened?"

Snape whispered a few words. Harry and Hermione couldn't hear clearly, but they saw the nurse blanch, and Dumbledore's mouth close into a hard line.

When the potion master had finished, the Headmaster waved his wand in front of his face, and Snape fell unconscious.

Dumbledore stood up and spoke to the nurse.

"You will find some anti-Cruciatius potions in his rooms. Take him there, not to the infirmary, and please be discrete. The Slytherin password is 'emerald'. He will need to rest for at least a day. Check him out fully and keep me advised."

"Albus. These people are animals! You can't let him go back there. If they can do this to him when they don't even suspect he spies on them, what will happen when they do?"

"We know that it is dangerous work. Severus knows it as well." He straightened up and touched her arm. "Please do the best you can for him."

She gave the Headmaster a hard look but didn't say anything. She levitated the unconscious form of Snape, and proceeded toward the Slytherin quarters.

Harry and Hermione waited a moment before following the Headmaster.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" asked Harry.

"I can't answer that," replied Hermione in exasperation, "since I can't read your mind. However *I think* he was with," she swallowed, "Voldemort, who probably was rather angry with how things are going on, and he probably made it plain to his followers. I wouldn't be surprised if other Death Eaters were also in need of medical attention." She looked at Harry, aghast.

"He used the Cruciatius," said Harry in a strangled voice. He could still remember the terrible pain. "I don't like Snape, but I would not wish that on him."

Hermione closed her eyes and pressed herself against him. The previous days had been pure happiness, and she had almost begun to consider the war as an abstract problem. Now she was trying to keep from thinking about Harry, or herself, in Snape's place. *I shouldn't have forgotten what this was about.*

Harry shook himself and squeezed her shoulders.

"Don't dwell on this. Let's go to see Dumbledore. Whatever happens we have things to do."

She looked at him with an anxious face.

"Are you all right?" he asked with concern.

"Yes." She took a deep breath. "Let's go."

They made their way to the Headmaster's office and called out the password he had given them. As she entered for the first time this most holy of places, Hermione couldn't help looking at some the

precious books that were visible. With an effort she turned her mind to the business at hand.

Dumbledore was seated at his desk, gazing pensively at some point in space.

"Sir?"

He turned toward them.

"Harry, Hermione. Good morning. How are you?" He started to put on a smile but when he saw their serious faces, he immediately realized what they must have witnessed.

"We're fine sir," Harry responded gravely. "And how is professor Snape?"

Dumbledore noted the use of Snape's title. Not something that Harry had done frequently in the past.

"He will live, and there should not be any lasting damage," he replied. "But it has not been a very pleasant night for him I'm afraid."

Harry swallowed convulsively, and a white faced Hermione's couldn't hold back a cry. *They tortured him for hours!*

Dumbledore raised his hand.

"I know how horrible this feels to you. You know that professor Snape performs a valuable role for us as our agent inside the enemy's stronghold. He volunteered for this, and we agreed that he can stop it at anytime." He looked at them. "He insists that he wants to continue."

Harry knew that in Snape's place he would probably do the same. *But I didn't imagine that he would.*

"Professor Snape is a very strong wizard and he can survive a lot of this ... abuse," continued Dumbledore. "However there are limits to what anyone can stand. And things are further complicated by the Dark Mark which Voldemort can use to summon or torment him."

"Sir, how did professor Snape become a Death Eater?" asked Harry.

"You will have to ask him that question yourself if you want the details. However the basic truth is that he got drawn into something he did not fully measure. When he realized what it meant, he reacted in a very courageous manner and came to me."

Dumbledore paused.

"I wonder if you can understand how difficult that decision was." Harry and Hermione didn't say anything. "I looked into his soul and saw that his regrets were true, and I gave him my trust and what help I could."

He looked at Harry.

"I have never had an occasion to regret it, or to doubt the man's sincerity. I can assure you that he wants Voldemort's demise more than anyone else."

He sighed.

"Severus Snape is not the most pleasant of person, and there was a great deal of enmity between him and your father Harry, but he is not an evil man. His life has not been a happy one, and not always because of him. You should remember that."

Harry stayed silent for a while and sighed.

"Yeah. He got a raw deal." He looked at Hermione for a moment, remembering the unfair treatments Snape had given all them in classes. *Part of that must have been a front for his cover. But he was also very unpleasant in private.*

He was close to deciding something, but he wanted to be sure of Hermione's position. She seemed

to guess his unformed question. She looked at him and then nodded briefly. *It's almost like telepathy.*

He turned to Dumbledore who was looking at him very closely.

"Sir?"

"Yes Harry."

"How can we make him accept our help?" *Ron is going to have a fit about this, but he'll understand in the end.*

Dumbledore controlled his reaction, but inwardly he felt a strong elation. He has waited for Harry to make such a proposal, but he had not expected it to come so soon. Unfortunately it would not be as easy as it should be.

"Do you understand why he might reject it?" he asked gently.

"Hatred for my father... and for Sirius."

Harry was extremely uneasy with the knowledge of what had happened between his father and Snape. His instinct was to heal that at all cost. *Is that my mother's heritage speaking?* But he was also beginning to learn that good feelings were not sufficient in themselves. The history of Gryffindor and Slytherin had shown him a great deal about when and how a leader could be magnanimous, and he tried to see how it could be applied to this situation. *Leader? Is that what I should try to become?* He didn't want the role, but it didn't look like he had a choice.

"That would be the greatest barrier yes," replied Dumbledore.

"Would it help if I ... apologized in their name?" Harry was afraid of betraying the memory of his father, but still it felt like the *right* thing to do.

Dumbledore nodded gravely. Once again Harry had taken a great step forward, and he was filled with joy and pride.

"Yes Harry, even though the responsibility was not all your father's, I believe that a Potter should take that first step. It will then be professor Snape's responsibility to accept it and to make peace."

"It will not be easy, and success cannot be guaranteed, but it would be a very good thing. If you agree then later on we can go and see him together."

"And then how could we help him?" asked Hermione, ever the practical one.

Harry and Dumbledore didn't have anything ready for that.

Hermione thought for a moment.

"Could we try and remove the Mark?"

Dumbledore grimaced.

"I do not know. That kind of dark magic is very difficult to counter. We looked into that at the beginning but it wasn't feasible. It could be done with enough power. I did learn some interesting techniques when we *removed* some of the artifacts from the Black's house." He nodded in apology to the portrait of Sirius's great grandfather, who harrumphed in distaste but said nothing.

"But I am almost sure that it would prove deadly, and I do not see how we could protect him."

Hermione's mind made connections. *Protection - Harry - Grimauld Place - Commitment.*

"Could a formal pledge with Harry give Snape protection for that particular situation? Something like what we did at Grimauld Place?" she asked.

Dumbledore opened his mouth in surprise and forgot to close it for a long moment.

"What an extraordinary idea!" he said. "Now why didn't I think it? It is more complex than you

might think but there is something..." He raised his head in the air, and mumbled absently, as if he was trying to remember something elusive. After a moment he nodded.

"We could not make it as powerful as what you did," he said. "But then we would only require something for a little time." He thought about it some more.

"I will have to discuss this with professor Flitwick," he said finally. "But I do believe that if Severus truly made his peace with you, we could use the corresponding power of commitment to protect him, and apply enough power to remove the Mark."

"We have to do it," said Harry firmly. "A lot of good would come out of it. It would improve the relations with the Slytherins, and it might even be possible to convert other Death Eaters."

Dumbledore smiled at them.

"That would indeed be a significant victory against Voldemort."

"In the meanwhile we should return to the morning's business. Please be seated."

He gestured and two comfortable chairs materialized next to them.

"I have read your report Hermione, and the book Sirius left you Harry, and I must admit that they do touch on a subject which is very relevant to our situation."

"In fact everything holds together. We have a major enemy, Tom Riddle as Voldemort, and a secondary danger, which is represented by the tensions in the wizard world. Some of these tensions take their roots in ancient rivalries, but in the end most of them hinge on the negative attitude toward the muggle world, and the wizards who originate from there." He nodded to Hermione, "Even your interest in the well being of House Elves can be considered in that light, my dear."

"Sirius's book contained a number of things I had known from elsewhere, but it is the most precise relating to date of a very important period of our history. And, if I may say so, it touches something very dear to my heart."

Harry and Hermione grinned at hearing those words. They had a good idea of what the old wizard was talking about. The unity of the Houses which composed Hogwarts.

"You guess correctly," he divined. "We do know each other well enough to anticipate some things." They looked at each other in shared complicity.

"The key events related in Sirius's book are of course the meeting between those powerful wizards, and the founding of Hogwarts, the first community explicitly created to merge independent groups of wizards, through the education of their children. It was a large success inasmuch as, for close to one hundred years, there was not a single occurrence of organized dark wizardry."

Hermione was surprised to hear that. Actually she reflected that they had learned only a little about the general subject of dark wizards. Dumbledore made it sound that it was a recurring phenomena. She voiced her question.

"Yes, few muggle born are aware of the statistics," he answered her, "and most wizards try to forget it. There have always been regular appearances of dark wizards. Only the most powerful among them develop followers which become generally known to the public, and these are the ones which are dangerous. For the individual rogues we have the Aurors, and some other organizations, which are generally capable of controlling them and protecting the rest of us."

"Now if there is one common theme, in all instances of organized dark wizardry, it is anti muggle sentiment. By reducing this, we can help insure another prolonged era of peace."

He looked at them to emphasize his argument.

"In my opinion this is as important as destroying Voldemort."

After their conversation, Dumbledore invited them to share a meal with professor McGonagall and

Hagrid in one of the private dining rooms of the school.

Hagrid was of course delighted to see Harry, and when he learned that Hermione was his declared girlfriend, he jumped up and nearly smothered her in his embrace. He became so enthusiastic that Dumbledore and McGonagall had to remind him that it was a little early to compare them to James and Lily, and to talk about marriage and children, as he had been going on. Harry and Hermione laughed at his exuberance, but they exchanged embarrassed glances, and it was plain that some of those thoughts were also in their heads.

At the end of the meal, McGonagall and Hermione were discussing some delicate point of magical theory, while Harry filled Hagrid and Dumbledore about the happenings at Grimauld Place.

"I take you're comfortable there," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling.

"Sir, I'm having the most wonderful time of my life. We all are. I will never be able to thank you for all that you've done."

"And young Remus?" asked Hagrid innocently. "How he is?"

Harry blushed a little when he explained to new arrangements with Tonks. Hagrid however was very happy to hear the news, and Dumbledore's eyes danced even more. Professor McGonagall started to voice her opinion that perhaps the young people should be chaperoned a little more, but she reminded herself of her student days and didn't insist. Besides, she felt she could count on Hermione to impose a minimum of discipline.

Afterwards, Dumbledore took them to see professor Flitwick, so that they could discuss the matter of removing professor Snape's Dark Mark.

The two wizards exchanged complex technical arguments and obscure references. Harry was quickly over his head. Even Hermione seemed to be just hanging on to the discussion. Harry tried to follow anyway, if only because curse removal was bound to be a part of advanced Auror training.

At the end, and for their benefit, professor Flitwick explained what they would have to do. More than one wizard would be required to work the spell. At Grimauld Place, both he and Dumbledore had been needed to eliminate the hardest items such as the portrait of Sirius's mother.

"In this case we need to apply magic to both fight the curse but also protect Severus," he said.

"Mister Potter, you and him will provide the basic power with your commitment. Once this is under way, Miss Granger and I will attempt to remove the Mark. The Headmaster will be responsible for protecting us from the side effects."

Hermione practiced the specific counter curse spell they would be using. It was not too difficult in itself, and she didn't have to master all of its intricacies, since she would effectively only assist the professor.

When they were ready, they made their way to Snape's rooms.

The potion master was lying on his bed but not sleeping. He answered to Dumbledore's call, but his eyes blazed with anger when he saw who was with him.

"I have no wish to see you Potter. It is bad enough that I will have to waste my time teaching you and your friends in a month's time."

Dumbledore raised a calming hand.

"Please Severus, I would ask you to listen to something important Harry has to say, and which does concern you."

Snape said nothing and fixed the Headmaster with a closed face. *What crazy scheme has the old man conceived now? Can't they leave me in peace?*

"Just lend us an ear Severus," continued Dumbledore. "I ask nothing more, but I fear I must insist

on that."

Snape frowned. It was very rare for Dumbledore to impose something on him. Most of the time it was something unpleasant. *But always there had been valid reasons.*

"All right. Sir." *But make it short.*

He looked at Harry, taking in the subtle changes in the boy. *He's certainly more confident than I've ever seen him to be. I would have expected him to be lost in depression after the Ministry fiasco.*

Harry forced himself to ignore the man's animosity and concentrate on his objective, and on how he could make his case with arguments acceptable to a Slytherin. He fixed the potion master calmly.

"Professor Snape. There has been a lot of bad feeling between us, and between you and me and my friends and family. Still, all of us have parts to play in the current struggle. We have common interests in defeating Voldemort and his accomplices."

"I know that you have done a number of things for this cause, and for me. I am grateful for that, and I am aware that you pay a heavy price for it."

"I don't need your pity Potter!" snarled Snape. "My actions are my own responsibility and none of your business!"

Harry ignored the outburst.

"I do not pity you sir. I only see someone who fights the same enemy that I do, and whom I believe I can help."

"*You would help me Potter?*" he sneered. "Out of the goodness of your Gryffindor heart? Merlin save me from your childish delusions!"

"With all due respect sir, Gryffindor do not help Slytherins out of pure goodness," said Harry proudly. "Nor, if I understand it correctly, is it the Slytherin way to accept it. What I propose is an end to wasteful enmity between us."

"What in the world for?" Snape was openly scorning.

Harry pointed to Snape's forearm.

"To rid you of *that*."

Snape was shocked and speechless with fury.

"How *dare you* presume to be able to do anything about what you certainly do not understand!" He turned to the Headmaster. "What did you put into the boy's head this time?"

Dumbledore replied in his usual gentle voice.

"Severus, there is a real chance we could remove the Black Mark. I have thought very seriously about this and professor Flitwick agrees with me."

A number of emotions played across Snape's face as he considered what they were saying. *Fools! What do they know of what might happen? The arrogance of them!* Yet rising in his mind was the insane hope to be free of the awful curse placed on him so long ago. *I stumbled once and was ruined, and now they propose to undo it. Is it only possible?*

The hope was like the first lights of the sunrise at the end of a long night, but the fear of disappointment was terrible.

"Do you realize what you are doing to me?" he said in a toneless voice.

Hermione answered him.

"Yes sir, we are offering you the possibility of freedom at the risk of a tremendous deception, or worse, in case of failure." She inclined her head toward Harry, "There is nothing easy or trivial in



this."

Snape calmed himself. He was impressed by their seriousness.

"I cannot imagine a force sufficient to remove the Dark Mark without killing the person," he said. "What is your idea?" *This is utter madness.*

Harry spoke tersely.

"Commitment magic. As in Privet Drive, and now Grimmauld Place. In this case it would be used toward a slightly different goal."

Snape frowned. *He's referring to his mother's sacrifice and the protection it generated. What exactly happened at Grimmauld Place?*

In a few words, Dumbledore described what had been done. Snape looked at Hermione who stood next to Harry.

"Are you suggesting we declare our love for each other Potter?" He couldn't help himself sneering.

"No sir." Harry took a deep breath and looked the potion master straight in the eyes.

"But I will sincerely apologize for anything my father, Sirius or I did against you, and I will forgive anything that you did against them or me. I will pledge to respect and stand by you as a friend."

Snape stayed silent. He would have to accept to do the same of course. He reviewed some of the worst incidents which had opposed him to the Marauders long ago. What he really felt was disgust. *We were childish and stupid all of us.*

Looking at Harry, he realized that the dispute with the boy's father was an abstract thing now, and his own attitude as a teacher was a minor irritant. The main guilt he felt toward Harry was that he had taunted Sirius and played some part in his death.

"Will you forgive even Sirius?" he asked softly.

"Yes," replied Harry in the same voice.

Snape realized that he was at an important point in his life. Independently of the Mark's removal, by sealing his peace with Harry, he would also lose most of the anger which protected him from the world. For a while he would be defenseless against the insults and hatred of others. He would be able to pretend of course, but, having had a taste of respect and friendship from a former enemy, he would crave it from others.

He turned to Dumbledore. The old man's face told Snape that he understood exactly what was proposed here, certainly more than these youngsters could.

*Damned Gryffindors. Why don't they ever mind their own business!*

He waited for him to say something, to encourage him to go through with this, but Dumbledore stayed silent.

*He wants me to make my decision by myself.*

Snape knew that if he refused, Dumbledore would not hold it against him. But it would always be there between them. A last chance that he had ignored.

*Do I really have a choice? Yes I do. I can swallow my pride and take great gamble, or stew in my own bloody juices until an ignominious death.*

He looked at Harry and couldn't escape a feeling of grudging respect for the boy. If nothing else it would be nice to stop seeing the father in him, and to cross out that part of his life.

Harry examined Snape. He felt he understood some of his teacher's turmoil. His face cracked into a devil-may-dare grin as he extended his open hand toward the older man.

Snape looked at that hand. *Of course. Bodily contact would be necessary in this.* He couldn't remember the last time he'd shaken hand with anybody. He looked at Harry's face and despite himself he was moved by the love of life that he saw on it. *Just like Lily.*

*Damn it! I actually want to do it.*

Severus Snape took a step toward the boy and said the necessary words.

"I accept your apology, and I extend my own for what was, and which should be forgiven and forgotten. I pledge to be your friend and teacher, for you and your friends... Harry."

He extended his arm, and Harry gripped it decisively. The sleeve of his robe pulled up to display the Dark Mark which flared at once. Harry and Severus grimaced in pain. Dumbledore, Flitwick and Hermione immediately took position and started to murmur the counter curse incantations.

The Mark pulsed like some obscene living creature, and it glowed with an ominous green light. At the same time Harry felt his scar starting to burn fiercely and he brought his other hand to his brow.

Lines of fire erupted from Flitwick and Hermione's wands toward Snape's skin. He and Harry screamed horribly, but they continued to hold each other.

Hermione was terrified by what could be happening to Harry, but she forced herself to concentrate on her task. The Mark became a twisting tentacled thing which detached itself from Snape's arm and fought against the fire from their wands. A black blood flowed from the professor's skin.

Harry and Snape's minds were in agony. They could only vaguely see each other and were oblivious of anything else except the pain. In flashes, Harry began to experience bits of Snape's life and memories. Images of battle with his father or Sirius, visions of Lucius Malfoy, Voldemort and others. The impressions went by, too quickly to be analyzed, and he couldn't really concentrate.

It seemed to be taking much longer than Hermione would have expected. She stole an anxious glance at professor Flitwick and her fear redoubled as she saw he appeared as troubled as she was. *It's not working like we hoped. My God, what can I do?*

Dumbledore has his eyes closed and a golden light emanated from his hands and bathed Harry and Snape. He was extremely concentrated and trembling slightly. *It's all he can do to shield them. How long can it last?*

Professor Flitwick suddenly spoke up.

"We are going to try something else Miss Granger. At my signal you will launch another spell."

He explained rapidly what he wanted. She tried not to think at what Harry must be going through, or what could happen if she failed. She rehearsed mentally what she would have to do and indicated that she was ready.

She watched as the diminutive professor frowned in concentration and adjusted his own spell.

"Now!"

Hermione murmured the new incantation and the color of the fire beam from her wand changed color to take on an intense blue color. The black shape of the Mark twisted and jumped in response.

Harry was losing ground. Desperately, he tried some of the mental techniques he had been taught but to no effect. He fell back to raw willpower, but it was becoming too difficult to resist.

Suddenly the pain stopped, and his vision returned. He saw what looked like a red bubble imprisoning a dark shape floating about their clenched arms, and behind it, Snape's face, covered in sweat but with an intense expression of relief.

Their eyes met and for a moment their minds were one, and he saw himself through Snape's vision. A storm of strange thoughts overwhelmed him. It lasted a fraction of time and then the link was broken. He felt himself losing consciousness and fell forward.

Snape couldn't stay upright, he managed to fall on his knees and catch Harry's falling body. He could see the reddened but bare skin on his forearm, and he knew that it was over. That he was free. Without thinking, he cradled the boy gently and pressed his face against the unruly dark hair. He had never imagined doing such a thing. For the first time in many years he was smiling.

He raised his eyes toward an anxious Dumbledore and a terrified Hermione. He had barely enough strength to stay conscious.

"He's all right. Don't worry.... It's all right now." and then he passed out.

Hermione jumped to Harry's side. His breathing and pulse was erratic but strong and going quieter. Professor Flitwick breathed a long sigh and wiped his brow. Dumbledore patted him on the shoulder and called Madam Pomfrey. Together they installed Snape back in his quarters and they brought the unconscious boy to the infirmary.

Harry woke up to a row of concerned faces. Hermione was crying and holding his hand. They all looked somewhat disheveled, even the Headmaster.

"Did it work?" he asked.

"Yes Harry," replied Dumbledore. "Professor Snape is resting, but the Mark has been removed and destroyed. It was a bit more complicated than what we planned, but it has been done." He turned to Hermione. "You did very well both of you."

"How do you feel Harry?" asked Hermione.

He smiled at her. Exhilarated by the news of their success. For once he had taken the initiative and done something *right*.

"I ache all over, and I have a terrible headache but basically I'm ok. Nothing that a swim and a good night's rest can't cure."

He started to get up. Madam Pomfrey intervened to say that he should probably spend the night in observation. Harry turned a pleading face to Dumbledore who reassured him, and convinced the nurse that he did not need any special medical attention.

"Harry, if you want, you can go to the Gryffindor quarters and rest a while before you go back to Grimauld. But please notify us if you feel unwell," he said. "I am sure that Miss Granger will keep an eye on you."

The two of them took their leave and started toward the student quarters but Hermione had another idea.

"Er... Hermione, Gryffindor tower is that way," remarked a puzzled Harry.

"We're going somewhere else. Follow me and don't say anything," she answered mysteriously.

They stopped at the door of the room of Requirement.

"Harry, please close your eyes and don't think of anything until I tell you to." She closed her own eyes and concentrated for a moment. When she opened the door, it was exactly as she wanted.

"You can come in and look now," she said softly.

Harry opened his eyes. He saw that the room was now something like the private quarters of a Sultan. There was a very large bed decorated with braided pillows and veils, a big bathtub incrusting in the floor was filled with foaming and bubbling water. A soft music and sweet perfumes floated in the air. Here and there were towels and silk robes. There was even a massage table.

"Whoa!" He turned to her. "Hermione this is brilliant!"

She smiled in satisfaction at his reaction.

"I thought that student quarters would not be as comfortable. And this is more private than

Grimauld Place." She looked at him and blushed.

He walked to her and gently took her face in his hands and kissed her.

"I love you," he whispered. The pain of the previous ordeal was forgotten.

She started to remove his cloak.

"Allow me?" she asked softly.

Harry found he couldn't speak anymore so he nodded as she continued with the buttons of his shirt. His hand went to her school tie and his eyes begged the question. She nodded and they both slowly undressed each other, shivering in anticipation and delighting at each gesture.

Hermione's body was as wonderful as he had imagined it.

His hand gently caressed her shoulder and descended over her bare breast. She caught her breath in pleasure. His face was beaming with pure joy and wonderment.

"You are the most beautiful girl in the world and I love you," he said simply.

Their last bits of clothing were taken off and then they were naked next to each other, with the roar of their beating hearts in their ears. They came together and kissed for a long time.

She took his hand and led him into the bath. The water was warm and soothing. They played and washed each other, delighting in the unusual activity. After a while they just soaked, snuggled against each other.

"I think we ought to visit Hogwarts more often," he said. Hermione giggled.

"What is it?"

"I was just thinking that not a few students would like to know the secrets of this place."

"It certainly beats hiding in the owlery for snogging." He recalled some remarks from the Gryffindor boys' quarters. "Do the girls talk a lot about ... this kind of things?"

"Bloody too much! Parvati is one of the worst."

"Maybe this year you'll be more interested," he teased. "You'll be able to tell a few stories yourself."

"I would not!" She frowned at him. "Would you tell the other boys about us?"

He reassured her.

"No of course not." *Certainly not in the boys' room.* "I might tell Ron about this one day through."

She nodded.

"That's ok. But no one else."

"We're both going to have to take some ribbing though. You know that."

"Most famous couple in Hogwarts?"

"Yes. Before we become the most famous couple in the wizard world."

"Thinking long term, are you now?" she looked at him seriously.

He turned toward her.

"Maybe I'm not completely objective right now, but I can't conceive of living with anyone else than you."

"I can't either, but isn't it a bit too soon to talk like that?"

They looked at each other.

"We won't rush it, and we have a lot of things before us. We're in love but we've also known each

other for a long time, we have a lot of respect for each other and we have common goals, and ... well, when you add up everything, it only goes one way."

Hermione nodded silently.

He grinned at her.

"Of course we should really have a major fight to test it. But I'm confident we can manage that."

"You brat!" she placed her head on his shoulder. "I'm very happy to be with you Harry," she said softly.

He held her close and they started to review what had happened with Severus. He told her that for a moment he had been inside the man's mind, and he had felt his thoughts. It was an extraordinary experience. He tried to describe it to her.

Hermione was fascinated but the whole thing had been very unpleasant for her. She hadn't expected it to be so messy and painful.

"You were screaming, it was awful."

"Every contact with dark magic is painful I guess. But the mind reading came after, when it was all over."

She nodded absently. *It's like childbirth. There's pain, blood, and ... a new life.*

"Do you think it was the same for him?"

"Yes. I think it was both ways." Harry's face took on a dreamy look. "You know, he is a very hard and lonely man, but he also has a lot of integrity and principles."

"Snape? Principles? Do you remember what he did in classes?" She was outraged.

"Yes, but that was not very important to him. On other things, and for his Slytherin students, he has some very strong principles."

"Such as?"

"Slytherin house is very arrogant, and aggressive toward the outside, but between themselves they show a lot of solidarity and discipline. They work hard and the students respect him."

She didn't respond. She would need to time, and more evidence, to accept that.

"What do you think will happen now?"

"I don't know, but we have to try and integrate the four Houses together, and for all of us to accept our qualities and faults. Severus will not change completely, he'll always be a hard teacher, but I believe he will work toward this goal with us."

"We'll have to win over the other Slytherins," he said firmly.

She understood that the last events had crystallized his resolve in this. *He's really going to do it.* Of course she would help him.

"Some of them may be lost forever, but others will join in."

"Yes. It's not going to be easy. You heard Dumbledore. Part of it is that old wizard culture and the prejudice against muggles, even in the other Houses."

She nodded absently. She'd had her share of taunting herself. It had hurt a lot especially since she had tried so hard to fit into this world, and she thought that she deserved to be accepted. *This is another thing which I fear. That I will fail in taking my place next to him in his world. He belongs by birthright and power and I don't.*

Unconsciously she clung to him tighter and Harry guessed her fears.

"Hermione, love. For this we have the best possible answer."

She didn't see what he meant.

"What?"

"You," he said simply. She frowned and he continued. "You are the living proof that a muggle girl can excel in this world."

She shook her head in despair. She wanted to believe him but she didn't dare.

He held her close.

"Don't look at those you reject you. One after another, they will change. Consider those who admire and welcome you. They are the strongest and the more numerous."

"Even Severus sees you differently now." She looked up, doubting that. "He does," he insisted. "You can trust me I've been in his mind, and he values you. He's not going to kiss you every morning, but if you look behind the wall he keeps between him and the world, you will see it."

"Well of course he'll be grateful."

"No. Gratitude is not a Slytherin quality, but they appreciate power and knowledge. I'm talking about considering you as a full fledged witch."

She felt the truth in his words and it reassured her. She relaxed against him and they rested quietly in the warm water.

Severus Snape felt very strange. He'd recovered, washed up, and dressed in clean robes. Every minute or so he'd had to look at his arm, to make sure that the Mark was really gone, and then he couldn't help but smile, all the while calling himself stupid.

*First Dumbledore then Potter. Will I ever escape these damn Gryffindors?*

Not that he really wanted to, but he had prized his independence once.

A knock on his door announced the Headmaster.

"How are you feeling Severus?"

"Fine Sir."

Actually he still felt the remains of the night's torments, and he had a large assortment of aches and pains, but considering everything, he felt pretty good all in all.

"You must really be proud of yourself," he challenged the old wizard.

"I'm proud of Harry, and of you," came the calm rejoinder.

Severus sighed.

"Did the boy really propose this by himself?"

"Yes, he did, and it was Miss Granger who had the idea of using the occasion to remove the Mark. I'm actually quite vexed not to have planned it all along."

"Albus, I was in his mind at the end. I was wrong about him. I say it once and then never again." Severus looked defensively at the Headmaster, daring him to say anything about it.

Dumbledore smiled kindly and nodded.

"But there are some other things to clear up. We need to talk about Remus and the teaching positions."

Snape frowned.

"Do you still plan on calling him back as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher?"

Dumbledore fixed him calmly.

"I will not decide on anything before you have looked at the situation," he said. "I will only remind you that I need a potion teacher, and that you have your duties as head of House, which will not be trivial this coming year. Also there is the DA group, which Harry and his friends will continue and probably step up, and finally I am concerned about the History of Magic course."

Dumbledore rapidly updated Snape about the morning's discussion concerning Wizard culture and anti muggle prejudice.

Severus refrained from saying anything unpleasant. He would take his time in considering how to educate the muggle born. *Don't rush me!*

"You want me to discuss this with Remus?" he said curtly.

"I would appreciate it if you would."

"All right. I will."

At that point he spotted Harry and Hermione in the doorway. The boy looked indecently happy.

"Sir?"

Snape frowned again.

"You can come in Mister Potter," he replied in a formal voice. "I hope for Merlin's sake that you will not pester me with that grin of yours every time we meet," he added.

Harry wasn't fooled one bit by Snape's tone. His smile became even more brilliant.

"No sir, only in private. I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

Snape sighted once more. *How in hell did I get in such a situation?* He knew he would have to get used to it, and in truth it was not so unpleasant. *At least he doesn't call me Severus - yet.*

"Thank you for your solicitude Mister Potter," he replied in a sarcastic tone. "Since you will be going back to Grimauld Place, could you please convey a message to Remus Lupin?"

"With pleasure sir," Harry said eagerly.

Snape grimaced and rolled his eyes.

"Tell him I will be in the Three Broomsticks at seven PM tonight, and if he could manage it, I would like to discuss some matters with him." *And don't you dare thank me!* He glared at the boy.

Harry paused a moment and visibly controlled his expression to Snape's relief. He nodded gravely.

"I'll tell him as soon as I come back, sir."

"Thank you. I wish you and Miss Granger a pleasant vacation." He paused. "And please accept, both of you, my most heartfelt thanks and token of respect." He bowed his head briefly.

They acknowledged silently and bowed back. Then as they turned to leave.

"Mister Potter."

"Sir?"

"I will expect you, and Mister Weasley, to be extremely well prepared for the coming potions class in a month's time."

"Yes sir!"

When they arrived at Grimauld Place, they immediately filled in their friends about the events at Hogwarts. The reaction was predictable.

"You did *what* with Snape?" exclaimed Ron.

"I made my peace with him and we removed the Dark Mark of the Death Eaters," confirmed Harry simply.

"You're putting me on!" he looked at them suspiciously. "This is the worst bloody joke I have ever heard in my life!"

"No it's all true," answered Hermione. "We would never make fun about such a thing."

Remus thought so too, but what they described challenged his imagination.

"You said he'll meet me in Hogsmeade tonight?"

"Yes. He didn't say why," Harry said. "We never mentioned you. I felt I could only speak for my father and Sirius. But I think he'll be more reasonable than before, even with you. It's the logical thing to do, and to themselves Slytherins are logical."

Ron looked disgusted.

"You can think like a Slytherin now?"

Ginny glowered at him.

"Slytherin thinking is what Harry needs to understand in order to bring the Houses together. And that does not mean that he'll become like the worst of them."

Harry turned to his friend.

"Ron this is an occasion that we can't pass up. We have to give Snape and the rest of the Slytherin a chance to work with us." Ron looked dubious. Harry continued. "Don't you think it would be great if the school could show a united face to the world? It doesn't mean that there wouldn't be any competition, which is a good thing actually, but we should have mutual respect and solidarity."

"Do you honestly believe we can have that?" Ron asked.

"Yes I do, and I'll work for it as much as I can," answered Harry.

"We'll work on it," corrected Hermione. Harry beamed at her.

Ron was torn between his skepticism, backed by many years of Slytherin animosity and insults, and his faith in Harry.

Harry continued.

"There'll be no question of accepting abuse from them and turning the other cheek. We'll insist on them respecting us, but we will refuse to be provoked, and we will search for friends among them."

"If we can find enough of them to accept this idea then those few who don't will not matter," added Hermione.

Ron looked at his two friends and finally nodded his acceptance.

"It's not going to be a piece of cake you know."

*Hogsmeade, evening*

At the arranged time, Remus transported himself to Hogsmeade and went to the Three Broomsticks tavern. Only a few people were inside, and he spotted Snape alone at a table with a pitcher and two glasses in front of him.

"Good evening Severus."

Snape looked up and gestured to a vacant seat.

"Good evening Remus. Join me?"

The two of them considered each other silently for a moment. Their relations had never been more that coldly formal, and they both were plainly unsure of how to proceed.



Snape broke the ice and gestured toward the pitcher.

"Want some?"

Remus nodded and Snape poured him a glass, and another one for himself.

Remus raised his glass in toast.

"Shall we drink to the future?"

Snape nodded and raised his own glass, and glanced toward his left arm.

Remus noted the gesture.

"I'm very glad for you Severus," he said softly.

Snape sighted. He had spent the previous minutes testing his old animosity toward Remus. *Werewolf!* He found that it had largely disappeared. In truth Remus' main faults had been to be a friend of James and Sirius, more than being a lycanthrope. Once the first was resolved, he was just another magical creature. The repulsion these inspired him was balanced by the fact that he was a friend of Harry.

He looked at him directly.

"As you can imagine that the present situation is very... unsettling for me. I am still trying to adapt." Remus nodded and stayed silent, Snape continued. "I have however come to the conclusion that it makes no sense to continue antagonizing each other." He paused. "I now consider myself Harry's friend." he shook his head in amazement. "And I would like to be yours as well." *And of course you will accept, gallant Gryffindor that you are.*

Remus slowly started to grin. He replaced his glass on the table and extended his hand.

"I would be honored to be your friend Severus."

Snape grimaced at the offered hand. He still didn't like to touch others, or be touched for that matter, but physical contact was a big thing with these people.

He extended his own and shook Remus' hand. The man was plainly enjoying his reticence.

"I don't propose that we kiss each other Severus," teased Remus.

*Insufferable.*

"I think this will suffice."

Remus became serious.

"These kids are incredible. Whenever we think we have the situation under control they go and change everything."

"Yes," agreed Snape. He paused, "Harry is truly going to become a very powerful wizard. He's not afraid to attempt anything, and he'll lead the others with him. In a way it's very dangerous."

*Trust Severus to look at the worst case scenario,* thought Remus.

"You don't think that he's becoming... unstable?"

"No. There's no sign of that yet, and he doesn't seem to crave domination, but his power is growing and he's not reticent to use it. I fear that one day he'll become... impatient with the limitations of the rest of us."

Remus thought about it.

"He looks up to role models. We'll have to stay up to standards."

"Exactly, and guide the rest of the students," replied Snape. "Make no mistake. I find much to admire in the boy, but he's growing up too fast."

"Power corrupts? Is that your fear?"

"Yes, both personal power and a having great number of wizard looking up to him. A lot of good men have been ruined by this."

"There's not much that we can do about it for now."

"No." Another pause. "There is another subject I would like to discuss with you." Severus used his fingers to turn his glass between his hands, catching the lights in the crystal.

"Please go on."

"It concerns the teaching positions for this coming year." Snape was considering a particular reflection on his glass, and then he raised his gaze at Remus. "The DADA position is opened, and Dumbledore also wants to replace the History Of Magic teacher."

"Hum. And you'd like to take the DADA post?" Remus had expected to teach that course, but he certainly wouldn't push for it.

"Well, Dumbledore remarked that I have a number of other responsibilities, but he said that he would listen to a reasonable proposition." He turned glass again, flickers of multicolored lights played across his face.

"I won't insist on the DADA position Severus," Remus said softly. "I know that you are as qualified for it as I am. Actually I wouldn't mind teaching History Of Magic."

Snape permitted himself a very discrete smile. The present teacher was such a bore that Remus would have no problem dramatically improving the popularity of the course.

"What would you say to a split of the DADA course between us?" he proposed.

Remus' eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Unusual setup but it might work. I could take the first three years, we could even arrange common field classes. It's more efficient to have two teachers for practical exercises."

"I agree. I will turn over the first and second years of potion to someone else and concentrate on the older students as well." He raised his glass. "Let's drink to that then."

Remus took his own glass. They clicked and took a sip. He coughed at the burning broth. Smoke was coming out of his mouth.

"What is this?" he said in a rasping voice. *Not bad but it sure packs a punch!*

"Personal recipe. Think of it as improved Fire Whisky." Snape smiled at the man's face.

"And a whole pitcher of it!"

"I was thinking I needed a good drinking night." He raised an eyebrow. "Care to join me?"

Remus looked dubiously at his glass.

"I may not survive it." Then he flashed the same devil-may-dare grin Snape remembered in Harry and James. "But it will not be said that I refused a challenge."

"Spoken like a true Gryffindor."

Remus raised his glass in his turn.

"To the eternal glory of Slytherin and Gryffindor."

They finished the pitcher, and then Snape produced another one. Neither would remember much of the rest of the night, but witnesses would later tell of a memorable carousing, complete with stories and rowdy songs, and which ended in the early morning, when McGonagall and Tonks took pity on them, and transported them to their beds, instead of letting them wake up in the village road ditch where they had finally collapsed, in each other's arms.



## Chapter 6 - Party

*Next morning*

That morning, waking up was more difficult than usual for some people. Severus and Remus both emerged from sleep with a raging headache, a queasy stomach and in a confused mental state.

Severus had of course prepared a hangover potion for the occasion. His discomfort lasted only the time it took him to reach his private bathroom. He gulped the brew and immediately his head cleared, leaving only a vile taste in his mouth. A small price to pay for such a reprieve.

*We certainly tied a good one last night.*

He considered the small bottle with pride. It was another one of his private recipes few people knew about, one of the few perks of being a potions teacher. He hoped he had remembered to give Remus a dose of the stuff. He checked his robes for the other vial he had prepared and found that it was not there. *I must have given it to him, or else it was dropped somewhere. If so then that's life.*

He didn't remember every detail of their revelry, but it had been a surprisingly pleasant moment. Thinking about the previous day made him glance at his arm. He had to check it one more time.

He held his breath and rolled his sleeve... yes the Mark was still gone.

Snape stared at himself in the mirror. It would simply have to get use to it. *I'm not complaining. I probably lost the right to complain about anything anymore.* He grunted and started his morning routine.

Remus didn't remember anything about any hangover potion. Waking up reminded him of his monthly transformations. He managed to drag himself to the sink, and he ran some cold water over his head while he sighed in misery. After a while he heard Tonks coming in.

"Well if it isn't the prodigal wolf himself," she called out cheerfully, making him wince in pain. "I hope you're aware that your reputation dropped a notch last night."

He turned a dejected face toward her and mumbled something about being sorry and higher duty, but she laughed and told him it was ok.

"I just received an Owl from Severus that says for you to look in your side pocket."

Puzzled, Remus searched his robe and found a small bottle labeled *Morning after*.

He opened it and sniffed. It didn't smell too bad as potions went. He drank the dose and sighted with relief at the results.

*Severus must have placed it there last night. Damn decent of him.*

He must have a pretty stupid expression from the look Tonks gave him. He resumed their evening to her.

"All in all it was a very interesting outing. I expected Snape to have mellowed a bit but he was downright pleasant and he got us drunk to prove it. Not to mention this little gift."

"Well that's nice," she replied. "But speaking of outing this is the day for Harry's party and we just have time for a quick lesson with the kids before preparing the house."

He dressed quickly and stepped out to greet the youngsters at breakfast. At their urging he retraced his evening with Snape and Harry let out a long whistle. Ron kept shaking his head and asking for confirmation of every detail. Remus finally produced the empty hangover vial which shut him up.

Another Owl arrived, sent by Dumbledore, confirming the new teaching positions.

Remus decided to forgo Apparition practice because they actually had to leave the house for that, in any case Harry and Hermione were practically ready to take the exam, and the others would only

need a couple more lessons. The morning's training session was therefore a review of combat techniques.

They had already gotten to the level where several of their spells were too dangerous to practice on each other. Harry had asked Tonks how Auror training coped with the problem and she had mentioned the simulator balls. Remus had balked at their price but Harry had overridden him and ordered a complete set of three, as well as other basic equipment he felt they needed.

"Those Galleons are just sitting there. This is the best use I can make of them," he had told him.

The simulators were perfect for combat practice. They could be programmed for different strengths and appearances and could even impersonate friendly fighters and bystanders. Tonks didn't want to teach them the *Avada* curse, but there were plenty of spells which were be just as good to take out a dark wizard if used properly.

At 11 A.M Remus and Tonks went to Diagon Alley, with the special portkey, to pick up the group of guests.

All those invited was there. A number of them had taken advantage of the occasion to sample the latest of the Weasleys' ware and initial curiosity had quickly turned to fascination. Remus had to threaten the twins of not waiting for them if they didn't agree to stop their commerce. It still took some time before George finally closed the shop, taking with him a very large box covered in mysterious signs and eloquent warnings.

At last everyone was assembled around Remus. He activated the portkey and the group materialized in the garden. Harry, Ron and the girls cheered their arrival.

Fred and George rushed to greet Harry.

"So you've closed the shop for the rest of the day?" he asked them.

"Actually we need the rest," said Fred.

"We didn't take a single breather since the vacation started," confirmed George.

Harry made the round of his friends. He was particularly happy to see Neville and Luna although he was a little bit awkward with her. He knew that if it hadn't been for Hermione he would have considered dating her. As it was he hoped that she would still be as friendly.

Luna noticed his relationship with Hermione immediately and gave Harry a gentle kiss with her quiet dreamy smile.

"I see that your heart has found someone special Harry."

"Er... yes." Harry swallowed. He tried not to sound apologetic but she stopped him.

"You don't have to explain anything. It's a good thing. You seem to be happy."

He grinned boyishly.

"Yeah I really am."

"Then I'm very glad for you both."

She turned to Hermione who greeted her pleasantly enough. Hermione didn't really know what to make of Luna. Intellectually they were complete opposites and her first impression had been rather negative. Hermione valued rigor and analysis while Luna was forever ready to ramble about irrational or imaginary things. Yet at the ministry she had fought well and she knew that Harry appreciated her.

Trying to find something neutral to say, Hermione remembered that she and her father had planned to spot some imaginary animals with crazy sounding names she couldn't remember. Luna's mother was dead and the two were very close and often traveled together.

"And how was your vacation with your father?"

"I'm fine and the trip was nice, but you're not really interested in the details," Luna replied matter of factly but not aggressively. "I know you don't believe in Crumpled-Horn Snorkacks, but it doesn't matter. We didn't find any as it happened."

Hermione was a bit shocked at the direct language.

"Well it's true I'm not overly fond of your fancy animals but I do care about you. I want to be your friend as you are Harry's." *And I do hope that 'friend' is all that you want to be to him.*

"I will be your friend Hermione, and you shouldn't be afraid that I could steal Harry from you. I wouldn't try it and I don't think he would go for it in any case."

Hermione tried to laugh but she was very unsettled. It was almost as if she could...

"Do you read minds?" she blurted out.

Luna hesitated and for a moment her expression become more serious.

"No, not exactly but I get flashes, and I can usually guess what people are thinking about me. I always know when someone is lying."

Hermione blushed and started to protest but the other girl interrupted her.

"It's a strange talent and it bothered me at first but not any more. A long time ago I decided to just ignore people when they're unpleasant."

Comprehension dawned on Hermione. *That why she often looks dreamy. It's not an affectation. It's her protection against what others think.*

"I think I understand you better Luna. I'm sorry I misjudged you, and I really do want to us to be friends."

Luna smiled and she placed her hand on Hermione's arm.

"But we are, even if we don't agree on everything."

"We haven't had much chance to talk, and I'd really like to get to know you better."

Luna flashed a mysterious smile.

"Maybe you will. See you later?" She went of toward another group.

The party was already well under way. For most of them it was their first meeting since the end of the year and a lot of gossip was exchanged.

"...How did you do on your OWLs? I got only six and my parents were furious. I'll have to tutor for all of August...."

"... fancy Harry and Hermione together. I've been waiting for her to do it for two years...."

".. Professor Lupin lives here. Do you thing he'll be back as teacher?"

"...did you see Cho's face...."

It was decided that they'd eat outside. A Quidditch match was organized for the afternoon while most of the rest planned to try out the pool.

Tonks had installed her enchanted gramophone, and a space was reserved for dancers. Hermione looked forward to her first public dance with Harry. She noticed that Ginny was seated next to Dean Thomas but the discussion seemed a bit strained. Hermione looked at her friend thoughtfully. Ginny was going through boyfriends rather quickly. It was nothing serious - yet, but she didn't really approve. *Not my business unless it gets out of hand.*

Harry was talking with a group which included Neville, Macmillan and Colin. It was remarkable to

look at Neville and see the calm assurance of the boy. Harry's consideration and friendship had built him up, and his action at the ministry had given him prestige among the others. His devotion to Harry was evident. All things considered she felt their group was establishing itself on solid bases and that was a good thing.

She looked around for Ron and found him, of all things, talking to Luna. Something about chess and tactical moves he wanted to apply to the DA.

*Ron on friendly terms with Luna. Interesting.*

She thought about it. Ron needed a girl. If she was reading him correctly, he would be even more sensually demanding than Harry and much less able to endure the usual play and tease of the girls of his age. *He'll want to go too far too fast.*

How would he make out with Luna? Hermione amused herself at playing matchmaker. With her *sight* and her intelligence, Luna would control any relationship she'd choose to enter, so she wasn't worried about her. Would it work for Ron? He wouldn't be bothered by her brains. He wasn't stupid but intelligence was not something he felt he had to compete in, and he had other talents.

"Looking at the competition?" Harry said. She jumped at the interruption. He'd followed her gaze on Luna. *Does he think I'm jealous?*

She smiled and pressed against him.

"No. We talked and I know she's not hunting you."

"Of course not! But, is it my eyes, or is she interested in Ron?"

"I think she's sounding him out." Hermione retraced her discovery of Luna's talent and her own reflections. "What do you think?"

"I like the idea." A pause. "He doesn't look like he's aware of anything."

"He's a boy. You're all kind of hopeless that way." She considered it. "We'll wait for things to develop and assist as needed."

"Er... maybe you'll assist. I'd rather stay out of this."

"You don't have to do anything. Just refrain from telling him it's a bad idea. Ok?" They grinned at each other.

Lunch was announced and everyone converged on the table that Dobby had set up. Harry found that he was seated at one end and everyone seemed to expect him to make some kind of announcement.

"Harry! Give us a speech!" called out Colin.

"Speak to thy followers Oh Great One," mocked Fred. "Yes show us the way, Gentle Thunder Struck Leader," added George.

Others took up the request and Harry decided that he had to give them a few words. Actually he didn't mind the position they put him into. He didn't want to order people around, but it made him feel good to lead them toward an objective which would benefit everyone. He knew that at some time in the future he would have to take more difficult decisions, but he wouldn't dwell on this for now.

"My friends," he began.

"He loves us!" screamed Fred. "We never hoped." said George with a rapt face.

Harry shot them a disgusted look and Hermione raised her wand menacingly. The twins immediately took up the attitude of perfect guests, sitting straight in their chairs, hand clasped in front of them.

"I want to welcome you here, in my new home and I'm very glad to have you all with me today." It

sounded pretty lame to him but everyone cheered.

"I don't really have much to say except that I hope to continue the DA next year. Some of you won't be there but others will join, and I will be proud to learn new skills with you."

Applause broke out and Harry grinned boyishly. There was something else he could say but he hesitated. He caught Remus' eye who nodded so he raised his hand to silence them.

"There's something else I can tell you. Those of you who want to try for a NEWT in potions should be aware that professor Snape will teach a remedial class this summer." Groans were heard from various sources. "But you may not know that professor Lupin will share the Defense Against The Dark Arts course with him." The groans redoubled.

"Please! Hear me out." Harry paused for silence. He wanted to put in a good word for Snape so that there would had least be a chance for a more serene year, and he also wanted to start rebuilding relations with the Slytherins.

"We have both talked with professor Snape and a number of, er *differences*, have been ironed out." Most of them stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Although professor Snape is certainly going to be a very demanding teacher, I have good hope for the future."

There were more sounds of disgust. He surveyed them all and spoke in the most convincing tone he could muster.

"Whatever happened in the past, and whatever feelings you may have, there is one thing that I am sure of and that I ask you to take into account." He paused. "I have a lot of respect for professor Snape and I would trust him with my life and that of my friends. That may not have been the case in the past but it is now."

They all stayed silent for a moment. Even Fred and George were looking for something witty to say and seemed lost at words.

Remus spoke up, saving him from acute discomfort.

"If I may add to Harry's words, his opinion of professor Snape is fully shared by me and by Headmaster Dumbledore. It is your fullest right to decide upon such things by yourself, but we do ask you to give him a chance."

He paused to give them a chance to digest his words, and to give them something happier to think about.

"On a more positive note I am happy to be able to tell you that the Headmaster has given me, and Auror Tonks here, the authorization to teach you defense techniques which are not normally approved for pre-NEWT students." A number of smiles re-appeared on several faces and all of them clapped.

Remus sat down and Harry took over.

"Okay. This concludes my 'serious' minute - please remember that you all asked for a speech." This last drew chuckles around the table.

"The rest of the day is devoted to fun and play. We'll have a little Quidditch game." He was relieved to hear some hand clapping and cheers. "And for those who prefer the water and sunshine routine there is the pool, and this evening there will be music and dancing. I also understand that our former comrades will have a little surprise at that time."

He gestured toward Fred and George who managed a set of particularly sinister grins. Some cheered again but several seemed anxious. Then Harry raised his hands one last time and concluded his speech.

"For now all I've left to say is: Tuck In!"



All of them applauded. Harry let out a deep sigh and sat down. Hermione squeezed his hand and he grimaced at her. He didn't think he was ever going to like speech making.

The food was excellent and plentiful. Hermione was extremely impressed by Dobby's work. There were almost twenty of them and, although the kitchen was very well equipped, and even allowing for the use of magic, it was no small feat. She discussed this with Harry.

"I was wondering how Dobby managed all of this."

"He's not alone, he asked me permission to enlist Winky's help, plus he's been preparing stuff for several days now. You know I'm always telling him not to over extend himself but he really enjoys do this." He said all this with a worried expression in case Hermione started on the subject of exploited House Elves.

She noted his face and let out an exasperated sigh.

"Please. There's no need to look at me that way when you're talking about Dobby. I'm not going to shout and rave like..."

"The passionate advocate of Elfish rights," interjected Fred who'd been following their conversation.

"That you are famous for at Hogwarts," concluded George.

Hermione glared at them for a moment before bursting out laughing.

"We've discussed this with Harry," she told them. "And although I don't regret anything, I will do things differently in the future." Fred joined his hands and raised his face to the heaven as if to thank some unseen deity, while George made a show of comforting Harry for what must have been a painful ordeal. Hermione ignored them.

After lunch the Quidditch players left to prepare themselves and some non players took seats to watch the action. The rest went inside to change into bathing suits or took out some reading material or cards.

Luna considered whether to watch the game or not. She was rather interested in Ron, partly because he was unattached and close to Harry and Hermione, and partly because he seemed a nice boy. They hadn't really gotten well along last year but she had been more interested in Harry and Ron had been looking at Hermione, who hadn't noticed or hadn't wanted to.

She smiled at the memory of these clumsy moves, so childish and yet so sweet. Dating was not very important on her mind but friends were and she could sense that a minimum of romantic involvement would be needed to be a member of this group.

*And who knows, maybe I will really feel something special for him?*

Luna had long ago decided to take a fatalist and cynical attitude toward other people. Her gift made their defects and pettiness so apparent that she had to keep them at bay, except for a very small group of true friends and even then she had needed to wall off most of their thoughts. One of the reasons she favored far stretched theories was that most people's attitudes to these were very predictable.

Harry had been the first person, aside from her father, from whom she had not felt a single unpleasant thought. She had really felt relaxed around him.

She remembered when they'd meet at the last day of school. He had been so sad and engrossed with his problems. His mind was so filled with the need to be accepted and appreciated that sympathy for her troubles had been his first reaction, and she had felt it immediately. She'd been so surprised that she hadn't had the presence of mind to hold on to him right then.

*In any case I wouldn't have taken such a decision quickly. I always take my time to make up my mind on something important.*

She was honest enough with herself to admit that Hermione was probably a better companion for Harry. Like him she was someone with a lot of decision and drive, able to make choices when needed. Luna considered herself a follower and they were leaders. It was better that way.

*What does that leave me with? Ron or Neville...*

Harry was very friendly with Neville, who was all right but she didn't feel very attracted to him. Perhaps if things didn't turn out right with Ron she would consider it.

She looked around to see what everyone was doing. She wasn't particularly interested in sports and normally she would have preferred to lay in the sun near the pool but her instinct told her to go and watch the game, or at least the players.

*Well specifically one particular player.*

Making her decision, she took a pitcher of pumpkin juice, some cookies and found a nice place to observe.

Ron was keeping the goals and Harry and two others were defending. Ginny was in the opposite team. Last year, until that last game, Ron had suffered from a big lack of confidence, greatly aggravated by the taunting of the Slytherins. He seemed much more at ease now and she admired how Harry was subtly building him up with a mix of direct support when needed, and delegation when he could. Ron also seemed to be handling a lot of the tactical decisions, and he was doing a nice job of it.

Looking at them Luna reflected that she would never be interested in Quidditch *per se* but they were doing some impressive things with their brooms. *Flying is something I would like to do with them.*

After a while she found that someone had joined her quietly.

"I didn't know you were a Quidditch fan," said Hermione.

"No more than you are," she replied.

"Well I'm sort of pulled into it by my boyfriend. Is it the same with you?" she asked mischievously. She could see that Luna was following Ron's moves more than the actual game.

Luna smiled but kept looking at the players.

"I don't know yet."

"Are we talking about Ron?"

Luna turned to Hermione, her expression neutral.

"I think he's cute, don't you?"

"I think he's adorable, even if he gets on my nerves now and then. But he and Harry have been my closest friends for a long time so I'm not really objective."

They looked at each other for a moment, then Hermione broke the silence.

"Luna, excuse me for asking but please tell me. Are you considering going out with Ron?"

"Yes. Are you trying to warn me about something?" She could see no animosity in Hermione's mind but she sensed a strong protective feeling.

"I know you wouldn't hurt him on purpose but Ron is the kind of boy who gets his heart broken easily. If you go out together he's going to take it very seriously." She smiled in embarrassment. "I just wanted to tell you that."

Luna considered the other girl. *They watch out and care for each others of course. It's another reason I want to be with them.*

"Please be assured that I will not *fool around* with him," she said in a serious voice. "I cannot guarantee anything, but I will be *attentive* for your friend."

Hermione reached out her hand and touched the other girl's arm.

"Please don't think it rude or un-sensitive of me to have said that. I think it would be a very fine thing if you two were together."

"You make him seem rather emotional."

"He has a big heart and he takes things rather upfront. But he is really someone you can count upon. He also has a brain when he can trouble himself to use it." She shrugged apologetically. "I'm not demeaning him. His grades suck but I've never been able to beat him at chess. He'll be a fine wizard one day I'm sure."

Luna acquiesced.

"He has a lot of tactical sense. I've seen him organize the players around and I know *they* think he's good."

They went back to watching the aerial display. When it was over, the players came back toward them. Harry had his arms over Ron and Ginny's shoulders and all of them were flushed with exertion and exchanging lively comments on the game. Nobody had bothered to keep score. It had just been a friendly practice and pure fun.

Harry spotted the girls and went toward them after giving quick indication to the others about bathrooms and showers. Ron followed him.

"Did you enjoy the show?" he asked as he dropped down on the grass and took a draught from Hermione's glass.

Luna replied that they did, and she proposed her own glass to Ron.

"You must be thirsty. Do you want some?"

Ron hesitated. Luna was evidently proposing her own drink, there was actually some lipstick on it, but he felt it would be impolite to refuse, and somewhat exciting to accept. He drained the glass under the approving eyes of Luna. Hermione and Harry were trying hard not to laugh.

"Thanks Luna. I needed that."

"You're very welcome. Would you like more?" she asked pleasantly.

"Er... Thank you yes."

"You played as if you'd spent your whole life on broomsticks. I'm hoping you could teach me some techniques."

The question was not directed at him specifically, but her eyes rested on Ron's face when she said it.

Ron swallowed. He was not used to being asked to teach something to anybody, much less a Ravenclaw girl.

"Er... Sure. It would be a pleasure." He shot a quick glance at Hermione who just smiled. He turned back to Luna. "What kind of broom do you use?"

"I don't have one. I was considering buying one actually." She smiled at him. "I'm sure you could help me choose an adequate one. Are you planning on going to Diagon Alley one of these days?"

Ron was ready to say yes when he remembered he was not completely free. He turned to Harry who shrugged.

"Actually Ron I think you could go tomorrow. Hermione and I have an appointment elsewhere. "

Hermione jumped and frowned at him.

"An appointment? I don't remember anything?"

Harry grinned.

"You shouldn't as it's a surprise. Trust me."

"Well I do but I hope you're not planning something foolish or dangerous." *Harry is foolhardy enough when he's depressed. I can't imagine what he's thinking of with his new found confidence.*

"Don't worry I checked with Remus and he okayed it." He gave her a bright smile. "Relax. It's something you will like."

He turned to Ron.

"If you're going to the Alley Ron, there's a couple of stuff that you could buy for us." He started on a list of supplies and Hermione and Luna exchanged a secret smile. Ron was not being offered much choice.

They stood up and started toward the house. The boys went in to change clothes while Luna rejoined Ginny near the pool. Hermione remembered that she wanted to check in on Winky and went to the kitchen.

She found Dobby and Winky busy with cakes and snacks. Dobby was his usual exuberant self and Winky seemed almost happy herself. Certainly she had come a long way from the despondent Elf she remembered at Hogwarts.

"Hello Dobby. How are you Winky?" she greeted them.

The Elves turned toward her, and Winky managed a shy smile.

"Winky is happy to be of help to Harry Potter and his friends. Missy Hermione," she answered.

"I want to thank you very much for that help Winky. And both of you should know that all of us appreciated the fine meal you've prepared. I hope it wasn't too much trouble."

Both Elves beamed with pride and assured her that it was no trouble at all, and that they enjoyed doing it. Then Winky hesitated and Hermione could sense that she wanted to say something.

"Is there anything I can do for you Winky?" she asked gently.

The Elf looked up shyly at her, and then at Dobby who nodded vigorously and urged her on. Winky took a breath and, twisting her pillow dress, blurted out what had evidently been on her mind for some time.

"Winky sees that Harry Potter and Missy Hermione have a fine house now, with many friends coming to visit them. Winky wanted to know if Missy Hermione would consider taking Winky at her service to help Dobby," she finished in a rush, almost cringing with her eyes downcast.

Hermione was thunderstruck. *Christ! Is she's asking me to take her on as my personal servant? How could I ever use the enslavement spell on anybody?*

She was having enough trouble trying to do convince others that SPEW was a valid project as it was. She could imagine the consequences if she took on a House Elf herself.

On the other hand Winky evidently wanted something like that, and it was likely that she would be very upset if she was refused.

"Winky you know my feelings about House Elves. I think you should all be free to live your lives as you want." She stopped what she saw that Winky was starting to cry.

Instinctively she took the small creature in her arms. She turned to Dobby for help. *Why was he the only Elf that seemed to actually want freedom?*

"Winky, please don't cry. Dobby, help me. What can I do?"

Dobby placed a comforting arm around Winky's shoulder.

"Does Missy Hermione think Winky should not stay here?" he asked.

Hermione spoke from her heart.

"Winky is welcome to come here whenever she want!" At those words Winky stopped crying and looked up at the girl.

"Listen," Hermione said, searching frantically for a solution. "I don't know everything I should about House Elves but there must be some other way to work together than having you as a slave. Would you like to be paid like Dobby here is?"

Winky considered this. She was clearly uncomfortable with the idea.

"Winky doesn't understand why she must be paid. She wants a master to care for, and who will take care of her."

Hermione realized that she would really need to learn a number of things about Elfish psychology to solve this, and actually to advance things for SPEW. Winky didn't seem to be the right person to ask. Dobby might be a source of information but not right now. *Harry had been right. I need to discuss this with others.*

"Winky listen to me." The Elf looked at her with her big tear filled eyes. "I promise you that I'm going to find a way so that you can work here. I don't know exactly how, but I will speak with professor Dumbledore. We will work it out."

The Elf nodded.

"Headmaster Dumbledore is a very good wizard. He will help Missy Hermione find a way."

"Yes. In the meanwhile you can stay here with Dobby. I don't imagine there's much for you to do at Hogwarts during the summer anyway. If you need something please ask me or one of the others. All right?"

Winky nodded happily and wiped her eyes. Hermione smiled at them reassuringly and left the kitchen.

*I'm going to ask Remus about this also. After all he's going to be the History of Magic teacher and we might even make it into a class project. That would be just perfect.*

Harry was trying to comb his hair in the bathroom while Ron finished his shower. Even wet it was still a hopeless job and he gave up quickly.

"Ron?"

"Yea."

"That was a good play we had. You know I've been thinking of something."

"What?"

"Angelina won't be at school this year, so we're going to have to find a new captain."

"You could be it."

"No Ron. I think you would be a better choice."

Ron's head emerged from the shower stall.

"Pull the other one!"

"No I really mean it. I love to play but I have my hands full with the DA and the rest of it. More to the point you're the latest hero of the Gryffindor team, and you have a better head for tactics."

Ron saw that Harry was very serious.

"Whoa. You really meant it?"

Harry smiled at his friend.

"Of course I do, you git. I'm telling it as I see it."

Ron's face took on a faraway look. *Captain of the Quidditch team!* It was something he'd be daydreaming about since when he was a kid. He had never really believed it would happen one day.

Actually it hadn't happened yet. The captain had to be accepted by the other players.

"Do you think the others will go with it?" he asked.

"Well you've got my voice and probably Ginny's. Who else could be chosen?"

Ron considered this.

"I can't wait for school to start." He looked at his friend. "Thanks mate."

"Don't mention it," said Harry, grinning.

He remembered something else.

"By the way do you need anything for tomorrow?" he asked in an offhand manner.

Ron frowned, Harry was always ready to help him financially and he was very uncomfortable with it. When they were together it was understood that Harry would pay for treats and minor stuff, but this time he wouldn't be there.

"I'll manage," he said gruffly.

Harry looked at him a second then shrugged.

"Ok."

Ron decided to change the subject.

"What are you planning with Hermione?"

"Tomorrow is her mother's birthday, so we'll go and visit them."

"But aren't they still at the Krum's?"

"Yes but Remus and I arranged for us to take our Apparition exams tomorrow morning, and then he'll come with us."

"Cool! Ginny and I sure aren't ready yet." He sighed.

"Wouldn't you prefer going shopping with Luna?" he asked mischievously.

"Come on! I'm just going to help her buy a broom," replied Ron, squirming.

"And that's all?" Harry asked, plainly unconvinced.

"Well maybe we'll go and eat something in a nice place. I'm not sure yet. Don't make me talk about it okay?"

"Ok. I won't tease you for now." He chuckled. *But wait a bit and you'll have to bear it.*

They finished up and descended to the living room where several students were in deep discussion with Hermione. Luna wasn't there and Harry pretended not to notice how Ron looked around for her and discretely went outside.

Harry signaled to Fred and Georges that he wanted to speak with them.

"Great party Harry," said Fred.

"Yes, nice set up you've got there," added George.

"Quite a difference from last time."

"What can we do for you? Oh Great Financer."

Harry had to laugh. The twins were the only one who treated him with such informal camaraderie. Every one else was either aggressive, in awe, or overly anxious for him. It was very refreshing.

"First of all never change from what you are," he told them. "I take it the shop is doing well?"

"Wonderfully!"

"I have a small favor to ask."

"Name it."

"Ron is going out to the Alley tomorrow with Luna. He won't let me lend him any money but I'm afraid he won't have enough for a proper date. I know you've already been generous with him but could I use you as a front?"

Fred became immediately serious.

"Harry, we owe you plenty for the start up money - we will insist on paying you back by the way - but we're also thinking about Ron."

"And the rest of the family," completed George.

"So we've set up a Gringotts account for Ginny and Ron."

"And another one for Mum and Dad."

"And we arranged for part of our profits to automatically go there."

"So we'll just give this to Ron".

Georges displayed a small key like the one Harry had for his bank account.

"It should be enough for a first date."

"Unless he's going into diamond rings right away."

Harry stopped his head going from one to the other. Their antics were making him dizzy. Then he sighed with relief and embraced them both.

"That's really grand of you. It makes me feel much better. Thanks."

"Don't mention it." The two went into exaggerated contortions of modesty and embarrassment that set Harry laughing.

"So when are you going to open a subsidiary in Hogsmeade?"

"We might at that. Zongo is considering retirement, and we might lease his shop part time."

"Which would be a big boost for us."

Harry was very pleased that the twins would still be around Hogwarts.

"Well it would be great to visit you on week ends. I hope it will work that way."

Harry left them to join the other group of students. He saw that they had been discussing the news about Snape. Most of them were skeptical of the potion master's appointment.

"Are you really sure about this Harry?" Dean challenged. "I mean he's been horrible to all non-Slytherin pupils since the beginning."

Harry snuggled next to Hermione.

"Yes I am sure and I'm going to tell you something about this that I feel is very important."

He waited until he had all their attention.

"What is the greatest menace that we face?" he asked.

Nobody answered at first, then Parvati spoke up.

"The return of You-know-you."

"Yes, but you can say his name. He calls himself Voldemort."

A number of them cringed at the name but most just hardened their expressions. *Good they're learning to live with it too.*

"Even though Voldemort is the greatest danger right now, I don't think we should just plan on defending ourselves against him, or even to destroy him," he continued. "That's necessary of course but it's not really an uplifting objective. Especially if after him comes another one and we have to start again."

He scanned their faces using the tips Tonks had given him to judge how his words were received. *Tell it step by step and don't go to the next step until they've digested the previous one.*

"Let me tell you of something which happened long ago."

He reviewed briefly the circumstances of the creation of Hogwarts and the period of peace which followed, and he stressed the importance of the alliance between the four houses and especially between Gryffindor and Slytherin.

"To do the same, the first step is uniting Hogwarts, and then we can set it as an example for the rest of the wizard world."

"Each House has strengths that we need. Hufflepuff's values are that of humanity and healing, Ravenclaw is intellectual power, Gryffindor is courage and the will to go beyond oneself, Slytherin is cunning and mental discipline."

"Added together, these values can be very powerful, and that power can once again be put to strengthening our society and undermining the support for Dark Wizards."

He paused.

"Do you accept that?" he asked them.

Some acquiesced and none challenged him. They were not all convinced but at least they were willing to admit the idea for discussion.

"If unity is so important why doesn't the Headmaster impose it on the students?" called out someone.

"Headmaster Dumbledore wants every student to decide freely," answered Hermione. "He knows that if they are coerced into cooperating then it won't mean much. We've got to believe it for it to work and you can't force someone to believe."

Most of them nodded at that. It made sense.

"How do you figure convincing the Slytherins to join in?" asked Michael Corner

Harry had been waiting for that one.

"It will not be easy and to achieve it, we will have to do something about the Muggles problem."

"Muggles?"

"Yes. Specifically our relations with muggles and muggle born wizards. This is a key issue with Slytherins and also as it happens with a lot of Dark Wizards and their supporters."

"It's also something of a problem with some families in other Houses," added someone.

"Right. It's a difficult subject, but I'm convinced we have to tackle it, one way or the other, because it's a divisive subject."



"What's your position on this?" asked a youngster.

Harry turned to Hermione who answered.

"As a muggle born I can't pretend to understand all the elements, but we've been thinking about this a lot, and not just us."

She cast a quick look at Remus and Tonks who were quietly following the discussion.

"There is a big problem of ignorance of each world about the other," she continued. "One conclusion we came to is that muggle-borns should have special courses on wizard customs and culture, and likewise a minimum of muggle studies would be a good thing for pure blood students."

There were isolated sounds of agreement at that.

"Do you think that going to help win over the Slytherins? I don't." said Dean Thomas.

"It won't be enough but it's a start, and in fact it's a necessary first step," answered Ginny. He still looked unconvinced.

"This is really the beginning of an open discussion so we can't expect definitive answers right now," continued Harry. "What I would like to have you agree on is that the three problems of Dark Wizards, Hogwarts unity and muggle acceptance in the wizard world are linked together."

He paused and surveyed the group.

"Is there anybody who thinks this is plain wrong?"

Nobody said anything, some exchanged looks and shrugs. It was visible, however, that several of them harbored doubts, even if they didn't voice them.

Harry considered this.

"I can see that it's not that obvious to all of you," he said. "Would I be right in saying that although most would agree on the general idea, some of you have doubts about the actual possibility of doing something about it?"

After another pause, Dean looked around and answered him.

"Yea. I'd say that's more like it."

"It's not that we don't believe you Harry," added Seamus. "I'm not going to doubt your sincerity on this." This brought murmurs of agreement which warmed Harry's heart. "But it looks more like a task for adult wizards than for students." More agreements followed his words.

Harry stood up and walked to a position where he could look at them all and considered the situation for a moment. He hadn't planned it but he could sense that this was a very important time. They were almost ready to follow him but he would have to effectively take his role as leader and accept the responsibility which went with it. *If I lead them I'll be responsible for the consequences. Some of them may be hurt and it will be because of what I will have said.*

He looked at Remus whose serious face told him that he too understood the stakes. Tonks was also looking at him but her stance was that of a soldier awaiting orders. *I don't have to ask her what she'd do.*

Remus was torn between his desire to protect Harry, and to prevent him from taking yet this other burden on him, and the knowledge that it was vital that he did. *The decision was actually taken long ago. It will be worse in the long run if he pulls back now. The least I can do is to make it easier for him to accept it.*

Remus nodded slowly and smiled an encouragement. Harry took it in and turned to his closest friends. Ginny, Hermione, Luna, Neville and Ron came and sat closer to him. It was plain that they would follow him no matter what. He held Hermione's eyes, and the trust he found in them strengthened his resolve.

He made his decision, turned toward the group. They were all looking at him, he could even spot Dobby and Winky huddled together at the back of the room. Suddenly he knew what he had to say. He knew that he wasn't capable of finding more *logical* arguments to convince them, and he wasn't going to try. He was going to speak from his heart.

He started to speak, softly at first and then more and more decisively. He reviewed briefly the events of his last confrontations with Voldemort, in the graveyard with Cedric's death and then the battle at the Ministry. He didn't dwell on the goriest details and strangely, he found that it wasn't as painful as he feared to recount these ordeals. Actually he wasn't really talking about himself but about the new realities of their world in general.

"These are only the first steps in a fight which goes beyond me and you. But we are part of it nonetheless whether we want to or not. In this war one can hide and hope to be passed by - this is the cowardly way which many will take hoping others will save them. Alternatively one can prepare to defend and fight - this was the DA's goal up till now. It is necessary but not sufficient."

It was much easier to speak to them tonight than it had been at lunch. He could see that he had a captivated audience and it was thrilling.

He told them of the prophecy.

"Even if I can hope to train myself to fight and vanquish Voldemort, and I believe I stand a chance." he flashed his devil-may-dare smile, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Tonks raise her fist in tribute. Parvati almost clapped her hands.

He raised his voice slightly.

"Even if I can do that, and become an Auror, I don't want to spend the rest of my life killing Dark Wizards until one of them kills me."

He raised his voice again.

"I want to dedicate my life to doing something more positive than that. I will fight Voldemort but I will also fight against the causes which produce the like of him. I want to fight against the fear and ignorance and hatred which help him. I want to keep these away as long as possible, like the Founders of Hogwarts did."

This time there were several cheers and he felt that they were really listening to him. He continued with more assurance.

"And more than all of that I don't want to do it alone. I wouldn't be able to anyway but I know how much better it will be if there are many of doing it together."

More cheers. He continued in a normal voice.

"Now you asked why it is for us, students, to act in these matters, and I will tell you why."

He paused and they were all hanging to his words. The silence was almost frightening.

"Where were the adults when most of this happened? What was the ministry doing? I'll tell you what it was doing. It was blocking our efforts by appointing that horrible woman, and trying to hide the evidence."

"Some adults helped us." He gestured to Remus and Tonks. "But they had to fight them to do it."

"Some will say that the Ministry has changed and seen the light. I don't care because I'm not ready trust someone like Fudge again."

They cheered again.

"But there is another reason for us to play a role. Sure, we are students and we are young, but that's just it. We're still learning and able to learn. We can take a new look at things. In the matter of changing mentalities, about the relations between Houses, and between muggles-borns and pure

bloods, we can set an example. It is actually easier for us to work this out than for the adults. Because we have less at stake than them, and we can shake out the prejudices."

He looked at Dean.

"All of us have had issues with the Slytherin, and we even hate some of them. But we have to live together for at least two more years, and we're all older and more mature. I say that we make the effort and give them a chance. If none of them will take it then it will be too bad, but I want to be able to say that we tried and gave them a fair deal."

"If they take that chance then together we will have the strength. We will be stronger than the Death Eaters, and maybe even Voldemort."

He paused again and smiled at them, with all his sincerity.

"So, my friends, tonight I'm inviting you join me in this mission. It will not be an easy thing. This is only the beginning and, just as tonight we're having a pleasant evening together, other times will come when a terrible price will have to be paid."

His face became grim and resolute.

"There will be fights during which we will help each other, but despite this some of us will suffer and even die. There will be setbacks and we will lose battles and friends and we will be crying in pain."

He paused again to let them imagine those scenes.

"And when that happens we will comfort each other and I will cry and suffer with you, just as I cried and suffered when Cedric and Sirius died."

He felt tears running down his face but he continued.

"But it will be worthwhile because we'll have chosen, together, to work toward such a worthy goal. And in the end we will succeed because we will never give up."

He had to pause to catch his voice.

"I'm confident that at the very least we'll defeat Voldemort."

"But if we succeed in this greater challenge then we will live knowing what a tremendous thing we will have done. Wizards will remember us like they remember the Hogwarts Founders and, most importantly, we will know, each and everyone of us, how it happened and what part we played."

"And we will be proud."

Harry stopped talking. He was drained of nervous energy. He looked at them hoping that they'd understood at least part of what he had tried to say.

They looked back and he saw that all of them had been deeply moved by his speech. There were no smirks or expressions of doubts among them, and tears of emotion showed on several faces.

Dean was the first to react. He looked around and saw how they were all mesmerized. He wasn't totally convinced of their chance of success, but he wanted to be part of what had been proposed.

He stood up and went to Harry and clasped his arm.

"Okay Harry, I'm on and I think that all of Gryffindor will follow you. You tell us what to do and we'll do it."

Ernie Macmillan came too.

"I can't speak for all of Hufflepuff but I'd be surprised if we wouldn't go along as well."

Terry Boot joined them.

"We'll discuss this at Ravenclaw but I'm convinced myself, and I will plead your case."

The rest of them stood up, and they started to cheer and slap each other and Harry on the back.

Harry was overwhelmed and struggled to find his voice

"Thanks..." was all he could muster. Hermione embraced him fiercely, and he held her close.

It took a moment for the pent up tension to drain away. Drinks were passed around and they gradually returned to normal. The euphoria remained however and they were all looking at each other in a different way. More than ever they felt that they belonged to a special group, sharing something which was bigger than themselves.

They couldn't know that in a distant room, five figures had also witnessed Harry's speech with as much emotion as them.

In his office Dumbledore, and the four Heads of House, were looking at the group of students through a simmering mirror floating in the air. The Headmaster's smile was radiant as he waved his wand and drinks and snacks materialized. He took a glass and raised it in toast.

"My dear friends. Let me simply say that what I have heard and seen here is something I will cherish to the end of my life."

McGonagall was filled with a tremendous pride that her Gryffindors were taking the initiative in this. She looked at Snape who seemed torn between elation and shame that none of his House was present.

*But they will be. It is plainly now my task to guide them in this. Merlin knows it will not be easy.*

He felt Dumbledore's gaze on him and looked up to the old wizard.

"That time will come Severus," he said gently guessing the other's thoughts. "The next time they meet I know that some of your students will be with them."

"Sir, is this also of your doing?" asked Professor Flitwick.

"I have followed the activities of the DA, and of Harry and his friends but I do not command them," replied Dumbledore. "As Hermione said, it is something which can only come from themselves. We will help of course but they, and the rest of the students, are the key elements, because they are the next generation and if they go through with this then the rest of the wizard world will have to follow."

"Do you think they have a chance?"

"It will be difficult, it will take time, and there will sacrifices, but I do not doubt that they will succeed," said the Headmaster simply.

They digested that. If the greatest wizard in the world, the man who was their god, believed then how could they doubt?

At Grimauld Place the mood gradually returned to the previous partying atmosphere. If anything the students felt more energetic and dynamic than before.

Fred and Georges made good on their promise and brought out an enormous rocket which was set up in the garden. When they lit the fuse most of them were more than a little anxious, but it only produced a tremendous firework, forming a gigantic phoenix bird which flew around them.

Music was played and some couples resumed dancing. Ron found himself standing next to Luna. He noticed that she was looking at him in her calm soothing manner.

"Er... do you want to dance?" he asked awkwardly. *Merlin! What an idea. Now all I need to do is crush her toes or ridicule myself.*

Luna smiled at him.

"I didn't know you liked dancing."

"Well I'm not all that good at it but I expect you'd like to, and I want to... I mean I'd like us to have fun together." he said lamely.

"Would you like to dance outside, away from the crowd?" she asked gently.

He nodded and she extended her hand. He took it gingerly and guided her to the terrace. They could still hear the music but he felt much more at ease, and holding her hand was very pleasant.

They started a slow waltz, she leading and him following as best as he could. Gradually gaining confidence. It felt wonderful to hold her like this. For the first time in his life he paid attention to a girl's perfume and make up. *Now I know why they do it. Funny how I never thought about it before.*

"You're very nice," he told her, relaxing into the rhythm of the dance.

"Thank you. You're nice too."

They smiled at each other. The music paused and they slowed down gradually. Ron didn't want to say or do anything which might disturb the moment. The thing he wanted most was to kiss her but he didn't dare. *She's probably just being friendly and if I try anything, she'll slap me or something.*

Luna's arm came behind his head and her face approached him. He was paralyzed as he realized what was happening. Before he could react, she kissed him softly on the lips and pressed her body against his.

Ron's mind dissolved in surprise and pleasure. She released him and he looked at her with an astonished expression. Then he grinned in pure joy.

"Luna..."

"Yes Ron?"

"This is wonderful." *I can't believe it. I'm bloody dreaming!*

"Of course it is."

"I don't know what to say."

She cocked her head.

"So don't say anything. Just kiss me again."

He did.

Harry and Hermione looked at them from the door and exchanged a smile. Leaving their friends alone, they went back inside to join the others.

The party lasted for a long time but, one after the other, the guests left. Luna was the last to stay, and she and Ron arranged to meet in front of the Weasleys' shop in the morning. Hermione had to convince him to make it a decent hour. He was practically ready to be there at sunrise. They invited Luna to come back and stay a few days at Grimauld. There was plenty of room. She accepted with pleasure but she would have check with her father first. If he agreed then she would bring back her things tomorrow.

Ron had a dreamy look, and sported a permanent vacant grin when he and Harry went to their room. Ginny found her brother particularly stupid looking but refrained from saying anything. Actually she was concerned and upset about other things, but none of them noticed it.

When the lights were out, Harry reviewed the day's events. His reverie was interrupted by his friend.

"Harry?"

"Yes."

"What did you feel when you and Hermione first kissed?"

Harry smiled in the dark. He knew exactly how his friend felt. He remembered the magic of it.

"I felt warm and secure, and very, very happy. Is that how you feel?"

"Yes." A pause. "Does it mean I'm in love?"

"Kind of seems like it. But I guess you have to wait if it lasts." He remembered Cho, and that it hadn't.

"Still it's always a great feeling isn't it".

"Yes!"

Another pause.

"What was the difference with Cho?"

"Well Hermione is better, but Cho was the first girl I kissed so there was, well the newness of it."

"Hum."

"I think you really have to see how it goes." He thought about it a moment. "Can I offer one piece of advice?"

"Please."

"Whatever you feel, be sincere with her but be gentle. Girls can understand a lot but they can get mixed up if you don't say things."

"What things?"

"Like when you want to play Quidditch and she wants to do something else. You've got to tell her that you love her but also that you want to do other things." He chuckled. "That about covers my experience. If you want expert advice you know whom to ask."

"Hermione?"

"Right."

"I'll remember that." Ron's mind drifted to the other event of the evening.

"Harry?"

"Yes."

"Your speech was brilliant."

"Thanks. I meant every word of it. I really want to do these things."

"And I want to do them with you," Ron said feelingly.

"Thanks mate. So do I."

## Chapter 7 - Visits

*Grimauld place, next morning*

Harry got up early as he usually did these days. He stopped by the girls' room to listen if they were awake. He didn't hear any sound so he opened the door carefully. Both were asleep. He approached the mass of brown hair that emerged from Hermione's bed. She was sleeping peacefully and he looked at her for a moment. Stepping close he basked in her sweet perfume and kissed her cheek gently. One of these days they would go to sleep and wake up together, and it would be yet another precious thing between them.

He left the room and went outside for his morning run and exercises

After an hour he had returned for a quick shower. He was getting fitter day after day, thanks to this routine, and it made him feel good. Someday, he was sure that he would need it.

As he came down to the kitchen Dobby and Winky greeted him joyfully. Winky still seemed overly shy, but she was looking better than he'd ever seen her.

Dobby brought him a cup of tea, some rolls and the day's edition of the Daily Prophet. *I guess we'll have to take a subscription to the Quibbler too*, he thought, smiling at the idea.

"Harry Potter seems very happy today," Dobby remarked.

"Yes Dobby. I was thinking about Ron and Luna."

"Ah yes. Will we have another guest in the house?"

"I think so. I expect her to spend most of the summer here with us."

Ginny entered the kitchen.

"Hi Harry." She kissed his cheek. "Did I hear you talking about Luna?"

"Yes." He considered the young girl for a moment. "You know we could also ask Dean to come over too if you'd like."

Ginny looked away.

"No I don't think so."

Harry sensed a difference in her this morning. She was very tense.

"I thought you were dating him. Is there any trouble?"

"Nothing important and nothing that concerns you." Her voice seemed a bit strained.

"Ginny?" She didn't answer but busied herself with her roll. Buttering it fiercely.

*She looks like she's ready to cry*, he thought.

"Ginny, please I'm your friend and something's wrong. Please talk to me."

She threw her roll away and broke into sobs on the table. Harry went to her and took her in his arms.

"What is it?" he asked gently.

She buried her head against his chest and the words rushed out of her.

"I'm so jealous that's all. I'm jealous of Luna and especially of Hermione. Because she has you and you love each other so much."

"But you've got all the boyfriends that you want."

"Bah! It's not the same at all, All they think about is themselves, and all they want is to get into my pants. So we snog and all but there's no real feeling and passion. Whereas you and Hermione you're

barely touching each other and you're in heaven."

She kept on crying, and Harry didn't know what to do. He caressed her hair gently.

"Don't tell Ron," she continued. "But I've even let Dean make love to me once and it was just... sex. I thought it would make him feel something more for me. He doesn't get any dreamy eyes and his heart doesn't beat faster when he sees me, all he wants is to do it again. I'm so disappointed and I'm disgusted with myself."

She banged her fist against him.

"I wanted you. I thought I would find someone as good, but there's no one. I wish so much I was Hermione. When she talks about you at night.... You can't imagine how much she loves you and how happy she is."

"Yes I can, I feel the same.... Oh Ginny I'm so sorry but please don't give up. You'll find someone who'll love you back. You just have to be patient that's all."

Her sobs redoubled.

"But I've ruined it. Everybody probably thinks I'm a slut now."

Harry saw Hermione coming down, and he nodded at her to be discreet.

"Nobody who's worth anything will think that. I know you're a fine person Ginny, and many others think it."

"I want to fall in love!"

"I'm sorry but that just happens, you just have to be ready for it. I don't think you can plan for something like that."

"Hermione is going to kill me. Ron is going to kill me...."

"Of course not. It doesn't change anything, and we're still your friends and we care about you." He placed his hand under her chin to raise her face.

"I care for you Ginny," he said gently, "if things had been differently I.... I don't know."

She looked up and wiped her eyes.

"Would you consider polygamy?"

He chuckled.

"No, but I'll be best man at your wedding."

She had to smile at that, and he took a napkin to dab at her tears.

"Or you can think of me as the big brother who's never going to kill you."

She had calmed down and stopped sobbing, as she replaced her head against him.

"Thank you big brother," she murmured.

Then she sat up, looked at him with a gentle sad smile and kissed him deliberately on the lips. He started to protest but she stopped him.

"Shh. That didn't happen, so let's not talk about it. Have a nice day Harry and give my love to Hermione."

She left the room before Harry had a chance to say anything.

He shook his head and decided that it was time to get back to his cup of tea.

After a while, Hermione re-entered the kitchen.

"Hi Mione."



"Hi Harry." Her face was serious, and she didn't kiss him as she usually did. "I just saw Ginny go by with a happy smile, and tears all over her face. And I saw you together just before. Anything special I should know?" she asked in a neutral voice.

Harry sighed.

"Didn't you listen in?"

"I don't like to intrude of other people's business."

He frowned at her. She seemed a little upset. *Lucky she didn't see what Ginny did then.*

"Well I wouldn't have minded if you did because I have nothing to hide from you. If you come and give me a good morning's kiss I will tell you about it." He extended his hand to her and smiled at her. "You have nothing to be cross about."

She went to him after a moment's hesitation, and bent down to kiss him. He responded vigorously and she quickly lost her coldness.

"Ok. What happened?"

"Ginny's sad because Dean and she are not really in love and that what she wants." He hesitated and looked away. "And she's still got a little crush on me."

"A *little crush*?"

He looked at her earnestly.

"It's you I love Hermione, there's no doubts in my mind. Ginny's my close friend, but I'm not in love with her. It's very simple."

She knew the truth in his words.

"Ok, forgive me." She embraced him. "This is so wonderful that I'm something afraid it will disappear overnight. That's all."

"Would it help if we shared the same bed?" Harry asked hopefully.

She chuckled. "Not a bad idea actually." She became serious. "I'm not ready to think about that on an empty stomach."

Harry immediately poured her a cup of tea, and he waved frantically at Dobby to bring more rolls and jam. He made a fuss of unfolding her napkin and setting her plate and glass until she pushed him away. They laughed about it for almost minute.

They turned back to breakfast and small talk. Soon afterward Remus and Tonks joined them.

"Are you two ready?" he asked.

"Yes," responded Harry.

"I'm not!" said Hermione. "Where are we going? What should I prepare for?"

"You don't need anything special," answered Remus. "Although I would recommend something nice to wear," he added mysteriously.

Hermione threw an exasperated look at Harry, who managed to keep an innocent face. She saw that he was dressed in an elegant wizard robe, not muggle stuff and not work clothes.

"I don't like conspirators, but I'll call your bluff," she said as she went up to her room.

Ginny was stretched out on her bed, awake and staring into space. She had obviously been crying again. Hermione paused and sat next to her. She gently placed her hand on her friend's arm, not saying anything.

Ginny turned to look at her.

"Did Harry tell you?" She could feel the tears coming back.

Hermione gathered her in her arms.

"He told me you still thought about him, and that you were unhappy with Dean."

"Aren't you mad at me?"

Hermione considered this.

"I'll only be mad at you if you tried to take him away from me. For the rest I really want to help you."

"Thanks," she whispered. "I wouldn't do that, and it wouldn't work anyway. You know how hard it is to make Harry change his mind," she said playfully. Hermione chuckled at that herself.

"He didn't tell you anything else?" Ginny's face took on an anxious expression.

"What else is there to tell?"

Ginny lowered her head. *Gentleman Harry. It figures.* She explained what she'd done with Dean and how disgusted she felt. She broke down in sobs again.

Hermione hugged her tightly.

"Ginny don't agonize over that. It may have been a mistake, but it's not the end of the world."

"Harry said the same thing but I feel real bad about it anyway." She sniffed. "Have you and Harry... no it's none of my business."

Hermione understood that she needed to speak about this. *Girl talk. That what we call it.*

"No we haven't... yet. We want to wait a little."

"I wish I had."

"I don't think it's so much the *first time* which counts as much as the *first time with the right boy*," Hermione reasoned. "At least you won't be as anxious or worried about the gory details."

"Yea. I guess so." Ginny wiped her face. "Now all I have to do is find the right boy. I hope there's some left around."

"Of course there are. Just give the machos a wide berth." She thought for a moment. "What about Neville? He's the decent caring kind."

Ginny shook her head.

"Not *macho* enough for me. I want someone... well with a more powerful personality."

"Hum. That kind of rules out Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw. Maybe you should look among the Slytherins." Hermione made it a joke and Ginny chuckled but the thought stayed in her mind.

*Malfoy's Manor*

Severus Snape apparated in the house garden and walked toward the main house. It was a large imposing structure where every detail expressed power and the passage of time.

The garden path twisted and on either side fierce looking plants looked ready to strike at any intruder. Severus knew that they could do exactly that. It was a very efficient defense system. A friend of the Malfoy family would have nothing to fear, but an enemy would be something else.

To many people the place would appear sinister, but it made him feel secure to know that so much ancient magic had been tamed and used in this place. That magic meant protection. It provided a reference against which the problems of the present could be measured.

Severus sighed. He also remembered the dark side of these spells. He had been lured and seduced by them into the Dark Lord's hands. It had paid for it with many years of loneliness and pain. Harry

and Dumbledore had saved him.

And now he would try to save his godson, Draco.

At the door he gestured to the guardian gargoyle. The statue deformed and uttered a long ringing sound. Shortly afterward the door opened and Narcissa Malfoy appeared.

"Hello Severus. How nice to see you." She looked sadder than usual which he could understand considering the circumstances.

"Hello Narcissa. How are you?"

She gestured for him to come inside.

"Life goes on, more or less. I spend most of my time with Silena." Silena was Draco's younger sister who would be about ten if he remembered correctly.

"She's not going to Hogwarts this year?"

"No, not until next year. Lucius had wondered if she wouldn't be better at some other school, but we agreed that Hogwarts is still the best. And I know you'll take care of her."

"Of course." He looked at her. She was beautiful but also very cold and haughty. It was a shame. She wasn't a Death Eater as far as he knew, but she had embraced the prejudices of those people. *At least she cares for her children.*

"I had thought to take Draco on a little trip. How is he?"

She twisted her face in disgust.

"He has been brooding ever since he came back. Did you know he got in a fight on the train with those Gryffindors? He and his friends were a mess." She shook her head. "I do not know what to do or say to him anymore. I would be glad if you could talk some sense in him."

Severus shrugged.

"I will try. I do have something in mind that could help him."

Narcissa turned to a cringing House Elf and ordered it to go and get Draco. She led Severus into the living room and asked another Elf for refreshments.

Draco was in his room, dejectedly buried in his favorite chair. It was a gigantic piece of furniture, covered in dark green velvet, which had been his playing ground since he was a baby.

But now he was taking no pleasure from it. It was simply more comfortable than the floor, and more dignified than his bed.

He had spent most of the summer brooding on his life and raging at others. *Damn that Potter, damn those Gryffindors, damn Dumbledore, damn those stupid helpless Crabbe and Goyle, damn Voldemort and damn my father. Damn them all!*

In the first days those thoughts had been all that he could hold in his mind. He had struck out at everyone, even at Silena who was the person he had to most affection for. She'd always been the one to hug him when he received so little love from his mother and only towering disdain from his father.

At least this summer he didn't have to hear lessons or take punishments from his him.

*What I am supposed to feel for what he did?*

As a child all he had known was that his father was a powerful man in conservative circles and that he had friends in old families. He had heard some of these people condemning Voldemort's most extreme acts while basically sharing his prejudice against muggles and mudbloods.

Then one day he had understood that his father was a Death Eater, and that he Draco would one day

be invited to join them. At first he had felt pride because he was going to be with the powerfuls. He would be one of the masters, destined to rule over the weak. He had gloried in his part with the Inquisitive Squads at Hogwarts.

But they had been defeated, Umbridge had failed, the Death Eaters had failed. They had been condemned by the authorities, and now he and his friends were loathed and hated by the other students.

And he had failed ignominiously in his last attempt at revenge against Potter.

He'd been sick with shame when he had arrived here. *What kind of power can fail like this? What is the Dark Lord if he can't even get rid of a skinny, sick eyed boy?*

He didn't know what to do or what to think anymore.

The Elf entered cautiously and attracted his attention.

"I beg your forgiveness Young Master, but your Mother and Professor Snape await your presence."

He turned angrily toward the wretched creature. *Severus here? Well no harm in seeing him.*

"Tell them I'll be down," he barked.

Severus was the only teacher he respected at school. He ran Slytherin House with an iron hand. The students were allowed much leeway outside their tower, but inside it discipline was harsh. Professor Snape never punished a Slytherin in front of the other House's students. He always took their side in external matters, sometime outrageously, and the Slytherins knew it. However, among themselves, woe became those who had displeased the House Master. Snape used an old wooden cane in a tradition which dated back to the founding wizards.

Slytherins were used to pain and discipline. And to power.

He came down the stairs and moved toward the reception quarters. Severus was speaking with his mother when he entered the room.

"Good morning sir."

"Good morning Draco. How are you?"

"I'm fine sir." *Never admit weakness, even when it's obvious.*

"I have a little outing planned for today. Will you accompany me?" asked Snape. *The boy still has some pride. Good.*

Draco knew better than to refuse. *Beside I'm bored. What could be worse than waiting here?*

"With pleasure sir."

Snape turned to his mother.

"I will bring him back later Narcissa. Is that agreeable with you?"

"At your pleasure Severus. I wish you a pleasant trip."

Snape took his leave, and they left the house.

"Should I take my broom sir?" asked Draco. He noticed that Snape was carrying a small backpack.

"No need. I have prepared a portkey."

Snape took a silvery object from his pocket and, holding one piece, presented it to Draco. The boy touched it and they found themselves pulled into the void.

They re-appeared in what looked like mountainous country. The air was colder and dryer. In front of them, a foot trail led upward toward a kind of plateau.

Draco had never seen the place before

"Where are we going sir?" he asked sullenly.

Snape looked at the trail.

"There's a place up there which has a deep significance for those of us who follow Salazar Slytherin's path. Only a few know about it, and I felt that you should be one of them."

Draco was immediately interested. Ancient magic fascinated him and whatever else he was a Slytherin.

"I appreciate that sir." Some genuine interest could be heard in his voice.

Snape turned back toward him.

"Things haven't been very good with you these days Draco?"

He wasn't ready to admit anything, not even to this man.

"I'll manage sir."

Snape looked at him for a moment but said nothing. They started to walk up the path. The weather was pleasant and the scenery soothing. After a while he spoke again.

"You may think what you want Draco, but it is time that we have a serious discussion," he said. "Do you understand that?"

Draco wondered where this was leading.

"What do you mean sir?"

Snape let a hint of steel in his voice.

"You've seen what happened last year. I expect you to be bright enough to imagine what the coming months may bring!"

Draco's mind raced. *I didn't expect an examination.*

"You mean the battle with the Dark Lord, sir."

"Yes! And what do you have to say about that?"

Draco felt trapped. *What does he want me to say?* He had never discussed this subject with Snape. All he knew was that his father had once said that Snape was "one of them", supposedly meaning the Death Eaters. *Is he here on behalf of the Dark Lord?*

A deep terrifying fear gripped his insides.

*Are we in this desolate place so that I can be eliminated without witnesses? Will he ask me to join the Death Eaters and kill me if I refuse?*

Severus sensed the turmoil in the boy's mind.

*In a sense it's a good thing. If he had already chosen the dark side he wouldn't fear. He wouldn't have any doubts. I must test him further though.*

He took out his wand and pointed it at the boy's heart.

"Do you know about life and death decisions Draco?"

Draco's fear increased. He swallowed and tried desperately to keep control of himself.

"Sir, what...."

Snape prepared his mind in the Legimency routine. He had to know where this boy stood, and how far he could be trusted.

"Draco, you are at a crossroad in your life. You will answer me truthfully. DO NOT MAKE THE MISTAKE OF TELLING ME WHAT YOU THINK I WANT TO HEAR. I promise you that I will

detect any lies."

Draco nodded acceptance. His face showed apprehension but Snape noted with pride that he still had some control over his fear.

"You're afraid and with good reason, but you do not panic." He paused. "You pass the first test. Good."

Draco swallowed. His heart was beating so fast and hard that he could hear it.

"I am your godfather Draco. Do you know what that means? It means that I have a responsibility toward you. A pledge."

He smiled grimly.

"Today I invoke that pledge. I will help you choose your path and, once you have chosen, you will be committed to follow it, and I to help you." He paused again. "Even if I don't approve."

Draco tried to understand the implications. It sounded like an opening. A way out.

"Yes Draco," confirmed Snape. "If you choose your path in conscience then no power in the world will make me harm you. This is your chance, do not waste it."

Draco found his voice.

"And will you help me choose?"

"Up to a point. I will answer your questions. If you ask the right ones my answers will guide you."

*It sounds like a game. A deadly game.*

"Choose what?"

"What do you want?" Snape said simply.

"What do I want?" He was puzzled.

"Yes, you will decide what you want to do, what you believe in, who you will follow." He paused and let impatience and anger show in his voice. "Whose side you want to be in. It's really quite simple."

Draco thought about it. *Do I want to join the Dark Lord? Is that what he's asking?* He couldn't decide that yet.

"Perhaps you need to be led in this like a child. Must I hold your hand?" asked Snape sarcastically.

Draco raised his head in anger and spoke from his heart. *Do not lie.*

"I want power! I want the promise of Slytherin."

"Are you ready to accept all the consequences of that choice?"

Draco felt the fear returning. *What else can I say? I spoke the truth.*

"I ASKED YOU A QUESTION!" roared Snape.

Draco looked into his godfather's face with alarm. He could feel the force of pledge magic around them. Whatever was said here would be binding.

"I will."

"SAY IT CLEARLY!"

"I WILL FOLLOW THE SLYTHERIN WAY AND ACCEPT THE CONSEQUENCES!"

Snape lowered the wand and the tension drained from Draco. His knees felt weak, and he was trembling with exhaustion.

Snape replaced his wand in his robes.

"That will do for now. You will have more time to think about what this means when we get up there."

They resumed walking. Draco's heart was still beating fiercely and he had trouble breathing. It was some time before he could bring himself to speak again.

"Sir, what is this place?"

"It is called Salazar's Retreat. It was where Salazar Slytherin lived before Hogwarts, before he met Godric Gryffindor."

Once again Draco was captivated. He even forgot what had just happened. *Salazar Slytherin.*

"What was he doing there?"

"He lived a hermit's life, and occasionally he fought for various lords."

"Fought? You mean he sold out his services." *The great Slytherin was a mercenary?*

"Yes, most wizards did that in those times. The other Hogwarts founders too."

"How did he meet Gryffindor?"

"They were working for different warlords, and Gryffindor was commissioned to kill him."

They arrived at the plateau and Draco could see the rests of an abandoned house, and what seemed to be a miniature Stonehenge.

"They fought a great battle here," Snape continued. "I'm told it lasted for one entire day and night. But none could best the other."

"During the battle the house was destroyed, as you can see, and there was one single casualty."

He turned toward Draco.

"A unicorn was attracted by the commotion and blundered into the battle. No one knows what happened but suddenly it was dead. The two wizards stopped their combat immediately."

Draco nodded his understanding. The unicorn was the most revered of creatures in the wizard world. Killing one, even accidentally, was a terrible thing.

"Slytherin and Gryffindor were horrified by this. It changed their lives and it started a chain of events which led to the founding of Hogwarts and the traditions which went with it."

"But in the end they became enemies again," said Draco.

"That was a long time afterwards. At the end of his life Slytherin became bitter and left the others. He never became a Dark Wizard, but he tried to found another school. It didn't work out well and he came back here. Let me show you."

Snape guided Draco to a single tombstone on the side of the ruins. The stone bore the markings of Slytherin House and the inscription.

*There lies Salazar Slytherin,*

*Great and powerful warlock, co-founder of Hogwarts school of Wizard and Witchery and friend of Godric Gryffindor.*

"At the end, Godric returned here and they were reconciled before his death." Snape indicated a marking at the base of the tombstone where a serpent enlaced a sword. "This symbol of the serpent and the sword was the mark of their friendship. It's rarely seen now, but you can find it on some relics, and at Hogwarts if you know where to look."

"I've always thought of the two as enemies," said Draco after some considerations. *I was always proud of being a Slytherin and we always opposed the Gryffindors. What does this change?*

He noticed that Snape was looking at him with his previous hard stare. *It's not over yet. I still have to ask the right questions.*

"You said I was at a crossroad. Does this mean I have other choices to make?"

Snape restored his Legimency mental state and hardened his expression.

"Yes. But you made the most binding."

Draco felt the fear returning but he felt stronger in these surroundings. *I pray that the spirit of Salazar strengthens me.*

He had to get an idea of Snape's position.

"Did we make the same choice you and I?"

Snape's face was undecipherable.

"Yes."

Draco was relieved. *So at least we'll be on the same side.*

"The Dark Lord says that he is the heir of Slytherin. Is it true?"

"He is a biological descendant, through his mother."

*Biological. Why does he use that term?*

"And his father?"

"Was a muggle. A man named Riddle."

"A muggle!" Draco exclaimed. *The Dark Lord is a mudblood! What madness is this?*

"Yes, Voldemort is not a pure blood. He was called Tom Riddle at Hogwarts."

"Who else knows this?" Draco was bewildered.

"Not many people. Your father, Dumbledore, Harry Potter and some of his friends."

*Potter! I should have guessed he'd turn up in this.*

"I don't understand... I thought his goal was to defend the pure bloods values against muggles... pollution."

"So he says. It's a bit of a contradiction isn't it?"

"He's a fraud!"

"And yet very powerful." Snape took out his wand again.

Draco saw the gesture and hardened his face.

"Some power! He keeps losing against... those Gryffindors."

"Is he really fighting against the Gryffindors or against something else?"

"Muggle lovers then."

"What's bad about muggles?"

Draco was astonished. He had never really thought about it. It was just a given.

"They're weak..." *Are they really? What is he doing? He's confusing me!*

"Can I ask another question?"

"Yes"

"Are you a Death Eater?" *So be it. I have to know.*

Snape made a tremendous effort to control his expression. He lowered his wand.



"A very good question Draco. The answer is more complicated than you think. Yet most enlightening."

Draco frowned. He expected a simple yes or no.

Snape dropped his backpack on the ground and extracted a cup shaped object from it. Draco recognized it as a pensieve.

"To answer your question I have to tell you something about myself." Snape gestured for them to sit on the ground, the pensieve between them.

"A long time ago I was a student at Hogwarts. My best friend was someone called Lucius Malfoy and my worst enemies were a group of students led by James Potter and Sirius Black."

"We were all brilliant and arrogant students, just as you are yourself I might add. Some things never change."

"Like you I wanted to be a powerful Slytherin wizard. Specifically I wanted the power of dark magic. It wasn't taught at Hogwarts of course but my friend introduced me to someone who called himself Lord Voldemort."

"I was immediately seduced by him. His intelligence, personality and power were fascinating. He taught me things that I had never imagined. I became drunk with this knowledge."

"And then he asked my help in brewing a particular potion. I, a mere student, had the privilege to assist such a master. A minor matter for him but a tremendous project for me. Needless to say I accepted, learning new things in the process and enhancing my standing among his followers."

"To complete the task I had to become a Death Eater. I didn't think much of it. All I wanted was the power of that secret knowledge. I didn't care what they said and did about muggles, which I despised but didn't really hate."

He turned to Draco with an unreadable face.

"Do you know what the Death Eater initiation ceremony consists of?"

Draco had only heard indirect details.

"Not exactly. The Dark Lord puts a mark on the wizard. And I suppose there is a pledge of allegiance."

"The Dark Mark." Severus' eyes took on a faraway look. "You don't know where it comes from?"

Draco shook his head. Snape took out his wand again.

"I'll show you."

He concentrated, touched the wand to his head and recovered a gossamer of silvery threads, which he placed inside the pensieve. Then he gestured Draco to use it.

Draco approached the surface of the bowl. He dived into the magical space and found himself inside a large dark room, badly lit by torches. Snape was there, along with his father and other Death Eaters... and Voldemort.

He felt a chill in his spine. He had never seen the Dark Lord and he could understand Snape's description of him. He was a strong tall wizard with burning eyes and a very pale face. So commanding was his presence that he seemed the only one alive in the room, as if the others were mere puppets awaiting orders.

The Wizards were chanting some strange melody and he saw Snape being prepared for the ceremony. His robe was removed and Voldemort presented him with a cruelly shaped dagger. On a nearby table a cauldron was bubbling.

Snape took the dagger and plunged it into his arm, tracing a complex pattern. Blood flowed. There

must have been pain but his face didn't show any. He seemed lost in a drugged trance. He gave the bloody dagger to Lucius.

Draco heard a whimpering sound, and he noticed that another person was in the room.

It was a young girl with pale hair. She was lying naked on the floor, sobbing and paralyzed with fear. He guessed that she was a muggle.

To his growing horror, he noticed that she looked a lot like his sister Silena, the same elfin bones and long blond hair.

He began to feel queasy as he imagined what was planned for her. *Human sacrifice?* What followed was worse than anything he'd ever dreamed of.

He saw his father approaching the girl, a cold cruel smile on his face, the dagger in his hand. The girl raised her head and started to scream, her lovely face was deformed by terror. Two other Death Eaters took her arms and pulled her upright.

Lucius stabbed the girl in the belly and slowly pulled the blade up. She screamed horribly, blood and gore flowed from the wound. Draco was going to be sick. *How can I get out of this?* He closed his eyes but he could still hear the screams. He fled and ran.

And found himself panting on the grass next to Snape who looked at him with a hard, closed, face.

Draco couldn't look at him.

"I couldn't stay," he said after a while. "What happens after he kills the girl?"

"Her heart is used as an ingredient to tattoo the Mark on my arm," answered Snape dispassionately.

*Disgusting!*

"Why?"

"Her fear, pain and death generate a powerful magic which is used to bind to Death Eater to Voldemort. The Lord uses the Mark to summon his follower."

"My father did this." He shuddered.

"Yes." *And my former friend too.*

"What happened afterwards?"

"I finished the potion Voldemort wanted, but then I realized the horror of my situation. For some reason I did not feel pledged to stay loyal to Voldemort. I believe he was so impatient to have the potion, that he botched that part of the ritual. Typical mistake for him actually."

"So what did you do?"

"I was terrified and desperate. I went back to Hogwarts and searched for a way to remove the Mark and regain my freedom. I found none of course, but Headmaster Dumbledore found me."

Snape sighed.

"I confessed everything to him."

He looked Draco in the eye.

"He did something which I couldn't hope for. He pardoned me and pledged to help me."

Draco nodded. He now understood the loyalty and obedience Snape had always shown to the Headmaster.

"What was for the potion for?"

"It was used on Pettigrew, to make him betray James and Lily Potter."

Snape's face stayed expressionless.

"You know what happened then. When he tried to kill Harry, Voldemort was badly hurt and a lot of Death Eaters were captured. Dumbledore's influence saved me."

"Nevertheless I was cursed. The Mark cannot be removed without killing the wizard."

"He can always cut off his arm."

"That happened once. The Mark reappears somewhere else."

Draco shivered at the thought. *What a terrible curse!*

"Show it to me."

Snape hesitated. *What if it had returned?* He still feared that and regularly, he had to take a look to renew his belief that the Mark was really gone. He bared his arm and there was nothing but pale skin.

"I can't. I don't have it anymore."

"I don't understand. You just said that it couldn't be done."

Snape permitted himself a very thin smile.

"A very powerful magic was used. More powerful than the one which placed it." He shook his head and whispered in awe. "I never would have thought it possible."

Draco immediate reaction was yearning for that kind of power. He was still very confused, but it seemed that Voldemort wasn't the almighty force that most people, including him, thought.

"How did it happen?"

Snape looked at him gently.

"I will show you. It's a much happier memory, but it may come as a greater shock to you. He placed another of his thought in the pensieve.

Draco entered, with some apprehension and witnessed the removal of the Mark.

When he came out there was only one image in his mind.

*Potter!*

"I can't believe it." He took another look at Snape's bare arm.

"It's actually very logical," said Snape in his teacher's voice. "Magic is basically the processing of an external energy through the mind of a wizard. The effect of that processing is influenced by mental concentration and emotions. Strong will and commitment makes for powerful magic."

"Where does the energy come from?"

"Minds."

"Minds?"

"Yes the minds of wizards, muggles, magical and non magical creatures. Actually I believe that most of the energy comes from muggle minds. They are after all the most numerous."

Draco was thunderstruck. He was being dealt too many blows in too little time.

"The reason for the Death Eater's practice of human sacrifice and torture," continued Snape, "is to generate as much emotion as possible. Fear, pain and horror are of course the easiest to provoke and Voldemort has learned how to exploit this better than anyone else. Love, affection and respect take much more time and effort. However the actual power released is greater and lasts longer."

"Lily Evans, Potter's mother, knew this better than anyone at the time. She managed to protect him for many years."

"She was a remarkable witch," he murmured.

Draco stayed silent a moment, looking at the pensieve.

"And now Potter is starting to use that power."

"Yes. And the Headmaster is helping him."

Draco looked at him.

"And so are you."

"Yes I have been doing it for many years, mainly out of loyalty to Dumbledore but now I have more... *personal* reasons."

"You don't hate him any more."

"No. I have been inside his mind, only for an instant but it was enough." Snape looked away. "I have not yet fully digested this. It only happened two days ago."

Draco considered something else.

"Voldemort hasn't got a chance."

"Unless he can kill him soon. I don't think so either." Snape chuckled. "Potter is actually thinking beyond Voldemort. He has the same ambition as Godric and Salazar."

"What is that?"

"Reconciling the muggle-born and the wizards, restoring the unity of Hogwarts."

Snape considered the boy closely.

"And he knows that he will need an ally among the Slytherin."

Draco felt defeated. His nemesis was revealed as the greatest power in the world, even his revered teacher was on his side. All he could look forward was a life of mediocrity and persecution.

"That'll be you then," he said dejectedly. *He's going to sell out Slytherin House to them.*

"Certainly not," said Snape flatly. "But if could be you."

Draco opened his mouth in surprise.

"But he hates me! They all hate me. They hate all the Slytherin."

"You didn't pay attention to what I said Draco!" said Snape's in a biting voice.

The boy jumped, as if he had been caught day dreaming in class.

"Do not confuse schoolboy conflicts with everlasting hate," continued Snape. "This is the mistake I made. You have the making of a great wizard but you will have to work hard for it and more important, you will have to think about what it really means."

He waved his wand and a pile of supplies and books appeared on the ground.

"I have brought you here to give you the chance of fulfilling that ambition. You will stay in this place for as long as it takes for you to reflect on what you want, and to decide on your destiny. I will return in a few days and we will talk again, in the meanwhile you have much to think and to learn about. I suggest you get on with it."

He stood up.

"I sincerely wish you a good stay. Good bye Draco."

And with those last words he Disapparated.

*Hogwarts Grounds*

Hermione followed Harry and Remus to the area outside Hogwarts where they had gone before to train in Apparition. Someone was already waiting for them.

Remus introduced them.

"Harry, Hermione, this is Nessus Park of the Ministry. Mr. Park this is Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, two of the students we talked about."

The wizard greeted them pleasantly.

"Good morning. I am here to test your ability in Apparition."

Hermione jumped.

"You mean today's the exam?" She turned toward Harry with an angry face "And you didn't tell me anything. I didn't even have time for revision!"

"I'm fully confident that you don't need too," he replied, smiling.

Hermione didn't answer but gave him an I'll-get-you-for-this look and began to prepare herself mentally for the examination.

Of course it went perfectly well. She and Harry passed without a hitch, and on the theory of Apparition Mr. Park actually had to shut her up.

"My dear girl, please. I'm quite satisfied that you understand these principles very well. I dare say that if you were to study anymore, you would be better qualified than me to run the examination." He took out a quill and some official ministry papers and signed their licenses.

"Professor Lupin, I commend you on your tutoring. I understand that there will be two other students to test in the future?"

"Yes sir. Thank you for your time, and for accepting this rather unusual dispensation."

"You're quite welcome. I can see that it was fully justified. Well good day sirs, young lady."

They thanked him and he Disappeared.

Hermione looked at her license, her face full of joy.

"Oh this is wonderful. Thank you Remus, you've been the best teacher we could have had."

"Well you can also thank the Headmaster for getting that dispensation. And you can thank Harry for accelerating the process. The exam was normally scheduled for mid August."

She wasn't ready to forgive him his duplicity yet. Exams were serious things.

"Thanks Harry," she said simply.

He was unfazed and smiled brightly at her.

"My pleasure." He was amused at her attitude and he knew he had a trump card. "And now I have another surprise for you." He took out a crystal. Hermione recognized it as a memory device used to store apparition coordinates.

He held it out to her.

"Remus and I already memorized this. Please do the same and join us". She frowned and took it from his hand.

As soon as she had it, Harry blew her a kiss and Disappeared. She heard Remus go as well and was left alone.

*Now what ridiculous prank have they prepared again?* She couldn't get used to the habit these boys, even Remus, had for practical jokes. She knew that Sirius and Harry's father had been almost as bad as Fred and George.

She sighed and projected her mind into the crystal. The place looked familiar, grass and trees, mountains in the background. It didn't look too dangerous.

She triggered the spell and apparated in front of Harry. He was laughing and signaled her to turn around. She did and came face to face with... her mother.

"Mom!"

She recognized the park of Krum's Manor. All of them were there and a table was set with a big cake and....

*It's Mom's birthday! I completely forgot it.*

"Happy birthday Mom!" she said, hugging her.

"Thank you my dear. It's very nice to see you, but I see that the surprise is really on your side."

Hermione turned to Harry whose face was torn between joy and laughter at her.

"You!" She advanced on him. He stood still and flashed at her the winning smile that she couldn't resist. She rushed to kiss him.

"I don't know what to do with you!"

Her father observed that evidently she did know quite a bit more than that. She turned around and saw all these people looking at her, laughing and happy. She blushed and lowered her eyes a moment then raised her head defiantly. Tried to look serious, failed and laughed in her turn.

She spotted Viktor next to his parents. She looked at him carefully but he seemed genuinely happy to see her in these circumstances. She greeted them.

"Madam, Sir, Viktor. I'm very pleased to see you again." She curtsied.

"Welcome back here my dear. You look wonderful."

"I am glad to see you again Hermione," said Viktor smiling. "You seem to have resolved your problem."

She blushed and went to hug and kiss him.

"Yes Viktor," she said softly. "I think I did."

Madam Krum led them toward the table where drinks were passed around. They all cheered as her mother blew the candles on her cake. Soon everyone was talking and having fun.

She started to fill her mother in with the details of her life since her departure. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Harry talking with her father and winked at him. He winked back.

"So you're the famous Harry my daughter has been talking about for all these years." Marc Granger began. "I'm very glad to finally meet you, but I imagined someone a little different."

Harry supposed that Hermione had probably dwelled a little too much on his troubles.

"In truth sir I feel much better now than before."

"Don't fret it Harry. I have heard nothing but good things about you. I can see that Hermione is happy and since she usually knows what she wants, I'm not too worried."

"Hermione is simply the most wonderful girl I ever met sir. You must be very proud of her."

"Oh yes, but I will confess to understanding very little of my daughter, and of your world. We've met nothing but pleasant people from it but I understand that it has its dark side too."

"Yes sir," replied Harry in a quiet voice.

"Hum. You seem to talk straight, more than most of your friends at least." His expression took a more serious attitude. Harry imagined that Viktor's parent had been rather evasive about several aspects of the wizard community.

"No offense Harry but please tell me the truth. Is there any danger for Hermione out there? For you?"

Should I worry?"

Harry took a deep breath and looked straight at the man. He knew he wouldn't lie but how could he explain things.

"Er... I don't know what Hermione told you," he began.

"She said that you had lost your parents to a kind of rogue wizard and that you had had more trouble with him since. She also spoke of a battle where another wizard had died."

Harry controlled his voice, almost.

"My godfather, sir." He swallowed. The pain was less than it had been but it was still there.

The man touched the boy's arm.

"I'm sorry I didn't know that. But you understand why I'm asking."

"Yes sir. If these things can happen then no one is safe. Still, we have powerful friends." He groped for an analogy to explain the situation. "It's a kind of wild country, with dangerous animals and tribes of people who sometime live away from civilization, but they know how to make out in the wild. Think of Hermione as a reporter, or an engineer, on a mission there."

He looked the man in the eye.

"It is dangerous but we know it, and we're not alone."

"Hum."

Harry tried to project confidence.

"We're not defenseless. Hermione is a powerful witch herself."

He considered the boy.

"And you're a survivor."

Harry nodded. *Yeah I can say that at least.*

"I'll do anything necessary to protect her. I can promise you that at least."

"You're young, ordinarily I wouldn't intrude on my daughter's business at that stage, private life and all, but you're a very mature young man and things seem serious between you too."

Harry nodded and smiled. He was more conformable on *that* subject.

"I really love her if that's what you mean." He looked away, a little shyly. "I'm not all that experienced and it's kind of new but... I really hope for it to last forever," he finished in a breath and looked back at him.

The older man gazed at him for a moment then he smiled, raised his glass and clicked Harry's.

"I wouldn't mind it myself. Let's drink to that lad."

A few minutes later, Hermione found an occasion to talk with Viktor. It seemed such a long time ago that they'd been here together. Actually it had been little more than two weeks but so much had changed for her.

Viktor seemed as composed as ever, yet perhaps more at peace than before. At least she wanted to think that he was.

"You are more beautiful than ever Hermiony," he said. "I am truly very happy for you, even if I am a little envious of Harry." But he smiled as he said it.

"Thanks Viktor. I'm very happy too."

"So you have just passed your Apparition license. We are honored to be your first destination."

"I take it Harry arranged this with you."

"Yes, he wanted to know where your mother would be on her birthday. We had a long talk and then we decided on this."

"That was very nice of you."

"It is a pleasure." He bowed. "I enjoyed talking with him. He has changed a lot since the days of the Tournament."

"And in these last days, too," added Hermione. She blushed as she realized what she implied. "I don't mean that like it sounds. I mean it not just me, there's been a big regrouping of people around him and he's been opening to them and bringing us together."

"I am impressed." He took on a more serious expression "I understand that you have very ambitious plans. He told me you wanted to bridge some of the estrangements between wizards. I think it a worthy goal. I hope that you will allow me to participate."

"Yes we will. I promise you that Viktor. I would like it very much."

### *Diagon Alley*

Ron used the floo system to leave Hogwarts for the Alley. He threw a pink of powder in the flames, called out clearly before jumping in.

"Weasleys' Wizbank's Widgets."

He arrived in his brothers' little shop which was decorated in the same burning color as their hair. A number of customers were exploring the various gadgets on display, and Fred waved at him from behind the counter.

He went to greet him as he surveyed the shop.

"Not half bad I'd say. Sure beats using the Gryffindor common room for student sales."

Fred winked at him and gestured to a cabinet with some innocent looking jewelry

"Take a look over here, maybe you can find something for your girlfriend."

Ron grimaced.

"I don't think it would be a good idea to test her sense of humor that fast. Besides I probably can't afford it."

Fred grinned and produced the Gringotts key he had shown Harry.

"Seriously Ron, you should trust your family more. This is for you and Ginny."

Ron took it gingerly.

"What is it?" he asked in a suspicious tone.

"A token of solidarity," said Fred. "To thank you for your participation in the tuning up of some of our products," added George.

"Just go to the bank with it."

"But be sure to leave some for Ginny."

Ron understood and immediately protested.

"Hey guys I won't accept this..."

"Yes you will."

"There isn't much actually, only about a hundred Galleons."

They went on to explain the arrangement. Ron resisted a little then gave in. He was actually very



relieved, he hadn't been able to find a way to finance anything else than a couple of ice cream for Luna. That way he could at least buy her a nice treat.

He was much too early for their date so he looked around the shop and then decided he had time to go to the bank before Luna arrived. As it happened he met her in the hall.

"Er.. Hello Luna." As soon as he saw her, his stomach started to twitch. She was wearing a rich brown robe, and her hair was made up in a lovely golden pattern. Looking at her took his breath away.

"Hi Ron."

"You look terrific." It was all he could say. He wanted to kiss her but that seemed a bit undignified in the stuffy atmosphere. Still it seemed silly to just shake her hand.

He compromised by taking her hand and kissing it.

"Oh. How class!" She smiled and did a half curtsy. He beamed.

"Er... I need to take out some change and then we can go and look at the brooms."

"I need to do the same. Let's go."

The Goblins were as scruffy and unsmiling as ever. Ron explained that he and Ginny had just started their private account, passing over its origin and the fact that it was the same size as the main family one. Luna had no such qualms. She had access to her father's vault and Ron noticed that it was as unimpressive as his own. *Well it's a good thing if none of us is used to spending Galleons hand over fist.*

They came out and once outside Luna very naturally took his hand in hers. The bank was next to a building with some large pillars and for a moment they were somewhat shielded from the crowd. Of a common accord they stopped and looked at each other.

"Let's say hello in a more proper way," she said softly.

Taking his cue Ron took her face in his hand and kissed her tenderly. She responded passionately and when they moved again Ron was walking on clouds.

At the broom shop he recovered his wits and gave her a masterful presentation of the available choices. They went inside and he helped her resist the salesman's pitch for fancy models. They selected an All Weather CleanSweep, and because it was last year's model, but of fine quality he assured her, he even secured a little rebate.

When they came out Luna was delighted and Ron felt ten feet tall. He invited her to the Leaky Cauldron and they talked pleasantly around drinks.

He was glad to see that she didn't always go on about crazy new-age subjects. She could even be very practical when describing how she helped her father run the Quibbler magazine.

Time passed quickly as they discovered more about each other. Fred and George took them to eat a spot of lunch in a little tavern in a side street. Ron was a little apprehensive at the idea of having them around on his first date, but the twins were, for them, quite subdued. Luna did get a little taste of their scathing wit but she handled it quite well. Unlike Ron she understood immediately that she was being tested. She found it amusing and responded in kind.

Actually, from what she described of her family, the Weasleys could see it was every bit as original as theirs. Their father's fascination for muggle technology was well matched by Mr. Lovegood's own taste for exotic theories.

Ron was wondering what her house looked like and she obliged him by suggesting that they go pick up her things and transfer them to Grimauld Place.

Luna and her father lived in a flat, not a house and it was every bit as weird as could be expected.

Her own room was something out of the Arabian' Nights, full of drapes, pillows and unfamiliar objects. Ron had thought that Ginny's bedroom had been a little strange, but this was something else. He must have been gawking because Luna burst out laughing at his expression.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

He nodded, his attention fixed on her bed which mesmerized him. It was a cross between a tent and a miniature living room, complete with a little coffee table. The mass of silk pillows was extremely inviting. He started to imagine the two of them kissing and snuggling in it and ..."

He stopped himself with a start, looked at her and blushed crimson.

"Er... It's great. Really blows my mind."

"I can see that," she replied wickedly. "Actually it's supposed to." She kicked off her shoes and installed herself comfortably and gestured to him to do the same. "Would you like some tea?"

He wanted to say that what he wanted was something rather different but he checked himself and acquiesced. Luna taped the side of the table and a teapot and some cups appeared. He sat down next to her and she served the drink. She was amused by his reaction, and she understood that he needed some time to get used to the situation. *Boys are so easy to manipulate.*

She sobered at the thought. She didn't want to manipulate him, and in any case if she played this game too much she might find herself with her hands full.

"Ron?" she asked gently.

Ron was struggling to keep himself under control by concentrating on stirring the sugar in his tea. He looked at her and swallowed.

"Yes?"

"I hope I'm not coming over too strongly. I like you a lot and I hope we're going to be together, but I wouldn't want to rush things."

"Hum."

He wasn't sure what she meant exactly by that but his mind provided suggestions which were driving him crazy.

"I don't know... Well all I know is that I like you a lot too and I really like being here with you." He grimaced in apology.

"I'm not very used to this, and you're not much like the other girls I know." *Which basically means Ginny and Hermione, so that doesn't do me much good.*

She smiled.

"I believe in following one's feelings." She cocked her head. "I'm ready for anything. So it's up to you. What are your feelings Ron?"

His head was spinning and his body was aching to hold her. He hadn't expected this or prepared himself but he had fantasized about such a moment many times. He moved against her and took her in his arms, kissing her passionately. She responded and they lost themselves in each other.

*Grimauld Place*

Harry, Hermione and Remus returned to Grimauld in the afternoon. They found Tonks and Ginny working out together in the garden. It looked like the younger girl had decided to step up her proficiency in spell combat. Tonks was throwing her a barrage of hexes which she blocked determinedly.

Harry applauded and Ginny smiled while catching her breath.

"This... is... hard... work," she panted.

"She's been at it most of the afternoon," said Tonks. "You weren't that interested in fighting before Ginny."

Ginny ignored her and looked at Harry.

"Will you let me to test your defenses Harry?"

Harry glanced at Hermione. Actually he would have liked them to have a little private time together, and he thought it was mutual. Still Ginny had been very upset this morning and she sounded a bit forceful. Hermione seemed to think the same thing because she nodded her permission, and her hand caressed his arm with a promise that they would make it up later.

Harry told Ginny he was going to change clothes and come right back. Tonks made her drink some water to fight off de-hydration. Hermione picked up a book and selected a chair on the patio.

When Harry came back Ginny was at the ready and Tonks had restored a protective field for the arena. They saluted each other and squared off. Ginny immediately moved to the right and launched a spell at him, followed by another one in the direction he took in evasion.

Harry managed to block the second one but she was readying another multiple attack. He launched a barrage of his own but couldn't avoid being hit by a tingling discharge.

Harry had not warmed up, and he was not fully into fighting mode while Ginny was highly keyed up, if a little tired. At first he could barely cope with her attacks and he concentrated on adjusting to her rhythm.

Tonks and Hermione were watching in fascination. Ginny was hitting Harry with all she had and although he was now gaining the upper hand, he had certainly gotten off to a very shaky start.

He managed to hit her with a paralyzing hex and was ready to call off the fight when she shook off the spell and hit his left leg. He crashed to the ground and saw her prepare another attack. He had a trump for such a situation and used a spell to launch himself in the air toward her. It knocked her down and he was able to recuperate. They separated and resumed fighting.

After a moment Tonks began to fear for Ginny's health and called off the combat. Both youngsters were panting and grinning in pleasure. Ginny was clearly proud of herself and trembling at the edge of exhaustion. She practically collapsed in Harry's arms and Hermione frowned a little when she saw her friend, and erstwhile rival, press herself against Harry's chest and close her eyes. Her frown deepened when Harry carried the girl over to the couch and gently cleared a damp lock of hair from her face.

Ginny opened her eyes and smiled up at Harry.

"That was good wasn't it? Even better than Quidditch I think."

Harry smiled back and told her how impressed he was by her performance. Hermione almost let out a snide comment that she made it sound as good as sex, when she realized that it was not that far from what they'd been doing. The fight had been strangely erotic and, consciously or not, part of what Ginny had wanted was a kind of physical exchange with Harry. The way she acted afterwards was more proof of this.

*And the little slut is doing it in front of me!*

She got up brutally and cleared her throat noisily

"Harry I think that what Ginny needs right now is rest and a glass of cold water. Why don't you get her one?" she called out in an angry voice.

Harry looked up, surprised and hurt by her aggressive tone. She didn't give him a chance to reply and with forceful steps she stormed inside the house. He turned to Ginny who shrugged her shoulders and pretended not to care.

Luna woke up with her face against Ron's chest. For a while she just listened to his heart beating and his soft breathing. She didn't want to disturb his sleep, and she wanted to savor the moment.

Something wonderful had happened. She, who normally kept her control and distance from other people, had been caught in a storm of emotions.

She had reasoned and planned her relationship with Ron. She liked him as a person. She wanted to be part of the friendship he shared with Harry and the others. She had a sensual nature and she was enough at ease with him physically that she had been prepared to share immediately the full experience of sex. In her mind it had been the *logical* development to seal their affection.

But she had not been thinking about love. That word had been too abstract.

*Hoisted by my own petard!*

She'd use her empathic talent to follow his lead at the start. It was such a warm feeling to merge her sensations, of his caresses and kisses, and the burning perception of his lust and pleasure.

But Ron had felt more than desire. He had opened his heart to her and she had been overwhelmed by his emotions. Had it been love? She didn't know but it such abandon and trust had touched her profoundly and when she had lowered her guard, the mental feedback had enhanced the experience to a tremendous height.

*Hermione warned me. Did she guess it would be this way?*

Luna wondered if she would ever be able to relive such a thing. It didn't seem possible; the *surprise* effect would not be there anymore. But something remained. In her soul there was now a very precious space where Ron dwelled, and she would never need to defend herself against him.

And she knew he felt the same way.

*If this isn't love then I don't know what it is.*

Ron stirred under her head. She sat up to look at him. His eyes opened and a boyish smile brightened his face. His hand reached out to caress her face and his expression became more serious. He too, acknowledged that something important had happened.

They didn't talk much. By a common accord they accepted that words weren't adequate for what they felt. Instead they touched each other and after a while they got up, dressed and started to assemble Luna's things to take to Grimauld.

*Grimauld Place*

It was not a happy evening at the house. They had been waiting all evening for Ron and Luna to show up and Remus was considering whether to send out calls in case something wrong had happened. Dinner had been subdued, Ginny was exhausted and distant, Hermione seemed to be sulking and Harry was puzzled.

The sound of suitcases, and other luggage, was suddenly heard in the lobby. They rushed to check what was going on and saw that it was their friends returning. Remus was immensely relieved. He had begun to conjure up terrible scenarios and had felt lax in his duties. He couldn't bear to imagine telling Molly and Arthur that something had happened to their son.

Ron and Luna were oblivious to this. They both had dreamy happy faces which made it plain that danger had been very far from their minds.

Harry smiled at his friend but Hermione took the occasion to vent her frustration.

"Where the hell have you two been? Do you have any idea what time it is? Ron, are you ever going to grow up and be sensible?" she lashed out.

He was startled.

"Hey Hermione. What's the beef? We're just a little late that's all."

"That's all! Do you imagine what we've been going through here? Do you remember anything about Voldemort and Death Eaters?"

Harry looked at her in exasperation.

"Hermione. I think you're overreacting to this a little bit."

She turned an angry face to him.

"I'm not overreacting! I'm concerned. Maybe you didn't worry about them because you had your mind on other things, but I did because I care about my friends. You boys really have only one thing on your minds but there's more to life than a pretty rump."

"Your room has been prepared," she said to Luna. "It's the second one of the right, upstairs, and I'm sure that someone will show you the rest of the house. Good night."

She turned and stomped up the stairs. Shortly afterwards they heard the door of her room slam shut.

Ron turned to Harry.

"What's wrong with her? Did you two have a fight or what?"

Harry shook his head, he didn't understand why Hermione was so angry, and he was beginning to feel hurt. He'd been extra nice to her all day, and she'd hardly spoken to him during the evening.

Ginny knew exactly what was eating at Hermione, but she didn't want to talk about it.

Harry and the others helped Luna set up in her room. By the time they were finished, Remus and Tonks bid them good night and everyone agreed to turn in. Ron lingered for an extensive bout of kissing with Luna while Ginny took the bathroom.

Harry didn't feel very sleepy, so he took out a book to read a little in bed. Ron finally joined him in his room.

"With the stupid grin you have on your face I don't think I have to ask you if you had a good time," Harry said.

Ron turned to his friend.

"Boy did I!" He paused. "Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Did you and Hermione ever... you know... make love?" he gulped.

Harry blushed.

"No." *Not yet.*

"I... we did today. Luna and I."

Harry was impressed.

"Whoa! On your first date!"

Ron stared in the distance.

"It was... incredible. I never imagined. I'm so in love with her I can't even think straight about it."

"I'm happy for you Ron, I really am," said Harry grinning.

"Thanks mate."

"It kind of makes you feel that you have a new life doesn't it?"

"Yeah." A pause. "You're not having a serious fight with Hermione are you?"

"I didn't do anything, the whole day was fine. We got our Apparition licenses."

"Cool! Congratulations."

"Thanks. And then we went to see her parents and Krum. Everything was perfect until we got home."

"What did you do?"

"I did nothing! Ginny was working out with Tonks then she and I had a little practice duel. She's turned into a wildcat let me tell you! If Tonks hadn't set up damping fields I'd be carrying scars." The two boys exchanged a chuckle. "When we finished Ginny was very tired and Hermione was furious."

Ron sighed.

"I think she's jealous. Ginny's never given up on you, you know."

"I know, we talked about it this morning and she told me. I think she told Hermione too."

"Oh bonkers. That's it then. Knowing Ginny she must have planned it to be with you and Hermione caught it."

"But we didn't do anything!"

Ron shook his head.

"You had a duel. You said she was a wildcat. I bet it looked real hot to Hermione."

Harry considered and reviewed the action. He remembered what Ginny said at the end and how it must have appeared to a bystander. *"That was good wasn't it?"* she had said. *Oh my god!*

"I think you're right. Boy this is so stupid! I love Hermione. I don't want to play around with Ginny. I mean I love her too, but she's like a sister to me."

"Yeah well it'll blow over, Hermione will understand, but..." He blushed.

"What?"

"No, it's stupid really, but I was thinking that Luna's way was kind of simpler."

"Hermione's okay," said Harry, frowning.

"Of course. Look, I don't want to offend, but she's not so keen for the... physical stuff."

He looked at Harry who was beginning to bristle.

"Hey I don't mean to say she's cold or anything, but you know she can be a little hung up about some things."

Harry looked ready to explode then he sighed.

"Yeah, you're right, although we did some pretty hot stuff too, but we agreed that we would take our time."

He nodded firmly.

"I'll have a talk with her and with Ginny. I'll just have to explain things."

"Sure."

Harry considered things again. *Girls could be so complicated!* Ron was lucky with Luna and Harry envied him for a moment. Still, all things considered, he liked Hermione better. Like she said there were other things in life. *Still, it would be nice if she took a leaf from Luna's book, or Ginny's.*

He sighed loudly and Ron did the same. Both burst out laughing.

"Ok what is it?" asked Harry.

"I wish I was with her."

"Hum." Harry considered it. "You can you know," he said softly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm not going to be offended if you share her room, or her bed." He grinned.

Ron's face lit up. "You really mean that!"

"Yeah."

"Harry you're the best mate ever." Ron got up and gathered a bunch of clothes. "But what about the others?" he asked anxiously.

"It's my house isn't it? Besides it's nobody else's business."

"Harry I'll owe you forever for this. I swear you can ask me anything."

"Will you take my money then?"

"Aw Harry..."

"Just kidding, well no I'm not and yes I am. Go and join her."

"I never forget it. See you in the morning." He started toward the door. "Hey Harry?"

"What?"

"You've got the room to yourself now. Maybe you can convince Hermione to take my place."

"That'll be nice."

"I'm serious. Hey, do you want me to ask her?"

"No!" Harry cried in alarm. "Thanks but let me handle it okay?"

"Sure. Night Harry."

"Night Ron. Try to keep some energy for tomorrow will you," he added teasingly.

Ron blushed.

"Aw. No problem."

Harry smiled as his friend left. *Good old Ron. I'm glad it worked out with Luna.*

It would be nice to have another friend here. He slipped into bed and turned out the lights.

*Now it's supposed to be Ginny's turn.*

He sighed. It would certainly arrange things if Ginny found herself a steady boyfriend. If only to smooth Hermione's feelings.

He closed his eyes and imagined her sleeping in his room. He would suggest it to her in the morning, after apologizing for the mix up with Ginny.

When Ginny entered their room Hermione was pretending to sleep but she was wide awake and seething, angry at Ginny, at Harry and at herself. Ginny was very tired but she couldn't sleep either. The other girl's pretence of steady breathing didn't fool her.

*This is ridiculous, she thought. We're supposed to be more mature than that.*

She knew she was the cause of Hermione's bad humor. She hadn't been able to stop herself, and in truth she didn't regret it. It had felt so good to really hold Harry's attention, and to be in his arms at the end.

*I can understand Hermione being a little jealous, but damn it why is she so reserved with Harry.*

She'd only needed one look at Ron and Luna to understand what had happened. She'd felt a pang of

envy but she was really happy for them.

Outside she heard the sound of doors open and close. On an impulse she got up and took a peak. Sure enough she saw Ron moving carefully over to Luna's bedroom. *Lucky him and her.*

She went back to her room and considered Hermione's still shape. What should she do? *Time to make up. I've caused them enough hurt.*

"Hermione?"

No answer. She waited a bit.

"Hermione? Please talk to me. I'm really sorry."

Hermione raised a tear streaked face.

"What do you want? Go away and leave me alone!"

Ginny sat next to her friend.

"Hermione. Please I'm sorry. I did it deliberately and it was wrong. Blame me but don't blame him."

"He's a stupid git and you're a..."

She broke into sobs and Ginny hugged her.

"Don't say it. He isn't. He's a darling and you should know it, but I've been a slut and I'm really ashamed of it. I didn't want to hurt you but I couldn't resist."

"You hurt me!"

"I know I did, I'm sorry. Hermione please go and make up with him. He's alone in his room and you need to be with him."

Hermione stopped crying and sniffed.

"What do you mean alone?"

"He's alone because Ron's with Luna of course." Hermione's eyes went round. Ginny sighed.

"Come on don't tell me you're shocked. You're really ridiculous you know."

"Ginny..."

"Go to him. I'm not asking you to do anything, but go and talk to him. Please. Hermione do you know what I'd give to be in your shoes?"

Hermione had to smile at that.

"Well I can imagine."

"Too right. Now listen to me, you remember what you said about dangers. Well if something bad ever happens, and you've wasted the time you could have spent with him, you'll never forgive yourself. Life and love are so precious Hermione, you should cherish them."

Hermione considered this.

"I'll be leaving you alone here."

"Don't worry about that. Honestly I'll be better if I know he's happy with you than if you're sulking here with me."

"Are you sure? I wouldn't be surprised if you went back to crying your eyes out."

"It's a stupid situation. We both love the same boy but his choice has been made and you're the one." She sighed. "I can't promise I won't be sore about it but that can't be help. I'll just have to find another like him." She chuckled. "Unless you're willing to share him?"

She shook her head at Hermione's scandalized expression.



"Well no matter, just tell me if you change your mind," she added quickly.

"Ginny!"

"Hermione! Will you please go before I lose it completely?"

Ginny was very agitated and Hermione wasn't sure about leaving her alone. They looked at each other for a moment then Ginny got up and gathered Hermione's things and thrust them in her arms. Hermione hesitated then embraced her friend fiercely.

"Don't do anything rash Ginny. We love you," she said feelingly. She waited until Ginny nodded then she took her stuff and left the room.

Ginny looked at the closing door and felt the pain rise inside her. *Now I have to sleep.* She had some sleeping potions in her drawer. She gulped one and went to her bed. She took her wand and cast a silence spell around the room. They might be discrete, or nothing might happen, but she didn't want to hear anything.

She forced herself not to think about Harry. Sleep was still a long time in coming.

Hermione found herself slowly walking in the corridor toward Harry's door. She felt acutely ridiculous in her nightgown, carrying her clothes in a bundle. If someone came and saw her, she would probably die of embarrassment.

In front of the door her confusion deepened. Should she knock or just enter? *I can't believe I'm in such a situation. I've never felt so stupid in my life.*

Before she could decide, the door opened and Harry was in front of her, in his pajamas. He froze and his eyes widened in surprise.

"Hermione! What are you doing?" he whispered.

Hermione mustered as much dignity as she could, and pushed him aside to enter the room.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she answered in a clipped voice. "I'm coming out of this bloody corridor of course. That's what I'm doing."

Harry closed the door and turned toward her.

"Er... Hermione, I wanted to tell you I'm really sorry about what happened with Ginny. Please believe me I didn't mean anything, but I understand how it must have looked to you."

Hermione looked at him and muttered one word.

"Idiot!"

"Hermione, I..."

"Not you," she interrupted. "Me! I'm the stupid one in this. You're innocent and Ginny played a stupid game too."

"Well I don't know what to say about Ginny. I'll talk to her in the morning and we'll work this out."

Hermione sighed.

"Harry. I've had a talk with Ginny. Who do you think sent me here?"

Harry looked puzzled.

"She sent you here?"

"Yes. She saw Ron go off to join Luna and she told me I would be a complete jackass and a cold hearted bitch if I didn't do the same."

"I can't believe she used those exact terms," grinned Harry.

"So I exaggerate a little."

Hermione came to him and lowered her head.

"Anyway she's also right. I'm the one who should apologize to you. You've organized a wonderful day for me. I loved it but instead of thanking you I've been making this stupid scene."

Harry tried to interrupt but she placed her hand on his mouth.

"No. Hear me out. All this and then at last I have to be prodded into coming here to be with you when I should have been planning for it all along."

"I don't want you to think I'm a cold frigid girl Harry. I'm not and I love you." She broke into sobs and went to embrace him fiercely.

Harry took her in his arms. He was deeply moved by her outburst.

"Of course you're not. You're my sweet, warm, beautiful, caring girl and I love you."

She kept crying.

"But I'm not giving you what you want. If you were with Ginny or Luna you'd...."

This time it was he who interrupted her.

"I'm not. I'm with you and that's what I want." He kissed her. "Hermione my love you're much more to me than a sexy body, although you're that too and I was going to suggest that you moved in here."

He raised her head and traced her tears with a finger.

"But we agreed not to rush into anything. It'll great just to be sleeping next to each other and we'll take it..."

"...one step at a time," she completed.

"Yes."

"Harry Potter! The two of us in that bed and I won't answer for anything!" she said seriously.

He smiled.

"I'm willing to take that chance." He gestured. "You first."

The following morning Harry woke up and turned to look at the shape of Hermione lying next to him. Last night they had finally made love together, after a great deal of mutual exploration and tentative caresses. It had been a long sweet and delightful experience. They'd both been awkward at first of course, but each has taken the time to let the other adjust. It had been a wonderful mix of tenderness and passion and they had wanted it that way. For them every experience was an occasion to add to their love and to strengthen it.

He gently caressed her naked back and she stirred and turned toward him. Her hair was spread over the pillows and framed her smiling face. He bent down to kiss her.

"Hello love."

"Hi Lover."

"You're the most beautiful thing I ever laid eyes upon."

"It figures if you usually wake up to see Ron's face." They both chuckled.

The rest of the summer was passed in the regular routine of the drilling, teaching and coaching, and in the settling down of the two new couples. Ginny was the only one uncomfortable, and it didn't get any better. One day she announced that she was going to work in Fred and George's shop and go back to stay at the Burrow with her parents. Harry and Hermione tried to convince her to at least keep her room here but she refused. Seeing how edgy she was becoming they didn't insist.

Just before she left Harry took her aside.

"I'm really sorry you won't be there Ginny. Especially if it's partly because of me."

She looked at him longingly. It still hurt her to be close to him and to remind herself he wasn't hers.

"It's mostly because of you but it's not your fault. I need to get away and who knows? Maybe I'll find a nice boyfriend in Diagon Alley."

He caressed her hair and smiled at her.

"I wish you would. I hate to see you unhappy. "

She pressed her face to his hand.

"We'll see each other at school soon enough." She looked behind him. "Hermione's not watching. Can I kiss you goodbye?"

He chuckled.

"Will you control yourself?"

She nodded gravely and he bent his head to give her a tender quick little kiss on her lips. Her face lit up and he could almost hear her heart beating faster.

"Go now little sister," he whispered, "and come back to us soon."

She swallowed and nodded. She assembled her things, opened the door and left.

## Chapter 8 - To be a Slytherin

### Salazar's Retreat

After Snape left, Draco stayed where he was for a long time. His mind was in total turmoil and, outside of telling himself that he should be getting a grip on his situation, he couldn't see what to do. The only time he had been treated so brutally had been by his father, and that had only happened at home, where he could at least find solace in the comfort provided by House Elves or his mother.

Here he was alone, expected to care for himself for the first time ever.

Looking up he noticed that night was coming, and he also felt the first pangs of hunger. A quick search of the backpack produced some food but most of it was raw and needed to be cooked. Draco had never prepared a meal in his life, and he only had an imprecise theoretical knowledge of it. He supposed it would be somewhat like potion making, but where would he find the recipes?

Then there was the matter of finding a place to sleep. The temperature was going down fast in the thin mountain air.

He managed to scarp some nourishment from his supplies and carried the rest into the ruins of the house. He organized a crude nest, wrapped himself in some blankets and decided that things could wait until morning. Exhausted by the nervous tension of his confrontation with Snape, he quickly fell asleep.

Sometime in the night, he was woken by a shrilling sound. Trembling with terror he listened carefully to identify it, but it didn't come again. He was very cold and damp and couldn't get back to sleep. The rest of the night passed by in fits of dozing and insomnia.

When the sun finally rose, he was more miserable than ever. Half of his body was sore. He felt dirty and tired. It took him some time to realize that if he wanted warmth, he would have to build a fire. That was easy enough to do with his wand. At least he remembered some basic utility spells. He wasn't going to worry about underage magic. If the Ministry objected he would be more than happy to be hauled in and returned home.

With several logs burning he felt better. He rummaged into the pack and found a tin pot and some bottled water. With this he managed to make some tea. The dosage was wrong, the brew was too weak, but with some honey and in the state he was, it was close to the most delicious drink he ever had. He felt alive once again. Porridge was beyond his competence but he had some bread and he could toast it in the flames.

*This is first breakfast I cooked for myself and none ever tasted better.*

He looked around him. *If I'm going to live here for some time I'd better explore the area.* Standing up, he stretched to relieve the kinks in his muscles. *Damn Snape. He could at least have provided me with a minimum of comforts. Even muggle camping gear would have been nice.*

Muggles.

His godfather had said, and implied, a lot of things about muggles the previous day. As he began to explore his new domain, Draco reviewed their conversation. There had been some very unpleasant revelations. About his father, the Dark Lord... and muggles.

He was intelligent enough to understand the implications. Muggles were a source of magical power, maybe as much as wizards. They just couldn't activate or control it. Other things being equal, muggle born wizards were just as powerful as pure bloods. The Dark Lord was still one of the most formidable wizards, and he was a mudblood. Hermione Granger had no wizard ancestry, and she had helped undo one of the most powerful curse ever devised.

And yet he couldn't discount the power associated with old wizard families. It was not just a matter

of wealth. There were too many stories about the importance of those traditions, how they could be used for protection. They rarely fought against each others because of this. Even Hogwarts was protected by old magic.

Hogwarts.

Hogwarts, Gryffindor and Slytherin.

Maybe it was still prejudice but he knew that the two other founders were less important. They had been followers and the leaders had been those two wizards.

*What an extraordinary time it must have been,* he thought.

He remembered the choice he had made before Snape. *To be a powerful Slytherin wizard.* He knew he was gifted, he learned spells faster than most other students, but in truth he didn't really work at it.

*I could be even better.*

He had looked at the circle of stones but there was nothing special there. These places were usually important but only on special dates. He followed a vague trail which ran on the side of the plateau. It led to a rocky area and after a moment he could hear the sound of running water. A few paces later, he saw the mountain stream.

*At least I won't die of thirst.*

Plain water was not what he had been accustomed to drink but he had no choice. He tasted it and to his surprise he found it delicious. Draco Malfoy had never tasted fresh water from anything other than a decanter.

*Too bad it's not closer to the ruins.*

He sighed. He knew that he would have to work hard just to scratch a living from this place. And Snape wanted him to study as well.

*Not what I expected at all.*

He came back to the house and started exploring the remains. One room still had part of a roof left, as well as a working chimney. He could arrange it as a primitive dwelling, if he could move some of the debris away.

He almost did it by hand when he realized there was a better way.

*"Wingardium Leviosa."* The rocks raised themselves. *"Mobilis."* In a few minutes the work was done and he even managed to set up a large broken slab as a kind of table.

That done, he went through the content of his belongings.

There was a number of books on advanced magical theory, and even one on house keeping spells. Draco eyed it in distaste but he had to admit it would probably be the most useful object for him in the next few days. There were also some rough clothes and a crumbled leather hat.

*That hat looks familiar.* He took it out and recognized it suddenly. *It's the Sorting Hat!*

Draco was amazed. He knew the Hat always stayed in Dumbledore's office. *Snape must have borrowed it.* He was impressed.

*What am I going to do with it?*

"Talk to me of course!" answered the Hat, as it suddenly sprung to life.

Draco jumped at least a foot in the air.

"Wha... What?" he said.

"Good morning Draco. Nice little setup you have here. Crude but nice."

The Hat turned right and left to examine his surroundings. Draco was fascinated.

"I seem to recognize this place," it said. "Ah yes, now I remember. I used to live here."

"You lived here, with Salazar Slytherin?"

"As Salazar," corrected the Hat.

It somehow managed to frown at the boy, something rather difficult for an object with no face.

"Don't tell me you don't remember my songs?"

Draco swallowed and his mind was racing. He hadn't paid much attention to the Sorting Hat's little show at the beginning of each year, except to consider the new recruits for his House. There was something about it containing part of the personalities of the four Founders.

"Er... You mean he's inside you with the others?"

"Evidently you didn't consider them very important," it reproached. "I thought every student understood that I am a composite of the memories of those wizards who build Hogwarts, and that this enables me to select how the students should be placed."

The Hat deformed into something which could pass for a dejected grimace.

"Yes I remember you Draco. That first time you weren't much more than the nasty little boy of Lucius Malfoy."

Draco didn't know how to react to this. *Why did Snape bring that ridiculous thing here?* Too late he remembered that the Hat could read minds.

A flash of light jetted from it and struck him in the chest. He was thrown across the room, his head crashed against the wall and his vision blurred.

"May I suggest a little more respect when you *think* about me?" asked the Hat in a pleasant voice.

*Merlin! I didn't know it could do that.*

A Slytherin knew how to adapt to spectacular and dangerous powers.

"Please accept my apologies." He shook his head and stood up. "I've been a little unsettled lately."

"And you never had manners worth a damn. Arrogance is a perversion of courage, did you know that?"

He shrugged.

"I wasn't exactly brought up in humility."

The Hat considered him critically.

"To answer your unvoiced question, the Headmaster told professor Snape to allow me to adjust your education."

Draco was ready to reply that he didn't feel the need to be specifically educated, but he didn't dare *think* that anymore.

Actually he felt lost and even a little desperate. All that kept him from crying out in frustration was the remnants of the pride he clung to. He was being dealt too many blows, and he knew he was close to losing it completely.

He just nodded.

The Hat cracked a wide grin.

"It will be better if you put me on. Please do so."

Gingerly he took the Hat and placed it on his head. It fell over his eyes and he found himself in a very large space. He could look around and move inside it, like in a pensieve.

He couldn't see any walls but there were several vertical shelves filled with books like some kind of gigantic library. He moved toward the nearest partition and examined the books. Some were new, others old, most were thin while a few were quite thick. There didn't seem to be any logic on their storage. On the cover of each one of them, the only thing he could see was a name, a number and a familiar symbol. He quickly recognized the seal of Slytherin on one book. Comprehension dawned on him and he took out another. That one displayed Hufflepuff's, with some subtle changes, and the numbers could be dates in some sort of calendar.

*This could well be the register of all the students of Hogwarts.*

He tried to read a book at random but the writing was undecipherable. He replaced it and moved around. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a lighted area and walked toward it. It came from a larger open space. In the middle of it here was a round table with four chairs around it. In the chairs were two wizards and two witches, dressed in magnificent robes and talking together.

Draco realized in fascination that these were the four Founders. He looked at them and felt the tremendous power emanating from their personalities. They turned toward him. His eyes lingered on the one who was evidently Salazar Slytherin.

"Madams, Sirs..." he began automatically.

"Hello Draco," said Salazar pleasantly, acknowledging his presence.

Draco saw that Hufflepuff was looking at him in distaste, Ravenclaw seemed aloof and disdainful while Gryffindor had the grin of a warrior sizing up an adversary. He tried to ignore the hostility they projected. Salazar glanced at his companions and chuckled. He exchanged a look with Gryffindor who nodded. He turned his attention back to the boy.

"Some of us do not like you very much," he continued. "And some are wondering what you are made of."

The three other wizards disappeared.

"Their opinion is not very important for the moment. *I will decide what to do with you.*"

He chuckled again. It was not an unpleasant sound but there was still something disquieting in it, a hint of cold steel beneath the politeness.

Draco found his voice.

"And what do you think, sir?" He tried not to show how important the answer would be to him. He didn't realize that, like the Hat, Salazar could read his mind at will.

The Founder's face became an inflexible mask. What little warmth had been in voice disappeared.

"I agree with Severus that you showed great potential." Draco held his breath. "But that you've wasted a great deal of it. And maybe it is too late to achieve what you could have been."

The sentence was delivered like the thrust of a blade. At those terrible words Draco felt his heart stop. His eyes misted over and he stumbled back.

"No..." he said in a voice which betrayed a rising panic. *I didn't do anything! What can he mean by that?*

"You doubt this? Let me show you what you did with your inheritance."

He felt an irresistible mental force invade his mind, and before he could react, he was assaulted by a succession of images. Key events in his young life, brilliant successes, painful failures and other decisions he made, or not. Each time the relentless voice of Salazar passed a terrible judgment.

*That was not bad... You could have done better that time... This mistake was disgraceful...*

For what seemed like hours, his life passed before him. Not only was it incredibly humiliating, but each negative opinion was physically painful, like a drench of icy water. When it was over Draco

was lying prostrate and sobbing on the stone floor. His father had used the Cruciatus on him once, this was even worse.

Salazar was standing motionless. There wasn't a trace of pity in his voice.

"You will note that I do not refer to good or evil, justice or fairness. What counts is to have one's talent bear fruit, or let it go to waste."

"Please..." Draco said tearfully.

Salazar remained impassive.

Draco's mind was dissolving in despair. He had been judged and found wanting. He was lost. What could he do? Who would help him?

*I never wanted help from anyone and now I have nothing left.*

His pride had been his last possession. What good was it to him? He would discard it. Nothing mattered anymore after this last failure.

But some part of him didn't want to give up. One last resolve filled his mind, the promise he'd made to Snape.

He looked up to the wizard, opened his heart and called out.

"Please sir, I beg of you to help me."

Salazar's face remained unreadable.

"What do you want me to help you for?"

Draco wanted only one thing. He wanted to be called a brother, or a son, by that man.

"Help me be a Slytherin."

The wizard's eyes seemed to glow somewhat.

"How flattering. Nothing more?"

"Nothing would matter more."

"And you would follow my teachings?"

"I will do anything you ask."

"And you think that you are capable of it?"

Draco held his gaze. He didn't dare hope.

"I will do my best and accept your judgment."

Salazar smiled at last and went toward the boy. He gestured for him to stand up.

"Good. It has been a long time since I was a teacher. I will be glad to be one again. We'll see I can make a proper wizard out of you."

Draco was trembling with relief. He felt reborn and immensely comforted. He looked up to his new mentor and vowed to apply himself without restriction. He would learn and prosper to be the finest Slytherin ever seen in living memory.

The next days were filled with a whirlwind of lessons, exercises and discussions. Draco learned more about the origin of Hogwarts and of the traditions of his House. As time passed he began to loath his father and his entourage, and conversely, to admire his godfather even more.

"It is a difficult road we walk, us Slytherins," said Salazar in one of their discussions. "Much of what we are is hidden and misunderstood by others, and since we deal the most with what they call the Dark Arts, it is also very easy for us to succumb to it. This is what happened to Tom Riddle, and to your father."



"I was wondering what you thought about Riddle and Voldemort, Master."

Salazar's face was grim.

"Yes, and of the fact that he is a descendant of mine." He sighed. "Beyond the obvious, biological heredity is not as important as I once thought. But you must remember that I am not the true original Slytherin, only a memory and an abstraction."

Draco said nothing. What he saw was the embodiment of wizardry perfection. It was more real to him than the original could ever be.

"I do not see myself in Voldemort," continued Salazar. "He has crossed the line between the ancient traditions, which I still support, and the pure evil of selfish power. What he really wants is to be immortal and all powerful. He can only fail, and the means he uses are despicable."

*Well there's no ambiguity on that.*

He was allowed to come up for air a couple of hours every day. He also learned how to organize his camping and prepare his food.

He waited several days before broaching with Salazar the most difficult subject he needed to resolve.

"I suppose you are aware of much of what happens at school, Master," he asked.

"Not all certainly, but a lot nevertheless. You are wondering what I think of your friend Harry Potter?"

Draco grimaced.

"We're not exactly friends. But yes I would like your advice on how to deal with him."

"Do I really need to spell it out?" The question was accompanied by a raised eyebrow.

"I know we should join up but will he accept? How will his friends react? And what about the rest of the students? The Slytherin and the others." Draco lowered his eyes. "Much trust has been lost, and I know that some of it has been my fault."

Salazar shrugged.

"You've seen how it's done with professor Snape. Sincerity is very powerful magic but you have to be convinced yourself."

"I know. I think I understand what you did with Godric Gryffindor, but will I find the same spirit in Harry?"

"You will. He is a true disciple of his House. Both of you have changed much in recent times. It will help to think of it as a rebirth, a new beginning. Things will be more difficult with the others but they will follow the leaders."

Draco nodded.

"And I will have to lead the Slytherins." *That will not be impossible.*

"You should now have a better understand of what moves us."

"A priceless knowledge Master."

"The students will be easy. You will have more trouble with the adults. I count on you to help keep alive our traditions. And correct the prejudices."

"What about my father? My family?"

"That is always going to be your personal decision."

Draco sighed.

"Yes Master."

"I have taught you all I needed to. You will continue with others now."

Draco felt a deep sadness at that thought, but he had known it would be coming. He straightened up.

"Master..."

They looked at each other and there was a rare show of affection on the wizard's face. He too had enjoyed the time they had spent together.

"... I will remember what you taught me and I will profit from it."

A apprentice from another House would have thanked his master, but it wasn't the Slytherin way. The best thing Draco could do was to prove himself worthy of what he had received.

"We may meet again," answered Salazar. "In the meanwhile you have my blessings."

He gestured and Draco found himself in the ruins of the old House, holding the Hat in his hands.

With Severus Snape looking at him.

Draco placed the Hat gently on his makeshift table and greeted his godfather cordially. Severus detected the subtle changes in the boy's manner. The assurance was still there, it was even stronger, but stripped of the previous arrogance.

Draco offered him some tea and as he described the events of the past days, he saw the awe in the older man's eyes. Snape hadn't really understood why the Dumbledore had suggested that he leave the Hat with the boy. It was a powerful relic certainly, and one who sometimes offered spontaneous comments during discussions, but he would never have imagined what his godson was describing.

*Did he really meet with the avatar of Slytherin? Who else could have changed him so? How fascinating. I will have to discuss this with the Headmaster.*

"I find you much more balanced than when I left. That is good. Did you come to term with your situation?"

Draco's face was serious.

"Intellectually yes. I know what to do. I still can't tell how I will to react toward Potter."

Snape eyed the boy severely.

"You will know that when you see him. But you will need a very good reason to convince me you two can't work together."

Draco nodded.

"Fair enough, sir."

"Let's see what you've learned, and I have some ideas for the next few days."

Snape led Draco through several drills. His purpose was to give him the same practical knowledge that Harry had dispensed to the DA students, and to educate him in the rudiments of Occlumency, Legimency and Dark magic, with an emphasis on identification and counter curse. He also provided Apparition training for good measure. He made a mental note to ask Dumbledore for a dispensation as soon as possible.

He also insisted that the boy spend a minimum amount of time in physical exercises to build up his strength and endurance. Few wizards did, which gave those who took the trouble all the more of an advantage.

Draco accepted the intensive training without a word. It was much worse than what he'd had to do for his OWLs, but his motivation was total. Not only did he fulfill his promise to Salazar and to his godfather, but he understood clearly the advantages of such an exclusive tutoring. It led toward the

one thing he craved most: power. And the more powerful he felt, the easiest it was for him to consider confronting Potter.

Toward the end of August, Snape declared that he would be leaving him. He was curiously reticent but he didn't offer any explanation.

"You won't be coming back?"

"No. You know enough to be able to Apparate home but I would prefer that you stay here as long as possible. You will only need a few days to prepare for school."

He stood up and looked around with an unusual sad expression on his face.

"I am very satisfied by what we did together Draco," he said in a wistful voice.

"So am I sir." *Why is he like this? It's almost as if he was never coming back.*

Draco suddenly had a dark foreboding. If Snape was being summoned by Voldemort, and didn't have the Mark anymore, he would be branded a traitor.

"Sir, you're not..." He couldn't say it.

Snape frowned in annoyance.

"What?" he snapped. "Express yourself clearly Draco!"

Draco swallowed.

"You're not being summoned by the Dark Lord, sir?"

Snape looked back in astonishment. He was only going back to Hogwarts for that ludicrous remedial potion class he had promised to Dumbledore. He certainly didn't look forward to it but it didn't bear comparison to a meeting with Voldemort.

*Do I look so terrified?*

Actually it would be his first occasion to have Potter back in his class and he didn't know how he would react. He was getting ready to berate the boy when he realized that both of them shared the same reticence, which made it even more annoying.

*This is ridiculous.*

So ridiculous that there was no question of him discussing this with anybody. He straightened up and considered Draco severely.

"Certainly not. He can't summon me anymore and I don't have the slightest intention of confronting him without good reason." Despite himself he was touched by the relief he saw in the boy's eyes.

"I simply have another task before me. Not very pleasant but simple to do and without any risk." He shrugged and waved his hand negligently. "A routine chore."

Draco was sure that whatever it was, it wasn't routine, but the man plainly didn't want to talk about it so that was that.

"Forgive me sir. A stupid consideration." He straightened up. "I will follow your advice and I look forward to seeing you again at school."

Snape nodded curtly and Disapparated.

Draco's curiosity was undiminished and he knew that his godfather had been on the point of explaining himself before he'd changed his mind. He tried to imagine what kind of project could make him act in such a manner, but he failed. Finally he shrugged and went back to his studies.

*Hogwarts,*

The students were assembled in the main courtyard. A good part of the DA was there as well as

some Hufflepuffs and two Slytherins who were keeping to themselves. All were edgy, even Harry, who had otherwise started the day in an excellent mood. The repetitive negative comments by Ron and some others had finally managed to undermine his moral. This was the day they would confront professor Snape in circumstances which couldn't possibly please him.

During the previous week they had organized several revision sessions at Grimauld Place for all volunteers. Harry remembered Snape's last words to him and he was determined to show a good figure. Remus, Tonks and Hermione had put together a very complete program and they were confident that they now possessed the Outstanding OWL level of expertise the professor asked of his NEWT students.

But Snape was not just any professor and they knew it. Granted that he had changed but Harry and Ron were the only ones who knew of the actual circumstances, and they would never discuss it. All of them remembered what kind of a teacher he could be, and they dreaded what was coming.

Harry made a point of greeting the two Slytherins, Theodore Nott and another boy he didn't know. If anything they were even more terrified than the rest of them, which was understandable. By their very presence they were a black taint on the reputation of their House, and Snape was certainly not going to be happy with them.

They stayed mute but he still got a nod for his efforts.

*Not exactly the soul of the party these two.*

He didn't lose hope and remembered the words of encouragement Hermione gave him, along with a warm hug, before he left. As the hour approached he rejoined his group.

"All right, let's go. Everybody remembers what we agreed to: mutual respect, no provocation... and no panic." He cracked a smile. "I guarantee that we stand an excellent chance of surviving this, so chin up!"

A couple of forced chuckles answered him. They got together and moved inside.

In his classroom Severus Snape was putting the final touch to his preparations. He would have faced a dozen Death Eaters rather than to admit it, but he was just as nervous as before his first class as a teacher, more than fifteen years ago. He remembered that at the time Dumbledore had come down to encourage him, and even offered him some candy. He had almost expected the Headmaster to do it again.

*Thanks Merlin he didn't.*

He'd have been mortified, even if he still didn't know how he would react in front of... Harry.

*Potter. In class he's nothing but Mister Potter.*

Things had been much easier when he hated his guts and simply had to prod him along. Now he genuinely liked the boy but it only made him feel even more the need to prepare him for the task ahead. Severus Snape still didn't imagine any alternative to pushing him as hard as he could go, without breaking him.

*This is getting too complicated.*

He heard sounds in the corridor. Several hurried steps which stopped at his door, then somebody knocked. He glanced at his watch.

*At least they're on time.*

"Enter," he said.

The door opened and the class took their seats. Harry was the first to come inside. Contrary to his usual behavior, he didn't go for one the back row seats but marched toward the center of the room. For a terrifying moment, Severus feared that he would flash his insufferable smile, or offer to shake

his hand, or even hug him, or...

Harry took his seat in the second row, the Weasley boy at his side.

"Good day professor Snape," he called out clearly. The other students murmured a greeting.

Snape was too relieved to do anything but answer automatically.

"Thank you, and good day to you."

He struggled inwardly to recover a proper teaching attitude. It helped when his gaze fell on the two Slytherins who lowered their heads in shame. He sighed inwardly and cursed Dumbledore to have imposed this on him.

"You are here to redeem your failings for the OWL exam," he continued silkily. "This is not a training course but a verification of your true... competencies. A second chance if you like."

Harry didn't say anything but he reflected that Snape had certainly not lost any of his mordant wit.

"Since you should have had ample time to prepare, I will accordingly grade your answers more rigorously than the official system." His icy gaze ranged over them. Neville swallowed convulsively.

"The practical organization will be as follows. You will be staying in your usual quarters. Meals will be taken in the great hall. Sessions will take place in this room, at eight A.M sharp, until five P.M with a one hour break for lunch and five minutes breaks every two hours. This will go on for three days. After each session, I will decide who deserves to go on... and who doesn't. Those of you who manage to stay on to the end will be admitted to my sixth year class."

Ron threw a worried look at Harry who didn't bat an eye.

"If there are any questions I will be happy to answer them," added Snape, in a tone which implied that only someone especially stupid could possibly have something to ask about so clear a program.

Nobody said a word.

The first part of the morning was devoted to theoretical questions on the official program.

"Mister Thomas what are the properties of hellebore?"

"There are several, sir. It's a poison but it is also used in an anxiety reducing potion named the Draught of Peace."

"And with what else Mister Potter?"

"Powered moonstone sir. This has to be finely grinded and kept in a non metallic container."

Snape interrogated them all, one after another. He appeared satisfied with the first series of answers because the questions gradually became more and more difficult.

When they left for lunch, everybody made sure that they were a long way from the classroom before they started to discuss the morning's events. Everyone agreed that it went rather well but the imposed rhythm was brutal and nobody relished the idea of spending three full days at it.

"We'll need another month of vacation after that," sighed Ron. "And to top it off we have to stay here at night."

Neville exchanged an amused glance with Harry. That last didn't bother him much. Normally he spent his summer with his grandmother and outside of a few outings, it had been rather boring.

"It can't always be *home sweet home*, hey Harry?"

Harry grimaced. Ron would be thinking of Luna and he knew he'd miss Hermione fiercely. The others had been ribbing them mercilessly and they didn't look to be letting up.

They shared a common table for meals. The two Slytherin didn't participate in their banter but they

were a lot noticeably more relaxed than in the morning.

"What did you think of it Nott?" asked Dean. "You looked even more frightened than us."

Nott tensed for an instant, and then he showed a disgusted face.

"I think he's going to work us to death this year."

In response, the other Slytherin and Ron sighted loudly at the same time, which made the rest of the table burst into laughter.

The afternoon was devoted to brewing various potions. The first one was a general antidote, not very complex but quite delicate to prepare. When they entered the classroom they saw that on everyone of their desk, a little cage had been placed, with a live rat inside.

"Nothing but a little drama to spice things up," announced Snape with a cruel smile. "Your task will be to prepare the antidote for a poison which I will administer to these animals. The measure of your test will be starkly simple. If your rat survives, you go on, if it doesn't you go out."

Harry and Ron looked at each other. Ron shrugged, ever since Wormtail he had no particular liking for rats.

They started to work silently. Harry was casting frequent looks at Neville who seemed to have fallen back to his former clumsiness. Snape didn't give them any specific directions but, from time to time, he would throw some remark. For once these were not insulting, sometimes helpful, but always sarcastic.

"Mister Longbottom I urge you to relax. If it helps, I can assure you that there is no way in which the ingredients you are handling can blow up in your face, although that will not always be the case."

Harry saw Neville tense when he was addressed, but the neutral tone of Snape's comments was a welcome surprise. He did relax, and even showed a fleeting smile.

At the prescribed time the professor made the round of the tables, and for each rat he mixed a dose of potion with a small amount of poisoned food. Each student was anxiously looking at his animal.

The liquid was supposed to be almost transparent with glints of silver. Neville's was somewhat cloudy and his rat squealed once and was evidently distressed. He held his breath and sweated visibly, but after a minute the rat was still alive. Snape cleared his throat noisily and moved on to the next student.

That evening one of the Hufflepuffs was eliminated and two Gryffondors, including Neville, knew that they were in trouble. By common agreement an emergency revision session was organized to cover the subjects which were likely to come up the next day.

At the end of the second day they barely had the strength to drop down in the common room chairs and groan. The nervous tension had been exhausting but everyone was still in the race.

The third and last day was composed exclusively of practical exercises. By lunch one of the Slytherin had been eliminated and the pressure on the rest of the class was at its maximum level. At one point Harry suffered a memory lapse and hesitated between two ingredients. A mistake would certainly have catastrophic consequences and for the life of him, he couldn't remember which one to use. He raised his head in distress and saw Snape moving impassibly between the tables. As the potion master bent down to examine the work of another student, Harry suddenly felt the image of a root forming in his mind. Immediately he lowered his eyes and took the asphodel root.

*I don't believe it. He helped me!*

Harry finished his work while trying hard not to smile. Maybe the Occlumency exercises hadn't been such a waste of time after all.

At the end of the day Snape announced the final results.

"I will spare you the fastidious reading of your grades. You will get them by Owl post in the next days. All that you need to know, even if I confess to being surprised, is that you have all passed."

Dean couldn't stop himself from cheering, followed by several more students. Snape grimaced and rolled his eyes.

"Mister Thomas, since you are evidently suffering from an excess of energy, I leave you the privilege of cleaning up this room, along with your more vocal comrades. As for the rest of you, we will meet in September and until then I hope that you will profit from the rest of your vacations. Goodbye."

"Goodbye professor," they answered excitedly while Snape left the classroom in a swirl of robes.

### *Salazar's Retreat*

Toward the end of August Draco went back home. He spent his last night in meditation next to the old tomb, retracing the events of the last weeks and the words of his master, especially those concerning his relations with Godric Gryffindor. Often his eyes would linger toward the symbol of their friendship.

*If they could do it then it's possible.*

In truth he was certain to be able to put his differences aside with Potter. Cooperation was attainable and necessary, but anything more was probably superfluous.

*Severus can talk all he wants. For him there was the Mark, for Salazar and Godric there was the Unicorn. It takes an extraordinary event to bring together such different persons.*

He didn't realize how far they had already come.

In the morning he returned to Malfoy Manor. He rejoiced at seeing his sister again and vowed to help her grow in the new proper Slytherin way he had rediscovered. His meeting with his mother was more subdued. She saw the changes in him, but didn't comment on them.

As he moved around the house, he couldn't escape feelings of repulsion at some of the things which were in it. Objects which he had not understood, or even noticed, before. Over the years, his father, like his ancestors, had gathered many relics, some were truly potent and fascinating, but others simply reeked of dark evil.

He couldn't afford to make any comment. They had agreed with Snape that he would have to keep his new attitude a secret from his father's associates as long as possible. So he just gritted his teeth and carried his few belongings to his room.

*In here however, some things will have to go. And I'll have to check Silena's room as well.*

As he was reordering his possessions, his sister's voice interrupted him.

"Why are you throwing out all these things?" she said.

He shrugged it off.

"I'd rather use the space for something else. I'll just put this somewhere else."

She accepted the explanation.

"You look very fit after that vacation of yours. Did you have fun?"

He smiled affectionately.

"Yes, and I met some very interesting peoples." He thought about it. "Maybe one day, when you're older, I'll take you there."

"That'll be nice."

He looked at her. She was still a sweet child, but he could detect the first signs of the poisonous influence of their family and entourage. He could easily imagine how she could become a cold disdainful woman, and it sickened him.

"Come here Silena," he beacons.

She obeyed, trusting. He gathered her in his arms.

"I have something important to tell you," he whispered.

"Yes?" she replied in the same voice.

"You're growing up and I'll be back to school soon, but I want you to know that I will always be able to help you if you need it. If you have troubles or questions about things that you fear, or don't understand. You can always ask me, and you should. Do you hear that?"

"Well yes. Thank you," she said dubiously.

"You can trust me to keep any secrets. Okay?"

"Okay," she nodded seriously.

*She doesn't understand and that's actually a good thing. But maybe some time in the future she will remember and I may be able to help her.*

She ran off to her room and he turned back to unpacking.

The next day, he went to Diagon Alley to buy the year's school's supplies. He was looking at some books when he recognized the coarse slur of Vincent Crabbe's voice.

"Hey! What do you know? It's the little Weasley redhead!" he jeered.

"Don't you know it's dangerous for your kind to go alone in the big bad world?" added Goyle, never far from his friend.

Draco saw them trying to corner Ginny Weasley who was glaring at them.

"You two had better get out of my way unless you've developed a taste for slug crawling," she hissed.

"Aw, but where are your friends to protect you?" pointed out Crabbe.

"And anyway you're not allowed to do magic. And we do have a slight advantage in physical matters," added Goyle.

They roared in raucous laughter and Goyle reached out an arm toward the young girl.

Draco didn't even stop to think. He crossed over to them and seized Goyle's arm, twisted it and pulled hard. The bigger boy let out a yell of pain and fell to his knees.

"What do you apes think you're doing?" he growled.

The two of them looked at him in surprise. Draco had always condoned their bullying, when he hadn't goaded them on. And the Weasleys had always been fair game.

"But Draco..." started Crabbe.

"Don't say anything," ordered Draco a cold voice. "Get out both of you and don't ever try that again."

"But..."

"GET OUT!"

Draco expressed all his pent up rage and frustration and the two boys blanched. Even Ginny was frightened. She had never seen someone so menacing.

Crabbe and Goyle rushed out while he glared at them. When they were gone, he turned toward her.



"I'm sorry for what those brutes said. I take it you're not hurt?"

Ginny was amazed. *Draco was sorry for something? Draco Malfoy? I must be dreaming.*

"I'm all right. Thank you for intervening but I could have handled it," she answered defiantly.

He smiled grimly at her. *Maybe she could at that. She looks tough and Snape told me about that fight at the Ministry.*

"Nevertheless, students should have more manners."

Ginny considered him carefully, noting a number of changes. He was fitter. She could see where muscles had replaced soft flesh, his poise was impressive and his manner was completely different from before.

She smiled politely.

"Please don't take me wrong but I'm a little bit surprised."

He sighed, looked away and then back at her. She'd grown a lot since he'd last seen her. She was very attractive now, and that mop of flaming hair was impressive.

"I suppose you are at that. Well it's a bit complicated, maybe I'll tell you about it sometime." He cleared his throat. "Listen. I was wondering if your friend Potter would be around here today."

He noticed a slight flush when he mentioned Potter's name. Did she still pine after him? In any case she covered it well and it was not his business. What he wanted though was a lead to him. They had to talk before the school started, and now was as good a time as any.

"He'll be here for lunch with the others," she replied. "We're supposed to meet at the Leaky Cauldron in an hour."

She hesitated.

"I have one or two more things to buy and then, if you want, we can go and wait for them afterwards."

He flashed her a winning smile.

"I'll be glad to escort you."

They finished collecting the various things they needed. Draco gallantly carried the heaviest items. When it was done, they walked to the tavern and reserved a table for themselves and the others. He ordered some butterbeer and they made small talk. Ginny still couldn't believe that he could be so pleasant. *And he's really very good looking too.*

Draco was making a determined effort to be nice, but he was also warming up to the young Gryffindor. They'd both been on the defensive at first, but they managed to keep the conversation on neutral subjects, and away from the past conflicts. He was beginning to actually relax when Harry arrived with Ron, Hermione and Luna.

Draco stood up and they greeted each other awkwardly. Harry frowned but his demeanor was polite enough, as was Luna's. Ron looked ready to lash out and Hermione was looking at him carefully.

Draco noticed the pairings and smiled inwardly, careful to keep his expression neutral.

He ordered more butterbeers and waited until everyone was installed. Harry sat in front of him, between Ginny and Hermione.

Draco took a deep breath and looked straight at Harry.

"I wanted to talk with you Potter."

"I'm listening," answered Harry calmly. "What should we talk about?"

"Our past *differences*, the coming year and the conditions for a mutual... collaboration."

Hermione and Ron gasped, Harry's face stayed serious, Ginny frowned and Luna smiled.

Draco ignored them and kept his eyes upon Harry. When the other boy nodded he continued.

"I realize that we have a bad history and I don't want to go into details about that."

He gave him a challenging look and turned toward Hermione.

"I will only specifically apologize to you, Granger, for calling you by an impolite term. That will not happen again." Hermione's mouth fell open. He turned back to Harry.

"There have been a number of significant developments in both our lives Potter. We may still disagree on some things, but the time has come when I have to make a choice. I do not care for the Dark Lord's goals or his methods, and I do not want me, or Slytherin House, to follow his path. If you agree we will fight him side by side."

"Bloody Merlin!" exploded Ron.

"He's telling the truth," said Luna in her calm, matter of fact, voice.

Ron looked at her with an astonished expression on his face. She nodded firmly toward him and he sat back in his chair.

"I'm going bonkers."

Harry seemed to consider Luna's remark and take it in.

*Interesting. They trust Lovegood to make that kind of evaluation. I didn't know she had that talent. They're certainly a resourceful bunch.*

Harry moved toward him and placed his hand, palm up, on the table. He smiled for the first time.

"A long time ago two wizards made their peace and build a new world," he said in a soft voice. "I would have us do the same, Draco. Will you be my friend?"

Draco felt his heart skip a beat. This was more than he'd expected, or hoped for. He couldn't explain it but despite himself he was moved. Harry's smile gave him a glimpse of a world he hadn't expected: friendship and then something more. *Severus had warned me, but I guess I really had to see it live to believe it.*

He extended his own hand and clasped Harry's. Real emotion showed in his voice.

"I will be your friend and you will be mine... Harry."

Their eyes locked and both felt the importance of the moment. Then Draco laughed, liberating some of his pent up tension.

"What's so funny?" asked Ron, scowling.

"Your face. If you could see it I'm sure you'd crack up too."

The others joined in and even Ron followed a moment later.

They calmed down, but it was plain that it would take some time for all of them to get use to the new relationship. Five years of animosity could not be undone in a few minutes. Draco sensed it as well and he thought it better to leave them alone for now. In any case they would meet again in the train the next day and at school afterwards. He got up and told them he had to be going.

"I'll see you all tomorrow. I expect we'll have a lot to talk about. By the way I'm still a prefect this year." He grimaced. "I know what you're thinking. Please don't say it. Goodbye."

He nodded to Ginny and turned away.

Harry got up as well.

"Wait!" Draco paused for him and they left the tavern together.

"Don't worry about the others," Harry said. "It will be all right. They just need time to adjust to the situation."

Draco nodded.

"But you don't?"

"I've been thinking about it for some time. I didn't know how it would happen, if it would be you or someone else, but I knew it was a necessity."

Draco thought about it for a moment.

"The Headmaster?" he asked.

Harry nodded.

"I expect he's had a hand in your changes also? Or perhaps Professor Snape?"

Draco nodded in turn.

"Yes. He... explained a lot of things." He cracked a rueful grin. "I've had an interesting month you know. Not so great at first but it was very instructive."

Harry looked at him carefully.

"Something... unusual must have happened to you."

"Yeah it did. Well, we'll talk about it sometime."

"I'll be glad to." He hesitated. "Draco. If you need anything... whatever. Call me and I'll help."

Draco considered it and acknowledged the offer.

"Thanks. I'll remember." He extended his hand and Harry shook it.

As he walked away Harry suddenly called out.

"Draco!"

"Yes?"

"It's going to be all right you know!" He smiled.

Draco smiled back. "I know."

When Harry came back inside his friends were discussing the new development with animation. He sat next to Hermione and proceeded to order lunch. When they'd had a chance to think about it he asked for their opinions.

Luna's was simple and direct.

"He meant what he said. He's really decided to work with us. It's amazing."

Ron was still shaking his head over the fact.

"I'm sure Luna's right but we'll have to wait and see. I don't believe anybody can change that much."

Harry turned to Ginny who recounted the events of the morning. Ron sighed.

"Well at least those two baboons are still the same. In a sense it's reassuring, otherwise I would know I'm in a bad dream."

Luna kissed him in passion.

"Would you get a kiss like that in a bad dream?" she said when he came up for air.

Ron rolled his eyes and ordered another butterbeer. When they'd finished laughing Harry turned to Hermione.

"What about you Mione? He told me he'd seen Snape and had a very special experience. What do

you think?"

"I detect the hand of Headmaster Dumbledore," she said carefully. "And I think that what we did with Snape played a significant part, but there must have been something else. It takes a big shock to turn someone around like that."

She shuddered.

"We'll know what eventually. In the meanwhile it's a good thing and we should run with it. I can't wait for school to start."

"Me too," added Ginny in a wishful voice. Harry shot her a glance and made a mental note to talk to her later on.

They finished lunch and resumed shopping. Harry arranged to be alone with the younger girl for a moment.

"How are you doing Ginny?" he asked.

"I'm fine. Why do you ask?" she looked at him defensively.

He smiled and winked at her.

"Well the last time we talked you were a little tense. You look much more peaceful today."

Ginny smiled back.

"You think maybe I'm cured of my infatuation with the great Harry Potter?"

He chuckled.

"I don't know how to react to that." He cocked his eye. "Are you?"

Ginny made a play of slowly approaching her hand from his chest, as if she was testing a burning surface.

"Well maybe I am!" she exclaimed.

"And would it have anything to do with a newfound, pale haired, friend of us?"

Ginny looked away.

"I don't know." She frowned. "Okay. He's interesting enough to make me stop thinking of you, and let me tell you that it's been a wretched summer because of that, but I have to think about it."

She turned back toward him.

"What do *you* think? And please keep Ron out of it!"

Harry chuckled again.

"I can just imagine his face if he gets wind that his little sister is planning to go out with his former arch enemy." He sobered and looked into her eyes. "You can think about it all you want Ginny. All I will say is that I like the new Draco Malfoy. Let's just hope he doesn't change back."

The light in Ginny's eyes brightened, and Harry didn't believe she would need to think a lot about it.

"Will you take care of Ron for me?" she murmured.

He grimaced.

"Yes I will." *And I'll ask Luna to help me. The two of us will not be too many for that.*

That evening Arthur and Molly found their daughter almost euphoric at times, and distant and pensive at others. They could guess it somehow reflected her sentimental life, but they had long ago abandoned any hope of discussing it with her, and at least it was an improvement over her previous regimen of alternate nerves and despondency.

They'd convinced Ron and Luna to spend their last night at the Burrow, in separate bedrooms to Ron's dismay. Of course it would only be a theoretical setup since he planned to join her as soon as he could - and everybody, with the possible exception of Molly, knew it but no one said anything. Luna's father had also been invited, which made their pairing almost an official item, and Molly found herself fantasizing about dressing gowns and chapels.

It was a pleasant evening during which the conversion of Draco was discussed extensively. Ginny managed to hide her feelings by way of super human discipline. Arthur had received advance warning from Dumbledore, but he was impressed nonetheless. Everything seemed to be going extremely well. His experience told him it wouldn't last but this was no reason not to enjoy it.

At Grimauld Place a similarly pleasant *dinner à quatre* was organized. Hermione had suggested that they make it a little formal so that the girls could dress up differently from the usual jeans and tee-shirts. Everybody had approved.

They had set up a little table in the garden, complete with candle lights - and of course no silverware, but Harry and Hermione had bought a very nice set of polished steel for Remus' sake. Hermione dressed in the same blue robe and hair dress that she'd worn two years ago at the Yule ball and Harry was suitably appreciative.

All in all it was a fitting ending to a memorable summer. They danced one last time around the pool, and their faces were bright with happiness as they retired to their rooms.

For Harry and Hermione it was the last night they would spend together for some time. They rested in each other's arms and talked until the middle of the night.

## **Chapter 9 - Serious endeavors**

In the morning the various chests and cages holding everyone's belongings and pets were assembled and they made their way to King Cross Station and to platform 9 ¾. After the usual rush, they found themselves a compartment and took their seats, grinning in anticipation.

Remus and Tonks were also riding the train, and Harry assumed that more protection was being organized. In his mind he imagined Mad Eye Moody leading a squadron of exhausted Aurors on broomsticks, criss-crossing the sky above the train for hours, and his grin widened.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Ron. Harry told him and they all laughed at the image until a knock on the door interrupted them. It was Draco, alone.

Ginny went to open the door and he entered. They greeted each other. The atmosphere became more subdued, even though they exchanged timid smiles.

"Ok Draco, let's get this over with," said Harry, breaking the ice. "You're blowing our minds. Until we get your story, we won't be able to think about anything else. What really happened?"

Draco grinned at the admission. He understood their position well enough.

"All right. I was changed." He grimaced. "It was done according to the Slytherin way, which most others would probably find pretty brutal, but it's something which we all accept. We pride ourselves on being stubborn and hard to break."

They listened to him with attention.

"What you say is very interesting," said Hermione. "I'm convinced that we should all have a better understanding of the basic principles behind the various Houses."

Draco nodded and went on to describe, briefly, his feelings at the start of the summer and, in more details, the events at Salazar's Retreat.

When he described the ceremony of the Marking of Snape they all winced. He kept his eyes downcast.

"I couldn't watch it to the end. It was sickening. And worse of all, it was my own father."

When he got the time when he was left alone for the night, he found that Ginny's hand was on his shoulder. Somehow it seemed normal, and it certainly felt good. At least the others didn't remark on it. Perhaps they hadn't noticed, so enthralled were they by his story.

Draco continued. He watched Harry's face when he described the Sorting Hat and sure enough, the other boy's eyes opened wide. *Yeah. How would you like to meet your precious Gryffindor?* He knew the answer of course.

Harry was fascinated. Immediately he determined to find a way to share the same experience.

*Will Dumbledore let him me borrow the Hat? Would it work?*

When Draco finished his telling they all stayed silent for a moment. The shopping cart went by and Ron jerked up and stopped it. He started to order their usual selection - basically everything on display. Harry absentmindedly passed him a purse of money. It was now an accepted tradition that Harry always paid for the group treats.

Ginny took the occasion to adjust her position.

"So basically you changed your outlook concerning muggles and heredity," summed up Harry.

"And the practice of what everyone calls the Dark Arts," corrected Draco. "Voldemort is wrong because he uses false pretences to pursue selfish aims. He is a perversion of Slytherin ideals."

"He's evil!" cried Hermione, outraged. "He kills and tortures people! Isn't that the most important?"

"You're right of course, but if he only did that, he would simply be a criminal. He wouldn't have as many followers and he wouldn't be such a menace."

"He's right," added Luna. "Last year Voldemort was protected by the Ministry. If it hadn't been for Fudge's attitude, the Aurors would have hunted him from the start and nobody would have given him refuge."

"Hermione. Let there be no misunderstanding," said Draco earnestly. "Neither I, nor Salazar Slytherin would ever condone such actions. He told me so. They are not even necessary for unleashing powerful magic as you have demonstrated. It is unfortunate that they are an easy, if inefficient, way to do so. The way the Dark Arts are taught is partly responsible for it by not stressing the danger involved. That kind of magic should only be attempted by wizards with the appropriate discipline and moral fibre."

"You mean Slytherins?"

"Not necessarily, but part of our training is supposed to forge these qualities. Then again there have been perversions."

Hermione pondered this. Draco continued.

"Right now my main goal, and professor Snape's, is to correct this and to restore our House to its proper standing. In the school and outside it. This implies that Voldemort be destroyed and it should fit with what I understand of your plans. Can you tell me more about your side of it?" he finished.

"Yes," answered Harry. "Our objective is to reunite the Houses and the wizard community against a common enemy, but that's suppose to be a temporary thing, and around a set of common values."

"We start with the DA group - which I hope you'll join, along with other Slytherins - then the whole school and then onwards, through a new association which we'll be launching."

"What are those common values?" asked Draco.

Hermione passed him a stack of papers.

"This is the current draft for the bylaws of the association. It combines input from a number of sources, including Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. For obvious reasons Slytherin is under represented but you're here to remedy to that."

Draco scanned the pages. After a few minutes he frowned.

"I don't understand this part about House Elves and magical minorities." Hermione sighed and described once again her position. She'd already toned it down a lot - it was actually mostly symbolic - and she despaired of ever being understood.

Draco grunted and shrugged his shoulders. House Elves exploitation wasn't something which bothered him a lot.

"Okay I'll think about this later. Let's leave it at that for now." He continued reading silently. When he finished he handed back the sheets.

"There are a number of minor points which I would like to change, but basically I would agree with such a document," he said. "It will take some work however to have a majority of Slytherins to go along."

"That is actually the case for most of the school," intervened Luna. "We know we're still at the level where we have to convince people individually. When we'll attain a critical mass such a document will really be necessary and made public."

They discussed some more until Hermione reminded them that it was time for the prefects to have their meeting. They changed into their school robes, and then she, Ron and Draco got up to leave the compartment and make their way to the head wagon.

"After the meeting I'll have to spend some time with my House," explained Draco. It's going to be complicated enough with the best of them."

At that point Harry let out a yell and put hand to his brow.

"Harry! What is it?" cried Hermione.

"Scar... Burning!" said Harry through clenched teeth.

He forced himself to enter the Occlumency routine and the pain subsided, at least it became more bearable.

"Someone warn Remus quickly!" he breathed.

A tremendous noise was heard, and the train began to lose speed with a screeching sound.

Hermione activated the general alarm on her magical DA coin. They all took out their wands and Ron began to organize them.

"Luna you stay here and try to get feedback from Harry. Hermione you go and get Remus, I'll handle the DA students. We'll have them post lookouts in all directions. Draco and Ginny take out your brooms. If somebody's not on patrol we may have to be ready to fly outside." He was all business and no one objected.

Harry closed his eyes and tried to extract some information from his connection with Voldemort. It was difficult because, if he opened his perception too much, the pain returned in force.

Hermione hesitated and bit her lips. She couldn't help him. Ron was right and it was important to organize their defense. They had discussed that Luna's talent could be used to help Harry communicate in case he was attacked. They couldn't relay the information through the coins yet - she would have to develop a kind of talky walky. *Stupid not to have thought of it before.*

She ran toward the head compartment where Remus would be staying with the Aurors. She found him in the corridor.

"Harry's had a scar attack. The DA's organizing to defend the train. I'll be relaying any information we can have."

"Right!" said Remus. "We're sending scouts outside to give us some information. Tell Draco, Ginny and Ron to get ready to fly but not yet. Unless they're very close, we should be safer in the train."

She went back to check on Harry. Ron was organizing the DA students into trios, two for defense and one for attacks, and posting them at critical positions.

Harry whimpered in pain. He was locked into a mental battle with Voldemort and the pressure on his mind was terrible. He did get a picture of the train, seen from the front on their right. He struggled to rebuild his Occlumency shield, and he was barely aware of Luna giving the information to a white faced Hermione. After a moment the pain abated.

He was panting. Luna had his face in her hands and was looking at him anxiously.

"Are you all right Harry?"

"Yeah," he gulped.

Hermione came back saying that the aurors were converging on the supposed location.

"Listen." he told her. "I think I can hold, or at least hamper him. It could give them an edge when they attack."

She looked at him anxiously. She wanted to scream out to tell him not to attempt such a dangerous thing. But she knew it wouldn't make any difference.

"I won't be able to do it long so we'll have to time it," he continued. "Can you set up a relay to do that?"



She didn't move.

"It's all right Mione," he said gently.

"Right." she said finally and went out again.

He sighed and forced a grin at Luna.

"Not my idea of fun."

She grimaced. She had been able to feel part of his pain. She could block most of it, but even then it had been pretty bad.

"Lie down and rest. I'll try something."

He did and she positioned her fingers on his temples and placed her brow against his, after a moment he felt a delicious soothing effect. He smiled and relaxed.

"Hmm," he murmured. *I wonder if she could teach Hermione to do that.*

*I don't know but I can try,* came the answering thought.

??!

*Don't think about it, Relax.*

Hermione returned and she absentmindedly reflected that in normal circumstances she would resent violently what Luna was doing. At the time she felt only gratitude that she could help him.

"It should be time in 10 to 20 seconds." she said. Harry sat up and prepared himself. He looked blankly at the wall waiting for her signal.

Hermione raised her hand.

"Soon..." Harry concentrated, ready to hurl his perception at his enemy. He tried not to think about the pain. *It doesn't last. It's not important.*

"Now!" she yelled.

He lowered his shields and willed himself to engage Voldemort. At first it seemed to work. He could see the flying specks of the Aurors flying toward himself/Voldemort, he even recognized Remus on one of them. He tried to engage the dark wizard's mind and felt the vision blurring.  
*Gotcha!*

Then the backlash of Voldemort's riposte hit him like a truck It was every bit like a Cruciatus spell. He screamed in pain, and he could hear Luna scream with him. He barely managed to cut off the contact and stumbled on the floor.

Hermione was terrified, she immediately went to him.

"Harry! What happened?"

Harry couldn't speak for a moment. He wringed in the lingering pain of the curse and tried to signal her that he was okay.

"... almost got through. I think I unbalanced him for an instant but he was too strong." He closed his eye and probed gently. "I don't feel any pressure anymore. It looks like he's gone but I don't think he was alone."

As if to confirm this a yell was heard in the corridor.

"Dementors!"

Harry stood up awkwardly, grabbed his broom and they ran out to see. Ron, Ginny and Draco were already in the air and they signaled two directions in which Dementors were spotted. Harry started toward the train door despite the protests of Hermione.

"Check the lookouts. And make sure the younger students are safe. We can take care of these but there may be more."

The monstrous creatures could be seen gliding toward the train, attacking from the rear. Several students screamed as they felt their terrifying emanations. Harry jumped on his broomstick and circled the train before launching his first Patronus spell.

He visualized Hermione in his mind and expressed the full joy of it into the spell. "*Expecto Patronum!*" A tremendous silver stag emerged from his wand and rushed toward the nearest group of Dementors.

He could see that his friends were handling the other side of the train. Ginny seemed to be having some trouble but on her second try she managed a small silver bird. It looked like an eagle.

"Harry! There's a third group at the front." Hermione was signaling him from the open door.

He could see that the Aurors were still some distance away and would not be back in time. He pushed his broom to maximum speed and flew alongside the train toward the first monster that was battering a window. He could see the open screaming mouths of the students behind it.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" he screamed.

His stag crashed into the Dementor and drove him away.

The Aurors gathered around and soon had the situation under control. No one was hurt although several first years had been shocked. Harry made a last flying pass above the train before landing. He could see Malfoy kneeling and speaking softly to a young boy, who was clinging to Ginny.

Here and there cheers were heard for those who had defended them. *This is going to do wonders for recruiting. And to silence those who would downplay the gravity of the situation,* he thought.

He flew toward Remus to check up and make his report. A new group of Aurors apparated near him. Some looked to have been in battle themselves.

Remus spotted him and frowned.

"Hey Harry! Are you all right? You look like hell."

Harry told him what had happened. The Aurors were suitably impressed.

"You're Harry Potter," one of them said. "Proud to know you. I'm Lewis Calton. You and your friends did a good job." He nodded to Draco who had joined them.

Remus resumed the situation.

"We missed Voldemort but he was definitively thrown off for a moment. I think he'd have gotten some of us otherwise. As it was we bagged two Death Eaters. Good show." He looked at Harry in appreciation.

Remus' praise and the knowledge that he had probably saved some lives pumped Harry up. He flashed a big grin at his friend.

"However there were other attacks," added Remus with a grim expression. "One of them on Azkaban where they managed to free several prisoners." He looked at Draco. "Including Lucius Malfoy."

Draco's face hardened, and he paled a little. "And the other attacks?"

"Muggle homes. Diversions probably. They timed it well and figured to have at least one success here or at Azkaban."

Harry sighed.

"It could have been worse."

The full toll of his efforts was beginning to weight upon him and he felt very tired.

"You did well, all of you," said Remus, ruffling his hair. He glanced at Draco. "We'll handle the protection until Hogwarts so don't worry about it. Go inside and rest now."

Harry and Draco returned to the train. Harry turned toward his friend.

"What do you think, about your father?"

Draco's voice was cold.

"I don't expect anything good out of this. At least he's still hunted. I just hope he won't come near our home."

"Do you think he'll try to contact you? Would he get suspicious?"

Draco considered this.

"Yeah he might, him or some others. I'll think up some story - tell them that I'm trying to infiltrate and spy on you."

He looked at Harry with a guarded expression. Harry looked back.

"Are you afraid that's what *we* might believe?" He shook his head. "Don't. I trust you and besides, Luna would detect a deception."

"She's a handy resource," grunted Draco.

"I think that all things considered we've got a pretty good team," said Harry with a grin.

"And getting better," shot back Draco.

They climbed up the stairs, and were pressed by enthusiastic students congratulating them and clapping them on the back.

"Thanks Harry! Good job mate!"

"We knew you had it in you Draco!"

Draco joined a group of Slytherins, who looked at him with a mixture of incredulity and newfound respect. Harry was ambushed by Hermione who gave him a passionate kiss, which drew several whistles and more cheers from the witnesses.

They spend some time checking up on the other students. The train trolley was going back and forth, and everything was on the house. Most of the first years were being told of the previous exploits of Harry and his friends, and he was rather embarrassed by their reverence.

"You're Gryffindor aren't you?" asked a determined looking girl with short black hair. "I want to be sorted in your House!"

Harry smiled and sat down next to her. He noticed that some older students, Hufflepuff by their robes, were rolling their eyes.

"You'll be welcome of course but you will learn that no House is better than any others. It really depends on what you're best at," he said gently.

"I want to be fighter like you!" the girl said defiantly.

"Then you will be Gryffindor or Slytherin." That last drew an outraged gasp from one of the Hufflepuff. Harry turned his head to look at them. "There was a Slytherin among those who fought today. Don't forget it."

"I thought you were enemies."

"No. The Houses are different. There's competition for points and Quidditch of course, and

sometimes there's some of animosity between students, but we're not enemies. When we all stick together nothing can resist us."

"Are these *things* going to be back?"

Harry looked at the girl. She didn't seem to be afraid, only curious. *She's certainly a good candidate for Gryffindor.*

He felt she should be told the truth.

"For the rest of the trip I don't think so, and in any case more people have arrived to protect us. But until Voldemort is destroyed, yeah, they'll probably try again but we're much better defended at Hogwarts."

He winked at Hermione and turned back to the girl.

"The school has lots of protections. Have you read 'Hogwarts - A history'? If not then Hermione here, who can probably recite it by heart, can tell you all about it - Ouch!" he said as Hermione slugged him on the shoulder.

"Harry Potter you may be a hero, but I will not have you disparage scholarly endeavors. I believe the world would be a better place if books were treated with more respect."

"Yes Hermione," he said demurely. Then, in an aside to the girl. "Be like me and always agree with her. I'd rather face Dementors than make her angry."

Everyone laughed, including Hermione. The bantering had a soothing effect on their nerves. The two of them took their leave and finally returned to their compartment. Harry complimented Ron on his efficient organization.

"Aw Harry, it was plain common sense," Ron replied modestly.

Inwardly of course he was very proud of himself. He knew Harry liked and respected him but it was the first significant action in which he had showed himself to be anywhere near his level. Even the Aurors had praised his tactics.

"I don't think it was just that. Good showing mate!" Harry gave him a high five, and Ron's smile was like a shining star.

"Where's Ginny by the way?" he asked, suddenly aware that one of their number was missing.

Harry kept his mouth shut. He had last seen her with Draco but he didn't think that Ron should be made aware of his sister's developing infatuation. At least not yet.

"I think she's still with some of the children said Luna. *Technically correct. No need to mention who else she was with.*

Draco was walking toward the Slytherin compartments. Ginny was still following him, and he was becoming distinctly aware of it. *If I'm reading the signs correctly she's really hitting on me. I'm going to have to decide what do about it.*

"Ginny?" He stopped walking. They were in a quiet spot where they could talk more or less privately.

"Yes."

He could feel the hopeful tension in her. She was more nervous than when they'd affronted the Dementors.

"I noticed that you've been kind of *close* to me today. Am I imagining things that aren't there?" he asked carefully.

"I like you. I'd like us to be partners," she answered straightforwardly.

He grimaced. *Just like that. Well she's cute, she's got guts and brains and I frankly like her too, but*

*I've seen the way her brother looks at the boys she goes out with. A fight with the Weasleys is the last thing I need. And then how will this go with my other plans?*

"Okay." He smiled. "I like you too but there may be... complications."

Her face fell.

"Is there another girl... is it Pansy?"

Pansy had been Draco's date at the Yule ball and they were often in the same group during Hogsmeade weekends.

"No, no! It's nothing like that," he reassured her. Pansy Parkinson was nothing more than a *convenient* date for him. He didn't want to tell Ginny that he was concerned about other people's opinions. Personally he didn't give a damn but there was a *political* angle to consider. *And that could be important.*

"Listen we don't have the time to discuss this properly here. I've got to go back to my group and you to yours. Can we meet somewhere discrete after the feast?"

She grinned mischievously.

"Astronomy Tower at eleven? Everybody should be asleep."

"It's a date." He made to go, but before he could, she gave him a quick kiss of the cheek.

"Hey. What was that for?"

She said nothing, she only smiled and waived at him before leaving.

Draco touched his face where she'd kissed him. He'd gone out with girls before, and did much more serious things than such a simple pecking. Still, this felt a little special. *Let's not get carried away. I've got to use this occasion to grab the initiative among the Slytherins.*

He straightened up and joined the compartment of the senior Slytherin students.

Most of his year was there, including Crabbe and Goyle who eyed him gingerly. The more important seventh year Slytherins were there too. Everyone greeted him pleasantly enough, but they were clearly waiting to him to make the first move.

Draco knew that the leadership of his House was at stake here. They would be looking for weakness and they would pounce if he showed any. He felt for the undercurrents of the group and could sympathize with their confusion. Up to now he had been the arrogant, but not very impressive, son of a powerful and rich wizard. All of this had changed, his father had been branded a criminal and imprisoned while he had shown heroic behavior and he certainly *looked* more powerful than he had been.

And he had worked as part of Harry Potter's special group.

Draco considered one of the new Slytherin prefects. Lyn Merkin was a fifth year student with no particular affiliation. She had a reputation as a no-nonsense and fair minded girl. He didn't think she would challenge him. In fact it should be easy to make her an ally, as long as he wasn't isolated. The other important students would be Millicent Bulstrode, who had the making of a matriarch and was totally committed to the old traditions, and Montague, the seventh year prefect who was the captain of the Quidditch team, and who probably fancied himself as the natural leader of the Slytherins.

Millicent he could work with. Montague was a bully and would have to be made irrelevant.

Draco smiled inwardly as he saw the opening he had to take. He turned to Lyn.

"Are all the young ones all right?" he asked her.

"Yes," she replied without thinking. "Including the first years who should be sorted with us."

She meant the children of traditional Slytherin Families.

"Perhaps we should assign older students to stay close to them. They might be some nightmares tonight. And I will ask professor Snape for some sleeping potions."

"Right. I'll get on it."

*That's it. Now I'm the one who's taken the initiative both in defense and in caring for the troops. Let them challenge that.* Draco turned toward Montague and his tone was accusatory.

"I didn't see many of us in the defense teams. In fact I didn't see any."

Montague bristled.

"Don't take that tone with me Malfoy. You're not in charge here."

"Perhaps I should," Draco replied calmly. "I'd certainly do a better job than some others."

He continued before they could react.

"I'll grant you that this was a surprise. But others, specifically Potter's group, have been preparing themselves for more than a year, and *they* were ready."

He surveyed them all. There were some angry murmurs but no one dared speak up.

"If *I* hadn't been with them our House would have been *shamed*. At least now we're part of the winning team."

*And now they can't object to my cooperating with Harry's friends. They can't attack me at all and now all I need to do is to make them want to follow me.*

Montague tried a bid.

"What does it matter?" he said sullenly. "We don't care what the other Houses think."

"Of course we do," countered Draco. "We should be respected and not hated or despised."

He saw in some of their faces that he had hit a nerve. Not everyone was comfortable with their current reputation.

"House Slytherin is supposed to be strong one," he continued. "The next time, this coming year, I want us to be the heroes."

He looked at Millicent.

"What better way to defend our values than to be admired?"

She turned to Montague and then back to him. When she nodded slightly, he knew he had won.

"What's your plan for that?" she asked.

"We stop trying to exist *against* the other Houses. We cooperate, but we follow our ways and we excel in them." He gestured toward the outside. "These are hard times. Success will depend more upon willpower and strength than upon loyalty, thinking and bravado. These qualities will be needed by everyone but we should be the hardest and strongest."

He could tell that they were receptive to his arguments. All he had to do now was to act as if he was the leader, and then they would follow him. Montague had shut up and seemed to be sulking. He moved to take a seat in front of Millicent and the other students immediately made room for him.

"We have a number of things to discuss," he began.

## Chapter 10 - Hogwarts

*Hogsmeade station*

The students cheered loudly as the train entered Hogsmeade station. Hagrid was waiting for them, a gigantic crossbow in his hand, surrounded by more Aurors.

They proceeded to the castle in the usual manner. The first years went by boat with Hagrid, escorted by Merpeoples to the fascination of the youngsters.

The other students took the carriages, and for the first time Neville could actually see the Thestrals pulling them. He turned toward Harry with a surprised face but when he recalled why they were visible, he stopped in embarrassment. Hermione realized that it was because he had witnessed Sirius's death, and she squeezed Harry's hand in automatic sympathy. Harry didn't understand everything at once and when he did he became a little sad. *Will I ever get over it? How long will it take?*

They arrived at the castle and walked through the big doors. Harry's spirits lifted as he took in once again the wonderful atmosphere of the old wizard school. On an impulse he threw his arms around Ron and Hermione's shoulders.

"I really love this place. It's such a kick to come back here every year with you two!" They exchanged grins recalling their first adventures together.

"Remember the Troll fight?" said Ron with a wink.

"How could I forget?" answered Hermione. It had been the start of their friendship, almost five years ago.

Out of the corner his eye Harry saw Draco plainly leading the Slytherins on. He nudged his friend and Ron whistled.

"Blimey. He certainly didn't lose any time taking over did he?" He shook his head. "He's really slick that one. I don't like this at all."

Ginny looked at him in exasperation.

"What do you think will happen? Why don't you trust him?"

"I don't know," grumbled Ron. "I just can't believe that he's changed that much. And I don't trust the Slytherins." Luna touched his shoulder and he turned to her. "I trust *you* and if you say he's sincere I won't make a fuss about it. But remember that he's slick."

Harry considered him for a moment.

"Okay Ron. I think he's sincere, but maybe it's not such a bad idea to have a doubting Thomas among us. You can keep your eyes and ears open, but," his expression was earnest, "*I insist* that we give him, and the Slytherins, a real chance."

He fixed Ron, who looked back defiantly.

"Are you okay with that?" Harry insisted.

Ron fidgeted. He didn't like to have a disagreement with Harry but he was clearly being offered an out. Actually more than that, he made it sound as an assignment.

"All right." He sighed and balanced his head from side to side. "I'll go with it Harry."

Harry gripped his shoulder. "Good show mate."

They grinned at each other and Ron punched his friend's shoulder.

"If you two machos have finished your foreplay maybe we can go and sit down now," said Hermione sarcastically.

"And if you let go of Luna then maybe she can join her own table," added Ginny.

Ron gave his sister a dirty look, and Luna a last passionate kiss, and they made for the Gryffindor table.

Dumbledore was seated at his usual place. Remus was between Tonks and Snape. As expected professor McGonagall and Hagrid's places were empty since they would be handling the first years.

The Sorting Hat was placed on its stool, and Harry wondered once again at what Draco had told them of his experience. *What would it show me? Would I be able to talk to Godric Gryffindor? What would he say?* He cast a look at Draco who, sure enough, was looking at the Hat with a dreamy expression.

When everyone was ready, the great doors opened and the procession of new children advanced toward the head table. They showed the usual mix of apprehension, amazement and determination.

The Sorting Hat gave its welcoming song, exhorting the traditional virtues of the Hogwarts founders.

One by one professor McGonagall called out the children's names, and had them sit under the big Hat who would hum and grimace and, after a moment, cry out the name of the assigned House.

Harry saw the girl with short black hair he had talked to on the train. Her name was Emily Parker and the Sorting Hat cried a definite "Gryffindor!" for her. Her face broke into a tremendous smile and she raced toward their table as they all cheered her.

"I told you I'd be in Gryffindor!" she said to Harry, breathless.

"And you're very welcome with us."

The next one was very determined young boy who got sorted into Slytherin. His name was Parker too and he looked a lot like Emily, he had the same black hair in particular. Harry turned toward her and he was going to ask her if they were from the same family, but she was beaming at the boy and she'd started to clap her hands along with the rest of the Slytherins. Murmurs from another first year confirmed that he was her brother and Harry was surprised. It was very rare for members of the same family to go into different houses. Emily kept on clapping joyfully until she realized with alarm that she was the only one doing so at her table. Without really thinking, and mostly to stop her from being isolated, Harry joined in. A couple of seconds later he heard Hermione and Ginny clapping hands as well.

The other Gryffindors looked at them in shock and some reprobation. In living memory no one in the two rival Houses had ever applauded the other's success.

*There's got to be a first time for everything,* thought Harry, nodding toward his friends and encouraging them to join in. A number obeyed, including all of the DA. Behind him, he heard the renewed clapping from Ravenclaw and guessed that Luna and others were following up. At the teacher's table, Dumbledore looked up and surveyed the roomful of students with some surprise.

Richard Parker smiled in innocent delight as he made his way toward the Slytherin table. Draco considered the boy thoughtfully and beckoned for him to sit next to him. When he'd sat down he asked some questions and followed his finger pointing toward the Gryffindor table where Emily was waving happily at her brother. The ceremony was continuing and the Hat shouted "Ravenclaw!" as another girl was sorted. Harry and Draco exchanged a quick glance and led their respective tables to applaud the choice. Dumbledore was holding his breath and his eyes were darting right and left to follow the action.

"Gryffindor!"

Several eyes looked anxiously at the Slytherin table when the Hat announced his latest decision. Draco locked eyes with Millicent as he started to clap loudly, immediately followed by Richard. The other prefect hesitated for the tiniest of instant and followed them. The other Slytherins were



disoriented but in unfamiliar circumstances, following the leaders was the second nature to them.

"Hufflepuff!", "Ravenclaw!", "Slytherin!" The youngsters were being dispatched quickly and welcomed by their fellow students and all of the tables started to clap more and more loudly for each of them, building up a stable rhythm until the noise level became deafening. Toward the end every sorting was accompanied by clapping from the entire complement students and teachers alike.

When the last of the first years was finally sorted, professor Dumbledore stood up, his face radiant and his eyes twinkling even more than usual.

"My dear children this was the most moving Sorting ceremony I have witnessed in many years. I am even prouder of you for this, than for the remarkable showing you made on the train during that scandalous attack. You are showing the true spirit of this school and nothing could make me, and my fellow teachers more happy and proud."

Then he gave off the signal for the feast which was as magnificent as ever. For a time the students occupied themselves with eating and running excited conversations. When the last portion of dessert was finished Dumbledore stood up once again and resumed speaking.

"A new year is starting and it will be an important one and serious one, as events have unfortunately shown. I am of course extremely sorry for what happened. Luckily we had taken precautions, and thanks to the decisive actions of some of you, those were sufficient. I have send owls to your families explaining the events, and giving the appropriate reassurances."

He paused and took on a grave expression.

"I wish I could tell you that it was an isolated incident and that it will never happen again, or that you are perfectly safe here in Hogwarts. I will not lie to you."

"These are dangerous times since the Dark Lord returned, and not even Hogwarts can be said to be completely safe - no place can - but this school is actually very well protected from outside menaces, and I have called for the assistance of some of the more experienced Aurors to help us."

"Hogwarts has faced deadly challenges before, and it has always won over them. It will do so again I am convinced of it. You must know that you can count on us, the teachers and the rest of the faculty, to help you with our strength and experience, just as we know that we can count on you, the students, to help us with your energy and enthusiasm."

More cheering followed. Dumbledore followed up with the introduction of the new teachers and the usual recommendations about the forbidden forest and various dangerous places and practices.

After all this everyone was starting to feel pleasantly drowsy, and the students were invited to rejoin their Houses. The new prefects went on ferrying the first years, while the older students stayed around a bit. Harry saw Ron and Luna go aside for a last moment together and smiled.

*I'll be hard for him with his girl in another house.* He was glad that he and Hermione would be able see each other more easily. He reached out to take her hand and they made way toward the Gryffondor quarters.

As he entered the common room, he waved to a group of older students who had arranged themselves in front of the big chimney. Before he could rejoin them Ginny intercepted him.

"Harry can I talk to you for a moment?" she whispered.

"Sure."

She took him aside.

"Can I borrow your invisibility cloak tonight - and the Marauder's map?"

He whistled.

"Already got a date? You certainly aren't wasting any time."

"Life's short," she replied with a sweet smile.

He took on a fake severe fatherly expression.

"Is it anyone I know? Perhaps I should check with Ron?"

She sighed.

"Very funny Harry, I'm hysterical. Now will you help me or should I use my own devices, and maybe some of the tricks Fred and George taught me?"

Harry raised his hands in mock surrender.

"I give up. We're in enough danger as it is." He laughed. "I'm just kidding you Ginny. I'll go and get the stuff."

He came back with the silvery cloak, and the map which showed the movement of every person in the castle. An invaluable tool for those who needed to evade Filch's nightly patrols. The caretaker's main distraction was catching students in forbidden activities, and he was totally devoid of compassion or humor.

He gave her the package discreetly.

"You know I really thought that I would be doing this for Ron. Maybe I'm going to have to buy another one. You know how the map works of course?"

She nodded.

"Yes. Thanks Harry. I knew I could count on you, and I don't need to ask you not to tell Ron."

"I take it Draco is the lucky boy?"

"Yes." She looked at him seriously. "You're going to tell me to be careful. Don't worry, I won't mess up this one."

"Even if it means taking your time?" he asked pointedly. They both knew that patience was not her strong point. He continued.

"Ginny I'm not going to bore you with a lot of advice you won't follow, I'll leave that to Hermione, and you know I'll support you all the way, but please don't rush into things. Okay?"

She nodded hurriedly.

"I promise. Thanks again. Wish me luck."

"Break a leg."

She hugged him and went up to the girls' dormitory.

Harry rejoined the group of elder students next to the fire, and they started to talk about the coming year's organization. The seventh years were a little distant at first, especially the two prefects, Andrew Kirk and Rosaline Crown. They weren't very comfortable with Harry's growing importance, and Dean Thomas and his friends were plainly rooting for him to take charge. Ordinarily he would have ignored them but he understood that he could not, and he also remembered that the older students had never been particularly supportive.

Next to him Hermione was showing a determined expression and from the looks on their faces they seemed more afraid of her than of anyone else. Nobody had forgotten what had happened to Marietta.

"Good evening," said Harry politely.

They answered in kind and Dean made room for him to join them.

"We were just explaining what we had learned in the DA group," he said. He turned toward Andrew and drove the point home. "I can't imagine what would have happened if Harry hadn't been there."

"Not to mention the OWL scores," added Hermione.

"Exactly. We all got Es and Os, and it wasn't thanks to Umbridge."

Andrew grimaced and tried to put up a good face.

"I noticed that. Congratulation Harry."

"You can thank Hermione as well," answered Harry, "It was her idea originally, and Ron did a superb job at working out our tactics."

Ron murmured modestly but inwardly he was swelling with pride.

"And since we need to choose a new captain for the Quidditch team I suggest that he be considered for the job." Ron shot a glance at him and held his breath.

"Why not yourself Harry?" proposed Andrew. He would have liked the position himself but it was not easy to handle that and the preparations for the final exams. Moreover he was thinking that if Harry was captain then he might show less of an interest for the leadership of Gryffondor House.

Harry shook his head.

"I really believe that Ron is better qualified, and more passionate as well. I'll just stay on the team as Seeker."

Several students agreed and Andrew didn't press the point.

"All right then, I agree to that suggestion," he conceded.

"CAPTAIN RON!" yelled Colin. The rest of the team cheered and Ron found himself looking at them with a big stupid grin on his face. Ginny hugged him. He looked at Harry with bright eyes.

"Congratulation Mate," said Harry softly. "You deserve it."

Ron couldn't speak but his face showed more that he could ever say. He had just achieved his wildest dream and that didn't happen every day.

Rosaline smiled timidly at Harry.

"I would have thought that you'd want to be captain," she said. "After all you've been on the team for longer than anyone else."

"No, I really prefer it to be Ron, and I'll have other duties."

"What do you mean?" she stammered. "Excuse me but you're not even a prefect."

Hermione answered her.

"Harry may not be a prefect but his position is even more important. We want the DA to take a significant role in the defense of the school, and we also have an ambitious project concerning all the Houses."

"And we are all behind Harry," added Dean. Several murmurs backed him.

The seventh years felt acutely marginalized and they didn't like it at all, but Harry had a clear majority behind him. If they'd had more personality they would have tried to defend their influence but they were plainly overwhelmed by the situation. Harry saw the occasion to play his role as unifier. He winked at Dean and addressed the older students.

"And I would like you to be with us. The more numerous we are, the better. I assure you that it's important."

Andrew looked around and saw that he didn't have much of a choice. Harry would make things happen with or without them. Finally he and the others bowed to the inevitable and House Gryffondor was whole again. More cheers followed and someone broke out boxes of sweets which were passed around.

A real party spirit was developing when McGonagall entered the room. The noise level dropped dramatically but she made no remarks and only told Harry that the Headmaster wanted to speak with him.

"Nothing's wrong. He just wants a quick word with you."

He followed her and they walked toward Dumbledore's office.

He wasn't surprised to find that Remus and Snape were there too. Harry greeted the Headmaster and the potions master pleasantly and received a fleeting smile from Snape. Despite his formal attitude he could detect some warmth in the older man's eyes and he resisted an urge to move toward him. He understood Severus' cold attitude as something which would take time to disappear.

A magnificent looking Fawkes crooned at Harry and allowed itself to be caressed. He noticed the Sorting Hat on a ledge and thought once again about Draco's story.

"Good evening Harry," said the Hat.

"Good evening," he replied with a wishful expression.

The Hat cracked a large smile. Sensing the boy's thoughts he winked and whispered. "Someday Harry, someday. Right now you don't really need it." Harry grimaced and saw that the others were looking at him in amusement, even Snape who chuckled smugly.

Dumbledore conjured some comfortable chairs for them.

"Thank you all for coming. I apologize for calling you at this late hour, but I wanted to have a first hand account of the attack."

Harry described the events. Dumbledore nodded pensively but when Harry described Luna's role in their organization his eyes perked up.

"Do you mean than Miss Lovegood is able to read you mind?" he interrupted. He suddenly seemed more interested by that possibility than by the actions of Voldemort.

"It's a somewhat like Legimency sir, but she doesn't use any spell and it only works for thoughts and feelings she can relate to. She can also sense if someone is truthful." He hesitated then described the soothing link she had established with him during the attack.

Dumbledore turned toward McGonagall, his face thoughtful.

"What do you think Minerva? Could she be an Empath?"

"It certainly looks like it Albus. We will have to test her to be sure, if only to measure her power. She must have a significant talent if she can do such things without training."

"What's an Empath?" asked Harry.

"It's a very rare quality which enables a person to feel the emotions and thoughts of others who are close, and sometimes to influence them," answered Dumbledore. He stoked his beard for a moment. "This is a very interesting development but we will talk about it later."

Harry continued his story

"You were able to reinitiate contact and distract him?" asked Dumbledore.

"Yes sir, but only for a moment. When he gained the upper hand I had to break off." He grimaced remembering the pain, and McGonagall winced in sympathy. Snape showed a disapproving grimace. They could almost hear him disparage the folly of Gryffondor bravery.

*The boy is capable of taking the most reckless of decisions. It's a miracle he's still alive.*

He sighed. Where it not for Harry's courage he would still be a Death Eater.

"Would you like to say something Severus," asked Dumbledore with an innocent voice.

Snape rolled his eyes.

"No sir, I have enough to do following Mister Potter's initiatives during the school year as it is." He shot a glance at Remus. "Protecting him is clearly a task above one man's strength."

Dumbledore nodded gravely, his lips twitching. Harry couldn't help grinning at the potion master.

"The Occlumency worked pretty well though," he continued. "Perhaps with more training?" he looked at Remus and Snape.

"We trained a lot this summer but I'm afraid that I can't push Harry any higher," said Remus. "He can take all that I can throw at him. Then again..."

He broke off and Dumbledore exchanged a look with Snape. They both understood that even though Remus was a superb teacher, he would never be able to bring down on Harry the kind of painful mental assaults which would be needed for him to progress beyond his present level.

Dumbledore raised an inquiring eyebrow but the potion master shook his head.

"I have checked Harry's progress, and I don't think I could teach him much more myself sir."

"Harry," said Dumbledore. "If you're not too tired I would like to try something. Of course we can do it tomorrow," he added gently.

"I'm fine sir."

"All right then. I will attempt to enter your mind and you will defend yourself and use the link I create to make me do something. Raise my right hand for example. I will oppose only a limited resistance at first and then move up. Are you ready?"

Harry straightened his position and took a deep breath. He could sense the others, even the Hat and the animated portraits, look at him intensely.

"I'm ready sir."

Dumbledore's placed his hands on his desk and his face took on a look of concentration. His eyes seemed to actually shine. Harry felt a tremendous pressure on his skull and the scar started to pulse, but thankfully it did not hurt. He resisted the flow and ebbs of the mental thrusts and tried to use it to control the old wizard.

It was fascinating. He had flashes of insights into the Headmaster's perception. He could see himself straining in his chair and when he did he *willed* to raise the right hand. He could double-see the hand twitch on the desk then Dumbledore increased the resistance and he lost the contact, and had to fall back on the defensive. He gritted his teeth and tried harder. He managed it once again but his strength was failing.

The pressure disappeared and Harry slumped in his chair, exhausted. The room was very silent until the Hat broke the silence.

"Remarkable," it said. "But do give the boy something, he's about to pass out."

McGonagall conjured a tall glass of some foamy pink liquid and gave it to Harry. He couldn't even hold it because his hands were trembling so much. She had to help him up and bring it to his lips. The drink was delicious and he felt his strength coming back. He wiped sweat from his brow and grinned sheepishly.

"Yes Harry," said Dumbledore. "That was very impressive. We'll work on this again and you should be much more prepared for the next encounter with the Dark Lord."

These words had a sobering affect on everyone as once again they realized the terrible weight which rested on the boy's shoulder.

Harry finished the drink and looked calmly at the old wizard.

"Thank you sir," he said simply.

"I think that will be all for tonight. The day has been busy enough. We can go to bed now. Good night."

They left the Headmaster's office. Snape made his way to the Slytherin quarters and spent some time discussing with the prefects, he had already notice the new balance of power. He confirmed it implicitly by addressing Draco directly for most practical questions. The Slytherin tradition was to delegate a maximum of responsibility, and power, to one senior prefect. It was quite clear that Draco was it.

When all subjects had been covered Snape took him aside in the private bedroom he now ranked and complimented him on his maneuvering.

"Thank you sir," he replied. "For the moment only Montague is in declared opposition, but he's only got a minority with him."

"There will be an issue with the students whose parents are declared Death Eaters," said Snape.

"Yes sir. I'll keep an eye on those." He sighed. "What do you think my father will do?"

Snape shrugged.

"He'll have to lay low for a while. At least until the Dark Lord can summon a real support among enough wizard families."

"Do you think that's likely sir?"

"I don't know. The first indication will be the reactions to today's events. Probably a public relation mistake on their part, I'd say."

He paused.

"I will arrange some surveillance for your house in any case," he added quietly.

"Thank you sir." *I really wish Silena was old enough to be here.*

Snape bid him goodnight and left. Draco saw that he had a little time before his date with Ginny. He stretched on his bed without undressing and tried to relax.

In the Gryffindor quarters, as the girls prepared for sleep, Hermione caught sight of Ginny in their bathroom.

"That's the strangest sleeping outfit I have ever seen," she remarked. Ginny was dressed in a tight leather uniform, which looked more adequate for hunting than for anything else. Her hair was made up in a fancy high bun with some stray locks trailing in front. She'd even applied some makeup and perfume.

"Hermione please," Ginny pleaded. She'd waited until all the girls were in bed before preparing herself.

Hermione raised her hand and smiled.

"Breathe easy. Harry's told me all about it. As a prefect I can't approve but I'll close my eyes for tonight." She frowned. "But I'm not promising anything if you abuse the privilege, or if things get out of hand with the other girls."

"You're a doll. How do I look?"

"You are what is called 'dressed to kill'. I can't imagine a sixteen year old boy holding his own more than twenty seconds."

"I'm planning of having to work on this one for at least a minute."

"Unless he gets you first. He is *cute*."

The two girls exchanged a look of complicity, then Ginny dabbed a few puffs of make up on her face, adjusted her lipstick and slipped under the invisibility cloak.

"Wait!" Hermione called out.

"What?"

Hermione took out her wand and muttered a few words.

"*Odorous Furtivium*. The cloak may protect you from prying eyes, but Filch's cat would smell your perfume a mile away.

"Oh!" Ginny had completely missed that.

"The spell will disappear in about ten minutes. Don't forget to renew it."

"Thanks. I'll owe you the next one. See you tomorrow."

"Bye. Have a nice date."

Ginny activated the Marauder's map and checked that the way was clear. Draco was still in Slytherin quarters. She quickly made her way up the Astronomy Tower staircase. The upper observation room was a favorite dating spot - very romantic in the moonlight - if only because it was discrete, and there was at least two escape routes.

She perched herself on a wall stone. Arranging herself so that when he entered, he would see her with the autumn half moon sky as a backdrop. The map showed him moving and her heart accelerated. She was too nervous to follow the marked dot of his position so she inactivated the device and tried to control her breathing.

Draco had his own techniques for moving around the school furtively. Nothing as precise as the Marauder's map but he had an invisibility cloak and a creature detector, which had the advantage to operate anywhere. He evaded Filch and his cat and made his way to the bottom of the tower. He could sense Ginny's presence higher and started to think about what could come out of this.

Ginny was plainly ready to be his girlfriend, but she would not agree to be just a pretty face at his side. She'd talked of *partnership* and that was something Draco took very seriously. Most Slytherin girls were either meant to become supportive housewives, decorative if possible like his mother, or they took part in the power games and either remained unmarried or married nobodies. Mated partnerships were rare but they were usually powerful. *And because of this they were also feared and scrutinized.*

Then she was a Gryffindor. Mating between Houses was unusual and typically involved Ravenclaws, sometimes Hufflepuffs. The last Slytherin - Gryffindor pairing he could recall was more than a century old. *How did that turn out? I don't remember.*

As he mounted the steps, he returned to the central question. What did he want? He wanted to play a big role in future events, and later perhaps in politics. Would she help him or would she hamper his career? There would be prejudices against this alliance but it would be offset by the support it would bring from the Weasleys and Harry's friends. *If they succeed.*

He corrected himself. He had clearly chosen his side.

*If we succeed.*

The choice was neatly balanced and the defining factor would be Ginny herself. He didn't really know her well and that's what he had to do tonight. What he would learn, and his own feelings, would decide the outcome. It was after all the best way to do it.

He stepped into the observation room, saw her sitting on the wall and stopped dead.

She was incredibly beautiful. So much so that it took him a moment to start his brain thinking again, and analyze the fact that she had *prepared* for this encounter, which was a message in itself.

He walk toward her trying to keep as much of his assurance as he could.

Ginny had the advantage of not having to move so even if his arrival set her heart beating wildly, she had some time to recover. His pale hair was silver in the moonlight and she took in his assured composure and the regular features of his face. *He looks like a wild animal. Seductive but dangerous.*

"Hello Draco."

"Good evening Ginny." He stopped a few steps before her.

She stood up and gave him a calm smile.

"Beautiful evening isn't it. Perfect for a date."

"You're very beautiful too. I feel that there should be some music and then we'd dance."

"Thank you. I would like to dance with you." She looked into his eyes, and her face became more serious. "But I'm thinking of more than one kind of dance."

"Oh." He affected surprise. "What other kind is there?" *How good are you at that game little Ginny?*

Her smile turned charming.

"Well for example the one you did with Millicent and Lyn this afternoon." She marked a pause.

"You were very good when you snatched them from under Montague's clumsy feet."

He roared in laughter.

"You were listening in on us! Merlin you are a menace!" He took her wrist and pulled her roughly next to him. "And what would your dear friend Harry say to that."

"He would like it to know that Slytherin House is in good hands." she replied calmly.

He accepted that. *So Harry approves.*

"And why should I take a partner who plays the spy?"

She had an answer ready for that too.

"Don't confuse curiosity and initiative for disloyalty. I am loyal - utterly - but I will never accept being left in the dark. About anything," she added fiercely.

His body and part of his mind was very much aware of her physical presence. She was very desirable, and her lack of humility made her even more so. He pushed the thought aside. It shouldn't sway him. She was foremost a witch who would not accept a minor role, but who could clearly help his ambitions. She said she was loyal but what would happen in a crisis?

"Well and good Ginny but I have to know something. If we partner together and at one time my interest diverges from Harry's. What will you do?"

She narrowed her eyes and stayed silent for a moment.

"I don't know," she breathed. "I don't think you could ever make me act against Harry, or his friends." She raised her eyes defiantly.

"You should consider them all to be my close family. A sacred link will always bind to them and I will help them when they'll need me."

She placed her hand on his chest. He felt a shiver run through him.

"It would be the same between us if you accept me as your equal - and I won't go for anything less." Her look became intense.

"Only a terrible betrayal would change that and I don't know how I would react but it would be bad



- and I would be merciless."

Draco considered the diminutive girl in front of him. He was impressed. In two days' time he had seen her as demure school girl, gallant fighter, seductive spy and passionate woman. She'd been honest about her loyalty, and he was intelligent enough to understand that anyone who would promise uncritical obedience would in truth be flawed.

She was good enough to be his equal and so, *after that* he could listen to his heart.

And his heart told him that he wanted her and no one else.

He nodded and spoke the words.

"All right Ginny. We can be partners. I'll pledge my love and loyalty to you, and accept you as my equal on these conditions. What do you say?"

She caught her breath. Looked into his eyes and replied.

"I pledge my love and loyalty to you, and I will help and support you in your goals, as your equal."

They looked at each other, conscious that the words they had uttered would be binding, as all pacts between wizards were.

She was the one who broke the silence as her hand moved up to his cheek.

"And now you can give me the kiss I've been waiting for all day."

He did and when he released her both of them had forgotten about politics, Dark wizards, family or friends. They knew in their innermost being that they had found their complement, and nothing else mattered anymore. Draco led her to a corner of the room and used his newfound knowledge of house magic to conjure a simple bedding, giving a quick thought of thanks to Snape.

They made love fiercely, and Ginny didn't give a thought to what Draco was doing to her delicate make up and dress. Neither of them were virgins but nothing in their past compared to what they were discovering together. They finally separated in the middle of the night and with a last kiss they rejoined their proper beds for a token sleep.

Passing by the common room Ginny saw that Hermione had been waiting for her, and had apparently fallen asleep on the big couch in front of the fireplace. She gently roused her friend and was rewarded by a sleepy, brown hair framed face.

"...inny... it go?" Hermione muttered, before she took in the total mess that was Ginny's clothing and face and she grinned.

"Not too bad," started Ginny. Then she couldn't hold it and her face broke into a radiant smile.

Hermione chuckled and embraced the younger girl. They went up to their rooms while Ginny described her date in passionate whispers. Hermione was very happy and relieved and tousled Ginny's hair affectionately.

"So now we have three couples. That should make things interesting. Will it be official tomorrow?"

"You can expect me to have breakfast at the Slytherin table," said Ginny. She chuckled "I can't wait to see Ron's face."

"We better hope that Luna goes down before you do," sighed Hermione.

The morning breakfast was as memorable as predicted. Luna was down with Ron at first light, then Harry and Hermione joined them and they started talking pleasantly. The Daily Prophet's front page was of course dedicated to the train attack and the Azkaban escape. Fudge promised 'a most serious inquiry' and the naming of a special commission. Several voices called for his demission.

Ron was going on about the stupid restrictions which had kept him away from Luna after curfew, and he was consoling himself with a large portion of porridge when his mouth exploded, showering

Harry and Hermione with the stuff.

"Yuck! Ron for Merlin's sake. You're gross!" yelled Hermione.

"Yeah mate. If you can't keep it in, don't take any," added Harry, trying to wipe his glasses clean.

Ron was oblivious. His eyes were growing out of his head as he viewed Ginny, who had walked up to the Slytherin table and kissed Draco squarely on the lips.

The rest of the Slytherins were just as surprised. Crabbe and Goyle had their cake filled mouth gaping open, a very unsavory sight. Only Millicent and Lyn seemed unfazed. Draco had taken them aside to give them advance warning and explain the situation to them. He'd done it to keep the peace, but it had also been a token of respect which had reinforced his standing with them.

Completely unabashed, Ginny poured herself a glass of pumpkin juice and greeted the rest of the table. After a glance to Draco, who was frowning ever so slightly, most of them answered mechanically. The most blatant exception being Montague, his closest associates, and Pansy.

Draco continued his breakfast normally and passed some rolls to Ginny. Crabbe and Goyle resumed eating. *Probably reflex action*, thought Ginny.

At the Gryffindor table, Ron was muttering incoherently. Hermione used a spell to clean Harry and herself. She took advantage of a pause in Ron's ranting to try and talk sense to him.

"Ron will you please stop making a scene. Ginny's not a baby and there's no rule against sharing breakfast between Houses. The school etiquette only restricts it at lunch and dinner."

Ron looked at her incredulously.

"Hermione you're going mental rambling about etiquette. She's sharing much more than breakfast with him. That was a bloody kiss!"

"So what?" said Harry. "She's had boyfriends before, and I rather like it that it's Draco now."

Ron turned a burning stare at him.

"You told me to keep a look on him and this is what I see. He's seduced her. He's going to use her against us. He's going..."

He was stopped by Luna's hand over his mouth while she nuzzled her head against his.

"Shush Love. Will you let me be the judge of their attitude? If Draco is insincere then I will know it. But if they really like each other, then will you agree to let them be?"

Ron looked up at her then at his friends.

"Harry..." he began.

"Ron, I swear that I won't anything bad happen to Ginny," Harry reassured him. "And I won't let her do anything stupid. But if they really care for each other then I think that we should leave them alone. Will you trust us in this?"

Ron took a moment then sighed and nodded. Whatever else he trusted Harry - and Luna.

"Yeah... but Luna, you'll go check on them and tell me it's ok." He rustled his hair with his hands. His voice was plaintive. "I swear I'm going mental with all that's going on around here. Couldn't we have a little rest?"

Ginny and Draco had followed the excitement at the Gryffindor table, trying hard not to laugh at Ron's outburst.

"I think the worst is over now and that I should go and say hello," whispered Ginny.

Draco nodded, and followed her with his eyes as she stood up and went to Gryffindor table. *It's going well*, he thought. *Now all that's needed is for her to get on good terms with Millicent, and for*

*me to make up with Pansy.*

Ron was finally mollified by Ginny's evident enthusiasm, and later by Draco's explanation of the pledge between them. It impressed him greatly. Pledges between wizards were not trivial things, especially between pure blood families, and he really began to look at the Slytherin boy in a different way.

The school year was beginning.

## Chapter 11 - Defense Against The Dark Arts

Hogwarts

Like all NEWT level classes, the first Defense lesson with professor Snape was a shared one with all Houses represented. Most of the non Slytherin went in with some apprehension despite Harry's reassurances, confirmed by those who had done the potion remedial course. Snape was still stiffly formal, and very strict, but he was now scrupulously fair. He introduced the program for the year which, because of the circumstances, had been adapted to include some very practical elements for defending themselves against superior forces. Professor Lupin was also present for their first class.

"As many of you as possible will quickly learn how to produce a *Patronus* spell and we will also discuss shields and protections," explained Snape. "It is very much likely that we will suffer another attack by the forces of the Dark Lord. When that happens we can count upon several Aurors, and most of the faculty, to provide seasoned troops able to incapacitate or destroy them."

He surveyed the room.

"It is improbable that any but a few of you will be able to take out a Death Eater. I will certainly not teach the *Avada* curse in this course, and we will only cover the more powerful hexes when your defensive abilities will have attained a satisfactory level."

Some faces fell, but none among the DA group Harry noted with pride. *They already knew that lesson. Offense without defense is the surest way to destruction in front of experienced killers.*

"However," continued Snape, "you can play a very important role in relieving us of the need to defend the rest of the students, and the more advanced of you will be able to help us directly by distracting or handicapping our enemies."

He paused and saw that most of the students sported eager serious faces. Some were smiling.

"But even that is not going to be as easy as it sounds and with professor Lupin we have planned a number of exercise and simulations to prepare you."

He ended the phrase in a soft menacing voice and with a cold grin which sent shivers throughout the class. A number of students wondered privately if they had been wise to choose the Defense course for their NEWT.

Professor Lupin started to describe the practical aspects of training and his cheerful manner contrasted that of his colleague. At first he reassured them that all precautions would be taken and the faint hearted were beginning to think that nothing terrible could happen to them.

They changed their minds when he explained that the simulations only guaranteed that no permanent damage would incur to them. Most wounds could be reparable in a few hours' time by the healers. He also explained that fear, pain and exhaustion were an important part of combat and they would be trained to handle these things. Several faces blanched at when he said it.

"Now, we know that training is fun," continued Remus jovially. "But this class is also about theoretical knowledge of the Dark Arts, and we haven't skipped anything which you may need to learn here, as professor Snape will tell you now."

Snape proceeded to describe the very complete program he had prepared over the summer, and several students groaned. It made the OWL course sound like a vacation. Only Hermione, Harry and Draco looked unfazed.

Snape concluded his presentation.

"I have two other things to speak about. The first one is that since the program can be physically arduous some students may opt to skip the advanced combat training."

A number of them started to regain hope, but the expression on Snape's face kept them from

showing any sign of it.

"In compensation they will be expected to master a number of otherwise optional curse breaking exercises, which I have prepared from the program of the Gringotts Goblins Academy."

The hopeful students turned green. Goblins were the masters of curses and Gringotts was the varsity. They could expect burns, acid explosions and painful body transformations for every mistake they made.

"The second thing concerns the DA study group which has been put together last year by some students, and which has enabled some of you to compensate for the poor level of Defense."

Snape sniffed in disgust at the memory of their former professor Umbridge.

"That group will continue its activity, but it will not be a remedial course. Instead it will play the role of advanced cadre for our training activities. Mister Potter and Miss Granger will now say you a few words about it."

Harry explained that the DA was opened to any student of any House with at least an E average in Defense and that, since it was not needed anymore as a teaching substitute, he bowed to the two teachers and Snape grunted, it would be dedicated to the defense of Hogwarts against any attacks.

"The DA will also organize evenings where students can be coached in Defense related subjects," added Hermione. "You won't need to be a member for that."

They sat down and the rest of the class proceeded normally.

Draco planned to enter the DA group but before he did, he had a short but intense discussion with Crabbe and Goyle.

"All right you two, we need to talk," he told them during the first recess.

They nodded eagerly. For them the year had started in a very disquieting manner. Up to now Draco had been their leader and the closest thing to a friend that they had.

The pact keeping them together had been very simple. They obeyed and defended him, while he took care of the complicated things of life, including homework. The nice part had been that what he usually wanted of them was exactly what they did best, typically dirty and muscle work. Now Draco seemed to have changed completely and they didn't see where they could fit. He was smart enough to be friends with his former enemies but they knew that it wouldn't be easy for them.

The look he gave them indicated that he understood all that quite well. Which was at least reassuring.

"We've been together since the beginning and that means something," he told them, "so I'm giving you the best deal I can. However you've got to make a choice, same as I did."

"All three of us have parents who are Death Eaters and therefore in conflict with the rest of the wizard world. It's not possible anymore to ignore that fact."

They squirmed at the plain language he was using.

"For myself I refuse to join my father's side and I will work with Dumbledore, Harry and his friends." He waited to be sure that they understood what that meant.

"You can join me and enter the DA group - I think you'll find your place as fighters there - or you can choose Voldemort's side - and we will be enemies. You can also try and stay neutral in this but believe me it won't be easy."

Crabbe grimaced and looked at Goyle who opened and closed his mouth without saying anything. Crabbe turned to Draco and spoke for both of them.

"Er... Draco we'd rather follow you, but what about Harry and his friends? Are they going to accept us?"

"Harry will play ball and so will Ginny," Draco reassured him. "The rest will follow. In any case I'll defend you, and if you get into trouble I'll handle things myself." He narrowed his eyes. "You'll answer to me. Do you understand?"

They nodded emphatically.

"If you accept I'll want a formal agreement," he added.

One after the other they voiced their allegiance to Draco. He shook their hands smiling inwardly at the obvious relief visible on their faces. That evening the three of them, and two other Slytherins candidates, came to the DA's recruiting stand. Ron and some others frowned when they saw the two muscle boys, and the Slytherins were a little uneasy at joining their former enemies, but Harry and Draco had prepared the grounds and no one said a word.

"Good evening" said Draco pleasantly. "I and my friends here would like to apply for membership."

"Certainly. Do all of you have the required level?" Draco nodded. "All right then. Hermione will explain the working of the association and if you agree you'll just have to sign here."

When they did Harry smiled brightly and shook hands with each in turn.

"I'm glad that we now have some of you aboard, and I hope that this will be the beginning of a worthwhile cooperation between all of us."

He turned to encompass all of the DA members.

"I call on everyone that we forget past grudges and concentrate on our future together." He exchanged a grin with Draco. "It is perhaps a little too soon for hugs and kisses, but the first Defense exercise will be a good occasion to work together."

A number of heavy sighs told him that several of them, on both sides, were glad that he didn't insist on more. The Slytherins took their leave, Ginny followed Draco, and Ron shook his head in disbelief.

"Crabbe and Goyle in the DA," he groaned. "Harry I'm going mental, I swear it."

Harry was adamant.

"I think it's a very good thing. If anybody has a problem with this they should speak out now so that we can be clear about it." He paused. "Does someone have something to say?"

He caught the eyes of all of them, one after the other. They all remained silent until finally Dean sighed and spoke.

"Harry I think we all agree that it's necessary. Especially in light of what happened on the train and at the Sorting. We just have to chew on it that's all."

Ron nodded.

"And a bloody mouthful it is too." He walked to Harry's side. "But we'll follow you."

Harry gripped his friend's shoulder, and he surveyed the room again with a quiet smile on his face.

"Thanks," he said feelingly. "I don't know what will happen but I can guarantee you that this is something which we won't regret."

The school routine started once again. The main difference being that the former trio made by Harry, Ron and Hermione had turned into a sextet, and had acquired *de facto* a multi-House dimension. This eventually started the formation of some other mixed group, which pleased Dumbledore no end.

Harry and Hermione also meet with the current Head boy, Cyril Desmond, a Hufflepuff, and Head girl, Carole Themis, from Ravenclaw. They explained their project of an association for the cooperation of wizards and magical creatures. It was well received but the need to get the approval,

and participation of as many old and established wizard families as possible, was quickly identified. This led to the Headmaster sending out invitations to the more open minded representatives to come to Hogwarts and discuss the matter with the students.

Time passed. One morning, Remus and Severus were discussing how to conduct the first defense exercise for the sixth and seventh year. They wanted to cement the student teams in a large battle, and also make them aware of their limits. Suddenly the door opened and Alastor Moody entered followed by a large floating armored chest.

"A little present for you," he called gruffly.

"Good evening Alastor," said Remus. "What is it?"

"Equipment which should help you with the kids' training, at least if you're serious about it."

Severus sniffed in disgust.

"We leave crumpet baking and knitting to others," he replied. "I happen to think that our teaching methods will meet with your approval."

"I intend to make sure of it," shot back Moody unabashed. "May I inquire how you were planning to simulate credible combat situations?"

Remus and Snape exchanged a glance. It was a real problem because with only the three simulator balls Harry had bought, and even when using all available professors, it was difficult to organize a proper battle with more than a dozen enemies.

"I knew it," growled Moody. "You have big ideas but you're short on means."

"We sent word to the Ministry," said Remus, "and we asked for more equipment."

Moody snorted and Remus shrugged. He didn't really hope for a positive answer either.

"Voldemort doesn't ask for permission, and he doesn't follow regulations. Fortunately he's not the only one." Moody gestured toward the chest.

Remus moved closer to examine it. He was going to open it when a suspicious feeling came over him. He shot a quick glance at Moody who was watching him a little too attentively. Remus took out his wand and muttered an incantation.

*Constant vigilance.*

He smiled in triumph when a red aura indicated the presence of a trap around the lock. This was typical of Moody. It only took him a few seconds to disarm it.

"You reassure me," said the old Auror. Severus rolled his eyes and shook his head at such childish behavior.

The chest was filled with simulator balls and damping field generators. Remus let out a long whistle and even Severus was impressed. There was a small fortune's worth of training supplies.

"Where does this come from?" he asked, frowning.

Moody flashed a feral smile.

"Officially this belongs to the Auror Academy but the level of training we require is very hard on equipment. We've had a lot of equipment damage these last weeks." He indicated the chest. "Of course some of this stuff can probably be repaired."

Snape bent to pick up a simulator at random and examined it. Except for minor scratches it looked in perfect condition, and when he activated it the shape of a Death Eater at the ready formed before them. He raised an inquiring eyebrow at Moody.

"I'll grant you that our quality requirements may be a little strict," he explained with a wink.

"Anyway these are logged out of the active stocks and personally, I don't have the time to fill out

papers." He gave them a friendly salute. "I really must be going now. So long."

Remus and Severus looked at each other. They now had enough to organize company size battles, or at least very realist exercises.

"Maybe we should check the rest of them," proposed Remus.

"If you have time to waste then do it," replied Severus. "I won't and I'll wager a month's pay that you will not find the slightest defect in any of these."

Remus had to smile at that. He didn't think so either.

For the first exercise, the class was supposed to organize a defense against an attack by several dark wizards. A special area had been set up near the school and hidden from the students. The seventh years were the first to be put to the test.

It was a debacle.

After less than ten minutes Remus and Severus called a stop to it and the rest of the school watched in horror as less than three students were still able to walk unaided. Four others were hurried away in stretchers to the infirmary where Madam Pomfrey screamed in outrage. Every participant was marked by torn clothing, soiled by mud and soot, and panic was still visible in their eyes. Severus watched them pass by with a disgusted expression on his face and even Remus looked disappointed. Neither him nor Tonks would talk with Harry about it, saying instead that the debriefing would wait until tomorrow after the sixth years completed their own exercise.

This evening the sixth year Defense class organized an emergency meeting. The seventh years were mostly lying prostrated in their beds, the less generous among them secretly hoping for their insolent comrades to suffer the same fate in their turn.

"Knowing Snape it will be even more difficult for us tomorrow," said Hermione. "He knows we're better at this."

Harry was thinking furiously about what they could do. He couldn't find much.

"It's kind of hard to prepare ourselves when don't even know what the scenario is. It would be stupid to spend the night in training and wasting our strength. I'm confident we'll do a good job but maybe we should think about what could help us. What could have happened for them to be so badly beaten?"

"They were routed," affirmed Ron. "De-organized to the point where they had no defense left and everyone was vulnerable."

"What should they have done then?" asked Neville.

Ron was very clear.

"First of all, don't panic. If faced by overwhelming forces, retreat in good order and rebuild a defense. Second, have a reserve force to counter attack or handle any surprise. I'm almost sure that Snape imagined a scenario with a medium sized enemy force at the beginning and then something out of the blue from another direction. If you don't expect it, it can be deadly."

"We'll have to be able to react quickly," reasoned Draco. "The battle area is pretty big."

Harry had a flash and remembered the first task of the Cup of Fire.

"Brooms!" He turned toward Ginny. "Tomorrow you'll take out some old brooms from the Quidditch reserve and leave them outside along the pitch wall."

Hermione understood at once.

"And we'll recover them with *Accio* spells! That's brilliant! If we give them to the best fighters they will be able to go anywhere fast, and maybe even counter attack from the rear."



"Okay," said Harry. "That should give us a decisive advantage. Ron is quite right, the most important thing is to keep calm and work as a group." He surveyed them all. "We'll organize as teams, and the teams will stay together."

He turned toward the students who hadn't been part of the Defense group last year.

"In normal circumstances I would not impose a hierarchy, but I think that tomorrow we'll have to be realistic. We have three levels of skills here. Those like us who trained all summer, the DA group and the rest of you. It's better to take that into account and have the rookers supporting the more competent. All right?"

They all agreed, actually the newcomers much preferred it that way. The group separated with a better moral than they had at the beginning.

The next day featured Transfiguration in the morning and McGonagall was clearly disappointed by the low quality of concentration of her class. Even Hermione lost points for giving a perfect answer, but completely off subject. Lunch was likewise hurried while a couple of seventh years made loud comments on how painful some of the simulator hexes could be.

At the appointed time the class was assembled in the training arena in front of Remus and Severus.

"This is the situation you'll have to handle," said Snape with a severe expression. "Hogwarts is attacked by Dark Wizards and your main objective is to regroup several first and second year students," he gestured toward a number of simulator ball who sprang to life and morphed into young children who immediately started to move around and play, "and escort them inside the school walls through this door here." A large portion of stone wall, complete with a strong looking iron wrought door, materialized at one end of the area.

"Points will be attributed depending on the number of children saved, and on damages caused to the attackers. You will loss points for each casualty you take, majored for children. The simulation will stop after twenty minutes."

"You have ten minutes to prepare yourselves and to setup no more than fifteen meters from this central point."

Hermione raised her hand.

"How many enemies do we face?" she asked.

"Between ten and thirty," he answered without blinking. Most of them gasped at that. There were only thirteen of them and preparing a defense in those circumstances seemed impossible.

Remus spoke up.

"There is something very important that you should consider. We are not asking you to win a decisive victory but to do as best as you can in a difficult situation. You will be judged on that at least as much as on the results."

"One last thing," added Snape. "The simulated children can follow simple orders but do not expect them to fight effectively, and be ready for them to act frightened." He looked at his watch and clicked on the timer. "Ten minutes."

Snape and Remus left for their observation position. Harry assembled his troops immediately.

"Ok, let's take six minutes top to devise a plan, and use the last four to upgrade and adjust it. Ron what do you think?"

"Hum. The priority is to save the kids which means regrouping them, providing protection, and directing them toward the walls. We can allocate one team for that and one or two other teams to fight and delay the attackers. Let's consider the grounds."

Everybody turned to examine the exercise area. From the center where they were, three paths could

be used to get to the large doors. The main group of attackers would certainly arrive from the opposite direction.

"The left path is the best one to establish defense positions, and what's more the last meters are under cover," remarked Draco.

Harry considered it. It also ran close to a small grove which he didn't like.

"It's perfect all right, except for those trees. Ideal emplacement for an ambush, if they attack the main party from there we'll be in big trouble.

"We'll have to secure the grove before the children arrive," admitted Ron.

They discussed it some more and then Harry resumed the plan.

"Hermione you'll take the biggest team. You'll be responsible for getting the kids together and moving toward the wall. Neville your team will be riding shotgun for them and Draco will run a mobile defense. Ron, Dean and I will use the brooms, rush to clean out the grove then secure the last part of the way. If there's too much of them then we'll use the right path instead. It's longer but we won't need to fear any more surprises.

"I propose to hold a defense line here with Vincent and Gregory," said Draco pointing toward a pair of large boulders. "It's a perfect spot to entrench and if we can hold long enough you'll have time to return for a counter attack."

They all looked at it. It was at least a hundred meters from the walls.

"Are you sure?" asked Ron who looked dubious. "You'll be alone for a long time and you'll certainly get battered pretty hard."

Crabbe and Goyle exchanged a worried look and Crabbe opened his mouth to say something but Draco cut him short.

"I know that both of you want to help me demonstrate what Slytherins are capable of."

Crabbe shut his mouth and swallowed hard. Goyle tried to show a smile but it only came out as a horrible grimace.

"Since when have you three transferred to Gryffindor?" asked Harry with a chuckle.

"It not a bad idea," pursued Ron who had been thinking about it. "It will speed up the transfer and we'll be able to get back faster. We could really wipe them out if it works."

They discussed a few more details. One Ravenclaw proposed laying on some booby traps and shields along the way.

"One minute left!" yelled Snape.

"Ok guys," said Harry. "We're ready, we've got a good plan and every chance to make it work. Take a deep breath and give me all you can. Remember not to panic if it gets tough." He looked at them proudly. "I trust you, you trust each other."

They looked back with serious faces.

"What's the magic number?" he asked, raising his voice.

"SIX!" they called back.

"And we are?"

"SIXTH YEAR!" they roared.

Severus and Remus were observing the students from afar. A special detection spell allowed them to hear everything that was said.

"I told you they wouldn't fall into the trap," said Remus smugly.

"Their plan is not bad but it's too ambitious. I wonder if they'll be able to pull it off," replied the other man.

"What do you think of Draco's idea?" asked Remus with a teasing smile.

Severus didn't answer immediately.

"That boy is under a bad influence," he murmured.

"Good afternoon gentlemen," said a rich and deep voice. They turned in surprise to discover the Headmaster standing behind them.

"Good afternoon sir. Did you come to observe your *protégés*?"

"I confess to a powerful curiosity yes. How many adversaries are you counting on placing against them?"

"Thirty," said Severus curtly.

Dumbledore raised an inquiring eyebrow. The seventh year had only faced ten.

"The object of this exercise is to make them realize that some situations call for cautiousness and reasonable ambition," added Severus in defense of his decision. "Better that they learn this here rather than against real Death Eaters."

"Oh I fully agree," replied the Headmaster. "I was just wondering if thirty would be sufficient," he added wishfully.

Snape wondered for an instant if Dumbledore was mocking him, but it didn't seem so.

"It's all we have," he said, gritting his teeth.

"May I make a suggestion?" asked Dumbledore pleasantly. Snape nodded briefly. "Ask Miss Tonks to take part in the last attack group. I'm sure that she will add some spice to the game."

Remus was ready to protest, but he kept his peace. Tonks would play along of course. She'd love it actually. He knew that the odds would really be excessive against the students but he was beginning to think that Harry and his friends would still surprise them. Whatever happened, it was bound to be a fascinating show.

Snape announced out the start of the exercise and immediately Harry and Ron called out two loud *Accio*, soon followed by Dean's third. Four Dark Wizards materialized close to the group and were quickly engaged by Neville and Draco's teams. The screaming sound of flying brooms tore the air and in no time Harry's team was rushing toward the clump of trees near the wall. Meanwhile Hermione and her group proceeded to regroup the children who had started to run and scream right and left. She and two Ravenclaws assembled a rudimentary raft using branches and magical ropes, and enchanted it to float above the ground. The children were placed on it and attached with more ropes.

"Quite ingenious," commented Dumbledore. Snape grumbled something indistinct and activated half a dozen more simulators.

Two wizards were already lying on the ground and the group was beginning to move along toward safety. Harry, Ron and Dean reached the grove and five wizards came out, wands at the ready and spells flying. Harry banked his broom brutally and riposted.

"*Protego! Blugos!*"

One wizard fell down and two spells rebounded against his shield in a firework of sparks. Ron was engaging two wizards while flying at breakneck speed. Dean looked in trouble and his broom appeared to have been hit.

"*Stupefy!*" he cried.

The Wizard in front of him somersaulted in the air. It gave him enough time to land and continue on foot. Harry launched another series of hexes which disorganized the three remaining wizards. Ron got one and the last two were quickly dispatched by Harry and Dean.

"YIPPEE!" yelled Ron, before doing a barrel roll over the bodies. In the distance Remus cheered while Severus snorted in disgust.

Dean's broom was useless and they decided that he would stay and prepare the arrival of the others. Harry and Ron turned around and went back toward the position where Neville was locked into a fight with another group of wizards who had appeared from the right side.

Draco, Crabbe and Goyle stood in the large trench they had dug and were getting ready to face a score of attackers.

"Er, Draco..." started Goyle

"You handle the defense," interrupted Draco. "Use only *Protego* for the moment while I pick them out. Go!"

The two big boys took their place on both sides of him and endeavored to block the multiple spells being launched at them. It was hard work because the energy of the hexes wasn't always deflected or dissipated. For them it was soon the equivalent of being battered by heavy pillows and worse from time to time, when part of a spell effect got through, provoking a small burn or cut.

Draco was doing his best to aim decisive blows and one after the other, an attacker would bite the dust. He too received his share of minor damage and after a few minutes he knew they were tiring. His spells were less effective, as was the protection of Crabbe and Goyle. He couldn't afford to look behind him but judging from the sounds he was hearing, things were going rather well for their friends.

"HARRY! I NEED YOU!" he yelled as a new attack wave was coming toward them.

"COMING!"

Harry and Ron were going flat out toward Draco's position. They could see that he was practically in hand to hand combat with the closest ones.

"*Blugos! Stupefy! Reducto!*"

Harry was launching hexes with extraordinary speed; his wand was alternating right and left while he balanced his broom in synchronization. Draco saw two of the three wizards in front of him being blasted away.

"DUCK!"

Instinctively he dropped to the ground inside the trench and felt Harry's broom miss his head by an inch before it struck the third wizard dead center. An instant later Harry who had jumped from it, rolled in the dust next to him.

"I almost had to wait," said Draco panting.

Harry was grinning like a kid. He was completely into the euphoria of battle, no Quidditch match had ever been this fun.

"Watch out!"

They looked up and saw a fast moving shape over their head. Two wands went up simultaneously.

"*Stupefy!*"

"*Blugos!*"

The wizard managed somehow to turn while in the air and evaded their spells. They jumped out and saw him move behind a rock. Meanwhile Neville and his group had arrived and were engaging the

last of the attackers.

The two boys looked at each other. That last one was not in the same class as the others and they would have to be very careful. Using signs Harry indicated that they split up to try and encircle him around the rock. Above them Ron was assisting Neville and sending spells into the dwindling group of dark Wizards who were clearly in retreat, at the other end the children's chariot was being pushed through the doors. Whatever happened, the mission was a success.

Harry saw a shadow over his shoulder and jumped to the side. There was an explosion where he'd been and he felt a sharp pain in his left leg. He rolled away behind a boulder and he heard a scream and knew that one of their numbers had been hit.

*He jumped over the rock and almost got me. I think that was Dean's voice.*

Moving carefully he saw Draco on his belly a little farther. Exchanging glances they decided to stand up and attack together.

The mysterious wizard suddenly materialized next to a tree to their left. Harry didn't even have time to think.

*"Protego! Expelliarmus!"*

His shield was battered by a violent blast and the wizard blocked his spell but Draco got in a paralyzing hex to his legs. He still managed to roll away behind the tree just as Snape called out the end of the exercise.

The students stopped to catch their breath, and then moved toward the teachers. Most were breathless and a number of them sported combat marks, bearing witness to the intensity of the combats. They had lost four, including Goyle. Crabbe was reduced to a punch drunk robot and he didn't seem to realize that the battle was over. He was still holding his wand menacingly and Snape had to disarm him before he hit someone. At least twenty simulator balls were glowing red on the ground.

Tonks emerged from her hideout with a bright smile and Harry threw her a disgusted look.

Dumbledore was softly clapping his hands.

"Well that was certainly impressive!" he announced. "How would you rate their performance professor?"

Snape surveyed the grounds and sighed inwardly. By every possible measure, the students had won a clear victory. That was good but in so doing they had taken extraordinary risks. The kind of risks which could turn minor setbacks into catastrophic defeats.

He looked at Draco and Harry with a closed face. They were the ones who had conceived a brilliant but excessively dangerous strategy. They'd also applied it with talent, attaching the kids on a moving platform had been a brilliant idea, likewise using the brooms.

He said all this and expressed his reservations concerning what could have happened if some things had not turned out as planned. Inwardly he kicked himself for not having put Tonks in that first group of trees.

Except for Dumbledore, they were shocked at his remarks, Ron was muttering under his breath and Draco looked hurt. They had won fair and square. Why didn't he admit it?

"You could have played it safe and insured that all defendants could get inside the walls with little or no losses, instead you took in on yourselves to eliminate a maximum of enemies. Draco, your defense action was criminally risky. You were lucky not to lose all. What do you have to say?" he added in a harsh voice.

After their initial reaction Draco and Harry was beginning to understand what he meant, but they still thought him unfair.

Draco spoke first.

"In the worst case my group would have been lost but the rest would have finished the mission. There were no orders to preserve our forces at all costs," he said.

"We took a calculated risk," added Harry. "We had the chance to make a dent in the enemy forces and reduce the chance of an ulterior attack on the school."

Snape stayed silent for a moment while he reviewed their arguments. He didn't look convinced.

Draco spoke again.

"Sir, there was another reason for what we did."

"What was it?"

"We showed what Slytherin could do," he said simply. *And even the sons of Death Eaters.*

Snape nodded slowly, he turned toward Remus then Dumbledore, and then he addressed the group of students.

"I accept part of your analysis but my remarks still stand. Fifty points will be taken from Gryffondor," gasps were heard from those students, "and from Slytherin." He glared at them until silence returned.

"If something like this ever happens again then I will take one hundred points from each House and you will all serve detention for a month. Understood?"

Harry and Draco nodded demurely.

"Otherwise the quality of your performance was excellent. Thirty points per House for having completed the mission, ten per enemy put out of action and twenty points each for Mister Crabbe and Mister Goyle for their key role in the defense.

The students screamed with joy, even more so when Snape told them that they could get the rest of the afternoon off, although they would have to clean up the terrain and write an essay on the exercise for the next class.

Crabbe and Goyle looked at each other and wondered if they'd heard correctly. It was the first time any of them had ever won anything for their House, and they also received eloquent praise from all the participants. That evening at the Slytherin table they were toasted repeatedly and they were so proud that they insisted that Madam Pomfrey refrain from healing the black and blue marks on their faces, which they saw as badges of honor. Even Ron had to admit that he would want them on his side in any future fight.

The other classes were thankfully less intense. Hermione insisted that Ginny and Luna work hard for their OWL and drove Harry to Ron to spend a minimum of time on those subjects which they found 'less than vital' such as Charms and Transfiguration.

The first meeting with an external wizard family involved a young couple, heir to a venerable Ravenclaw family. They were very sympathetic to the student's ideas, and they provided a number of interesting suggestions about relationships with House Elves. This prompted Hermione to start a new line of research on the original spells used to bind them to wizard families.

At Dumbledore's suggestion they also started to experiment with the idea of working together as one unit using Luna's empathic talent. The Headmaster called on professor Firenze to help them in this. The three of them, joined by professor McGonagall, had a long conversation, at the end of which Ron was called in as well. When he came out, his face was redder than a tomato and refused emphatically to discuss any of it.

Firenze organized a number of exercises during which one of them, often Harry, would attempt a particularly difficult spell, the idea being that the others could 'get behind him and push' and thus

boost his ability.

They made some progress, but it was slow and what they gained in power, they lost in speed and flexibility. It was clear that they would need a lot of practice before it could become something useful.

None of the teachers were very familiar with the techniques and Dumbledore and Hermione spend a lot of time researching in the library.

One evening after classes all six of them were talking together, comfortably installed on the grass next to the lake. Hermione was reviewing for them the latest information she had gathered on House Elves. Ginny had her head against Draco's lap, Harry was seated up against a tree, and Ron and Luna were stretched out alongside one another. It was one of the last autumn days when they could still be outside before it got too cold.

"So in the beginning," explained Hermione. "There was a pact of equals negotiated between wizards and a number of Elves who wanted to leave their natural wild habitat. The wizards agreed to teach the Elves some magic and shelter and feed them, in exchange for basic house keeping services."

"Do you mean that the Elves sold themselves in servitude?" asked Harry.

"It was not slavery at first. It was almost like a short term contract but basically what happened was that the Elves weren't very bright and the wizards took advantage of it. The initial pledge was... Ron can you stop nuzzling Luna for a moment. I'm talking about a serious matter."

Ron, who had been paying much more attention to his girlfriend than to Hermione, didn't even look up.

"You're *always* talking about serious things. Harry mate, can't you do something to distract her?"

Harry chuckled while Hermione's eyes glared at them.

"Luna. How can an intelligent girl like you suffer such childish behavior?" she said, exasperated.

"I think he's cute," replied Luna calmly. "And in truth we don't see as much of each other as we'd like. At least you and Harry are in the same house, and you can use the common room."

Hermione blushed. She and Harry had 'used' the common room only once, when everyone was asleep. It had been a needed relief, but they really hadn't been able to appreciate it properly while expecting someone to barge in at any time. Even invisibility cloaks had their limits.

Ron looked up and his face was serious.

"She's right. We're working a lot." He ignored a snort from Hermione. "And I think we should be using some of our knowledge and resources to organize ourselves a nice *private* place."

"What about Grimmauld?" asked Ginny, turning toward Harry.

"Can't," he said, shaking his head. "Dumbledore made me promise that I wouldn't use it during the school year. We'll be able to return to it for Christmas, and you're all welcome of course." He gestured to Ginny and Draco. "But in the meantime we'll have to find something else."

He grinned.

"Personally I wouldn't mind a solution which would keep me from listening to your wishful lamentations every night Ron."

"Oh. Does he lament wishfully every night?" asked Luna.

"Yes he does," replied Harry seriously. "It's even affecting the studying of the rest of us," he added with a straight face.

Ron pounced on that.

"See Hermione. It's really a public health issue. We have to do something." He tried another argument. "Couldn't we treat it as a NEWT level research project?"

Draco roared with laughter, quickly followed by the others. Even Hermione had to crack a grin.

"Hum... Maybe we could learn something useful that way." She blushed at Harry and Ron's leery faces. "I don't mean that the way it sounds!" And they all laughed again as a number of ever lewder suggestions were expressed.

Draco laughed with them, but he didn't participate as freely as they did. This atmosphere of playful banter was still new for him. The Slytherin equivalent was unusually made up of much more mordant wit, and certainly not as relaxing.

"All right," called Hermione. "Let's be methodical about this. We need a place with privacy, comfort and within easy access from our dormitories. The school has a number of well known trysting locations such as the Owlery and the Astronomy Tower." This time it was Ginny and Draco's turn to blush. "But a number of students use it already, and it's hard enough to evade Filch."

"Harry have you studied the Marauder's map?" asked Ron.

"Yes, although not with this idea in mind, but I didn't find anything." replied Harry pensively.

"What about the Room of Requirement?" asked Luna.

Harry looked at Hermione and they both looked embarrassed.

"Er... actually we did try it once." Harry grinned at the memory.

Ron muttered under his breath something which sounded like 'Bloody lucky stiff'. Draco was given a quick explanation of the map and the Room and whistled.

"The Room isn't the solution," said Harry. "I'm sure it's idea of necessity will not cover what we want. Except maybe for Ron in a couple of weeks," he jibbed and Ron howled wolfishly.

Draco returned to the subject.

"As I see it we have two possibilities. Finding an existing place or building one."

"What do you mean building it?" asked Ron. "You mean with bricks and mortar?"

"Well I wasn't thinking of using thin air," replied Draco with some sarcasm.

That last remark made Hermione look up.

"Thin air..." she murmured. "Yes, why not? It's the perfect solution. We're going to build a room out of thin air right inside the school."

They all looked at her in astonishment.

"I knew it would happen some time," said Ron flatly. "She's gone bunkers. Her brain blew out from too much thinking. Let's take her to the infirmary. I hope that madam Pomfrey can fix her."

Hermione glared at him.

"Stupid! I'm perfectly all right. Here's the idea. It's something I found from a book."

"It figures," said Ron. She ignored him.

"Actually it's an application of the Secret Keeper charm, and the volume expansion effect that wizards use in trunks, cars and even in the Grimauld Place garden. We can't use it directly in Hogwarts because the entire castle is enchanted and protected against that kind of magic."

"As anyone who read 'Hogwarts a History' should know," interjected Harry.

She looked at him severely.

"If I'm to be constantly interrupted then maybe I'll keep out of this project. Unlike other persons I



could name, I have a lot of patience and Christmas is not that far away."

Harry and Ron immediately apologized, took on serious expressions and indicated that they were listening to her with complete attention.

"Hum. All right, so we can't build upon any existing material without using very strong magic. We could however build a bubble which would be a kind of invisible chamber. I've read that some wizard houses used these as safe storage."

"Could we really perform the Secret Keeper charm on it?" asked Luna. "It's a very complex spell." Hermione thought about it.

"Maybe we won't have to do it with all the effects. It would be very useful to have it however." She turned serious. "It could even be a last ditch refuge if the Hogwarts defenses were to be overrunned."

They visited the library for the details of the spell. For once Ron was the most eager to spend hours pouring over obtuse Transfiguration and Charm books. It took them three days to be ready. They decided that Luna would learn the bubble spell while Hermione would concentrate on the Secret Keeper magic. Finally one evening they found themselves in one of the recesses of the second floor corridors. Filch patrolled here regularly, but they had timed his rounds, and they knew that they had at least one hour to do the job.

Luna took out her wand and waved a complex pattern as she murmured. "*Bublum Invisibla*". A shimmering sphere materialized and floated above the ground. A circular opening could be seen and inside it looked like a six meter wide circular room with white walls. Hermione took over and performed the Secret Keeper spell. It took her three tries but suddenly the sphere disappeared to all but her eyes.

"What did you call it?" asked Harry.

The ritual implied that the object to be hidden have a unique name. He moved his hand where the sphere had been moments before and he couldn't detect anything, which was the whole point of course.

"I named it 'The Marauder's Resting Home' and it's located right inside the second recess from the south wall of the west corridor, on the second floor of Hogwarts main building," enounced Hermione

As they heard her say the words, the bubble suddenly reappeared before them.

They went inside and Draco conjured up a number of necessary items. Soon they had a large comfortable room with a big bed and a small bathroom. There was enough space for a small table and six chairs. Harry had practiced for his own contribution and with a wave of his wand six glasses and a pitcher of butterbeer appeared on the table.

"Whoa!" breathed Ron. "I'm sure glad I threw in my lot with you fellows." He went to test the bed's comfort. "Draco mate, you're a brilliant decorator."

Harry checked his watch and the marauder's map.

"Filch should be passing by in five minutes so by that time we'll either be called in for the biggest detention in Hogwarts history or else we'll know that we have our own private little space."

"I drink to the second," said Ginny.

"And let's also drink to those witches who earned an officious, but nonetheless real, Outstanding in Transfiguration and Charms," added Harry, toasting Hermione and Luna.

They raised their glasses and drank grinning at each other. Harry had placed the map on the table and they followed the movements of Filch and Miss Norris. Everyone became a little a nervous

when the dots approached their actual position and no one said anything. When the caretaker passed them without stopping and turned around the corner they stood up and high-fived each other. It had worked. Harry toasted Hermione again.

"To the greatest witch in the world. You'd have made the original Marauders proud. This is going to be part of the legend of the school."

"Hum," said Ron. "We'll have to decide on a rotation schedule and... Er... Who's going to be first?"

They looked at each other with embarrassment.

"We could draw lots," suggested Harry.

They did and to Ron's chagrin, Ginny and Draco won the toss. His face underwent a number of interesting transformations as he looked at Ginny and imagined things, but she glared at him while Harry and Luna each took one of his arms and led him out.

"Harry..." he started to protest.

"It's nothing more than equal rights mate. And if should I remind you that Luna's even younger than Ginny?"

Ron looked at Luna who gave him a charming smile.

"Okay, but if mum learns about this she'll skewer me."

They took turn in spending a number of quiet and intimate evenings in the room. After a first rather intensive week Hermione convinced them to reduce its use, lest too many students grow suspicious.

The routine of the term went on.

## Chapter 12 - Death Eaters

Hogwarts

The Quidditch season had started and Harry, Ron and Draco were finding that they didn't have enough time for all activities. This started a small recurrent disagreement with Hermione, who was getting more and more involved in their association which had *de facto* replaced SPEW. Harry would have forgone some time, if Hermione would agree that they spend it together, but she had decided that homework and studies should come before pleasure and Luna had taken her side.

One morning Draco received an owl from the Parkinson's, Pansy's parents, concerning the association. He and Pansy had basically made up, although it had taken some time and a lot of patience from him. The Parkinson's were very well connected in Slytherin circles and Pansy's mother was famous for organizing regular dinners with influent wizards. He had been to several of these with his parents. One important fact was that, to his knowledge, the Parkinsons had never showed manifest sympathy for the Death Eater opinions.

If Draco wanted to make a career in politics, being on their good side was mandatory.

In their letter, the wizard couple proposed a meeting in Hogsmeade the coming afternoon and specifically wanted to meet the 'remarkable muggle born young witch' who had drafted the association's bylaws.

Hermione was enthusiastic at the idea of reaching out to the 'hard core' of Slytherin families. They hadn't had much success up to now. At that time Harry and Ron were plainly bored with these meetings and declined to participate, preferring to squeeze in a little Quidditch practice.

"You can go without us," proposed Harry. "There's no real need for all of us to be present every time."

"Yea," added Ron. "Tomorrow night we have the Defense Group meeting and Firenze wants to see us the day after. The match is this week end and we really need to fine tune the rest of the team."

"You're really not serious the two of you," accused Hermione with a hint of anger in her eyes. "What we're doing is more important than a Quidditch game."

"Hermione we've already been through this. We're not stopping you from going, and you can even take Ginny."

"It's always the same thing. I can never count on you for anything," said Hermione with obvious annoyance. "All right then. Go play at your silly game but the next time you need me you can be sure I'll remember this."

"The problem with you Mione," answered an exasperated Harry, "is that you never stop bossing others around. Whatever we do, it's never enough."

Ron had stood up and was moving toward the door.

"Let it go Harry. There's no use arguing with her. We're just losing our time."

"Go away then!" she yelled. Harry shook his head angrily and followed Ron. "I don't care, but maybe one day you'll find that you'll have lost more than just your time!"

Draco and Ginny had stayed silent during the outburst. Hermione threw Draco a glare, daring him to contradict her.

"Do you have something to say?" she snapped.

Draco shook his head slowly. He was beginning to know them well enough and the last thing he wanted was to get caught into one of these disputes. It was a mystery to him why they needed to get regularly worked up about such trivial issues, but he knew that things would calm down after some

time.

"What time's the meeting?" asked Ginny, changing the subject.

"In two hours," answered Hermione in a clipped voice. "I'm going to put together my notes to prepare for it."

She hesitated. She would have liked to discuss her information on the Parkinson family with Draco but even if he wasn't saying anything, she could see he didn't approve of her attitude. She couldn't find it in herself to ask him to help her, at least not right now.

"Shall we meet in the hall in one hour to discuss the last details?" she asked finally.

"All right," answered Ginny.

Hermione walked toward the Gryffindor common room, hoping that Ginny would follow her, but the other girl was staying with Draco, and then they moved off in another direction. Hurt and embarrassed despite herself, Hermione muttered something foul and accelerated away.

*They can well all go to hell, along with that stupid game!*

More than one hour later she came back to find Ginny waiting.

"Where's Draco?"

"He's coming. Some trouble with Montague." Ginny shrugged. Montague was still taking Draco's position very badly, and he didn't miss a chance to cause problems. Draco was all the more irritated since he'd played that game long enough against the Gryffindors.

She looked at Hermione who still seemed uncomfortable. In her mind both sides were equally wrong, but she did feel some pity for her friend.

"Do you want us to review your notes while we wait for him?" she asked gently.

Hermione threw her a look full of gratitude and opened the large, well organized, notebook where she kept all her association data. Her hand was trembling slightly. She cleared her throat.

"Yes, I wanted to go over the Parkinsons' position relative to the Slytherins working in the Ministry and..." She suddenly stopped and broke into sobs.

"Hermione!" Ginny took her in her arms. "Don't cry, it's really not that bad."

"No, I know it's not," she replied, sniffing. "But I always have a terrible foreboding when we fight like that, a terrible feeling that something awful is going to happen and that I won't see him again." She wiped her eyes. "I know it's stupid but I can't help it." She stood up. "I'll just go see him and make up before we leave."

"I'm not sure we have time," said Ginny, thoughtful. Her eyes caught a familiar shape coming toward them. "Here's Draco coming."

"Sorry, but it took longer than I thought," he said, frowning absently. He looked at his watch. "We'd better go. I wouldn't want to keep them waiting; they're kind of old fashioned. We'll talk on the way."

Since everything had been going so well lately, their sense of precaution was dulled and none of them thought to check with any of the adults. They made their way to Hogsmeade while Draco described what he knew about the Parkinsons' relations. When they entered the Three Broomsticks, the arranged meeting place, he spotted the older couple seated at a table in the back of the inn.

Mr. and Mrs. Parkinson stood up to meet them. Hermione had the impression that they had rather dreamy eyes but she didn't think much more about it. They didn't have a chance to be suspicious before the trap closed on them.

It happened very fast. At one moment Ms. Parkinson was holding her hand while Mr. Parkinson had

Ginny's and his own on Draco's shoulder and they felt the portkey effect pulling them into the void.

### *Malfoy House*

They found themselves inside another, darkly decorated house. Draco immediately recognized it as his parent's Manor and cried out a warning.

The heavy arms of the elder Goyle grabbed Hermione and Ginny. He sensed a presence behind him but his first thought was to allow the girls to escape. Disapparating was out because of the Manor's wards but if they could reach the outside they could do it.

"Run!" he screamed to them, indicating the door leading to the exit. He took out his wand and cast a spell toward the big man. "*Petrify*" He managed to stun him before a terrible blow struck him from behind, and a spell sent his wand flying away.

He tried to turn against his aggressor and saw that Hermione was dragging Ginny toward the door. Ginny was reaching for her wand but a powerful hex caught them both and they dropped to the floor. He heard the loud sound of Ginny's head hitting the wall. Crabbe's father was in front of him and readying another blow. Draco feinted to the right and managed to connect a punch to the wizard's belly but he found himself attacked from another quarter.

*"Imperio!"*

His own father was using the Imperius curse on him! It immediately paralyzed him and he tried to throw off the spell, but he couldn't. Crabbe took the occasion to hit him violently in the face. He fell against some furniture and his vision blurred.

"STOP IT! I can hold him now," yelled Lucius Malfoy. "Take the girls down!"

Crabbe, joined by Goyle who was recovering from Draco's stun, grabbed Hermione and left Goyle to handle Ginny who was still unconscious.

Hermione tried to break free but her strength was no match for Crabbe's. All she got for her efforts was a back handed slap of such violence that she tasted blood in her mouth.

The two girls were brought down a set of stairs into a rough featured room with a big wood table and two solid looking chairs. Hermione was terrified but still angry, but when she saw who else was in the room.

Voldemort.

An icy feeling washed over her. Never had she imagined such a terrible evil and cold face.

For a moment all she hoped for was a quick death. Her muscles had turned to jelly and she let Crabbe carry her roughly to one of the chair and attach her with some fittings. She looked as Ginny who was similarly immobilized, and who was starting to come back to her senses.

Voldemort broke into a horrible laughter and feeling of terrifying despair filled her.

On the Quidditch pitch Harry's head was suddenly pierced by a blazing pain. Crying out, he barely managed to land his broom before doubling over on the ground, whimpering.

"Harry! What's the matter?" Ron was running toward him.

By a terrible conscious effort, he forced himself to empty his mind and build up his mental shield, but before he could do so his enemy showed him one single stark image.

*Hermione!*

Harry screamed louder than he ever had, Ron's blood froze as he looked at his friend's face deformed in anguish.

"Harry! What is it?"

Harry turned toward him.

"Hermione and Ginny! Voldemort's got them!"

Ron felt exactly as if someone had punched him in the guts. He opened his mouth and shook his head.

"No! No..." He tried to *will* it to be false. "It's a trap..."

"I *saw* them!" Harry's voice broke. "Ron, I'm sure of it. We have to find out where they are. It must have happened in Hogsmeade."

He started to run. Ron didn't react immediately but when he realized that Harry was going directly to the village he went to catch up with him.

"Harry, we've got to tell Dumbledore!"

Harry looked at him, his face uncomprehending. Ron repeated himself.

"We have to talk to the Headmaster."

For an instant he debated telling him about Sirius and what happened last time Harry had gone away alone, but it seemed too cruel a thing to say. His friend was still looking at him, indecision plain on his face.

"Harry..."

"Okay, let's go," answered Harry. They resumed running, but this time toward the school building.

Hermione tried desperately to steel herself for what was coming and forced herself to look at Voldemort. *Harry was in that situation before. He survived. I will survive.*

She kept repeating the phrase like a mantra but she was trembling uncontrollably and her teeth were chattering.

Draco was compelled to join them inside the cellar, marching like a robot. Despite all his efforts he couldn't find a way to break out of his father's iron will.

He looked at Hermione and Ginny. What could he do? The Parkinsons must have been under a similar Imperius curse and his father must have arranged to kidnap them.

"Get the boy out of here," said Voldemort to Lucius. "He's infatuated with one of the girls. If he stays, it may affect your control of him. We will deal with him later."

Lucius turned toward his son.

"Go to your room and wait for me there."

Unable to resist Draco walked out the way he came. He climbed the stairs to his room, closed the door and stood there. His mind was racing but his body did not belong to him.

He had to get help. *Harry and Snape, and Dumbledore.* If they could get back here fast enough, then the girls could be rescued. He heard a scream that froze his blood, and he threw his will against the curse but he still couldn't move a muscle. "*Stay in your room!*" he had been told.

Lucius moved his wand toward Hermione. "*Crucio!*" A jet of light struck her and she screamed in agony.

After several long seconds, the pain stopped and Hermione collapsed in her chair, moaning. She was nauseous and her insides felt as if they'd been twisted and torn. In a spasm she vomited and started to sob.

The cold voice of Voldemort spoke to her.

"Really Miss Granger, these are just the preliminaries and yet you seem so distressed. Very poor showing for one with such a reputation. Well I guess one can't expect too much of a muggle I imagine."

Hermione raised her head and tried to look at him. *I will resist him, as Harry did. I have to gain time until he can come.* She couldn't imagine how Harry would know where to find her but he had said he would do so. He had told her never to lose hope.

"I'm not a muggle. I'm a witch!"

"You are nothing but a piece of flesh which holds information I want." He gestured to Ginny who was trying hard not to panic. "If not for yourself then for your friend' sake."

Hermione stayed silent, forcing her mouth shut. He smiled cruelly at her and slowly raised his wand.

"Did you know Miss Granger that there are several flavors of the Cruciatius curse? They make the game much more interesting... *Crucio!*"

She screamed again, her nerves were on fire. She tried to control it but the pain was overwhelming. After a while he released her. She saw blood dripping on her lap and realized that she'd bitten her lips. Her wrists were also bloody from the fittings she'd struggled against.

"Now I realized that I haven't actually asked you any question yet," continued Voldemort. "Most indelicate not to give you a chance to surrender now."

"You'll kill us anyway," she croaked. *Time, I must hold for time. Someone will come.* "What do you want?"

"Well of course I would like to understand why my minion, professor Snape to you, no longer answers my calling, and I would also appreciate some details about the Hogwarts defenses, if any, but the first order of business would be the content of the prophecy."

His eyes bored into hers.

"And don't ever try to lie to me. You can be sure that I will know it and then I'll do something truly terrible. I might ask Goyle here to gouge out one of Miss Weasleys eyes for example." Hermione shuttered.

Voldemort turned to Ginny who looked at him defiantly. Like Hermione she clung to the hope that their friends would save them.

"Perhaps you know the answers to some of those questions Miss Weasley?" asked Voldemort pleasantly. "Perhaps you can give them to me. *Crucio!*" Ginny screamed in her turn.

*The last scream had been Ginny!* Draco was sure. His Ginny was being tortured by those animals! The girl he had *pledged* to help and support in all circumstances. He held the memory of that pledge in his mind and gathered all his energy to free himself.

He felt something tear in his mind, and his body was his to command once more. *It worked! I'm free!*

He stormed out of his room. Once outside Draco knew he could Apparate near Hogwarts. He listened carefully but there wasn't any one in his way except for the Parkinsons downstairs. He rushed to the door and out of the house.

He stopped, concentrated and apparated next to the road to Hogsmeade. It was a long way before the gates. He started running.

*If only I'd thought to take a broom! Stupid! Too late for that and I'm not going back in there.*

Harry and Ron had just reached the Headmaster's office when they came upon Snape.

"Professor! Hermione and Ginny have been captured by Voldemort!" breathed Harry.

"How do you know that?" he replied, frowning.

"I felt it, I saw it!" Snape's frown deepened and he started to reply when Harry interrupted. "It's not

like last time. I swear that it's different. We've to talk to professor Dumbledore."

Snape made a face but gave the password to the statue. The two boys ran inside and he followed at a more dignified pace. Harry repeated the story to Dumbledore. He was getting more and more agitated as the two men questioned him.

"Why aren't you doing anything!" he finally screamed. "We have to get there now before it's too late!"

"We do not know where they are Harry," answered Dumbledore calmly. "Voldemort is certainly not in Hogsmeade and no Death Eater either. I would know it immediately."

He went to the fireplace and threw some floo powder in the hearth.

"The Three Broomsticks, Madame Rosmerta."

A few seconds later, the head of the innkeeper appeared.

"Yes? Good day Headmaster."

"Good day Madame, we are looking for three of our students who had an appointment with a couple in your establishment. They should have been at your place about a quarter of an hour ago."

The head disappeared a moment. Harry raised his eyes toward the ceiling, trembling with impatience and balancing on his feet, oblivious to the disapproving looks Snape was throwing him.

The head reappeared.

"I see who you mean. They were here ten minutes ago but I don't see them anymore. It's very strange, I'm sure that nobody left the inn since."

"May I call upon you to inquire further?" asked Dumbledore politely. "Perhaps by questioning some of the other customers?"

Madame Rosmerta went away again and came back to say that according to one person, who had however apparently consumed a large quantity of drink judging from the number of empty bottles on his table, a group of five persons had suddenly disappeared from his sight.

"I told you so!" exclaimed Harry, who was becoming ever more restless. "When are you going to believe me?"

Dumbledore raised his hand to appease him.

"Harry, we must not act in precipitation. I do not doubt your sincerity but it was important to have some objective information, and unfortunately it is now the case. If our friends are in the enemy's hands we still have to determine the place where they are being held."

Harry suddenly cried out in pain and his hand went to his scar. They helped him sit down, it looked like another one of Voldemort's attacks.

"Mister Potter, try to get a clue to his location!" ordered Snape.

Harry suppressed a flash of anger and concentrated. He winced for a while then his eyes snapped wide open in a look of pure horror.

"NOOO!" he screamed.

Fawkes let out a shrill cry and flew from his perch, a number of bookshelves crashed brutally to the ground and the lamp on Dumbledore's desk exploded like a grenade, sending pieces everywhere.

"Harry! What is it?" asked Dumbledore, very concerned.

Harry looked at them, madness in his eyes. He started for the door when Snape gripped his arm roughly and pulled him back.

"Let me go! Hermione... He's torturing her. LET ME GO!" He struck at Snape's forearm to break



free but the professor blocked the blow easily.

"They're going to kill them! If you won't do anything at least let me try!" he screamed as he struggled like a madman, kicking and hitting at Snape. More books flew from the selves across the room, and the front panel of a large cabinet exploded with a loud sound, showering them with crystalline debris. Inside their frames, the pictures of the former headmasters were running for cover as cracks splintered their glass covers. Snape finally let go of Harry's arm and his hand struck the boy's cheek in a violent, resounding slap.

*To think that I dreamed of doing this for years.*

The silence that followed was more impressive than the preceding tantrum. Harry was thunderstruck and he looked at Snape in astonishment. The older man was holding him in an iron stare. Harry's face fell.

"We have to help them," he said in a low, pleading voice. "Please..." Two large tears flowed down his face.

Severus' expression softened. His hand rose, hesitated a moment, then went toward the boy's neck and gently touched the back of his head, caressing the thick mop of hair. Harry closed his eyes and let the man pull him in close, awkwardly embracing him with his other arm. Ron looked on, a bewildered expression on his face.

"Harry," said Dumbledore gently, "we must find out where they are. Open your mind so that we can analyze your vision. We might get a clue."

He nodded, tried to relax but the anguish was blocking his attempt. He couldn't stop himself from trembling and inside his head; all he could think about was how the most terrible thing had happened. His friends, his love, were in deadly danger, and he was helpless.

A new voice was heard.

"Harry!"

They all turned toward the Sorting Hat who was shaking glass shards from itself. The glittering shape of a gold and steel blade materialized before it.

"Take the sword," said the Hat.

Harry looked at it and remembered the last time he'd held it. He remembered that other terrible time when they'd almost lost hope of finding Ginny alive, of saving Hermione. The time when he'd fought and won against all odds.

*I deserved to hold that Godric Gryffondor's sword then.*

He lowered his eyes with shame. It was a far cry from the weakness he'd just shown.

"The sword will give you strength Harry," insisted the Hat. "It will help."

He shook his head, simultaneously thinking he wasn't worthy anymore, and berating himself for such self-pity. The Hat contracted upon itself in a manifest effort and the sword flew across the room. Automatically Harry reached out to catch the handle with lightning reflexes. The sword seemed to melt into his palm with natural ease. He felt a shiver run through his blood and looked at the silvery blade. Coolness washed over him and a new determination finally appeared on his face. He turned toward Dumbledore and Snape, who watched on in fascination, and his expression was calmer.

He relaxed enough so that they could enter his mind. As he relived the awful vision of Hermione, tied and screaming in her chair, he couldn't help a small cry, but he kept his mind clear.

"What do you think Severus?" asked the Headmaster.

"Some elements seem familiar," the other man answered after a while. "Particularly that chest in the

background. Give me a minute..."

Harry and Ron exchanged a look of hope. They were holding their breath when a cry broke out from the office's entrance. Dumbledore gestured to open the door.

"Malfoy's Manor," panted Draco, rushing in, close to collapse.

"Draco!"

"What happened?"

He told them in a few words. They organized themselves quickly. Snape had a student send word to Remus and the other teachers. Dumbledore grabbed two objects at random and transformed them into portkeys.

"This one will bring us back here, the other will take us outside the wards."

They found Luna with Remus and Tonks in the corridor. Harry was still holding Godric's sword.

"I'm going with you," said Luna.

"No way!" answered Ron and Harry simultaneously, closely followed by the adults.

"They're my friends and you may need me. Discussing it is a waste of time." She glared at Ron and her insistence seemed more than a match for the legendary Weasley stubbornness. Dumbledore hesitated then finally relented.

They activated the first portkey and, after a moment of vertigo, they found themselves on the road to Hogsmeade. Draco gave them the coordinates and they Apparated separately into the garden of Malfoy's Manor. The plants immediately moved to engage them but Draco and Dumbledore managed to control them.

The small group ran toward the main door and rushed inside. The Parkinsons were still standing stupidly in the front lobby. Dumbledore dispelled the Imperius curse with a wave of his wand. The Slytherin couple emerged with a gasp, shocked at what had been done to them. He told them to go home quickly and ignored them. Meanwhile the others found the way to the lower floor blocked. Even the Headmaster's spells could not budge it.

"Draco. Can't you open it?" Harry asked.

"No!"

They heard a terrible scream rising from underneath the floor. Harry and Ron exchanged a horrified glance.

"Draco what are they doing to them?"

He opened his mouth but he couldn't manage more than a strangled sound. Dumbledore turned toward him.

"Draco is there something in this house upon which the protections could be based?"

They were all staring at him.

"Think! It would probably be an artifact associated with some of your parents' rituals. Something which must have been in your family for a long time."

Draco had a flash.

"The Orb! Follow me."

He sprinted toward his parents' quarters.

In the cellar Voldemort ended his latest curse upon Hermione when she blacked out. He'd alternated between the girls but they'd resisted long enough that he knew the present method would take too long for his patience. He gestured at Crabbe to revive the older girl.

When Hermione came to her senses she was exhausted and lost in a sea of suffering, once again her mind desperately tried to find something to do, to escape, to fight back or to die.

"Miss Granger it seems that pain by itself is not sufficient to convince you. So we'll try something else. Goyle here has a certain fondness for young girls, strictly one sided I'm afraid." He fixed her as she realized in horror what he was talking about.

Voldemort turned to the thick set man.

"Goyle. What is your preference?"

Upstairs Draco led them to a side room filled with strange looking paraphernalia, and with a black glistening sphere placed upon a table decorated with sinister symbols.

"This Orb is the only magical object my parents used with me. I don't know what it does but they treat it as something very important. No one but a Malfoy can pass the door to this room."

Effectively all of them, except him, were blocked at the doorstep.

Dumbledore examined it and tried a few spells with his wand.

"Destroying this object should neutralize several protections on this house," he said. "I don't know what all the consequences would be however."

He looked at Draco who hardened his face and turned to Harry.

"Give me the sword!"

Harry surrendered it but Draco plainly had trouble yielding it. The sword seemed to be acting of its own volition. Suddenly Draco screamed

"It's burning me!"

Dumbledore spoke quickly.

"If you must use it, do it now."

Draco gritted his teeth and stepped up to the Orb. His hands were hurting terribly and he could see smoke coming from where they were touching the sword. He fixed his mind on Ginny and stroked at the sphere with all his might.

The Orb shattered with a deafening sound and Draco was thrown back into the corridor. The floor and the wall heaved like in an earthquake.

Snape grabbed a dazzled Draco while Harry recovered the sword. Panels and furniture were crashing down around them. Dumbledore muttered a spell and a bubble of stability enclosed their group.

Screams could be heard from other parts of the house and were interrupted by crashing sounds.

"Mother! Silena!" Draco screamed, suddenly aware of what was happening. He tried to go back but Snape pulled him along. They went back to the blocked entrance but now the door to the cellar offered no more resistance.

When they entered the room they took in Hermione's bloody form in her chair and a half naked Ginny struggling against Goyle. A beam of light erupted from Dumbledore's wand toward Voldemort who blocked it. Harry rushed toward Goyle and ran him through with the sword. Both of them fell to ground and blood jetted from the wound to cover his hands. Snape managed to stun Lucius but was stunned by a curse from Crabbe. Stones were falling everywhere and the walls were crumbling.

Ron rushed to Ginny and Harry pulled out the sword and struck out at Crabbe who was distracted enough so that Remus could dispose of him.

They were trying to turn their attention to Voldemort when he managed to hit Dumbledore with

something. The old man was thrown against the wall and, before they could react, Voldemort disappeared.

The shape of Lucius Malfoy could be seen half buried under a mass of debris.

The house was falling apart upon them. They grouped together and when they were all in contact Harry activated the portkey Dumbledore had given him.

They found themselves in the great hall in Hogwarts.

"We need the infirmary. Fast," said Remus. He was holding the Headmaster in his arms and the old wizard was deathly pale and not breathing.

Helping each other they proceeded to the infirmary. Others immediately came to help them and soon the girls and Dumbledore were placed on beds.

Snape instructed a Slytherin student to fetch a chest of emergency potions he kept ready and went to assist Madam Pomfrey who hovered upon Dumbledore. They worked furiously and managed to restart his breathing.

"He's stationary but it's not good. I don't know what else to do for him. It doesn't look like normal spell damage, more like poison."

She gave him a general antidote and she could be sure that there was nothing urgent that could be done, she turned to the girls. Hermione was clinging to Harry and sobbing in abandon. Ginny and Draco seemed to be in shock. Ron stood next to them and tried to speak to his sister.

"We must prepare some defenses quickly," Snape said to Remus. "Without Dumbledore we're vulnerable. Contact the Aurors, Arthur Weasley and have the students organize themselves. We'll need lookouts around the castle."

Remus nodded and left immediately.

After turning away from Ginny, Ron faced Draco in a rage and struck him in the chest.

"What did you do? My little Ginny... How could you let this happen to her!"

Draco backed away from Ron with vacant eyes.

"I'm sorry...."

He turned and started to walk away as he gradually realized everything that had happened. *Silena was in the house with mother, they're both dead. My father is dead. Our house is gone and they're going to blame me for what happened.* He felt more alone than ever in his life. Only a few hours ago he had felt so happy secure in the esteem of his school and House, holding Ginny in his arms, talking and laughing with his new friends and now he had nothing left. *How could I lose so much in so short a time?*

"Mister Weasley," Snape addressed Ron. "What happened is not Draco's fault. Lucius Malfoy tricked them. Draco actually saved the girls, we'd never have found them if he hadn't come and gotten us. He also destroyed the protections keeping us away."

Ron fixed Snape with an agonized expression. He started to open his mouth but said nothing. He turned to Harry who nodded.

"He's right Ron. We can't blame him for anything. It's actually because of our negligence that this was allowed to happen." Harry looked at Draco who stood dejectedly away from them, and continued softly. "And Ron, he lost his whole family out there. He took his decision and sacrificed everything to save Ginny and Hermione."

Ron considered that, and gradually realized the enormity of what Draco had done. He felt ashamed at his outburst. Lucius Malfoy was one thing but Draco had loved the rest of his family.

"Yeah he did. Oh Merlin...." He walked toward Draco who looked at him with empty eyes. Slowly

he embraced the boy. "I'm sorry...stupid git... forgive me. You saved them, you did." Draco burst into sobs and pressed his head on Ron's shoulder. Ron hugged him tighter and closed his eyes. "Come on. You're my mate and Ginny needs you. We need you."

Snape breathed a sigh of relief and started to rummage into the small chest his students had brought him. He'd had his own share of prolonged Cruciatius and by necessity he had studied and developed a very complete arsenal of potions to combat its effects.

Ginny came out of her trance and buried herself into Draco's arms.

Hermione had calmed down a bit but she was still in pain. Madam Pomfrey gave them a drink from one of Snape's potions. She closed her eyes as Harry whispered soothing words to her.

Gradually she began to feel better and she could see that Ginny was also recovering.

Professor McGonagall arrived and turned white as she took in the situation. The Headmaster unconscious and two girls in torn bloody clothing. Even Harry was covered in blood but he didn't seem wounded.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Voldemort and Lucius captured them. We just got them out with Draco's help. The headmaster's been hit and we can't revive him," resumed Snape.

She stifled a cry and touched Hermione's arm.

"Are you both all right? What did they do to you?"

Hermione looked at Harry who nodded to her.

"Tell us about it Hermione. It's over now but it will be better if you tell us about it."

She swallowed and she and Ginny recounted their ordeal in a dry voice. The two girls looked at each other and reminded themselves that they had both survived. That it was over.

They were all horrified but Harry's anger was like nothing he had felt before. It was threatening to overwhelm him, and he was actually moving beds and objects around the room as he felt the magical energy of his anger flowing through his body. He felt Snape's hand on his shoulder and turned to him. No words were said but the man's eyes expressed the affection, support and control that Harry needed. He placed his own hand on Snape's and closed his eyes. His agitation subsided.

At the end of her story Hermione reached out to hold Ginny's hand. The younger girl was quieter and now seemed in better control of herself than Hermione. She even seemed to comfort Draco who described how he managed to escape his father's Imperius but broke down when he got to the part when he shattered the Orb.

Professor McGonagall addressed the boy.

"We all carry a great debt to you Draco," she said gently. "And we realized how terrible you must feel. Whatever happens, you must know that you can count on us and that you are not alone."

Draco looked around and saw that all were looking at him. He was ready to resent pity but he found none. He looked at Ron, Harry and Snape and knew that they stood at his side without reserve. Once again he felt he belonged in their world. *But I lost Silena!*

There were still several important things to do. It was decided to let the girls recuperate and organize a general meeting in an hour. Meanwhile the rest of them were needed to make sure the school was not under any menace.

Snape accompanied a group of Aurors who were sent to search the remains of Malfoy's Manor.

Harry and Draco stayed in the infirmary for a moment. Madam Pomfrey assured them that there would be no permanent effects. The girls were given sleeping draughts and she allowed the boys to stay for the few minutes until it took effect.

"We knew you'd come for us," said Hermione.

"Yes," added Ginny. "That's how we held out. None of us would give up."

"I'm not letting you out of my sight outside these walls," said Harry feelingly. "Not for one second."

"Same with me," acquiesced Draco. "This is never going to happen again."

"Ginny!"

The doors of the infirmary opened violently and Arthur and Molly Weasley entered, accompanied by McGonagall.

Molly stopped at the sight of Draco holding her daughter in his arms. She had been told that they had been going out together, and as a member of the Order she knew the importance of having the boy on their side, but this was the first time she was confronted with the actual situation.

"I'm okay Mom." said Ginny in a quiet voice. "Hi Dad."

Draco nodded and made way for the Weasley parents to embrace their daughter.

"Mrs. Weasley, sir," he said automatically.

Arthur held out his hand and greeted him, and then Harry and Hermione. Molly seemed indecisive, she smiled in sympathy to Hermione and Harry but accepting Draco was another thing. Her maternal instincts took over as she considered the boy's plight. He was now an orphan. Another victim of the evil they were all fighting for. She finally went and embraced him gently.

"I'm very sorry Draco. It's been such a dreadful shock and I'm not quite over it. Thank you for what you did. And thank you Harry too." She stifled a cry and Arthur put his arms around her.

The girls drifted off to a peaceful sleep and Harry stood up, followed by the others. As he and Draco left the infirmary he placed his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"I'm really sorry about Silena. I don't know what else to say."

Draco swallowed and nodded.

"There was no choice." *I didn't imagine something like that could happen. If I did what would I have done?*

It didn't bear thinking about. Maybe one day he would be able to face it but for now he could only push the thought aside.

"We've got work to do. Probably the best thing to think about."

Harry had something else to say.

"You'll talk to Vincent and Gregory?" Draco nodded. It wouldn't be a pleasant task. "Do you want me to go with you?" added Harry.

Draco shook his head.

"No I'll manage it." He turned to Harry. "You know they..."

Harry interrupted him.

"They're our friends and I would like that to continue," he said firmly. "Nobody's responsible for their parent's actions." Draco looked at him and nodded slowly.

They rejoined Ron and the other DA members and proceeded to organize a number of patrols for the evening and the night. Tonks gave word that Mad Eye Moody would be joining them shortly. Once more they reviewed the possible ways the school could be attacked.

McGonagall and the remaining teachers assembled the school in the great dining hall. She explained what had happened. There was a series of collective gasps from the students. The biggest of them

when learned that the Headmaster was out of action. McGonagall explained grimly that a state of emergency was declared and that classes would be suspended until a special schedule could be worked. Students would be confined to their quarters except for meals. The only exceptions would be the DA groups but in all cases no one would be allowed to move around in less than twos, preferably threes.

The students went back soberly to their Houses.

At the site of what was left of Malfoy's Manor, Snape and the Aurors were searching for remains. The house was a mass of ruins and Snape was trying to determine where the hidden chamber had been when he heard a call from one of the wizards.

"Body over there. It's a girl. She's alive."

He rushed toward the source and saw the crumpled form of Silena on the ground. She looked to have some broken bones but as he checked her he found a beating irregular pulse. She must have been thrown out by a window when the house fell. Maybe her mother or one of the House Elves. It didn't matter.

There was some internal damage but she was transportable with a minimum of precautions. He instructed the Auror to try and find any wands in the ruins and then he carried the girl to the infirmary.

Draco was discussing patrols and lookouts when he spotted Snape running toward him with the first real smile he had ever seen on him. His heart skipped a beat. *What kind of news could make Snape act like this? Could it be...?*

"Draco!"

"Sir?"

Professor Snape stopped before him.

"We've found Silena! She's alive. Just some broken bones. She's in the infirmary and she'll be okay."

Draco felt like the sun was rising after a long night. He forfeited all reserve and threw his arms around the potion master's chest and hugged him tightly, thanking him tearfully. Snape was acutely embarrassed by such a public display of affection. Especially since the students around them cheered at the good news. He returned the embrace clumsily and wished he was somewhere else.

*Well not exactly, but Merlin knows that discipline is going to hell around here.*

At Draco's silent query Snape shook his head.

"We found the other bodies. I'm very sorry."

Draco nodded. There would, after all, be a price to pay. At least his sister was safe.

"She can stay with us can't she?"

"Of course. You can go and see her. She'll be glad to see you."

Draco ran to the infirmary and found Silena being tended by Madam Pomfrey. The little girl was very confused but stopped crying when she saw her brother. Draco embraced her gently and soothed her.

"What happened? The house was falling..."

Draco couldn't tell her.

"There was an accident," he said simply.

"Where's mother?" she asked in a frightened voice.

Draco looked away.

"Mother's dead Silena. I'm sorry." He felt a lump in his throat.

The girl broke into sobs and he held her all the while speaking calming words. He could see Ginny and Hermione sleeping and he reflected that today he and his sister had lost one family and gained another. *It could be worse. Merlin it sucks, but it could be worse.*

After a while the girl fell asleep and he left. He decided that it was time to check in how Slytherin House was doing. They would expect him to say something.

As he entered the common room he caught sight of a group of students whispering together. A nasty thought entered his mind.

"Montague!" he called out.

The older student turned sullenly.

"What is it Malfoy?"

Draco entered the Legimency mental state that Snape had taught him.

"I was wondering if you had any ideas on how the Parkinsons could have been tricked by my father and Voldemort."

A number of other students looked at them curiously. He ignored them.

"They were under the Imperius curse. That's all that there is to it," replied Montague. "By the way do you realize that none of this would have happened if it hadn't been for your stupid ideas?" he added viciously.

Draco discarded the accusation. He felt the lack of sincerity in Montague's voice and his suspicions increased.

"The curse doesn't explain everything. They knew a lot about recent things. Somebody told them. Do you think it could have been a student?"

Montague looked flustered.

"Your mind has been corrupted by your filthy friends Malfoy. You're imagining things."

Draco's Legimency sense exposed all the little betrayals in the sullen boy's body language. *It's him. He was part of that plot. Maybe he even suggested it.*

Draco increased the pressure. If he could make Montague admit his crime it would be much easier.

"Imagining things I am? Why did you do it Montague? Why did you betray us?" He began to extract flashes of details from the boy's mind. "Did you tell Pansy what would happen to her parents?"

Montague lost all control.

"You're the traitor!" he raged. "I stayed faithful to the teachings that the Dark Lord defends. He is a true Slytherin and you are nothing but a traitor to your kind." Several gasps of horror and disgust were heard from the other students.

Draco felt a cold deadly anger engulf him. He turned it against the mind of Montague and his accomplices who huddled together at the center of a growing circle of students.

"You planned for my father to capture us. Did you know what they would do to Hermione and Ginny?" he roared.

"Of course I did!" screamed Montague. "What did you expect? That mudblood had the gall to presume telling us how to live. And your precious Ginny is nothing but a muggle loving slut. They deserved what was done to them." He turned to Pansy who was looking at him with a horrified look



on her face. "And you! If you'd had an ounce of loyalty you would have been with us instead of chickening out."

Draco looked ready to kill as he walked toward Montague and raised his wand. He felt he could channel the hatred he felt toward the other boy into a killing force. It was a thrilling sensation of power.

"Draco!" He heard Snape's voice from far away.

*Why should I let him live? He deserves to die and I will show everyone my own power.*

"Draco! Don't do this. He's not worth the price you'll pay."

*What price? I am within my rights by all wizard traditions. This scum thinks he follows the heir of Slytherin but I know better. I'm....*

Suddenly Draco realized that he was falling into the same trap that menaced so many powerful wizards. He had the power to destroy another with his mind and it was such a seducing thing! He knew it wouldn't stop there. It was a way which led to the likes of Voldemort, and only scums like this one would follow him.

He wanted followers and friends but not of this kind. He wanted the respect and love of peoples like Snape, Harry... and Ginny.

Ginny. She would never follow him in this. It would break their pledge.

He lowered his wand and released the pressure of Montague who slumped on the floor.

"You are right sir," he said. "Nothing is worth that price actually." He turned to his godfather. "Thank you for reminding me."

Snape sighed in relief and nodded. He turned toward Montague and the others.

"You will tell us all you know of the Dark Lord's intentions, and then you will leave this school forever," he said coldly.

He collected their wands and snapped them in pieces. The noise was not loud but to everyone it sounded like thunder. Montague groaned and closed his eyes.

"You will never be wizards," continued Snape in a terribly cold and loathing voice. "But you will live - this time. We had better never hear from you again."

He threw the remains of the wands into the fire.

Montague was a broken man. He didn't have much to say about Voldemort's plans, except that an attack against Hogwarts had been mentioned, and that he had planned to eliminate Dumbledore before Harry.

Snape ordered some students to recover the renegades' luggage, which were un-ceremonially stuffed into chests, and then the despondent group was sent out of the castle's wall. Snape had owls addressed to their parents to pick them up in Hogsmeade.

Draco was pensive while the other students looked at him with awe, and not a little fear. Pansy gathered all her courage and walked up to him.

"Draco?" she asked in a small voice.

He looked up.

"Yes."

He knew that she had almost followed Montague and she probably had a small, if unwitting, part in what happened but he didn't really feel any animosity for her. She had been just a pawn in this game and she hadn't really understood the stakes.

Pansy's face store bore the marks of tears.

"I wanted to say how sorry I am, to thank you for helping to save my parents, and ... to tell you that I really wasn't with Montague and his friends." She made an effort to look at him in the eye. "I admit we did talk and I was angry with you but I never..."

He raised his hand to her lips and smiled.

"I know you didn't. He would have told me if you had." Her eyes opened wide at the idea that he could control minds. He shook his head. "Don't worry this was special circumstances and in any case I believe you. I'm glad that your parents made it but for that you can thank the Headmaster more than me."

She nodded and went up to her room. He noticed Vincent and Gregory sitting dejected in a corner. He could understand what they felt. He went over to them and, in a quiet voice, filled in the details they should know. They were disgusted. They had known that their fathers had been criminals but that was not the same as finding that they had tortured two fellow students.

Vincent had tears running down his face.

"What are we going to do?" Gregory's eyes held the same plea.

"You still have your place with us, of course," answered Draco. He told them what Harry had said. They stayed silent and nodded sadly.

Most of the students were preparing themselves for sleep. The oldest would share guard duty. *There's only one place where I can be now. Next to Ginny. There's no way I'm going to leave her alone tonight.*

He turned to the two boys.

"You're coming with me," he decided.

He collected some things and made sure that everyone was ready and that Millicent knew where to find him. They left the common room and made their way to the infirmary.

The other five were already there, having made the same decision as him. He smiled and brought in the two big Slytherin boys. Harry got up and clasped their arms briefly, followed by Ron and Luna.

"We don't know what to say," stammered Vincent.

"There's nothing special to say," said Luna. "We're all together and that's what important."

They settled in for a long night.

## **Chapter 13 - The final battle**

*Hogwarts, morning, the next day*

Morning finally came to Hogwarts.

Madam Pomfrey was only moderately surprised to find that the infirmary had transformed overnight into a secondary dormitory, and a mixed one at that. At least the non patient had kept their clothes on.

She harrumphed upon entering and Harry was the first one to wake up. He held her stare and smiled affectionately at the healer who had patched him up so many times. She felt her heart melting and couldn't bring herself to berate him, or the others, for the transgression. These were extraordinary circumstances and some rules could be overlooked.

She checked the girls, who were all practically recovered and then the Headmaster who was still in his unknown coma. She had never seen anything like it.

Hermione woke up to see Harry's anxious face above her and she smiled to reassure him.

"Hello love. How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I'm fine." It was true. She didn't feel any lingering pain. There was only the memory of those terrible hours but the dreamless night had managed to put that a little bit away. She realized that all of them had spent the night in this room. Even Vincent and Gregory who were starting to wake up. She spotted a very young girl with pale hair next to Draco.

Harry followed her glance.

"It's Silena. Draco's sister. Professor Snape found her in the ruins of their house. She's the only one who survived."

He paused and reviewed the events of the previous evening

"Lots of orphans in this room," he concluded.

"Poor thing. She must be terrified."

Hermione stood up and walked toward her, greeting the others as she went.

Draco and Ginny were in each other's arms and she hugged them. Draco was a little surprised but when he saw the emotions in her face he nodded. It was hard to speak about what had happened but he knew that Hermione shared his grief fully, and that she would never forget his sacrifice. He turned to Silena who was just waking up.

"Silena."

The young girl looked up with frightened eyes at all these people. Vincent and Gregory she had seen several times at the house, she didn't particularly liked them but they seemed friendly enough. She recognized the boy called Harry Potter, about whom his brother had ranted so much about these past years, but with whom he was now friends, as he had explained in some of his letters. The red haired girl must be Ginny Weasley, the one he wrote much about. Still it was a little confusing.

"Silena these are my friends and yours too. Don't be afraid. You'll be safe here. Did you sleep well?"

She nodded. It was hard to speak and she only managed a greeting and a shy smile.

"Hello..." She was comforted by the gentle smiles and greetings she got back.

An uncomfortable silence followed, which was broken by Ron.

"Anybody for some breakfast?" he called out. Vincent and Gregory nodded in enthusiasm. Harry chuckled.

"Good idea Ron," answered Ginny. "For once we'll listen to your stomach. Come Silena we'll find you some clothes." She took the younger girl's hand and with Draco they made for the Slytherin quarters.

They agreed to meet in the eating hall.

It was still very early and they were the first in, and so naturally they took place at the same table. A warm sense of camaraderie made the meal a little special. The latest crisis had brought them closer together and the mix of love, friendship and trust was a permanent background of their lives. Whatever could happen they would not be alone. It reminded Harry of how he had felt at the beginning of the summer at Grimauld Place.

The situation might be terrifying, but as long as they could face it together it was bearable. The exceptional seriousness only showed itself in the lack of the usual banter between them. They all felt that today would be not be a time for games. Nothing special was planned but they *knew* that something would happen, maybe even something decisive.

They would be ready.

The first event of the day came as a summons for Harry and Draco by McGonagall. They looked at each other and then at the others for the briefest instant and without saying a word all six went to the professor's office.

Minister Fudge was already there with two serious looking wizards and Percy Weasley. Snape was there as well. The two Hogwarts teachers' faces were closed and unsmiling. McGonagall looked as if she hadn't slept at all but she showed resolve and energy. Percy looked uneasy and Ron and Ginny glared at him.

Fudge frowned at the sight of the six students.

"Excuse me but we will only need to speak with Potter and Malfoy."

Harry ignored Fudge and turned to professor McGonagall.

"I'm sorry professor. We felt that it might be better for all of us to be there." *I'll obey you but not the Minister*, his eyes said.

McGonagall picked it up.

"You are correct Mister Potter. It is after all normal that all witnesses be present." She turned a cold face to Fudge. "I have also arranged for Arthur Weasley to be here as well."

Fudge looked like he was going to explode.

"What does Weasley have to do with the case? This is preposterous!"

McGonagall was unfazed.

"Quite a lot actually. After all he is father to two of the students, co-guardian to two others and he has also expressed interest in looking after Mister Malfoy and his sister."

Fudge turned violently and glared at Percy as if to ask for a reason to object. Percy cringed and felt obliged to quote the relevant regulation.

"Er... Professor McGonagall is right sir," he mumbled. "There is a precedent for this in the case of...."

"All right!" Fudge cut him off. "But I don't have time to wait until every possible party has been notified. I have some serious business to attend to and I don't have any time to waste for...."

He stopped as he spotted Arthur Weasley entering the room.

"Certainly Minister. We wouldn't dream of wasting your time," said Arthur pleasantly.

Fudge frowned and gestured Arthur to join them.

"Harrumfff! Well don't stand there Weasley. Do come in and let's get this over with."

Fudge took out a note and spoke without looking at anyone.

"I have received reports of a very disturbing incident, one consequence of which is the death of Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy and the destruction of their house." He looked at Draco. "I am to understand that there is a survivor besides yourself. Your sister?"

"Yes Minister," answered Draco calmly. "Her name is Silena. She was injured but her life is not in danger."

"And where is she now?" asked Fudge.

"Here in the school, Minister."

Fudge didn't pursue the matter. Clearly the girl was no concern of his.

"And what happened exactly?"

Draco described the events of the past day. Percy grew alarmed when he realized what had happened to his sister.

"Ginny! Are you all right? What..."

"Weasley," Fudge interrupted him. "Will you please keep your place! We are conducting an inquiry into a serious matter and you have a duty to perform."

"Sir! This is my sister! You can't ask me to..."

"MISTER WEASLEY! I believe I have made myself clear!"

Percy was very confused. He looked at Ginny, and then at his father who nodded almost imperceptibly. He swallowed and subsided.

"Yes Minister." He said in a toneless voice.

He gave Ginny another concerned look and his hand reached out toward her until he stopped it.

Harry and Ron exchanged a look. *So he didn't even tell Percy all the information he must have had.*

Fudge ignored his subordinate and turned to Draco.

"These are serious accusations and they concern the Crabbe and Goyle families who are also victims in this. Is there any proof of your allegations?"

Hermione and Ginny gasped in outrage but before they could speak Arthur answered the Minister in a calm unfazed voice.

"We have a very complete report of the Auror task force, and of Professor Snape here present. Everything fits Minister."

Fudge looked embarrassed.

"Well... All right. But the Parkinsons have also filed a complaint and several families have requested additional protections. I will have to allocate the Auror force currently affected to Hogwarts to other duties."

"But Voldemort is menacing us more than any other targets," exclaimed McGonagall. "And while the Headmaster is out of action we need this extra protection."

"I'm afraid that I cannot do anything else," replied Fudge stubbornly. "I'm sure that the school is well protected."

"With all due respect Minister," intervened Snape. "I have to agree with professor McGonagall. We are most likely to be attacked soon, and a team of Aurors would probably make the difference between survival and disaster."

"That is not possible at the moment. I will need them until we can organize a number of self defense groups. I will consider letting you have some of them back in a few days."

McGonagall was adamant.

"In a few days it will likely be too late. You are condemning us by your decision Minister. I urge you to reconsider it."

Fudge shot her a hard look.

"If you feel that you cannot assure the security of the school then I can assign someone else to head it. The choice is yours."

"Would you give that person more assistance than you would give me?" she said returning his stare.

"No I wouldn't" replied Fudge.

She gave him a look a pure loathing.

"Then I will not rescind my responsibility, and you can be sure that I will remember your attitude Minister."

"Are you threatening me professor?" said Fudge in his most administrative voice.

No one replied but the look on their faces was clear enough. Fudge shrugged and signaled his subordinates to follow him out. Percy stayed put.

Fudge stopped at the door and looked at him impatiently.

"Well Weasley? Are you coming?"

"No sir I'm staying here," Percy said, looking at his father.

"What! Don't be an idiot. You don't have a choice in this. Come with me."

"No sir I won't." Percy turned toward his superior.

He had taken on his old stubborn attitude, but this time directed at someone he would never have thought of disobeying.

"Weasley If you don't come here this minute I'll have you fired!" said Fudge menacingly.

"No sir you can't fire me," replied Percy with a rare smile. "I invoke the Wizengamot Clause of Conscience and I thereby ask for an emergency leave of absence effective this instant."

Ron's eyes opened up in surprise, and Arthur's face broke into a smile at his son's decision.

Fudge was furious.

"I will not allow this." He turned to Arthur. "Weasley. I demand that you talk some sense into your boy!"

Arthur shook his head.

"That boy is a man Minister. I will certainly not attempt to change a decision which I approve of."

"I'll have you fired too!"

"I'm afraid you cannot do that so easily Minister," objected Percy. "My father is a senior officer of the

Ministry and his dismissal requires a full hearing comity, which must be properly convoked."

Fudge stuttered incoherently for a moment and then left abruptly. Percy started to tremble as he realized what he had done but Ginny rushed to hug him.

"Percy I love you. You did the right thing."

"Welcome back son," said Arthur simply.

Percy shook his head in disbelief.

"I had no doubts before that he was right and that he only wanted to do the decent thing," he tried to explain. "It was harder to believe lately but that was the last straw." He squeezed Ginny in his arms. "I swear I had no idea what had happened. He could at least have told me."

"Minister Fudge has never cared about anything but his own career," said Snape.

Percy winced. He had been exactly like that himself, and not only for selfish reasons. He had really thought that the ministry was doing the proper thing. *Where did I go wrong?* He was confused about the past but the present situation at least was clear. Fudge was making a criminal decision to diminish the school defenses.

Arthur spoke up. Gone was the gentle eccentric ministry official. He seemed to be taking charge of things, even above McGonagall. In fact, with Dumbledore absent, he was the leading member of the Order of the Phoenix and that organization was once again the most important thing they could count upon.

"We need to recall all the members of the Order here," he said. "And we'll have a meeting with you six. It's time that we discuss the last plans we made with the Headmaster."

They felt a thrill at hearing that. Harry knew that Dumbledore had been preparing something, but it had not advanced to the stage where it could be discussed with them. It had been hinted however that he would play a central part in it.

*This is it. It can't be anything but the final confrontation with Voldemort.*

He looked back at his friend's father and tried to force a resolute smile. It probably looked like a grimace but there was no doubt that he was willing.

They organized things quickly. Tonks had spectacularly protested when Fudge had notified her of the recall order. She threatened to resign with such fury that he backed away immediately. The rest of the Aurors were indecisive, especially so when they received an official written order from the Ministry.

Mad Eye Moody was officially retired and therefore free to go where he wanted. In practice he had been spending a lot of his time with the Aurors, giving them advance training, and he was a hero to all of them. He berated Fudge in colorful language but even he couldn't convince more than a few of the force to stay.

The rest of the Order came in, including Fred and Georges who made a spectacular entrance with a chariot full of dangerous looking paraphernalia, cheered on by the whole school. The meeting was organized and after getting everyone up to date, Arthur called on Madam Pomfrey and Snape to give them a report on the Headmaster's condition.

"The Headmaster is suffering from a combination of curse and poison," explained Snape.

"The poison is a type of snake venom which constantly regenerates and adapts to any antidote which I can devise. I surmise that the curse makes this possible, by providing a link between the wound and the actual snake providing the venom."

Everyone listened in morbid fascination.

"Voldemort is probably using magic to mutate the animal. While that link is in operation it is all that we can do to keep the Headmaster alive, and we're even failing at that. I don't think we can hold him more than a couple of days, maybe even hours."

They looked at each other in horror. The idea that Dumbledore could die was something too terrible to contemplate. He had been the only wizard able to stand up to Voldemort.

"What could we do to break the link?" asked Arthur.

"Killing the animal would be a solution. Removing the curse seems very difficult." He turned to Bill, and professor Flitwick with whom he had discussed the situation. Bill had a lot of experience in curse breaking.

The young man shook his head.

"It's the most incredible thing I have ever seen. Certainly more complex than the Dark Mark. I don't believe we could break it without killing the Headmaster." Professor Flitwick nodded sadly in acquiescence.

Harry's heart sank. For a moment he had hoped that they could do the same trick which had worked so well with professor Snape. It would have been difficult without Dumbledore's help but they might have tried it.

"Part of the curse's strength is that Voldemort himself is part of it," continued Snape. "He probably has to regularly fiddle with it, but perhaps this is something that we can use for our benefit." He paused and turned toward Harry. "We do have another angle on Voldemort."

Harry felt himself the center of everyone's attention. His face was grim as he guessed what the older man was driving at.

Arthur explained it.

"Harry you remember that you trained with professor Dumbledore for the very purpose of using the link you have with Voldemort through the scar he gave you." Harry nodded. He remembered quite well how difficult that had been.

"The initial idea had been to use it as tactical device in case of another attack. That still stands of course but lately we have been discussing a more offensive approach."

Hermione started to protest. The idea of Harry going against Voldemort alone in mind to mind combat terrified her. She sensed that the others felt the same way.

Arthur raised his hand.

"Please let me finish before you misunderstand what I'm saying. There is no way that Harry can affront Voldemort alone and survive now. The Headmaster believed that he would eventually be able to best him but it is too soon."

"However Harry proved that he can do very powerful magic when others join with him. And also when strong sentiments are involved. We all remember what his mother was able to do."

He gestured toward the young students.

"You six have built something very special together. Not only do you feel deep loyalty and affection for each other you also have a rare combination of talents which has not been matched since the four Founders of Hogwarts came together." He paused to let them imagine where he was heading. "Those wizards build something extraordinary, you will perhaps do something similar one day, but the Headmaster was confident that, with a little help, you could destroy Voldemort."

He paused.

"I think that at the very least you should be able to break the curse poisoning the Headmaster."

There was a general gasp around the room. Harry looked at Hermione and at his friends. He could feel that there was truth in what the man said, but he didn't understand how it could be done. Certainly they had never trained for such a goal.

"How can we do that sir?" he said, speaking for all of them.

Arthur was embarrassed.

"A very valid question and for which I have no definite answer. It's a chicken and egg problem. Dumbledore is the one who could tell you how but he won't be available until you do it." He



gestured around the room. "But maybe we can devise something."

"Arthur how dangerous is this?" asked Molly.

She kept her voice steady but the anguish she felt could be sensed clearly.

"That link goes both ways. Isn't there a chance that Voldemort could fight back?"

"Well Harry has some experience in this," Arthur replied, grimacing. "I understand that it can be a very painful experience and please don't think that I take it lightly. We'll certainly try to devise a way to help you, but it is true that this is unknown territory."

"If it becomes a full blown mental battle, they might not be able to break out," insisted Molly. They could be killed or driven insane, and not just Harry but all six of them. Have you considered that?"

Arthur swallowed and looked at his wife.

"Yes," he confirmed in a low voice. "I discussed this with Dumbledore, and we had planned on a lot more advanced training before attempting anything like this." He turned toward the six youths.

"Everything Molly says is true. It will be very dangerous, and certainly painful. None of us would consider asking you to try this if the circumstances weren't so desperate."

He looked around the room.

"I know this is not fair but if anyone has a better idea I'm ready to hear it."

No one said a word and the heavy silence was like a massive weight upon them. After a while Remus spoke up.

"Can the school stand up against the kind of attack that Voldemort could launch against us?"

Moody was the most experienced warrior among them.

"We've about fifteen adult fighters and they can probably muster twice that number of Death Eaters. They'll have Dementors and maybe other creatures as well. We could probably hold out against that, if reinforcements came quickly. I expect we'd sustain half a dozen casualties among the fighters, and very probably more among the students. It would be a bloody draw but all this is without counting Voldemort. I don't think we could hold out against him."

"We'll do it." interrupted Harry. He knew that he didn't have to discuss it with his friends. They would follow him whatever he did, and this decision was only one he could imagine taking.

It was as simple as that.

He reached out to take Hermione's hand. Trying not to think about what could happen to her. He felt her reassuring pressure and turned toward her. Her face told it all. She would go along. He looked at Ron and Luna and saw the same trust in their eyes. Draco and Ginny were even more eager. *We all want to act*, he thought. *Anything is better than just waiting for something to save us.*

Looking up toward the adults he noticed Snape looking distinctly unhappy. He could easily understand why. Up to now he had always been the voice of reason, restraining them when he felt that they were taking excessive risks, and putting them down when they actually. Today he couldn't do it anymore and it caused Harry a perverse sense of satisfaction.

*Checkmate dear professor.*

He met Arthur's gaze.

"When do we start?"

McGonagall felt she had to make sure.

"Do you really want to do this? All of you? Do you realize what it can mean for you?"

"Yes professor. We understand very well," answered Hermione.

And that was that. There wasn't time to do much. It was decided that they couldn't wait for an attack while Dumbledore's condition was deteriorating. The plan was to engage contact with Voldemort and attempt to kill the poisoning snake, or at the very least weaken the curse's link.

McGonagall recovered the Sorting Hat and led them to a room at the very center of the school. None of them had ever seen it before.

"This meditation chamber is normally used for mental exercises requiring intense concentration," she told them. "We will leave you here to prepare yourselves but we'll be right outside if you need help. Professor Snape, professor Flitwick and Madam Pomfrey will be with the Headmaster and ready to act if you can manage to break the curse."

She looked at the Hat in her hand. She'd taken it from Dumbledore's office without knowing exactly why. Just an intuition actually, that and the thought that the Hat was certainly the one with the most extensive experience in reading other minds. It might conceivably help them.

Snape had prepared some mind enhancing potions for them. They drank them and sat in a circle. It was the same setup they'd used during their previous exercises. Only this time it would be for real, and no one would be there ready to help them. McGonagall placed the Hat in the middle.

Remus was the last to leave.

"Remember one thing above all," he said. "Remember your love for each other. That feeling should be a powerful weapon against Voldemort. Harry, remember that time at the Ministry. If all else fails you will need to fall back upon that. Refrain from using anger or negative emotions, Voldemort would turn these against you."

They nodded gravely and when their friend left they held hands. The Hat deployed itself and looked at them, turning around.

"Hum. I guess we're going to try something unusual today," it said and frowned in concentration. "Ah yes I see what you are planning to do. Very courageous, ambitious and kind. Not to mention clever. I like it."

"Can you help us in this?" asked Ginny.

"Yes. At least a little. I will help you communicate with each other. I don't have too much power but perhaps I will be able to invoke the Founders. Their memories may prove useful."

It started to levitate and turn slowly, fixing them one after the other.

"Close your eyes and concentrate," it ordered. "Harry when you are ready, and when you feel the others with you, then you can open the link with Riddle."

Harry closed his eyes and slowly he began to sense the presence of his friends and love's mind. It was much more intense than what they had previously felt. *We should have practiced with the Hat before. Too bad none of us thought about it.*

He felt the answering thought. *You didn't waste your time. You had to learn the basics first.*

After a moment, the feeling of the others' presence stabilized and didn't grow any stronger. He received occasional flashes of thought from them among a permanent flow of emotion. Warmth and love from the girls, enthusiasm and loyalty from Ron, admiration and power from Draco.

*I'm ready to open the link. Are you?*

He felt their acquiescence and launched his mind into the void toward his enemy. It was the first time he would be initiating the contact without previous provocation.

This time surprise was on their side. He plunged into the evil mind of Voldemort. There was a dark room with unrecognized paraphernalia here and there. They could even smell the potions, and smoking brews. The poisonous snake must be around somewhere.

Voldemort reacted quickly and blinding pain struck at them, but it was not as bad as it at once been and they could sense that the dark wizard was also suffering from their contact. Harry decided to try something. He magnified his feeling of love for Hermione, the deep caring affection he felt for his other friends. He heard Voldemort screaming and the pressure lessened. It was working! They were gaining control and he tried to see around and find their target.

*There it is!*

A vicious looking black snake with burning red eyes was in some kind of shimmering field on one table. It was linked to silvery objects which could be a supporting mechanism. How could they destroy it? Was there something that they could strike at? They had discussed a number of possible spells but it had been impossible to decide on one in advance.

Harry tried a *Finite Incantantum*. The field trembled but it was not enough. They launched *Reducto* hexes on some of the silver objects, and one of them finally broke. Meanwhile Voldemort seemed to be recovering and the pain in their head was mounting.

The shimmering field seemed different now, perhaps it was damaged. On a hunch Harry tried the *Finite Incantantum* spell again, putting all his willpower behind it, and calling upon the others to assist him. The pain in his head was incredible and his vision was blurring, but the shield was dissolving. He felt Draco launch a deadly hex at the snake and he hoped it worked because he had to sever the link before losing control.

He was back in the meditation room, but the view was very different. He realized that he was lying on the floor. The stone floor felt nice and cool against his cheek and he closed his eyes. He was drenched in sweat and trembling with exhaustion.

After a moment he heard movement and voices. He re-opened his eyes and saw that the others were also on the floor in disorder. People were moving around them, helping them sit up. Someone, it felt like it was McGonagall, placed a drink to his lips. It was the same one that he'd been given before. A little strength returned.

"Hermione, the others, the Headmaster..." he croaked.

"Everyone is safe and the curse has been weakened enough so that we were able to remove it."

He had to concentrate to understand what she was saying.

"We did it?" he asked, looking up to the old teacher's face. "We really did it?"

She was smiling, and her eyes were bright with emotion and pride.

"Yes," she whispered. "You did it. It was a remarkable feat."

He smiled back.

"Great," He murmured. He tried to turn around. "Where's Hermione?"

He found that she was in Madam Pomfrey's arms. She looked a mess with her soaked hair in disarray and her nose had been bleeding, but she was smiling at him. She reached out to take his hand. He closed his eyes again in relief and then fell unconscious.

The adults transported them to the infirmary. Dumbledore was still recovering, but he had regained consciousness. The rest of the school had been told of the attempt and its success, and it was impossible to keep them away. Representatives from each house were authorized to witness for themselves that the Headmaster was really cured, or at least getting better and morale went up dramatically. The defense situation was still serious and Moody and the Aurors continued their rounds impressing on everyone not to reduce vigilance.

When Harry woke up, and realized where he was, he reflected that he was really spending too much time in the place. He ached all over but basically he was all right. He stepped out of bed, wincing at his sore muscles, and walked up to Hermione's bed. She was sleeping peacefully and he placed a

hand against her arm for a moment while he looked at her.

He didn't want to wake her so he just planted a gentle kiss on her lips and went on to check on the others. As he looked at them he still felt the lingering intimacy of their fusion. This time they had gone much further than before. He was sure that with a little more practice they would be able to merge their power much more efficiently. For the first time he understood how they could vanquish Voldemort.

It was a very pleasant thought and with it came a feeling of power which washed over him. It was like the warmth of a summer sun. He heard the others squirm and turn in their beds and he guessed that they were still linked together. If he closed his eyes he could sense their presence around him. It was not as intense as it had been, but the sensation was still precise.

He relaxed and willed them to rest, testing the feedback. *It's really amazing.* They would discuss this later. For now they needed to rest. It was not over yet.

"Good morning Harry."

He turned at the sound of Dumbledore's voice. The Headmaster was sitting in bed. Propped up by pillows with Fawkes perched on the bed railings. Harry had to smile at the impressive amount of boxes of sweets and treats on his bed table. He walked up to him.

"Good morning sir. How are you feeling?"

Dumbledore reached out for a box of chocolate frogs and offered it to him.

"Much better thanks to you and your friends Harry. For once let me offer you one of my get-well candy." He smiled kindly at Harry and his eyes were twinkling with pleasure and something more.

"You taught us very well sir," Harry said.

He looked at the older man and realized what an understatement that was. Dumbledore had done more than just teach them. He had brought them together and given Harry the elements of a wonderful life, and the solution to the terrible curse of the prophecy. Harry felt tears of happiness swell in his eyes when he thought about it.

Dumbledore was looking at him with pride and he too felt the affection pouring out of the boy's heart. He swallowed a lump.

"Harry my dear boy..." his voice broke and Harry couldn't take it anymore. He rushed to embrace the old wizard who meant so much to him.

Dumbledore returned the embrace and closed his eyes. He had hoped that such a moment would come. When he would finally have no secrets to hold from Harry, no higher responsibility to prevent him from hiding his true feeling. And now Harry was his own man, who could find his own way. He still had a lot to learn, many battles to fight, but he could do it on his own. He, Albus, would be a friend and an ally but Harry had gained his independence today.

Harry understood some of that. The new assurance showed in his manner. There was tremendous respect and love for the old Headmaster, but he wasn't anymore the little boy who knew he could pass on responsibilities to the old wizard.

They talked for a moment, as friends. Dumbledore explained, and Harry was paradoxically glad to hear it, that there were no hidden plans anymore. What Harry and his friends had done was the ultimate weapon which could be used against Voldemort. Beyond that the field was open. There would be other tasks but they would tackle them together.

"What do you think will happen now?" asked Harry.

Dumbledore sighted.

"I don't think that Voldemort, he will always be Tom Riddle to me, has any choice but to attack us

as soon as possible." He looked at Harry. "You have demonstrated that you can engage him at will. He knows that, as you grow stronger, you will be able to destroy him. He only has two choices: attempt to build up a defense against a force he doesn't understand or attack now and hope to destroy us when he still thinks he has an edge."

Harry nodded. He thought the same thing.

"Should we attempt to attack him again? We barely made it that last time."

"You did something extraordinary considering the limited experience that you had," replied Dumbledore seriously. "It will be better next time but I don't think it would be sufficient. But perhaps we can give you some additional help."

"What do you mean? Could you link with us?"

"No. It could perhaps be done with time but we don't have enough of that. I was thinking of the other students. You're all heroes to them you know. They would follow you in this final battle."

Harry frowned. "How could they participate?"

"Through the Sorting Hat, and the memory of the Founders. The Hat has been inside every one of their minds, it has helped you last time, and the Founders were the last to use such magic."

Harry was fascinated at the idea. The Headmaster continued.

"Each individual student doesn't have much power, but they would back you up and globally they can contribute a lot. Furthermore the fact that the entire school would be behind you would also invoke the whole of the magical potential inside these walls. I can't imagine anything holding out against that."

They were silent for a moment. It sobered him to think that such power would only come from others. If it belonged only to him, it would probably end corrupting him. It seemed proper that he could only call upon it if his friends were with him.

Another thought occurred to Harry.

"Won't he be able to get away?"

"He must not," said Dumbledore gravely. "I won't be able to hold him if he's too far away and that's going to be the crux. We'll have to let him come in very close. Maybe even think that he is winning."

The old and the young wizard looked at each other. Harry was beginning to realize how dangerous it would be.

"You mean that they will have to be inside the school? Won't that mean casualties among us? Among the students?" He was horrified.

Dumbledore's face reflected the same concern.

"If we had more adults we could keep the students in the most protected part. As it is, and because of Minister Fudge's decision," the Headmaster's voice was bitter, "we will have to count upon the older students for defense."

He sighed.

"I have contacted the Wizengamot, and we may be able to count on reinforcements in a couple of days." A grim smile appeared on his face. "Several important wizards are very unhappy with the Minister's decision. It will be difficult for him to survive this politically." He shrugged. "But that is not very important compared to other things."

His smile turned mischievous.

"However I have also been talking with Fred and George Weasleys and we may have a solution."

He described the twin's ideas and despite the gravity of the matter Harry couldn't help smiling and even chuckling of the idea. *Trust those two to come up with such a thing.*

The entire school was assembled once again in the great dining hall. They listened gravely as the Headmaster explained the situation and described the defense plan.

"We cannot be sure when the attack will come, or if it will occur at all," he concluded. "But if it does it will come soon. Each of you has his assigned role and I know that I can count on every one of you."

He paused.

"I have never been as proud of this school, of the faculty and of you students as I am today. This is a moment which we, and the wizard world, will always remember as a source of pride and inspiration. Today will forever become Hogwarts' day. Your day."

The entire hall applauded and cheered wildly as he bowed to them. Everyone stood up and shouted until one word was taken up rhythmically, first by a few groups then by all of them.

"Hogwarts! Hogwarts! Hogwarts! HOGWARTS! HOGWARTS! HOGWARTS!..."

The noise was deafening. Even the teachers were taking it up. Dumbledore stood in the middle of the ovation and after a while he raised his hands and there was silence.

He waited a moment and then, smiling with pride and affection he spoke the final words.

"Go now my dear children. My blessings upon you all."

Soberly the students got up and left for their assigned posts. Everyone had a role to play, however minor. The first and second year students would be relaying messages and ferrying supplies. Third fourth and fifth years were busy brewing potions and enchanting items under the directions of Fred and Georges and the teachers. The older students were mixed with the Aurors and teachers combat teams.

Some of those teams were patrolling the grounds outside the school, with particular attention to the area next to the Forbidden Forest and the road leading to Hogsmeade. The village community was also on a war footing. Since it was very difficult to defend it had been decided that it would be abandoned quickly if attacked. Anyone who could not Disapparate had already been evacuated.

The school ramparts and tower were filled with figures, eagerly scrutinizing the countryside and the sky.

As the time passed tension grew among the defenders. Harry and his friends talked together. Their conversation came and went about little things. Anything but what was going to happen. The couples held each other's hands. Without needing to say it, each felt that doing anymore would disrupt the communion they felt. And it would also feel too much like a last goodbye. They would have time later, and if they did not then nothing would matter.

Time passed slowly.

From his vantage point, Voldemort surveyed the castle in the distance. It had been a long time since he'd seen it last, as a wretched spirit inside the flesh of professor Quirrell. That time didn't count. He had been barely alive then and the memory was unpleasant.

*Damn that Potter boy!*

Their last encounter had been a nasty shock.

*How could he have grown so powerful? Probably some relics of that damned mother of his. That must be it. That and some Legimency mind tricks Dumbledore must have taught him.*

Voldemort told himself that it hadn't worked. At least it hadn't managed to hurt him, although the pain had been pretty bad.

*If Potter tries that again I'll be ready and I'll fry his brain. No more fooling around now.*

The attack plan was simple. He knew that the defenses would be weak. Fudge has once again nicely obliged by recalling the elite defenders. He would face only a couple of Aurors, the students themselves and a weakened Dumbledore.

And he would shock them. He would kill scores of the students until they would all scream in panic. It was a waste but the adult defenders would not be able to fight properly among such mayhem. They would attempt to save the children and his Death Eaters would pick them out one by one.

He gave the signal and a first wave of black winged reptiles took off and flew toward the school. The Dementors would follow. These were cannon fodder but they were necessary to saturate the defense. He only had thirty Death Eaters and he had lost some of the best. He looked in disgust at Bellatrix.

"Don't disappoint me once again," he snarled at her. "I don't expect to see you again if we don't succeed. Don't try to kill Potter, he is mine, but those friends of his are your target."

Bellatrix's eyes burned with hatred. She was even gaunter than before and he knew that she had trained herself tirelessly since that last battle, and that she drove the other Death Eater as hard as herself. She would be a terrifying fighter.

They mounted their brooms and flew toward the castle. Flashes of spells could be seen striking his birds out of the sky and here and there a few *Patronus* engaged the Dementors. The pressure was on and it was the perfect moment to strike.

Already he could see some bodies lying around. He felt a savage surge of joy at this.

*I'm hurting them! Finally. This is an omen of what is to come.*

The Death Eaters started to launch spells of their own but then something new happened. Patches of white mist appeared among the defense lines and the visibility dropped quickly.

When the first Death Eaters reached the walls. Most of the birds were gone, or invisible, and a good number of the Dementors had been routed toward the forest.

*It doesn't matter. We're in. They're in retreat. We'll fight them inside.*

The great doors were locked but Voldemort had a plan for that. He walked up to a side wall and whispered a few words in parseltongue. Several stones moved and rearranged themselves to form a small door. He chuckled to himself as he remembered how he had prepared this entrance more than fifty years ago, in his seventh year when he had realized that he might need to make a less than welcome return.

Inside they met with some fierce resistance. They didn't spot Potter or Dumbledore but the few Aurors and students they met were no real match for them. Still, in part because of the white mist which obscured much of their vision, those defenders managed to take out several attackers and in the close confine Voldemort resolved to take no chances and let his minions lead the way.

He tried to dispel the mist but it seemed to be constantly regenerating. He thought it an interesting but minor thing which only hindered them a little. The screams and sounds of battle left no doubt as to how the fight was going, as did the gory stains and the broken bodies along the way.

*I am winning. Soon I will confront them in their last retreat and then they will die and I will rule forever.*

The fighting went on. Finally they entered a great room and he saw the last of them. Dumbledore was on his knees in the center, his robe torn and one arm was hanging down as if broken. His eyes were glazed and he looked stunned. Harry was at his side with the Granger girl limp and bloody in his arms. A few pitiful crying children were huddled in a corner.

He pointed his wand at the Headmaster and blasted him away.

*This is the end. So easy. I should have done this before.*

"So Potter is that all you can do? Frankly I'm not impressed."

Harry cried in rage and raised his wand. Voldemort made a quick gesture and it flew out of the boy's hand.

"More than that. I think I'm disappointed. I truly expected a great fight. Well no matter. Die then! *Avada Kevada.*"

He launched the killing spell aiming straight at the boy who was attempting to run toward him.  
*Whatever for? This is boring.*

Then everything disappeared. Voldemort turned around and found that he was alone in the room with his Death Eaters.

*What in Hell is happening? An illusion! How could they have done that?*

Before he could react he felt the mounting pressure in his head.

*Potter! He sought to trick me and now he's trying the same mind trick as before. Well little good will it do him.*

Voldemort lashed out with all his power against Harry's mental probe. He didn't bother to try to inflict pain, pure savage destruction would do.

He felt the tremendous surge of power reflected back at him. It was all he could do to neutralize and dissipate it. The Death Eaters next to him were caught in some of it and screamed in agony. He himself dropped on his knees.

*It's a trap! I've got to get out of here.*

He tried Disapparating but of course it didn't work inside the wards. And he had no portkey!

He had to leave this place quickly. He ignored the screams of his followers and stumbled toward the door but the pressure in his mind increased.

*So much power! It's impossible!*

He tried every trick he knew and still the pressure and pain mounted. It was more than pain. Those thoughts were pure nausea. It was more than he could take.

He vomited on the floor. Black bile and blood burst from him, from his mouth, his nose, his eyes. He was blind. He ran and stuck the wall, racked his nails on it.

Still the pressure mounted. He crawled along the floor, leaving a bloody trail. He didn't even feel his body anymore. It was like he was disintegrating. There were no thoughts anymore. Only pain and a terrible disgust. Anything was better than that. Even death.

It was his last coherent feeling as he fell into oblivion.

Inside the Chamber of Secrets Harry felt Voldemort die. The others could feel it too, even the students perceived part of that sickening agony. It was awful, but he had been the driving will behind this *execution* and sensed everything. He wondered if he would ever stop feeling disgusted at what he had done.

No one said a word. Harry was shivering and terribly afraid of looking at his friends' eyes. Fearing what they would see in his. Or what he would see in theirs.

It had started as something so pure, so noble. They had felt the power of their love, friendship, all those brilliant generous feelings and they had used it to carry out a terribly evil and disgusted deed.

It had been a crime. A necessary one perhaps but a crime nonetheless. They had defiled themselves.



He looked at Hermione, whose face was as stricken as his, and started to sob. A terrible raking anguish overwhelmed him. The others joined in and soon the sound of crying was deafening in the enclosed space. It reverberated against the stone walls like a heartrending concert of grief.

They wept for the innocence they had lost. It had felt like a game before. A dangerous and serious game but still not something which could claim their soul.

Dumbledore and the other adults were crying too. Not as wholeheartedly, but they understood what had happened. They cried in shame for having had to lead their students through that terrible act.

No one should have to pay such a price.

After a while, one after the other the children fell asleep, exhausted and drained. Dumbledore stood up and made sure that their sleep would be as deep as possible and then he gathered the teachers, House Elves and adults and gave his instructions.

It took a long time but one by one the students were carried to their beds and tucked in. Spells were cast, potions were made and administered and finally the bone tired adults could retire in their turn, but before that they all passed one more time in front of the Headmaster...

Harry woke up in his bed. His mind was still fuzzy with sleep and for a moment he couldn't recall what day it was or how he had gotten to bed.

He stood up and went to Ron's bed.

"Ron, Ron! Wake up!"

A disheveled red topped face emerged from the pillows.

"..Ugh. What's up?"

"Ron! What happened?" Harry struggled to find the words to describe what he felt.

"What do you mean what happened?" Ron was anything but a fast riser and his morning puffed up face usually amused Harry, but not today.

"Ron! I want to know what happened yesterday. I can't remember!"

"Remember what?" Ron massaged his face. "Nothing special happened. We just..." The astonished look on his face would have been funny in other circumstances. "I can't remember either."

"Where are the girls?" Harry didn't even bother to dress. He ran down to the common room where he found professor McGonagall sprawled on the largest sofa.

"Harry!" Hermione and Ginny arrived from the girls' dormitory. He felt relief at seeing her and they rushed to embrace each other.

"Hermione what happened? I can't remember what happened last night!" It was eerily strange to be in such peaceful surrounding and yet to know that a very important part was missing.

He tried to recall the events of the previous day. *They had spent the night in the infirmary...broken the curse on Dumbledore and then...*

"What happened with Voldemort?" he asked suddenly.

"You can stop worrying about him. He's dead." answered professor McGonagall in a tired voice.

They whirled around to look at her. She wasn't a fast riser either and the sofa wasn't a very comfortable bed.

"What happened?" they cried as one.

She cringed and closed her eyes in pain.

"Please! Everything is fine. I will tell you all about it but I will not be questioned after all that night's work, without a decent cup of tea first." She gathered her robes and stood up but some

puzzlement appeared on her face. "I..." She shook her head in annoyance. "No matter. You have time to get dressed and you can meet me in the dining hall in ten minutes."

"Professor..."

"I said ten minutes Harry." She looked unsure of herself and almost ran out of the room.

Hermione was the first to react.

"All right. We'll do as she says. Back here in five minutes."

When they came back and walked toward the hall they were joined by Draco and Luna. Everyone they met had the same symptoms of partial amnesia. No one could recall anything until they had regrouped inside the Chamber of Secrets. The plan had been to run a mobile defense using the simulators and create enough illusions so that Voldemort and his Death Eaters would be drawn unsuspecting deep inside the school. Since the wards would prevent them from leaving they would have to engage in the prepared battle.

It must have worked or else they couldn't imagine that things would be so peaceful, but why couldn't they have any memories of it?

They found McGonagall sipping her tea with Dumbledore. Both looked very tired, especially the Headmaster who looked carefully at Harry's face. McGonagall looked... angry.

"Good morning Harry. How are you feeling?" he asked in his gentle voice.

"I'm fine sir. Really fine. Except that I, we, don't remember what finally happened."

Dumbledore answered gravely.

"I know Harry. I did that to you and to the others." He turned toward McGonagall who glared back.

They were puzzled.

"But sir, why?" asked Hermione. The idea of having her memory changed was very disturbing to her, and she guessed that the same thing had been done to the Transfiguration teacher as well.

"It was for your own good," the headmaster said. "Believe me, it is not something which I did lightly but it was necessary." He looked at them and they saw something very dark and sad in his eyes.

Harry was beginning to understand.

"Was it... very bad sir?" he asked gently.

The old wizard closed his eyes and nodded slowly.

"Yes it was Harry. Voldemort didn't die easily and you had to... Well you did what had to be done." He shivered and his voice was heavy with pain. "Please believe me that I didn't think it would be so awful. I am terribly sorry you had to do this and I did what I could to... repair things."

He sighed.

"Your memories will return slowly with time. When you will be better prepared to understand them."

There was a long pause as they digested his words.

"Voldemort is gone forever," continued Dumbledore. "And you are heroes. To us, to the school and to the world."

"That is good but it can be a heavy load. Let us hope that you can put that away for some time. You are still students and you still have a number of things to learn, trivial things compared to what you have seen, but you will need them nonetheless." He tried to smile at them. "And you have your lives to live. I know these will be rich enough and that you will find sufficient challenges to occupy you."

He sounded terribly weary; there was no twinkle in his eyes anymore.

Harry looked at his friends. He was grateful for the old wizard's last gift. He had dreaded so much to fulfill the obligation of the Prophecy. To kill or be killed. He was glad that it was over and gone. He, for one, wouldn't miss the memories. The others weren't so sure. They hadn't really realized, and agonized over such things. No matter, they would understand in time.

Turning back to the old wizard he thought he understood what he was feeling. He'd had his share of feeling guilty for terrible events. He knew how awful that could be. He couldn't leave him shouldering such a load.

He went up to the Headmaster, smiled at him and spoke from his heart, like a little boy who had received a wonderful gift from a dotting grandparent.

"Thank you sir. Thank you for what you did."

Dumbledore's eyes misted and he opened his mouth to speak but found that he couldn't. It was all he could to simply smile at the boy he loved so much, and who has risen to such a tremendous challenge and who after all those trials, still understood and loved him. He had been ready to lose his trust, the wonderful harmony and complicity that they had so briefly shared, and Harry was telling him that he had lost nothing.

He nodded convulsively and some life returned to his eyes. He sat up a little straighter. The other were still wondering what was happening but Harry and Dumbledore looked at each other and there was only affection and respect in their eyes.

"The Christmas vacation would have been starting soon anyway. I think that we'll advance it. We could all use the rest certainly," the Headmaster finally said.

Professor McGonagall sighed loudly and everyone smiled at hearing her. Dumbledore stood up and left them.

The six looked at each other. Yes it would be nice to go back to Grimauld Place. Ginny took Draco's hand.

"Harry do you think that you could prepare a couple of rooms for new guests?" she said.

"Consider it done. Draco you're most cordially invited, and Silena as well. I can think of nothing better than for us to share that house together. What do you say?"

"It's a deal."

Several more students arrived and the hall filled with the pleasant noise of breakfast. The day was starting with the usual routine. Even the mail came with anxious letters from parents mixed with messages of thanks and congratulations.

Hermione opened the Daily Prophet who had plastered "VOLDEMORT IS DEAD!" on its front page. Luna had received an edition of the Quibbler with the same news, and some ingenious theories on how it had come to happen.

Each student also received a small packet with the Chocolate Frog logo. Inside was a deluxe box with six new cards figuring Harry, Hermione, Ron, Luna, Ginny and Draco.

Ron was speechless as he held his card in his hand. He couldn't even bring himself to eat the frog who promptly escaped. When he finally found his voice he exclaimed with awe.

"Merlin. I'm bloody famous... Harry, can you imagine that. My own Frog Card."

They laughed and compared their pictures. Hermione was displayed in the library, of course. Harry, Ginny and Ron were on their brooms playing Quidditch, Luna floated on a background of stars and Draco was in Slytherin finery. In all their cards the five others were somewhere in the background.

Under their names there was a single legend.

*The Six Founders who led the students of Hogwarts to vanquish Voldemort, the most terrible Dark Wizard of all time.*

The other students rallied to congratulate them. They were carried around the school in honor and the rest of the day was a succession of games, discussions and improvised picnics on the school grounds. During that time they forgot about heroes, battles and dangers. They had gone back to being only students bent on having fun at the end of a long, overly serious school term. The day ended with a great feast to celebrate the victory over Voldemort and the anticipated start of the Christmas vacation.

In the morning the Hogwarts express would come into Hogsmeade to carry them back to their homes.

The End.