

Harry Potter and the Heir of Gryffindor

By

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Chapter One - Summertime Blues

Aunt Petunia was staring out of the kitchen window again. Of course, she usually spent the better part of the morning spying on whatever activity there was on Privet Drive (which wasn't much at all) but this morning she was positively glued to the windowpane. A moving van had been parked next door all morning, and the moment she'd been waiting for had finally arrived.

"Vernon!" she cried, waving her pink dishcloth in the air, "Come look, quick! They've just pulled up!"

Harry Potter had always thought that his Aunt's busy-bodying was perhaps her worst flaw, aside from her raging temper. But as he stood at the sink, drying the last of the dishes, even he had to raise his eyes out of curiosity, pressing his glasses at the bridge firmly to get a good look.

A deep maroon Renault had pulled into the next door driveway and out stepped--

"Oh, but they're young aren't they? I do hope they won't be bringing any bad habits into this neighborhood! Look at the state of their car--filthy!"

"Perhaps they've had a long drive. They can't be all that young, Petunia--that daughter of theirs must be at least Dudley's age."

"What is that woman wearing? Such loud colors--foreign, I expect."

Harry was trying to get a better look, but his Aunt and Uncle's backsides seemed quite opposed to his attempts. Uncle Vernon whipped around, his red face in a fury at seeing Harry standing so close to him. Indeed, Uncle Vernon's distaste for the boy had reached the point where even being within the immediate vicinity of Harry made him cringe.

"The dishes, boy!"

"I'm finished..."

"Then what are you standing about for? Didn't your Aunt tell you that she needed the weeds pulled in the flowerbed?"

"Right this minute?"

"As good a time as any, I'd say!"

Harry wrinkled his nose in annoyance, but knew better than to protest. He turned and trudged out of the kitchen, mentally flipping through a list of charms he would have simply loved to cast on his Uncle at that moment.

If the Underage Wizarding Law hadn't been so strictly enforced, he would have done so in a heart beat. But since it would have meant his expulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, he decided against it.

After all, it was Hogwarts that really felt like home, and never seeing it again sounded like a fate worse than death. If he would have been allowed to stay at Hogwarts for the summer holidays the world would have been a much rosier place-the Dursleys would have loved it as well-but Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore was adamant that Harry return home for the summer with the Dursleys. Especially after everything that had just happened the year before.

Everything that happened. . .

There wasn't a moment that went by that Harry wasn't plagued by the vivid memories of it all. Even as he crouched over his Aunt's pansies and wildflowers, struggling with the stubborn weeds overrunning the flowerbed, the images ran wildly through his head-a flush of color and cries and screams and horror. . . complete, absolute horror.

It had been three months since that horrible day. The prestigious Triwizard Tournament had ended in unfathomable tragedy.

Harry had seen his friend Cedric fall dead at his very feet, and he had watched, a helpless captive, as the evil Lord Voldemort, who had murdered Harry's parents when Harry was only one year old, regained power after years of near nonexistence."

But Harry had escaped with his life, which is what he reminded himself as the sweat streamed down his brow, and his hands ached from the thorns and bristles on the weeds. He was alive.

The Dursleys, of course, knew nothing of the tragedy, nor did they know that at night time whilst they snored in satisfied sleep, Harry often lay wide awake, tormented by the memory of it all. They didn't know of the nightmares that woke him from what rest he could get, seeing Cedric's face still as clear as though it were right before him. How easily that face could have been Harry's. When Voldemort's wand pointed at Harry's chest, he should have died. . . any other wizard would have. . . and yet he was still here.

The Dursleys had never been close to their nephew, but even they had taken notice in a striking change in Harry's demeanor since his return home. He rarely smiled, kept to himself without having to be told, and was often given to long bouts of staring out the window with a dreamy look in his eyes. Harry even thought that once his cousin Dudley had come very close indeed to asking him what he was thinking about all the time-but thought the better of it.

The less the Dursleys knew about Harry, the more normal they felt things would be.

Harry was thrown out of his trance by voices carrying over the fence. He blinked, wondering who it could possibly be, and then remembered exactly what was going on. The new neighbors were in the backyard, surveying the lot.

"Still, Roger, it might be good for entertaining. With a little. . . well, with a lot of work, I think it should turn out quite smashingly. . ."

"Possibly. But I still wish we'd taken the home in Essex."

"You know that we had to move here because of my job. We've been through this already."

"I know Imelda, dear. I know."

Harry was still crouched over, not making a sound, straining to hear the conversation.

"I'm sure you'll love it here too, Cherub. Did you see your new school as we drove in?"

Harry heard a young girl's voice speak up with the same solemnity as her father's.

"Yes . . . a bit dodgy, if you ask me."

"Nonsense! It's one of the best in Surrey! And you'll be able to walk to it, you're so close. Oh, but we've left the movers inside! Come on you two, let's help."

Harry could hear the mother walk away briskly, the other two trailing her slowly.

"She doesn't like it here either, does she Dad."

"Not in the slightest."

Harry stood up when they'd gone, stretching his side which was cramping and wiped his forehead with his shirt. He removed his glasses and wiped them clean and turned to take his bag of weeds to the rubbish bin, when he was nearly knocked down by a particularly smug-looking Dudley.

"And what are you so happy about," Harry snapped as he walked past Dudley, whose arms were crossed as he followed Harry's steps.

"See the new neighbors?"

"No."

"You will. They've got a daughter, you know."

"And?"

"Well, I guess with your kind you don't notice normal things like girls."

Harry was suddenly visited with a flash of memories: Parvati Patil's smile, Cho Chang's . . . everything, Fleur Delacour's flowing hair. Harry ended up repeating what he'd told his best friend Ron Weasley earlier that year.

"Oh, they make them okay at Hogwarts."

Dudley flinched and those last two syllables. When he found his voice, it was venomous,

"Yeah! Warts on their noses, pointed hats and broomsticks-- real knockouts, I bet."

Harry subconsciously clenched his fist as Dudley's sinister laugh filled the yard.

"Well, maybe you'll see what you're missing at that freak school of yours once you get a look at the new girl."

Harry slammed the lid to the rubbish bin closed and scowled at Dudley as he waddled away. If there was one thing that bothered Harry more than anything about the Dursleys, it was when they called his school a 'freak place.' Anything that Harry liked the Dursleys made a specific point of stepping all over: Hogwarts, his friends-his parents, even.

In years past, Dudley would have been a bit more vicious in his taunting of Harry, but things had changed recently: one, because Harry's godfather Sirius Black was known in both muggle and wizarding worlds alike as a vicious serial killer, so Dudley was more than careful not to really tick Harry off. And the second reason was because within the past few months, Harry had grown a good four inches at least. So even though Dudley outweighed Harry by a great margin, Harry was now a good deal taller than Dudley. Dudley, of course, would never admit it openly, but the fact that he now had to look up at his cousin was most unnerving.

Harry, meanwhile, was more than annoyed that all of his clothes no longer fit him: quite frankly, he looked silly with his trousers up to his shins and shirt sleeves nearly at his elbow. Aunt Petunia, however, was in no such disposition to buy him more clothes and since all of Dudley's old clothes were too large and too short for him, he simply had to make do.

At dinner, he was vaguely aware of the conversation between his Aunt and Uncle ("Not sure I like the look of them, if you know what I mean. Haven't even popped by to introduce themselves. . ."). He was occupied with staring at the unappetizing cold plate of left-over spaghetti Aunt Petunia had pulled out from the refrigerator-- the rest of them dined on chicken and mashed potatoes-- and letting his mind fall on the only things that kept his spirits from dying out completely: Ron and Hermione.

His two best friends in the world. And the only two things that he missed so much that his heart literally ached in their absence. Well . . . them and Quidditch. His sleek, trusty Firebolt was hidden beneath a slat in his bedroom at that very moment and he would have loved nothing more than to jump on and go for a fly-- it was the only time that he felt completely safe. Completely happy.

But both the Dursley's and the Ministry of Magic wouldn't have liked that all too much.

After another wordless meal -- he might as well not have even existed while he was at 4 Privet Drive -- he cleared the plates, washed them in silence, wiped down the kitchen and then trudged back upstairs for his room. He was half hoping to see Dobby the house-elf on his bed, waiting for him as he had three years ago. Or maybe his beautiful Hedwig would have a package waiting for him from Ron or Hermione. But his bed was empty, and Hedwig was sleeping peacefully, her white feathers glowing beneath the bright moonlight.

The quiet was consuming and depressing. It was rather like a Dementor being nearby, the coldness of the moment.

'The Dementors will join us, they are our natural allies. We will recall the banished giants, I shall have all my devoted servants returned to me. . .'

He shook Voldemort's cackling, high pitched wail out of his head, hoping perhaps tonight he might get a good night's rest. And maybe, just maybe, he would wake up in the morning in his dormitory, walk with Ron down to breakfast, laugh with Hermione and Seamus, catch a glimpse of Cho on the way down to potions, and say a brief hello to a smiling Cedric--

because maybe what happened three months ago was really another nightmare and he was just having a hard time waking up . . .

The next two mornings brought more window peering on all three of the Dursley's behalves-- Dudley was suddenly just as intrigued as his parents at the new arrivals. Harry let them make meddling fools out of themselves and concerned himself with the newspaper. Harry had learned from Dumbledore that it was surprising how much information one could gain about the going-ons in the wizarding world from Muggle newspapers. Harry cracked a smile when he read Mysterious Fireworks Display in Twickenham-- Attempted Arson Suspected. That was most certainly good old Dedalus Diggle up to his old tricks again. He was almost positive that Diggle would be getting a strongly worded letter from the Ministry of Magic very soon. And then he nearly jumped out of his seat when he turned the page and found a picture of his very own godfather! A sinister, terribly unbecoming photo of him with the heading :

Sirius Black Still at Large:

LONDON. Police authorities say that the reported sighting of feared serial killer Sirius Black has been confirmed. Black was spotted near Vauxhall Road, London late Friday evening. By the time authorities arrived, Black had disappeared and although his whereabouts at this time are still unknown, police stress that all children should remain indoors and within immediate sight of a guardian. . .

Well that meant there was going to be one large dog running about London for a while!

But what was Sirius doing in London anyway? It wasn't too far from Surrey-- perhaps he was on his way to pay him a visit! The thought of seeing him again lifted Harry's spirits, but then he realized that with every man woman and child on the lookout for him (including the Dursleys) there wasn't much chance of it.

The newspaper was ripped out of his hands and he looked up to see Aunt Petunia's rigid, gaunt face glaring at him.

"How dare you ignore your Uncle Vernon when he's talking to you! Of all the disrespectful, spiteful, vicious things to do to someone--"

"I'm sorry Aunt Petunia, I didn't hear--"

"*Don't interrupt your Aunt,*" Uncle Vernon bellowed from where he sat in the living room. And Harry remembered that he was dealing with the Dursleys. There were no such things as apologies in that household.

Harry blinked for a moment and then turned around to give his Uncle complete eye contact, his mouth shut tightly.

Uncle Vernon resumed rocking his recliner and spoke in gruff, pointed sentences. "Your Aunt Petunia, cousin and I are going on Holiday. . ."

I'm hallucinating. He can't have just said that they're going on a holiday . . .

". . . to Majorca. We're leaving on Friday and won't be back for one week . . ."

Impossible! The Dursley's! On a holiday! For a week!

". . .we planned for Aunt Marge to house mind while we're away . . ."

No! Please! No, it can't be true. . .

". . . but she'll be away in Scotland until September, so that leaves you. . ."

Amazing! Fantastic! Unbelievable!

Harry was trying his hardest not to grin brilliantly, for it was quite possibly the best news he'd ever been given in his life! One week without the Dursleys! One week alone! One week to finally be able to be whom he wanted and say what he wanted and do what he wanted!

Uncle Vernon was still talking. ". . . and if you think that you can just be who you want and say what you want and do what you want while we're away, then you're sorely mistaken, boy. Sorely mistaken. I've arranged it with the Mr. Banbury-- told him all about you and St. Brutus'. Oh, he knows all about you and he'll be watching. Like a hawk he'll be watching."

Harry wasn't threatened by this at all, merely intrigued. "Who's Mr. Banbury?"

Uncle Vernon was visibly annoyed with having to answer a question. "Mr. Banbury is our new neighbor, Harry. Met him just yesterday-- a logical, practical, sensible fellow who happens to work for the police, I might add." He smiled malevolently. "Like I said: he'll be watching."

Poor Mr. Dursley didn't understand that just three months ago Harry had

dueled with the most feared dark Wizard in history: a policeman peering at him through lace windows wasn't going to scare him one bit.

But he kept his face solemn and nodded understandingly as Uncle Vernon's threats kept flying, even though he wasn't listening. How could he, when in less than one week he wouldn't have to see the Dursleys anymore?

"And wipe that disgusting smile off your face," Vernon added.

Harry tried. But the beauty of it all was just too much for him to bear!

Chapter Two: The New Neighbors

Privet Drive was awakening to yet another quiet day beneath another dull gray sky, and for the first time in what felt like years, Harry slept right through it. It was only when he felt the floor boards quake from the Dursleys marching up and down the staircase that he was torn away from the wonderful, relaxing sleep. He stretched happily, and as he walked past his mirror was surprised to discover a grin upon his face. The grin faltered somewhat as he took in how his pajamas hung high above the ground and his shirt looked as though it had been shrunk in the wash, but he shook his head, knowing there was nothing he could do about it, and the grin returned.

After he was dressed he came downstairs to find that breakfast had already been eaten and cleared away, and Aunt Petunia was eyeing him coldly. She could sense that Harry was in a good mood that morning, and the fact that he was *smiling* seemed to make her all the more determined to put a stop to it.

"Well, well. Sleeping Beauty's decided to grace us with his presence. Just in time to wash the car, right Vernon?"

Harry heard a delighted grunt from the living room. His stomach was getting restless and he reached for a banana in a hanging basket, to which Aunt Petunia immediately objected.

"I'm baking banana bread today, don't even think about it."

She was trying to pick a fight, most obviously, and he wasn't about to give her the pleasure of taking her up on it. Without saying another word, Harry turned and headed in the direction of the shed for some cleaning supplies. Aunt Petunia could bully him all she wanted, all he had to do was remind himself that within the week, she'd be gone.

Outside, he rinsed the Dursleys' car off with the garden hose and began soaping it up, when he heard a voice from behind.

"Hello? You're Harry, are you?"

Harry whipped around and found Mr. Banbury standing ten feet from him, dressed in his policeman outfit, obviously getting ready to ride to work. He wasn't as young as the Dursleys had made him out to be, although there was definitely youthful vigor and spark in his deep brown eyes. His immediate reaction was what a *kind* face he had-- the sort that Harry would perhaps have liked to get to know better. Too bad, though, because Harry could only imagine the terrible things Uncle Vernon had said about him to Mr. Banbury.

He lowered his eyes somewhat and answered timidly, "Yes, sir."

To Harry's surprise, Mr. Banbury let out a *smile*. "I was beginning to think that Mr. Dursley had made you up! Like to keep to yourself?"

Harry shrugged and looked back down to the ground. He was beginning to get a bit nervous-- if Uncle Vernon saw him talking with their neighbor, who knows what he'd do to him. *Best just keep washing the car, Harry.*

"Are you and Dudley the same age?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's good, then-- nice to have someone your own age around. Poor Sophie, that's our girl, she only has herself and her cat Marwick."

Harry wasn't sure what Mr. Banbury wanted and raised his eyes to look at him, questioningly.

Mr. Banbury cleared his throat. "Yes, well, I must be off. But it was nice to meet you, Harry. We'll be seeing you tonight, of course."

"Sorry? Tonight?"

Mr. Banbury seemed surprised. "Yes, tonight! We've invited your family over to have a meal with us!"

"Oh," Harry sighed. "Them. Well, I'm sure that I'm not supposed to come--"

"Nonsense! Of course you are! Imelda, that's my wife, would be most offended if you *didn't* come!"

Harry didn't know what to say in reply! He wasn't used to Muggles talking to him as though he didn't carry the Plague-- it was quite a strange feeling. He merely nodded in reply. That seemed to satisfy Mr. Banbury who hopped into his car and sped away.

Needless to say, the Dursleys said nothing to him for the rest of the day about having dinner with the Banburys. Harry decided that perhaps, just to be on the safe side, he'd put on his nicest set of clothes (the ones that didn't make him look like a complete clown) and even sat down in front of the mirror to attempt to tidy up his hair. Besides his startling green eyes, his second most striking feature was his great mop of black hair: it was unruly, never obeyed his brush, but as of late had grown into thick black locks that Harry could almost look upon without complete distaste. He'd wished so often that he could look, well, normal. It was really all Harry had ever wanted-- to be *normal*. But aside from his intense green eyes that he was keenly aware were quite distracting, his round glasses and stubbornly unruly hair, there was also a curious lightning-shaped scar on his forehead. It was a scar that, to his dismay, labeled him as a celebrity and would forever cement the fact that he, Harry Potter, was by no means *normal* at all.

He usually tried his best to keep it covered beneath his hair, and he did so now before heading downstairs.

The Dursleys were already at the door, Aunt Petunia holding a custard of some kind, Dudley dressed in his very finest-- Harry could even smell a whiff of cologne. Uncle Vernon pulled up his nose the minute he saw Harry reach the creaky bottom step.

"Come to see us off, have you?"

"No, Mr. Banbury mentioned that he wanted me to--"

Aunt Petunia laughed a high, skin-crawling giggle. "You think you're having dinner with us? With the *Banburys*? Mr. Banbury is a very important man and we won't have him and his family exposed to people like you. Since you're so excited to have the house to yourself, you can start practicing now-- tonight. You're staying right here."

They turned, Dudley sent a glaring look of satisfaction at his cousin and the door slammed behind him. Harry stood in the quiet of the hallway, actually *disappointed* that he couldn't accompany the Dursleys. Mr. Banbury had smiled at him. He'd tried to *speak* to him! And Harry had appreciated it and wanted to see him again. He'd turned and began to make his way slowly back up the stairs when the front door suddenly burst open again. Dudley stood in the doorway, his face red with anger.

"Come on, then."

"Huh?"

Dudley could hardly speak, he was so angry. "You 'eard, come on. Hurry up, they'll be starting dinner soon."

Harry said nothing, but followed his cousin across the lawn and into number 3 Privet Drive. Sinful aromas met him, a gust of lovely, warm air, and to his surprise Mrs. Banbury extending her hand to him.

"Ah, here he is! I'm Imelda Banbury, and you are?"

She was a pretty woman in her mid thirties, dressed in a bright lavender sun dress with matching shoes and matching pin in her short chestnut brown hair. Her almond brown eyes sparkled just as her husband's did and she shook his hand heartily.

"Harry," he answered quietly.

"It's a pleasure, Harry. So you didn't want to come for dinner, eh? Well, you can go right back after you've finished eating, if you like. No sense in holding you here if you're not enjoying yourself! But come, let me-- oh there she is, Sophie! Sophie, this is Harry-- Dudley's cousin."

Harry knew why Dudley had been so intrigued with the Banburys' arrival. Sophie was absolutely lovely, a perfect blend of her mother's physical beauty and her father's magnetic charm. In her arms was her black and white cat and she was grinning which made her deep-set brown eyes twinkle and a small dimple appear on her left cheek. She innocently pulled a stray strand of her long, thick brown hair back into place and carefully extended her hand so as not to disturb her cat.

"I'm Sophie."

Harry was sure that his mouth wasn't the only one that had fallen-- Dudley was standing directly next to him.

"I'm Harry," he said calmly. He tried to think of something to say -- preferable something witty-- but nothing would come.

"Do you go to Smeltings with Dudley, then?"

Harry shook his head.

"Then that means I'll be at your school! I'm going to Stonewall High as well. Glad that I'll actually know someone. It's really hard when--"

"Harry doesn't go to Stonewall," Dudley piped up quite gleefully, cutting her off.

She raised her brow. "Oh?"

Dudley was positively *gloating*, and Harry knew what was coming . . .

"Oh, no. They don't let *his* sort at Stonewall. He goes to St. Brutus's."

Sophie stared at Harry in disbelief. Subconsciously, she took a step back. "S-St. *Brutus's*?" Really, it would have been much better if he'd just told her the truth: better for her to know that he was really a wizard instead of thinking that he was a serial killer in the making.

"W-well, er, that's quite . . . interesting, Harry. I bet it's very nice there . . ." she attempted a feeble laugh. "Worlds better than Stonewall, I'd wager."

Her cat jumped out of her arms at that moment and approached Harry's feet, sniffing his shoes and then rubbing up against them, wrapping his tail about his ankle.

"Wow! He likes you, doesn't he! Marwick doesn't like *anyone*, except for--"

"Children? You're letting the dinner get cold! Come and sit!" Mrs. Banbury had appeared right behind them and beckoned them to follow.

They walked through the living room which was clean, every bit as orderly as Aunt Petunia's with lots of flowers and rugs and frames, and into their kitchen where a delectable feast was laid out and waiting for them.

"It looks gorgeous," said Petunia. "How can you do it all what with working and whatnot?" Petunia was obviously fishing for information.

"Oh no," said Imelda as she sat down, "I don't work. I'm more of a housewife, really."

"Oh really? Well, that makes two of us then!" Petunia laughed her fake laugh and Harry cringed as he always did when he heard it.

Wait a minute-- a housewife? Harry remembered back to the other day when he'd specifically heard her tell her husband that the move had been due to her job. But he didn't have time to dwell on it, because he was in the process of being nudged out of a seat by Dudley.

Dudley made sure he sat next to Sophie, and Harry ended up sitting at the far end of the table much to the happiness of the Dursleys. Uncle Vernon was going on to Mr. Banbury about something to do with law enforcement and out of control teenagers, Mrs. Banbury was listening most intently as Petunia went into detail about the recipe for her 'signature dessert' Pavlova, and Sophie was looking at Dudley, nodding in agreement as he dramatically re-counted an incident Harry had never heard of before which involved Dudley single-handedly breaking up a fight that nearly ended with Smelting's star football player in a body cast-- he promised he'd show her the certificate of merit he'd been awarded in recognition of his heroism.

"That was very brave of you, Dudley."

"Yes," he said gravely, "well, that's just my way, Sophie. Doing unto others as I would have them do unto me."

Harry choked on his glass of lemonade, trying hard not to fall into stitches of laughter. He'd choked so badly, that he'd unwittingly knocked over his cup and the lemonade poured onto the tablecloth. Dudley looked up and *glared* at him, as did the rest of the Dursley's.

Mrs. Banbury was at once at his side, bending over to sop up the liquid.

Harry was more than embarrassed. "Oh, I-- I'm so sorry. . ."

"Nonsense," she said airily as she pressed the washcloth against the wet fabric. "It's just. . ." her voice trailed as she turned her eyes back on Harry's face. Her breezy, carefree countenance flickered -- ever so quickly -- to one of complete shock. She cleared her throat and tried to smile again, but Harry was aware of a change in even her voice. "It's. . . er, j-just one of those things."

Harry was at once put on guard by this odd change in her behavior, and what's more. . . Harry could have sworn that her eyes had lingered on his scar. She reached for the pitcher of lemonade, poured him another glass and then went back to her seat. She was decidedly quieter now, concentrating more on her food than anything else as Petunia rambled on.

Uncle Vernon was still hounding Mr. Banbury about his serious concerns with law enforcement.

"Well did you know what I read in the paper the other day? Remember that silly character who went on that rampage last month, robbing all those Woolworths stores? He was a ruddy teenager too and I can't believe, just can't ruddy believe, that the police can't track this kid down! He's *going* to strike again, you mark my words!"

"Yes Vernon, I'll be the first to admit that Scotland Yard isn't at all proud of that. But we're a bit preoccupied at the moment, especially with the reappearance of Sirius Black. Now that's a criminal we've not seen the like of before. We've just *never* come across a criminal before who is so. . . brilliant, really."

The mention of Sirius Black's name sent a chill through the Dursley's. Uncle Vernon tried his best not to appear as shaken as he truly was.

"Y-yes, B-Black. . . y-yes, well, we all know he's bad news," Harry was staring at his Uncle, wanting to strangle him for saying something so malicious. Vernon knew he was walking on thin ice because he quickly changed the subject. "But what I'm worried about are these bloody teenagers these days! When I was in school, if you put a toe out of line, they'd whack you! Make you cry like a baby, they would! But not these days, no, it's all about *feelings* these days. We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. What this generation needs is a good whacking, eh Roger?"

Uncle Vernon was laughing and Roger was nodding, though he didn't answer yes or no to the question.

And that's when he felt it again! He looked up in time to see Mrs. Banbury's eyes most definitely on him, but she looked quickly away upon seeing him notice it. She played with her food a little longer and then pushed her plate away, looking up and making a point of fixing her gaze directly into Harry's eyes.

"So, Harry. How are you enjoying school?"

The Dursleys went deathly quiet. His Aunt and Uncle were shooting daggers at him with their menacing stares, warning him to watch his mouth. Harry gulped and made a point of not looking at Sophie whom he knew was probably terrified by him.

"Oh, it's all right."

"Do you know, I actually have *seen* that place before. When I was young I had the most unfortunate experience of having to step inside."

"Oh my dear, Imelda! You poor thing!" Mrs. Dursley was cooing.

"Well, it was a long story. But I was just wondering, Harry. . ." she took a breath, "is Mr. Filch still keen on those horrific punishments?"

Harry's fork dropped. *What had she just said? Mr. Filch?* Had she meant *the* Mr. Filch, Hogwarts' ground keeper? No, impossible. St. Brutus's must have had a Mr. Filch as well.

"And that cat of his! That Mrs. Norris-- she's not still alive, is she?"

The Dursley's were staring at him, awaiting his answer. Only problem was that Harry was paralyzed. *This is no coincidence! She knows about Hogwarts!* His pulse was racing as he kept her gaze. . . a glimmer shining in her eyes, her mouth twisted in a strange smile.

He took a shaky breath and answered, ". . . yes . . ."

Mrs. Banbury's face was writhing with excitement. And then in the very next moment, she'd changed the subject and her and Aunt Petunia were back to discussing recipes, leaving Harry absolutely stunned.

He didn't touch the rest of his dinner. When Petunia offered to clear away the dishes, Mrs. Banbury opposed fervently.

"No, Harry will help, won't you Harry?"

He could see Dudley smiling out of his peripheral vision, but didn't care. He stood up shakily, picked up his dishes, and then went about collecting the rest, trying to keep his hands still. He followed Mrs. Banbury into the kitchen and, as he expected, she quickly closed the door behind them.

Her smile was about ready to fly right off her face. "I can't believe it. . . I never thought that . . ."

"How did you know?" Harry blurted, "How did you know about Mr. Filch and Mrs. Norris?"

She stood, admiring him for a moment before answering. "Can you keep a secret?"

If only she knew. He nodded.

She beamed, turned towards the sink where they'd set the dishes and to Harry's surprise, extracted a thin dark mahogany wand from underneath her belt. She pointed it at the sink and whispered "*Lavare Totalius!*"

The dishes were at once sparkling and shining like new and Harry's mouth fell open. He stared at her in disbelief.

"You're a *witch!*" he whispered

"And you're Harry Potter! Oh, I just can't believe that I'm finally meeting you."

"But-how? I thought you were a muggle-"

"Yes, I am quite good at it, aren't I! It's one thing I'm a bit proud of, actually. That's one of the main reasons I think the Ministry placed me in Special Investigations, since I'm so good at blending in."

"You work for the Ministry of Magic? Well then you must know Arthur Weasley!"

"Oh Heavens, yes. I've known Arthur for years. Good man, Arthur."

"His son Ron is my best friend!"

"Really? Well, how nice! I'll tell him that you said hello when I see him tomorrow."

"But- how -"

"Well, I feel it best to just tell people that I'm a housewife. That way they don't wonder when they don't see me leave the house since I Apparate every morning."

"And . . . Mr. Banbury. . . is he. . ."

"My stars, no! He's a muggle if there ever was one! Works for the police department. And before you ask, no, Sophie isn't a witch either. Strange thing, really. We thought for certain she would be- what with my family being an all-wizarding family-and I did so want her to go to Hogwarts. She really did as well. It was a tremendous blow to her when she never received her letter. She's a bit sour about having to go to a regular school the rest of her life, to be honest. But Roger and I are both very supportive of her."

Harry was delighted! His new neighbor, a witch! Not just *any* old witch, but one who worked for the Ministry of Magic and knew the Weasleys!

At that moment Aunt Petunia stuck her head in the kitchen, flashing a smile that Harry knew was merely show. "Need any help in here?"

Imelda winked at Harry and then turned around to face Petunia. "Not at all, we've finished as you can see-"

"That certainly was *fast*," said Petunia, eyeing Harry.

"Well, Harry here is an expert dish-washer. I suppose they certainly do train them well at St. Brutus's." Petunia nodded uncertainly and then turned and left.

"Mrs. Banbury, I think I should warn you now, it's best the Dursleys know *nothing* about your being . . . about who you are. They're being kind to you now because they think that you're a respectable, normal family. But they hate everything to do with our world, believe me, and if they ever knew--"

"I have no intention of them knowing. I've worked in Special Investigations for eighteen years-I know a wizard hater when I see one. And I daresay calling the Dursleys wizard-haters would be an understatement, right?"

The two of them laughed. Harry wished he could have spent the rest of the night talking to her, but instead he followed her back out into the living room, where Sophie sat looking bored out of her mind as Dudley rambled on and on about *himself*, and Roger sat trying to appear intrigued as Mr. and Mrs Dursley rambled on and on about *themselves*.

The company filtered out finally, after several announcements by Roger of just how late it was getting, and several more comments of 'Too bad I have to be up *early* in the morning . . .' Harry said goodbye to the Banburys and Imelda went so far as to quickly brush her fingers through his hair, catching a glimpse of his scar one more time. He followed the Dursleys back into number 4, not really noticing any of them at all. He was certain that his Aunt and Uncle were scolding him for *something* he'd done or said (the words 'useless, klutzy git' stuck out) but he paid it no mind and began his ascent upstairs in a daze.

"So you fancied *Sophie*, eh Harry?" Dudley taunted after him as they walked down the hall, bringing him out of his trance. "I saw the way you were looking at her. *Forget it!* She's *mine*, you hear me?" Harry rolled her eyes-Sophie was actually the furthest thing from his mind at the moment. "Yours, eh? Does *she* know that?"

Dudley stuck out his foot and Harry tripped over it, flying face forward onto the floor. He grabbed Harry's collar, and pulled him up onto his feet, pushing him up against the wall. "Think you're *funny*? I'm warning you, *cousin*. Let's see how tough you are without your silly little magic tricks to help you out, eh? Come on then, *let's see how tough you are!*"

Dudley was incensed and Harry's face fell when he realized that Dudley was seriously ready to fight him right there in the hall. His first thought was to make a dash for his wand, but that was under a slat in his bedroom--*No magic, Harry. No magic*. Then he thought he could perhaps talk his way out of it.

"Dudley, calm down, you're overreacting--"

"*I'm overreacting?* How am I overreacting when *you're* trying to steal *my* girlfriend!"

Harry made the terrible mistake of sniggering, "Your *girlfriend*? You've only just met her!"

Wham. Harry bent over, his stomach throbbing with pain. Dudley had actually *punched* him square in the stomach! Harry, squinting in pain, looked at his cousin's smug, satisfied grin.

And then, what happened next, even Harry didn't understand. He grimaced, eyebrows narrowed, his left hand nearly shaking from anger. He raised his left hand, which was tense and rigid and absolutely *itching* to return the favor to Dudley, and took hold of his collar. Dudley moved to get away, but Harry brought his other hand to his collar as well and held on tightly. And then-- he lifted Dudley--*lifted* him until his feet were dangling above the ground. It didn't even *feel* as though Harry were holding anything- though Dudley was closer to the weight of a rhinoceros, at that moment, in Harry's rage, he felt as light as a feather.

Dudley's face was frozen with fear as his feet swayed, Harry's electric green eyes visible in the whites of Dudley's. "*Don't you dare hit me again,*" Harry managed to say, and then he slowly set him back down on the floor. Dudley, took a step backwards, still staring at Harry, and then made a mad dash for his room, slamming the door shut behind him.

Harry walked, unsteadily, into his room, quite unsure of what had just happened. How had he been able to do that? He sat onto his bed and ran his fingers through his hair, mystified. It must have been the fact that he'd been so angry-years of taunting had finally put Harry over the edge. He had to smile, remembering the horrified look on Dudley's face.

And then he remembered Imelda- next door at that very moment! Oh, how was he supposed to sleep after a night like this! He pulled out a roll of parchment and ink from under the floor and did what he always did whenever he had things he needed to get out: he wrote a letter to Sirius.

* * *

Chapter Three: The Party

Dudley Dursley didn't so much as look at his cousin over the next week. Which was quite fine with Harry! And the fact that the Dursleys were so busy getting things together for their holiday meant even less interaction with them. They were going to be leaving one day before Harry's fifteenth birthday-and he could think of no better present.

The morning of their departure, none of the Dursleys acknowledged him, put their luggage into their car silently-didn't even *demand* him to help out. It was only Uncle Vernon who came back into the living room for his coat that glared at him.

"Remember what I told you. The Banbury's are going to be *watching* you. And you'd best believe me, if we come home and hear that anything *funny* has been going on, or see anything funny-you'll wish you'd never been born. I'll promise you that much!"

He turned, slammed the door shut behind him, and Harry watched through the curtains as their car drove angrily away, out of Privet Drive.

Harry sat for a moment in silence. And then . . .

"*Yaaaaa-hoooooooooooo!*" Harry shouted and jumped up onto the sofa, like a little kid, bouncing up and down in glee. He let himself plop down on the sofa and laughed to himself- giddy with excitement.

Without the Dursleys in the house, the place managed to even feel like home!

He saw the television remote control and flipped it on, happily clicking through the channels when suddenly a figure appeared directly in front of it.

"*Aahh!*" Harry screamed and threw the remote control out of his hands and covered his eyes.

A voice was laughing in front of him and he peered between his fingers to see-

"*Imelda!*"

She wasn't dressed in her muggle clothes, but robes of deep burgundy. Her smile was glowing.

"All right, Harry? Living the good life already?"

"Y-yes! J-just watching a bit of telly."

"Ah yes. My *personal* favorite amongst muggle inventions. And I didn't mean to scare you, dear. I was just on my way to work when I remembered something: I meant to tell you earlier that Arthur says hello! And I'm most disappointed that I had to hear from *him* your birthday is tomorrow!"

Harry smiled-it warmed him inside to know that Mr. Weasley remembered his birthday.

"Oh, yes."

"Fifteen, is it? Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"Do about it? What do you mean--"

"Well you *are* having a party, aren't you?"

Harry blinked. "A party? Me? Well, I've never actually . . . had one before."

Imelda looked horrified. "You'll be *fifteen* and you've never had a birthday party! Oh no, no, that won't do at all! We'll have to do something about that!"

Harry shook his head, "But the Dursleys-- can't have a party! What if something happens? They'll kill me..."

Imelda snorted. "I'd bloody like to see them try! No matter, no matter, you'll come by our house.

Tomorrow evening- five o'clock should do it, right?"

Harry shrugged- he certainly had nothing else to do! She winked at him, an odd green mist surrounded her and when Harry blinked again, she'd disappeared.

He had never, in his entire life, expected to have a birthday party. He'd only just started receiving gifts, so the idea of a party seemed unfathomable! And yet he spent the remaining of the day, and a good portion of the next, jumping with excitement. Not wanting to arrive empty handed, he decided to make something for the occasion, and went into the kitchen, snooping through Petunia's cupboards, looking for something he might be able to make.

A cake perhaps? He hadn't a clue as to how to bake anything . . . he pulled out a recipe book of Petunia's and flipped through the cards. . . he *did* have a particular fondness of chocolate cake.

Three hours, an entire carton of eggs, and one gallon of milk later he had . . . something that somewhat resembled a cake . . . lopsided and misshapen, but a cake nonetheless. He grinned with pride as he smothered it with chocolate icing, happily ignoring the fact that doing so made it look all the more *unappetizing*.

He cleaned up the kitchen, took a shower, tidied himself up to look as close to being presentable as he could, and walked across the lawn to Number Three Privet Drive, chocolate cake in hand, and rang the buzzer at precisely 5pm.

"*Happy Birthday Harry!*"

"RON!"

Harry nearly dropped the chocolate cake he was holding at the sight of Ron in the doorway.

Ron pulled him inside and closed the door behind him, beaming boldly at his dear friend. Harry was sure it was a dream! Ron right in front of him!

"What are you *doing* here!"

He laughed, giving Harry a hug. "My Dad! Told me that a witch moved in next door and that she was throwing a birthday party for you! She said that we had to come!"

"We?"

"Yeah!" Ron laughed, pulling him into the living room. Harry's heart leapt.

Beneath an enchanted banner hanging in midair reading **HAPPY BIRTHDAY HARRY!** were the rest of the Weasleys: Fred, George and Ginny. Hermione was standing next to none other than Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas. Oliver Wood, Angelina Johnson and Katie Bell were all there as well, standing next to a pile of odd shaped presents. Harry was very close to having his knees give out from under him! He'd never been so completely *surprised* in his life!

Imelda was loving his reaction and she walked up beside him giving him a hug, Roger and Sophie following her lead. Imelda gasped, "Oh and you've baked a cake too! What a fine host you are! I do hope that we've rounded everyone up all right!"

"How did you *know*?"

"Oh Ronald here--he took care of inviting everyone!"

Ron blushed as Harry smiled at him warmly. Hermione threw her arms around Harry first, soon joined by the rest of his Gryffindor friends.

"Hermione! Fred! George! Ginny!"

They all looked fantastic! Fred and George had always towered over Harry, but he was shocked to find that this time they didn't seem so very tall after all-- it appeared that he must have been catching up to them! Ginny looked older as well with her long red hair and pretty blue dress that seemed to match the very color of her eyes. That blush to her cheeks, however, it was *still* most definitely there. And Hermione! Once again, she was bronzed from the sun, dressed in muggle clothing of slick black trousers and a black crew tee.

She pretended to scold him. "I hope you know that I left from a holiday in Italy to come here for you!"

"Wow--"

"Oh, don't worry. This is infinitely more fun already!"

"And Oliver! How did you know?"

Oliver Wood, who had just graduated from Hogwarts, shook Harry's hand. "Fred and George, of course! I ran into them just yesterday at--"

Fred elbowed Oliver in the side and Oliver at once cleared his throat.

"Er. . . I ran into them and they mentioned it to me, so here I am!"

Harry was keenly interested as to just *where* Oliver had met them, but was cut off by Imelda.

"Now wait a minute, that's one, two, three. . . seven . . . oh but we're missing someone aren't we?"

"Are we?" Roger asked, looking down at a guest list.

"Yes! Where is--"

At that moment there was a large bang and a funny blue-ish green smoke came out of the fireplace. Roger didn't seem at all surprised by this, no doubt used to the wizarding ways, and went to the fireplace to greet the newcomer.

Out stepped someone Harry hadn't seen for two years.

"*Professor Lupin!*"

Remus Lupin stood, dusting off his robes, grinning upon the sight of Harry.

"Remus," said Imelda, shaking his hand. "So glad you could make it!"

He nodded, shook hands with Roger and then went directly to Harry. Harry didn't wait for him--he threw his arms around him, hardly believing his eyes.

"Professor! I can't believe you're here--"

"Ah, tut tut, Harry. It's Remus, if you please. My teaching days have long been over."

There was a murmur amongst the guests, everyone just as surprised as Harry to see Remus Lupin again. After all, at one time he'd been their favorite Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

"I'm just so *happy* to see you."

"And you, Harry, and you! My, but you're growing up! Thought you were James when I stepped out of that fireplace." He bent down and whispered, "Sirius wanted to come along-but he couldn't. I'm sort of his stand-in."

Still in shock, Harry turned to Imelda. "*How--*"

"I won't pretend that it was easy," she said jovially, "do you have any idea how difficult it was for me to add my fireplace to the Floo network? Mr. Fudge failed to mention that my house being next door to yours exempted my chimney from the Floo network! It took a great deal of bribing to get it added by the end of the day!"

"I can't. . . oh Imelda, I--"

"Okay, okay, okay, *enough* of this mushy nonsense," Imelda barked suddenly, clapping her hands together. "Let's all eat!"

She clapped her hands together and suddenly the living room was covered with trays of chocolates, sweets, pastries, and other goodies. He was rather embarrassed by all the fuss and whenever anyone spoke with him, he made sure that the conversation was focused on them-talking about himself was something he was never good at, nor fond of.

He was especially keen on getting to the bottom of what Fred and George had been up to and spoke with them the longest, trying to lure them into revealing their secret. But they knew what he was up to and remained tight-lipped on the matter.

Remus, who'd been standing off in the back with Imelda and Roger most of the evening, kept staring at Harry for the majority of the evening. Finally, when there was a lull in Harry's conversation, Remus put his arm about Harry and walked him out into the Banburys' backyard.

The two could hear the laughs and loud chatter from inside, even with the door closed behind them. The night was a temperate one, though there was very little moonlight. Despite himself, Harry was relieved of this- he didn't have to worry about Remus suddenly changing on him.

"I've . . . heard all about it, Harry. About everything."

Harry's smile faded, immediately knowing what Remus was referring to. He put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Sirius came to my house in the middle of the night and I knew, by the look in his eye, that something had happened. But what he told me-even I couldn't believe at first. And all I could think of was you, Harry. Sirius was fiercely proud of you when he told me about it-and I am as well. I can't think of very many wizards *my* age even, who've had years of training against the dark arts, who could have done what you did. You've shown yourself to be a great wizard, Harry . . ."

Harry didn't want to hear this. He shook his head, the vision of Cedric coming back to him. "Right. Some great wizard I am. I couldn't even save Cedric. . ." his voice broke off.

Remus' eyes were intent on him. "You know that wasn't your fault. You didn't know that was going to happen. And even if you did, there was nothing that you could have done-"

"I could have tried. . . you didn't see what I did, Remus. Cedric lying there helpless. . . he was my friend. And I couldn't do anything to help him. . ."

"You've done more than you know, Harry! At first Sirius, Albus and myself all thought that Voldemort would start immediately on his quest. . . and for two months now we haven't heard a thing from him. The fact that you escaped from him must have shaken him-he's laying low. Of course, we can only guess as to what he's planning and we're working tirelessly to find out what it is before he does it. But the point is, you're alive-once again Voldemort's weaknesses have been exposed! He obviously *isn't* as all-powerful as he would like to believe. . . Sirius and I *both* agree that he's *scared*. . ."

Harry cackled. "*Lord Voldemort* is scared of a *fifteen* year old boy--"

"A fifteen year old boy who nearly saw to his destruction at the age of one, who thwarted his attempts at gaining power at the age of eleven, and who survived his Avada Kedavra curse at age fourteen."

Remus's lips were thin and solemn. "He's *angry*, no doubt. But scared just the same."

Harry turned away, not wanting to listen to it anymore. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"None of that matters to me, Remus. . . what I'm concerned with is. . . my friends. Cedric died *because of me*. It was *my* fault. And now with Voldemort back in power again . . . who knows what he could try to do to my other friends. . ." his eyes were welling up with tears. "Some great wizard I am, Remus. If I can't even save my friends. . ."

"But Harry--you can and you will! Not just your friends, but all decent wizard-kind! Don't you see? The fact that you're still here, sitting right next to me at this moment, is a sign of hope for all of us! Cedric's family, the Weasleys, Hermione, Sirius, me--all of us!"

Harry didn't know what Remus wanted from him. What good was all of this talk?

"I'm still . . . scared, Remus."

Remus embraced Harry and Harry held on as tightly as he could. "Of course you are. But Harry, being afraid just means that you understand what's ahead of you. And courage doesn't mean that you're not afraid-it just means that you're ready to face it." He brushed Harry's hair out of his eyes and smiled warmly. "Just remember that you have a weapon to your advantage that no one, not even Lord Voldemort can conquer-not even in death."

"What's that?"

"Friendship, Harry." He squeezed his hand on his shoulder. "Everyone in that room, myself, your Godfather--your friends."

Harry hugged him again, needing those words more so than all the birthday parties or presents in the world.

Fred and George had delighted Imelda and Roger, more specifically, all night with their endless truckload of stories from their days in Hogwarts. Roger was delighted with every spell and charm illegally cast-every practical joke and prank. (Which made Harry wonder just how *good* of a police officer he really was!)

It seemed as though Sophie was delighted with Harry's friends as well-Dean Thomas in particular, whom she'd kept very close to throughout the evening. And ever since Dean had discovered that Sophie was a Fulham Football supporter, he'd been speaking to her of nothing else all night-not that Sophie minded, of course.

Seamus and Neville were the first to leave, as Neville's grandmother had a strict curfew for him, and Oliver, Angelina and Katie followed them closely. Dean Thomas was next, along with Fred and George who took Ginny with them. Ron and Hermione were the last to leave, of course, the three of them going about setting up their next meeting.

"When will you be in Diagon Alley?" Ron asked.

"Well, that all depends on the Dursleys. . ."

"Nonsense," Imelda spoke up, "I'll be glad to take you, Harry. It'll be fun! Besides, I know that Sophie would like to see what it looks like--"

Sophie's eyes lit up. "Would !! Oh Mummy, *really?*"

Imelda smiled. "Yes, yes, of course. Now, when do you leave for Hogwarts? The first?"

"Yes--"

"When will you be there Mr. Weasley?"

"The twenty-eighth."

"Perfect! Then we'll be seeing you there and Miss Granger too, of course?"

Hermione nodded, "Oh, of course! Oh and Mrs. Banbury, do see that Harry picks up some new clothes as well. Otherwise I'll have to think twice about wanting to be seen with you in public!"

Everyone laughed and Remus shuffled them off towards the fireplace. Three more puffs of green smoke and then everyone was gone.

He couldn't stop showering the Banburys with thank-yous. Imelda was quite opposed to his insisting that she was the kindest woman he'd met.

"If you don't stop complimenting me, young man, then I'm just going to have to revoke my invitation for you to have dinner with us tomorrow night."

"But--you haven't invited me over for dinner tomorrow night."

"Oh I haven't? Oh blast, well, I'd certainly meant to! And if you don't quit complimenting me, then I won't!"

Harry tried not to laugh and merely nodded.

"Good! Glad we have an understanding. How is six o'clock?"

He laughed. "Brilliant! I'll see you then!"

Harry ended up eating with the Banburys every night that week- one of the nights they even drove down into London! Harry was agog with excitement as he gazed out the back seat window, and Sophie kept laughing at the way he was ooohing and ahing at everything they passed.

"You may laugh at me now," he warned, "but I daresay you'll be acting the same way when you come to Diagon Alley!" And then Harry got an evil glint in his eye, "especially if *Dean* shows up, right?"

That landed him a smack in the arm from Sophie who fervently denied the accusation.

"You liar."

"Well . . ." she cracked a smile. "Even if it *is* true, I see that I'm not the *only* one who has an admirer."

"Sorry?"

"Your friend Ron--his little sister Ginny fancies you, doesn't she!"

"Whatever gave you that idea--"

"Oh come on. You're not going to tell me that you didn't notice the fact she was positively *drooling* at you all night long. . ."

Harry could feel his ears burning.

Sophie was staring at him, a strange twinkle in her enormous eyes. "Mum says that you're quite the celebrity in the wizarding world. . ."

He was sure that he was going crimson. "That is a matter of opinion."

"Well, then it's the opinion of most everyone! Even *me*, and I'm normal--- erm . . ." she tripped over her words, "I meant to say, er, that I'm a *muggle*. . ." she cleared her throat. "You know what I mean. . ."

Harry was smiling now.

". . . but when I was a little girl, Mom used to read to me stories about the legendary wizards and witches-you know, Agrippa and all them-- and of course, she used to read me your story--"

"*My story?*" *Oh great. Don't tell me they're selling Harry Potter books nowadays . . .*

"Well, it is in most every history book in your world, isn't it? Anyway, she used to tell it to me and it was always my favorite. . ." she stole a glance at his scar. "I mean . . . you have to admit, it is quite amazing . . ."

It must have been the five years of people staring relentlessly at his scar, talking constantly of You-Know-Who and all that, but Harry finally had had enough of it.

"No, not really," he said, quite sternly. "I didn't do anything. If you're going to gawk over it, you might as well know who the true heroes are: Lily and James Potter--"

"Your parents?"

"Yes." He folded his arms, lowering his voice so that Imelda and Roger couldn't hear, though no doubt they were eavesdropping. "Do you know why Voldemort couldn't kill me? It had nothing to do with *me*, but my mother. See, he came to kill my father and myself. My mother refused to let him kill me and . . ."

"She sacrificed herself instead. . ." Sophie finished, her voice cautious and tense.

Harry nodded. "It was a spell that she cast upon me. A simple one, an ancient one, and Voldemort hadn't suspected it and when he cast his death spell upon me, it instead flew back upon him."

"And it didn't *kill* him. . ."

Harry shook his head. "No. . . although he was very near death. Voldemort had spent his entire life trying to unlock the secret to becoming immortal. He did terrible things--he did anything in an effort to reach his goal, and after years of countless potions and spells to lengthen his life. . . I guess *that's* why the death spell didn't completely destroy him. . . and now . . . he's back."

"What do you mean 'he's back'?"

"He's rejuvenated himself. He's come to power once again--"

"*Sophie*," Imelda spoke up from the front seat. She'd been listening to the entire conversation. "Harry is exaggerating, dear. There is no proof that the Dark Lord has--"

"Oh, but there is evidence! And *I'm* it!"

"The Ministry of Magic would have been informed of the situation. To date, it is still just a rumor. Now Harry, I understand that the death of your friend Cedric was most unnerving and--"

"Imelda! It's the truth! I know it, Albus Dumbledore knows it--there are even people in the Ministry that know it's the truth!"

"Cornelius Fudge has made no such statement or--"

"Cornelius Fudge was *there* the day that Cedric died! He *knows* it's the truth! He's just too much of a coward and a power fiend to admit it! He knows that if he came before the Ministry with such a claim they'd boot him from office."

Imelda had turned and was facing her from the passenger seat. "Cornelius Fudge has taken a solemn oath that as Head Minister, his first and foremost obligation is protecting the lives of the wizarding community. If he knew this to be fact, as you claim it Harry, then he is bound by that oath to act on it. The fact that he *hasn't* proves that there is no such need. . ." she paused and then added, as if obligated, "at this time."

By the time the Dursleys arrived home, he'd quite forgotten about they even lived there! He'd been in such a fantastic mood for such a long time, that nothing - not even the Dursleys - could snap him out of it.

"And how was your holiday," he asked pleasantly, taking Aunt Petunia's coat from her as they heaved their luggage in the door.

Of course, she eyed him suspiciously. "Why? What's happened? What have you done!" Her eyes went frantically searching the house for *something* out of place. Harry even attempted kind words with Dudley, who merely grunted at him and trudged upstairs.

"And you, Uncle Vernon! Wasn't Majorca lovely?"

Uncle Vernon looked as though he would have loved to squash Harry into oblivion, but merely answered with "None of your damn business, boy."

Harry kept his smile and pranced upstairs, happily scratching a cooing Hedwig, and sat down to finish the remainder of his homework, unfazed by the Dursleys return. What did they matter, after all?

He had *friends*.

** *

Chapter Four: Back to Hogwarts

Imelda Banbury being the charmer she was (no pun intended!) had no problem in convincing the Dursley's that she merely wanted Harry to help her with taking care of some errands she'd been neglecting. Uncle Vernon was of course obliging to anything that had Harry doing some sort of physical labor, and he agreed heartily--even suggesting a number of things Harry could do around the Banbury's house. Painting the house, re-nailing the tile on the roof, de-weeding the garden-Imelda said she'd talk it over with her husband first.

Sophie was nervous as the three of them approached the great brick wall that Harry knew well as the entrance to Diagon Alley. Imelda pressed the combination, the bricks moved aside and the three were able to step right into the heart of the Alley. Sophie clung to her mother's arm, who was beaming boldly.

"It's been *much* too long since I've been here," she admitted to Harry. "I wonder if they still have-oh they do! Look-oh Sophie, *Witchy Woman* is the absolute *best* clothes shop around! You'll love it-oh, Harry, you don't mind, do you? I want to show Sophie their gorgeous hats."

"Er--no," said Harry, really not wanting to spend hours perusing the aisles of *Witchy Woman*. "Tell you what-I'll meet the two of you inside the Leaky Cauldron at three o' clock, all right? That should give me enough time to get what I need." Imelda and Sophie didn't need much convincing, and the three parted ways.

Harry's first stop was Gringott's bank (the place *still* put him on his toes) and then straight to Chester's, the clothing store. He couldn't wait to find some *decent* clothes to wear and spent a good hour and a half, going through the many selections.

"Thank *Heavens*," came the voice of Hermione Granger as Harry came out of the store, dressed in clothes that fit him perfectly. "Glad you've decided *against* going to Hogwarts dressed as a circus clown."

Ron Weasley was right beside her. "A circus clown? What are those, eh?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged amused looks. "Never mind," she said, "not important. Right then Harry, have you everything you need?"

"Only just started. Imelda and Sophie are here as well-off shopping somewhere."

"Sophie?" Hermione asked. "But she's a muggle, isn't she?"

"Yes," he said as they walked towards Flourish and Blotts. "But she's really keen on the wizarding world. Really wishes she was a witch actually. Poor thing."

Ron grimaced. "That's amazing. I mean, my Dad says that Imelda's family is one of the most prominent ones around. To have *her* daughter be a squib. . ."

Hermione shook her head sadly. "I'd be devastated!"

"That's why Imelda's let her come to see Diagon Alley. She just loves being around it all."

Harry had received his annual letter from Hogwarts that included his list of needed materials. He went through the list as they shopped, checking the items off as they shopped through the Flourish and Blotts bookstore. He stopped suddenly in an aisle, his eye catching a book entitled *Kwikspell*. It brought him back to two years ago when he'd discovered a letter in Hogwarts Caretaker Mr. Filch's office advertising that very book. Filch revealed himself to be a squib, and apparently these *Kwikspell* courses could teach even a squib new tricks. He immediately thought of Sophie--the longing in her eyes every time someone mentioned anything remotely related to magic.

He shrugged--why not? What's the worse that could happen? It wouldn't work for her and she'd be right back to where she was. He picked it up and brought it to the register. Ron caught sight of it and laughed at him. "What are you doing with *that*?"

"It's not for me, it's for Sophie."

"*Sophie*?"

"Yeah--who knows, right? It couldn't hurt."

Harry, Ron and Hermione met up with Imelda and Sophie at the Leaky Cauldron, Sophie ohhing and ahhing over the things that Hermione had bought. When asked what exactly the book 'Age of Intolerance-500 Years of Persecution' was about, Hermione wasted no time in going into a detailed history lesson about the injustices against witches and wizards over the centuries.

They finished their lunch and Harry made arrangements to meet up with the two of them at exactly a quarter 'till eleven at Kings Cross Station the next morning.

It was actually Sophie who volunteered taking Harry to the station--apparently getting a glimpse of her mother's world had really whet her appetite for more. Imelda of course didn't object and Harry was relieved that it meant he wouldn't have to worry about the Dursley's driving him into London.

When Imelda told the Dursleys that evening that she would be more than happy to take Harry to the train station the next morning, they were immediately opposed.

"N-no, Imelda, r-really. Please don't bother--it's quite all right. Besides, we wouldn't want you exposed to the sort of . . . er . . . *riff raff* that will be there. You know he'll be with all his kind, right? No, no, it's out of the question."

Aunt Petunia looked deathly worried-no doubt fearful of Imelda discovering Harry to be a wizard. The irony was too delicious to handle!

"Oh, well, if that's the way you feel about it," said Imelda, sighing.

"Yes-it's best that we do it, Imelda dear. Thank you anyway."

"Right, of course I understand-"

Harry was confused-she was just going to let it drop? Just like that?

He watched her as she turned her back towards the Dursley's, pulled her wand out from under her belt and whispered something that sounded an awful like '*Oblitus Dilutum*' and then quickly turned to point her wand at the family. The three of them froze: Uncle Vernon's newspaper in mid turn, Aunt Petunia's mouth open ready to speak, Dudley's finger firmly placed up his nostril in mid-pick.

"Imelda, wha--"

She then murmured something else and a bright white light sparked from the end of her wand.

"Simply a memory charm, Harry, no need for alarm. Useful little trick-especially in my line of work. Never fails to get Muggles to give you what you need." She tucked her wand neatly away and said, "*Argutum Acuere!*"

It was as though someone had pressed the "play" button on a remote control! The Dursley's immediately went back to exactly what they had been doing. Except this time, Aunt Petunia was saying, "Why, that's wonderful of you, Imelda! Takes such a load off of my back. How fortunate that you just happen to be going into London tomorrow."

"Yes," said Imelda, grinning, "How fortunate indeed! Then it's all settled! I'll be by to pick up Harry at nine o' clock sharp."

"He'll be ready," said Uncle Vernon, smiling overtop his newspaper. "Won't you, Harry old boy?"

"Y-yes, Uncle Vernon."

Imelda turned for the door and Harry rushed over to her. "Let me walk you out, Mrs. Banbury."

He followed her outside, hearing what *sounded* like his Uncle's voice say "How thoughtful of Harry! Such a sweet boy, isn't he Petunia?"

"*What did you do to them!*" He shrieked in disbelief, walking towards number three.

Imelda laughed and opened the door. "Oh, nothing. Come in, won't you? I've made biscuits, freshly baked. Don't you worry about your family. They'll be back to their usual terrible selves by the time you leave tomorrow. Just thought it might be nice to have at least one evening without having them on your case about something." She winked. "Not supposed to do things like that, strictly speaking. But I won't tell if you won't."

"Won't tell what?" asked Sophie coming down the staircase, already dressed in her pink cotton pajamas. "Oh! Er . . . hiya, Harry."

He laughed. "Bunny rabbits, Sophie?"

She looked down at her pink rabbit slippers and blushed furiously. "Oh shut up."

"Let me bring out the biscuits and milk."

Imelda disappeared into the kitchen and Sophie peered over the banister, then waved for Harry to follow her. "*Come here,*" she whispered, "*hurry.*"

Harry raised a brow and obeyed, following her up the staircase. She led him into what turned out to be her room and closed the door behind them. Harry felt incredibly awkward at first, and then realized: he'd never been inside a girl's bedroom before. Muggle or Wizard. And it was so . . . cute. Sophie seemed to be quite fond of pink as her bedspread was white with little pink daisies and even her walls had a very light pink hue to them.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, trying hard not to appear as uncomfortable as he was.

Sophie seemed completely oblivious to his awkwardness and pulled the kwikspell book from under her pillowcase. "I just wanted to say thank you. You really don't know how much this means to me."

Harry shifted uncomfortably, "Oh, that. No problem."

"I mean, I've swiped spellbooks from Mom's room before, but. . . of course I couldn't do anything with them. Hopefully this book will be different. Look," she said proudly, pulling out something from under her bed. "I even have a wand! It's old, though. Mom had it when she was my age and she just gave it to me-- just to amuse me, really."

Harry was interested. "Here, let me see? Maybe this wand isn't right for you-- after all, the wand chooses the wizard, not vice versa. And hand me that kwikspell book."

She obeyed and Harry flipped through the pages. "Hey, some of these are pretty good. . ."

"well, they go from novice all the way to expert--"

"Yeah, so I've noticed! From engorgement charms to the confondus curse-- that's a hard one. And some of these I've never even *heard* of yet!" He looked up to find Sophie peering past his shoulder to

the pages. He wasn't used to this feeling-- why was he so *antsy*? He held out the book to her, "Go on Sophie, show me one."

She recoiled. "No. I told you, I can't."

"Don't act shy now, let's have a look."

She took the book reluctantly and flipped through it, biting her lip."

"Right," she said, pacing about six steps and turning to face Harry. She held the wand and repeated "Transito Regalitie," pointed the wand towards Harry.

Nothing whatsoever.

Harry liked feeling the part of the teacher and remembered what Professor Flitwick always said.

"No, no," said Harry, taking his wand from his belt. "This is the way it's done: it's called the 'swish and flick'-- watch carefully, okay? Try it like this:" He swished and flicked and repeated what Sophie had said and a white light shot from the end of the wand and exploded in front of her. She screamed and jumped back a few feet, stumbling to the floor. Harry's face went white: he stood and waited for a Hogwarts owl to swoop in on them, scolding him for doing magic-- it was against the law, after all!

"You all right," he cried, rushing to Sophie's side.

She pulled herself up and nodded, "Yeah-- yeah, I'm fine."

"What was that incan--"

The door flew open and Imelda stepped inside, holding a tray of chocolate biscuits. "What in Merlin's name is going on in here?"

Harry gulped. How stupid could he get: Imelda worked for the Ministry of Magic! She could have him *expelled* for this!

"I'm so sorry Imelda, I wasn't thinking! I was just showing her the right way to hold a wand and I guess I just, oh, I'm really sorry--"

Imelda smiled and placed the tray down on Sophie's nightstand. "Relax," she said softly. "Lucky for you we have a hiberitus charm here."

"A what?"

"A hiberitus charm-- magic goes undetected here. Very important as I am supposed to appear as a muggle-- quite effective too. Your Aunt Petunia would have caught on ages ago if it weren't for it-- I must say, she spends more time peering out the windows than she does anything else!"

He agreed and helped himself to two of the delicious biscuits. All three sat on Sophie's bed and talked, mostly Imelda as was her habit, until finally she told Harry it was probably time for him to be getting back-- Aunt Petunia was probably worried sick.

He blushed as Imelda kissed him on his forehead as they reached the front door and he turned away back to number four.

The next morning he could hardly believe his eyes. Thanks to Imelda's charm, Aunt Petunia had woken Harry from bed sweetly, calling 'Better get up, Dumpling! Don't want you to be late!'

He walked downstairs, unsure of what to make of the stack of blueberry pancakes, sausage and kippers that lay at his spot at the table. Uncle Vernon winked at him as he sat down. "Better eat up, my boy! That's a mighty long train ride, isn't it?"

Harry, not wanting to move too quickly for fear he might ruin the spell, merely nodded. "And do your Aunt and I a favor, would you? Please see to it you don't get into any trouble this year! It would break your Aunt's heart to get another Owl from your Professors. Promise us, will you?"

Harry, sure that he was still dreaming, answered, "Y-yes. Of course."

The doorbell rang.

"Ah! That must be Imelda! So *kind* of her to do this!"

Dudley, finishing off his plate, jumped out of his seat. "Don't worry, cousin! I'll go and get your suitcase from upstairs! You just finish your breakfast!"

Aunt Petunia rushed to the door and greeted Imelda and Sophie with a kiss on the cheek each and a hug. Imelda saw the look of shock on Harry's face and tried her best not to laugh. Sophie seemed quite delighted as well.

Dudley heaved Harry's trunk down the stairs and eagerly handed Harry Hedwig's cage. "All set, cousin!"

Harry walked to the front door, stopped only by Uncle Vernon who put his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"You will stay the Christmas Holidays with us this year, won't you?"

"Oh yes," said Petunia, "Please Harry! You *never* stay with us!"

Harry nodded. "We'll . . . we'll see." Uncle Vernon gave Harry a suffocating hug and *even* said a goodbye to Hedwig, who'd surely expected him to take a swipe at her, not tickle her feathers.

The Dursleys waved happily to Harry as he piled into the Banbury's car, Roger helping him with the trunk.

"That," said Harry, "was the strangest thing I've ever seen."

"You want to know something even better?" Said Imelda, "they're going to remember every last *minute* of it after it wears off! They'll be beside themselves with horror when they remember how they've acted."

"*Imelda*," Roger scolded, "really, dear, isn't that a bit childish?"

Imelda was laughing. "Oh, nonsense Roger. They, of all people, could do with a little kindness."

Kings Cross Station was duly crowded for a Monday morning. Roger pushed Harry's cart through the crowds. "Where is it again?"

"Platform Nine and three quarters."

Roger missed a step, "Platform what?"

"Here!" said Harry, stopping right in between the barrier between Platforms nine and ten. Roger looked incredibly confused, but shrugged, knowing better than to question wizarding logic.

"Harry!" Hermione called, "Finally! What took you so long!" She came running up behind them, her parents pushing her cart. "Ron and Ginny have already boarded-oh! Hello again Mr. and Mrs. Banbury! Hello, Sophie."

"Hello Hermione," said Sophie eagerly, delighted at seeing her again. "All ready, then?"

"Oh, yes thank you--*Harry* come on, we'd best get going!"

"Right, well . . ." he turned to the Banbury's. "Goodbye, Sophie."

"Goodbye," she said quietly, giving him a hug-he felt so very sorry for her. "Send us a letter, eh?"

"Of course." He turned to Imelda and Roger. "And you two-I can't thank you enough for everything you've done for me. Really-you'll never know just how much it's all meant to me, these past few weeks. They've been the best I've had in years-actually, they're the best I've ever had."

"*Hey*," said Hermione, slightly offended.

"Well, what I meant was, the best weeks at *Privet Drive* I've ever had."

Imelda laughed and embraced him, followed by Roger who gave him a firm handshake.

"And don't you worry about your cousin," said Roger. "I've got an eye on him--don't trust him for a minute. Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could somehow get *him* sent to St. Brutus!"

Harry laughed again and then, seeing Hermione impatiently tapping her foot, took hold of his cart and made a run between the barrier.

The world around him immediately morphed and he was standing, once again, in front of the glinting scarlet Hogwarts Express. He heard Hermione appear behind him and followed her quickly.

The stewards heaved their trunks onto the train, one of the men struggling with Hermione's in particular.

"What you have in here, luv?"

Hermione blushed. "Well . . . perhaps I did pack one too many books."

"Knowing you, Herm, you probably have all of Flourish and Blotts in that trunk."

It was amazing to Harry that already this would be the fifth time he made the journey out of London for Hogwarts. It really did feel like yesterday that he saw the school for the first time and still, the sight of the castle rising majestically amongst the hills, left Harry momentarily speechless.

It was an exceptionally warm evening when Harry and his fellow fifth years arrived at the entrance hall to be seated for the grand banquet. The enchanted ceiling above them was deep sackcloth black sprinkled with stars like salt and pepper and the room flickered with the dazzling warm orange and yellow light of hundreds of candles hanging in mid air upon nothing at all.

Harry, Hermione and Ron took their usual spots together at the Gryffindor table, shouting hellos and their friends whom they hadn't seen all summer. The biggest news amongst the Gryffindors was that Dean Thomas had been named a Prefect. Hermione coveted that position, but remained congratulatory as Dean proudly showed off his Prefect badge.

Colin Creevey, now a fourth year himself, had once again managed to slide himself in between Harry and Ron. Although he no longer hounded Harry with a camera and requests for his autograph, he still stuck to Harry like glue. Especially after what happened last term, Colin was by now thoroughly convinced that Harry was just as important a wizard as Albus Dumbledore himself. Harry had learned to simply ignore Colin whenever he dared say something so outrageous.

Ron elbowed Harry. "Hey, take a look at the Slytherin table."

That 'S' word put an immediate scowl on Harry's face. He looked across the great hall to see the long row of black and green clad Slytherins, all of which held no smile as the rest of the hall did. They merely sat, stern faced, staring most threateningly at the Gryffindor table especially. Draco Malfoy sat directly in the middle, his arms folded, with his familiar smirk, eyes pointed at Harry, and Harry only. If it hadn't been for Lord Voldemort, Harry would have called Draco Malfoy his archenemy in a heartbeat. He most certainly ran a close second, to be sure.

"Amazing," Harry whispered to Ron. "How can he even show his face here, knowing what his father is."

Draco Malfoy's father, Lucius, was a supporter of Lord Voldemort. Although the Ministry of Magic had cleared his name of charges and his family was actually respected by the Ministry, Harry had seen

Lucius with his own eyes, bowing before Voldemort. He heard him call Voldemort his 'lord' and vowed he would never stray from him again. And here sat his own son, for crying out loud, at *Hogwarts*: a haven of safety, a place run by the very people who spent every fiber of their being trying to *protect* the people from the dark Lord.

"I'm telling you," said Ron, his cheeks flushed at the very sight of him, "if it wasn't going to land me in Azkaban, I'd like to put a Cruciatus curse or two on him-- wipe that smile right off his face."

Harry elbowed him to shut up, as at that very moment Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor house, swept past them in her signature robes of tartan green, her black hair pinned up tightly beneath her hat. The first years followed her and assembled in front of the teacher's table-- they were ready for the sorting ceremony. A very long, but intriguing event.

"Wait a minute!" Cried Hermione in disbelief, "Where's Snape?"

Indeed, Snape's usual position at the table was most definitely not filled by Snape! Instead, there sat a positively *radiant* woman with blond hair that cascaded down her back in long, thick, gently curled locks. Even from far away, Harry could see that she had enormous striking blue eyes-- a deep blue that matched the color of her robes.

Both Ron and Harry's jaws dropped to the floor-- as did every other boys' in the entire great hall.

"She must be part Veela--"

"Oh *really*, Ron! Just because a woman is attractive, doesn't automatically make her a *Veela*!"

"Five sickles says she is."

"You're on," Hermione said bitterly. "Oh they can't have sacked Snape, can they?"

"Who *cares*," Ron roared, "*look* at this woman!"

The sorting ceremony commenced and Harry noted how odd it was that there were so few new additions to the Slytherin table! Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw received a generous amount of new students-- but only a few trickled over to Slytherin's side. After all the new students had taken their seats (the first year sitting directly across from Harry an especially frightened looking thing) Professor Dumbledore stood up and clapped his hands, addressing the first years with some general rules.

"And, as you have all most certainly noticed, our potions master Professor Snape is not with us today--"

There was a noticeable clamor of excited whispers.

"-- nor will he be with us for the rest of the first term. Professor Snape has been assigned a very important mission directly from the Ministry of Magic and he will not be rejoining us until after the Christmas holidays. Professor Warwick will be filling in until his return."

The whispers grew louder. . . Harry even heard a few catcalls from some of the boys.

Professor McGonagall peered over her glasses at this, and the hall grew quiet once more.

"And finally, I should like to direct everyone's attention to the back of the hall."

Hundreds of pointed hats turned in that direction.

"You will notice the large blue fire hanging above the entrance door. That, my dear children, is an eternal flame that we have placed here in the great hall in honor of the memory of our own Cedric Diggory. It is interesting to note that similar flames have been put in place at both Durmstrang and Beauxbatons Schools for Witchcraft and Wizardry."

Harry stared-- the flames were beautiful: brilliant white and glowing blue, crackling ever so quietly. And the students applauded. Then the students *roared* and got to their feet, clapping still louder-- all the more louder. After an eternity, they finally sat back down and Dumbledore officially began the feast. The chatter at the Gryffindor table was, of course, about the most unexpected disappearance of Severus Snape. Now, any other time, Harry would have been rejoicing at the news of Snape's absence along with the rest of his Gryffindors. (Neville Longbottom looking especially relieved knowing he no longer had to fear walking into Potions class). Snape had succeeded in making a considerable amount of Harry's time at Hogwarts pure misery. He'd been picked on and bullied and slandered to a relentless extreme by Snape, and the two of them most definitely had what one would call a 'hate/hate' relationship.

But not seeing Snape at the table worried Harry. Snape used to be one of Voldemort's loathed Death-Eaters, however he reformed years ago and renounced the Dark Ways. Harry had been suspicious of Snape at first, however after seeing Snape last term, he knew that Snape's loyalties were not with Voldemort, but with what was right. The Death Eaters had been called together by Voldemort, Snape of course did not join them, and Harry remembered *specifically* Voldemort saying that he would have to be killed. When Harry had escaped back to Hogwarts, Dumbledore had merely said to Snape 'You know what must be done.' Snape had agreed, said the he was ready, and left-- that was the last Harry had seen of him, and the fact that he was still gone was *quite* bothersome to Harry.

Harry may have hated Snape with a burning passion, but as Dumbledore had said last term, they were all on the same side now-- and a house divided cannot stand.

After the students had all pretty much gorged themselves on the feast, the prefect lead the tables out of the great hall and up the staircases to their dormitories. Harry smiled at the sound of first years passing, oohing and the infinite staircase, and shrieking gleefully at the talking portraits. Gryffindor's new prefects were none other than Angelina Johnson and Dean Thomas-- a seventh and fifth year. (Hermione was most disappointed she hadn't been made a prefect. Harry had to remind her that although she was top of her year, her *track* record hadn't been entirely, shall one say, *clean*.) Dean lead them up to the entrance of the boys' dormitories and gave the password "Brambleberry" to the Fat Lady who smiled at them and let them enter.

Harry threw himself onto his bed and sighed loudly. "Ahhh. Good to be home, eh Ron?"

"You're daft," Ron chuckled as he sat down on his adjacent bed-- their things had been brought up, as usual, by the castle's house elves, and the boys went about the business of changing for bed.

"So, where do you think Snape is?" Harry asked.

Ron wrinkled his nose. "Who cares? As long as he doesn't come back! Get some sleep Harry."

"Goodnight Ron," he said quietly-- although sleep was the last thing on his mind.

** *

Chapter Five: The Stow-Away

"Go on then, let's have a look!"

Harry, Hermione and Ron all compared their class schedules after Professor McGonagall handed them out over breakfast.

"Damn," Ron muttered, "of course we'd have Potions with the Slytherins. Why can't they put us with the Ravenclaws. . ."

"Well, we have History of Magic with them, that's why," Hermione answered promptly.

Ron rolled his eyes. "It was a *rhetorical question*, 'Mione."

"Oh, and look! Our new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor is someone named . . ." she held the paper closely to her face, "Professor Simon Gray." She blinked. "He wasn't at the fest last night, was he?"

"No. . ." Ron shook his head as he shoved a spoonful of oatmeal into his mouth. "Too bad it's not another witch! I could get used to this!"

Hermione made another groan of disgust, and they quickly finished their breakfast before making a break for their first class of the day-- which just so happened to be potions.

They joined the Slytherins in the familiar dungeon, neither house so much as making eye contact with the other. Usually the complete cold shoulder came when the battle for the House Cup was at its highest, but here on the first day of classes, the two houses had already reached that breaking point.

Draco Malfoy, sitting in between his two oaf-like friends Crabbe and Goyle, was the only one giving the Gryffindors any type of attention. And it was that same, curious, twisted smile-- the smile that Harry had wanted to slap off his face for four long years.

Professor Warwick entered the room at that time and immediately, every boy in the chamber snapped to attention, sitting perfectly straight. She walked-- no-- she *flowed* to the front of the classroom, her robes billowing behind her with the same airiness as her platinum hair. She turned to face the students and folded her arms, absolutely silent, staring down each and every one of them.

It was an uneasy silence and it seemed like it was going to last forever.

And then, she finally opened her mouth to speak. "Before any of you ask-- no. I am not part Veela."

She flashed a winning smile as the boys laughed happily at her joke. Hermione spun around to face Ron and mouthed triumphantly, 'five sickles!'

"I am, however, your Potions master for the time being and shall try my best to be every bit as efficient as your dear Professor Snape."

Ron coughed loudly, gaining a snigger from several other Gryffindors.

Professor Warwick raised a brow. "Perhaps we should first learn a potion to cure nasty coughs, should we Mr. . ." she glanced down at her roll sheet, "Mr. Ronald Weasley, is it?"

The Slytherins liked this, and let out a series of muffled laughs.

Professor Warwick turned to them immediately, her eyes wide. "And after that, we'll brew a remedy for those wretched giggles. You'd like that wouldn't you, er . . ." her eyes flickered down to her roll sheet. "Mr. Draco Malfoy, correct?"

Draco stared at her. She smiled once again. "*Malfoy*? You aren't Lucius' son, are you?" Draco stiffened.

"I went to Hogwarts with him. Let him know that Aariah says hello, will you?"

Shutting up Draco Malfoy was all that was needed to gain the approval of any Gryffindor, even at the expense of one of their own.

Professor Warwick was a pleasant tempered witch, but anyone thinking they could take advantage of her disposition soon found out that she had absolutely no problem with handing out both scathing sermons and detention notices.

Hermione thought she was absolutely brilliant.

After lunch, the three trudged up the staircase to their Defense Against the Dark Arts class with the Ravenclaws and took their seats. Hermione was going about the business of arranging her parchment and ink so as not to miss a beat of the professor said.

Now, Harry was a bit nervous about just who his new Dark Arts Professor would be. In the four years he'd attended Hogwarts, only one of them turned out to be someone he could trust--and even he turned out to be a werewolf! There was Professor Quirrell in his first year, whom Harry discovered to be nurturing Voldemort back to power. There was Gilderoy Lockhart in his second year --- enough said. His third year he had Professor Remus Lupin who was a fantastic teacher and was nearly able to capture Lord Voldemort's servant Peter Pettigrew--but Snape, who'd loathed Remus since adolescence, saw to it that the school board found out about Remus being a werewolf and he of course resigned. And then, last year, there was 'Mad-Eye Moody'--who really wasn't Moody at all! A Death Eater named Barty Crouch had been taking a potion to appear to be the Professor so that he could help set up a plan that would both bring Voldemort back to power and bring Harry back to Voldemort--a plan that he succeeded in.

So needless to say, Harry was on pins and needles as the classroom waited for their new Professor to arrive. Given his past history, Harry wouldn't have been surprised if the new Professor was Lord Voldemort himself!

Harry shuddered at the very idea just as the door to the chamber flew open.

A tall and slender man, dressed most elegantly in rich, gorgeous black robes strode past them to the front of the class. His brown hair was cut rather short and neat--every hair in its proper place. He wore large silver spectacles, that were perhaps a bit too large for his face, for they magnified his eyes much the way Professor Trelawney's did hers. A thin pencil line of a moustache was the finishing touch on this striking face. . .

And Harry, staring at him from his seat up in the front, had the gnawing feeling that he knew him from somewhere.

"Good morning class!" Came a voice, considerably higher than Harry would have imagined from such a tall man.

He looked visibly nervous and fumbled with some papers he'd placed on his desk.

"My name is Professor Gray and I should like to welcome all of you to your fifth year! You made it!" He swallowed and then continued, trying very hard to sound as composed and collected as possible. "I attended Hogwarts as well, of course. A Gryffindor, actually."

Happy murmurs came from the Gryffindors.

"And I must tell you, that out of all seven years, my fifth year was my favorite. And I think it was actually mostly due to this class! There's so much to learn this year--and several, erm, *surprises* along the way." He cleared his throat. "A--and I also have been educated on the rumors that many here feel this position to be. . . cursed?"

More murmurs from the students.

"Well, I must admit, the past several years doesn't give one much confidence. But. . . I'm willing to take my chances."

Harry was staring Professor Gray intensely. . . yes, there was most *definitely* something about him that seemed *familiar* to him. Oh, well, perhaps it had just been in casual passing. . .

Professor Gray opened his textbooks, "Class, if you please, open to the index--right there on the first page, yes. There are thirty four chapters in this book--all of which are very important of course, even though to be quite honest, well, most of you are never really going to come across Moorish Syads that Chapter Seventeen mentions, as those have long been banished from the wizarding world. Nor will you be likely to rendez-vous with the Gauraneese Mauler Bat that Chapter Twenty-Six focuses on unless you find yourself alone in a dark cave in the middle of night in the Gaura Valley in Transylvania--and if you ever are, well, of course it would be your own silly fault in the first place for even *being* there."

The class laughed in agreement.

"No, we have more important things to deal with than fierce creatures whom none of us will ever really come across. Much more. . . *pertinent* things to deal with. . ."

Everyone leaned forward.

"Let me ask a personal question and, please, anyone feel free to answer. When you think of the Dark Arts, what is it that scares you the most?"

Silence.

"Oh come now, over the past four years you've learned much about the arts. What is it that frightens you the most?"

A memory suddenly whipped into Harry's mind of Voldemort's red eyes, that high-pitched laugh, his cold and bony finger upon his cheek. . .

To everyone's surprise, it wasn't Hermione that raised her hand first.

"Yes- er. . . Mr. Longbottom, correct?"

Everyone turned to face Neville. His face was ghostly pale. "Well. . . death."

Professor Gray's expression didn't change. "Death," he repeated. "Unfortunately, Mr. Longbottom is quite correct in his fear. Dark Wizards differ from yourselves and myself in many ways-the most obvious of which is their utter disregard for life both wizard and muggle. Killing is their most common weapon, this is true. But someone else answer me this: does this mean that you should spend your lives locked up in a dungeon, scared to step outside?"

Harry felt himself raising his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Potter--it *is* Mr. Potter, isn't it?" Harry nodded. "Well. . . no, it shouldn't." He remembered what Remus had said only two weeks ago. "Because being afraid just means that you understand what's ahead of you. And courage doesn't mean that you're not afraid, it just means that you're ready to face it."

There was a terrific smile that flashed across Professor Gray's face, and then he quickly brushed it off.

"*Precisely*, Mr. Potter. I know that . . . given recent events. . .there is a lot of fear gripping the magical community. But this, in a nutshell, is why we're here in this class. So that we can understand what may be ahead of us and therefore be able to face it and deal with it."

Professor Gray was most definitely passionate about his subject and spoke every word as though it sincerely meant the students' very lives. "So, forgive me for I'll be skipping several of these chapters--oh yes, we'll cover them--but I just want this year to be focused on the more important things."

The class dismissed not too long afterwards, everyone leaving in a sort of daze.

"Well," Ron breathed, "I, for one, am now completely *depressed*. Made it sound like the end of the world was coming."

"He did not, Ron," Hermione protested. "He was really, rather brilliant. Don't you think so Harry?"

Harry was in a sullen mood after the class, but would have hardly called it depressing. "It was sobering, that's for sure."

"Absolutely," said Hermione. "Professor Gray is wonderful-I think we're going to learn an awful lot with him this year."

"Oh Herm, you just fancy him, that's all."

"What ever would give you that idea!" There was a flush to her cheeks.

"Because that is exactly what I said about Professor Warwick after we left *her* class."

**

Hermione had been devastated over her not being selected as a prefect. It wasn't the *exact* feeling, but a bit similar to how Harry had felt about not being named the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Oliver Wood had graduated two years prior, but this was to be Gryffindors first Quidditch season without him since last year was preoccupied with the Triwizard Tournament. That meant that a new Captain had to be appointed.

Now, Harry wasn't the sort of person to pat himself on the back, but if there was one thing he was certainly proud of, it was the fact that he was a damn good Quidditch player. He was of course, *happy* for their new captain Angelina Johnson, but disappointed nonetheless.

Angelina, as it turned out, was just as uncomfortable over the assignment. The first morning of practice, the week after school began, she told Harry so, privately.

"You know that I really think it should have been you."

"Angelina, you're the best Chaser that we--"

"And you're the best Seeker in the entire school! It really should have been--"

"Look, what's done is done. You're going to be *great* as Captain! I know it!"

Angelina opened her mouth to protest again, but Harry would have none of it. "Come *on*.

We're a *team*. And, most importantly . . ." he paused, smiling at Angelina. "We're going to beat *Slytherin* again!"

Angelina laughed, and the two walked off on the playing field. Fred, George and Katie Bell were waiting for them, shouted the Gryffindor cheer and then sped off up into the air.

Harry's Firebolt hadn't missed a beat -- three months away from it, and it was still just as deft and skillful as ever. Now, Harry thought as he rose and dove through the air. *Now I'm really home*.

Harry walked towards the great hall, more than ready for lunch, his heart still racing from his ride on his Firebolt.

Two arms grabbed hold of him and pulled him back behind a pillar-- Ron and Hermione both were wide eyed.

"We," said Hermione, "have a problem."

Harry's stomach churned. "Exactly what do you mean by 'problem'?"

Ron grimaced. "As in something that could get us all expelled if we don't fix it."

Harry's jaw dropped. "What is it?"

Ron stared at Hermione, looking as though he was ready to burst from anger.

Hermione took a breath, "Right. This morning before breakfast I was getting dressed and I went to pull my shoes out from my closet when I *heard* something. Something hidden in amongst my clothes. So I looked through all my clothes and . . . and . . ."

"SOPHIE!" Ron blurted, coming unglued, "SOPHIE BANBURY was hiding in her closet!"

Harry gulped. "Impossible..."

"Apparently not!"

Hermione looked frantic. "So I pulled her out and demanded an explanation. She was just standing there clutching her jumper for dear life, terrified, stammering--"

"*What did she say!*" Harry roared.

"Said she was sorry-- oh so sorry. Said that she couldn't help herself-- that Harry and her mother and I were yakking away at the gate and the urge just overcame her-- she opened up my trunk and slipped right in--"

"WHAT" Harry cried-- he could hardly believe his ears! "Oh my-- if Dumbledore-- no, if *McGonagall* knew about this-- oh *Hermione!*"

"I didn't do anything! *Sophie* did!"

"Still, you do look like a Muggle Smuggler, Herm." There was more amusement in Ron's voice than anger when he said this-- and Hermione was not very pleased.

"Oh just *shut up!* The both of you! You've got to help me get her out of here!"

"How can we possibly get a Muggle out of Hogwarts when it's hard enough as it is to even get one in!"

Harry groaned. "Okay-- where is she now?"

"Well, she's in my closet of course! She's got to keep hidden. . ."

"Well, Ron and I will come right up and talk to her."

"Great," Ron muttered. "The bloody *girls'* dormitory. I can see it already: *McGonagall* catches us in the girls dormitory with a muggle."

"Ah, but we won't get caught!" Harry smiled at Hermione. "It's okay, Herm. We'll figure this out. Ron? Let's go and get my cloak-- Herm, you wait for us at the door to your dorms." All three turned and made a dash for Gryffindor.

"But -- what -- about -- lunch," Ron panted as they blitzed up the staircase.

"We have to act *now*, while everyone is out of their rooms."

Harry yelled the password "magnus sungam" at the Fat Lady. He threw open his trunk, pulled out his father's invisibility cloak and pulled it over himself and Ron, then made a break for the girls' dorms.

"Can't bloody believe this," Ron was saying as they ran. "What the hell was she *thinking*!"

"Obviously she *wasn't* thinking." Harry was still in disbelief. "I mean. . . she's a *muggle*! What could she possibly have thought--"

"*Keep it down!*" Hermione scolded. She was standing at the door, waiting, and pulled it open.

"I could hear you all the way upstairs!"

Still hidden beneath the cloak, they followed Hermione towards her dorm.

"Hey," Ron said, "it looks just like ours!"

"Well of course it does! What did you think it looked like?"

"I dunno-- more. . . . *girly*. Lots of pink and daisies and all that--"

"*Really*, Ron." Hermione knocked on the closet door. "Sophie? You all right?"

There was a squeak in reply and Hermione pulled open the doors.

Sophie looked a wreck: her hair was sticking up in all places, much the way Harry's did, her clothes wrinkled, her eyes red with fatigue.

"Come on out, Sophie," Hermione coaxed. She did so, very cautiously.

Ron threw the cloak off him and lay right into Sophie. She yelped, most likely never having seen an invisibility cloak, and took a step back as Ron shouted at her.

"*Are you flipping mental? What were you bloody thinking? Do you know how much trouble we could get into for this? Do you know how much trouble Hogwarts could get into with this? My Dad works for the Ministry of Magic, and if they find out that Hogwarts has allowed a Muggle onto the property, who knows what they'll do!*"

Sophie had tears in her eyes. Harry's heart softened and, still clutching the cloak close around him, he stepped forward.

"Sophie, calm down. It'll be all right."

She yelped again, her eyes still wide in horror. Harry remembered what he must have looked like to a muggle-- his body half invisible.

"Oh." He threw the cloak off and Sophie relaxed. "It's just . . . you can understand why we're upset, right?"

She nodded.

"And your *parents*, Sophie," he continued. "Roger and Imelda must be beside themselves. *Why* did you do it?"

"B-because I. . . I. . ." the tears came again. "I wanted to *be* like you! All of you! I spent my whole life wanting to go to Hogwarts, and be as great a witch as my Mum was. I know. . . I know I'm a disappointment to her. . ."

Harry had to smile. "That's ridiculous and you know it. You're not a disappointment-- your parents love you!"

Hermione nodded. "Exactly."

"But I'm a--"

"Your Dad is a muggle as well and I'm sure that *he* doesn't think it's so very terrible. My parents don't!"

"Your parents are both Muggles?"

"Yes!" Said Hermione brightly.

Sophie burst into tears. "You mean to say that *you're* a witch and both your parents are Muggles, while I'm --"

"Oh this is just silly," Ron snapped. "Listen Sophie, I'm sorry that you're unhappy. I really am. But you can't stay here! We're going to have to get you home." He took a breath. "You lot? We're gonna have to tell Dumbledore."

"No!" Sophie shrieked, "*Please* let me stay! *Don't* tell Mr. Dumbledore! Oh, my mother would be in such trouble!"

"As much as we'd *like* for you to stay," said Harry, "we *can't*. If we did, all of us: you me, Ron and Hermione, would all be out of school.

"It's not fair to any of us," added Hermione.

Sophie was bawling. . . but she understood. After a moment she was reduced to shrivels every now and then.

"Right. Of course you're right. I'm . . . sorry. I didn't want to put anyone in danger, and certainly I didn't want to risk your being expelled. I just lost my head. I'm sorry."

"Well, thank heavens for that."

Harry whipped around to see none other than Professor McGonagall in the dormitory, her arms folded, leering over her glasses.

Everyone gulped.

McGonagall eyed each one of them and then said, "This way, please."

The four walked out of the girls' dormitory in silence, Sophie looking particularly terrified.

Harry's heart went out to her: if McGonagall could scare *him* out of his wits, how much more so to a Muggle!

She led them wordlessly, up a winding staircase-- wonder evident in Sophie's face as they passed the portraits. (One bade her 'good day' which made her collide into Ron). Albus Dumbledore's office was a place that Harry and Ron had seen much more of than any other student at the school. Dumbledore was sitting at his desk, writing away, and he looked up and upon seeing them, gained that familiar twinkle in his eyes.

"My, my, Minerva! This sets a record I believe for Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley! The second day of school! It's usually a week before I see you-- and *this* is with Severus gone!" He chuckled happily as he stood up.

Sophie, who stood next to Harry, subconsciously grabbed Harry's arm when she got a good look at Albus. Harry had to admit that to a muggle, seeing Dumbledore with his long, brilliant white hair and beard, and his purple robes-- it would be a bit intimidating.

"And this must be our little stow-away," he said pleasantly.

"How did you *know*?" Harry breathed-- and then quickly realized what a stupid question that was. Albus patted the head of a barn owl that looked somewhat familiar. It was Mrs.

Banbury's owl, to be sure. Albus picked up a letter, cleared his throat and read:

To Albus Dumbledore

Hogwarts Headmaster

Dear Sir:

I am writing to you in a state of panic. Sophie, my only daughter and a muggle has disappeared and I have good reason to believe that she is at this very moment on your campus. This at least gives me some peace of mind, knowing she is of course safe in your institution.

Please write to me the minute you receive this owl and let me know if Sophie is indeed there and when I may come to take her home.

Yours most sincerely,

Imelda Banbury,

Ministry of Magic - Special Investigations.

Sophie kept her gaze at the floor, not able to make eye contact with anyone.

"However. . . this has put us in a most awkward position." Professor Dumbledore took his seat once more, folded his hands, and peered overtop his spectacles. "I take it that Miss Banbury hid herself in one of our Hogwarts school trunks, am I correct?"

"Yes. Mine," said Hermione.

"That is a very lengthy train ride to be cooped up inside a trunk. Ten hours, I believe the train ride is. Especially tedious is it inside a Hogwarts trunks which, incidentally, are all airtight. " Harry's heart skipped a beat. *What* had Dumbledore just said?

"That's right, Miss Banbury. Those trunks are all specifically designed to be absolutely airtight. There is no possible way that any non-magical living being could survive more than twenty minutes inside one of them. And you survived ten *hours*."

Sophie had lifted her gaze up to meet Dumbledore- the shadows of smile beginning to appear. "This being the case only leaves one conclusion to draw: that Miss Banbury does possess some degree of magical potential."

"So she's *not* a squib then?" asked Ron.

Professor Dumbledore laughed softly. "She never was a squib to begin with, Mr. Weasley. You see, a squib is someone who comes from an all wizarding family, and yet has no magical powers. A muggle is classified as someone who has at least **one** parent who is a muggle, and has no magical powers. Sophie's father is a muggle, therefore her lack of magical powers classified her as a 'muggle' as well. When you look at it that way, it's just a simple matter of genetics. However, in Miss Banbury's case, she is neither a muggle nor a squib."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as he smiled at her. "No, she is a witch." He laughed. "Although a very, very late-bloomer, I should add!"

Sophie was positively beaming! Harry, Ron and Hermione were smiling as well, delighted with the news!

Dumbledore continued. "Now, it being the case that Miss Banbury is now too old to be admitted as a student here, with her blessing, I should like to send back home where she will participate in a correspondence class. I am certain that your mother will be delighted to tutor you, as will Mr. Potter here, whenever he is home."

Harry knew that he was being volunteered, but knew better than to ever appear ungrateful for anything Dumbledore said or provided. He merely kept quiet. "Good," said Dumbledore. "I shall write your mother immediately, and if all goes according to plan, you will be on your way home by tomorrow morning."

Sophie broke out into a smile, her eyes still red from all her tears. She nearly choked out her words, too overcome with emotion. "Sir, I cannot thank you enough . . ."

Dumbledore pat her on her head, "then best not try to, eh?" he turned to Professor McGonagall, "Minerva, I trust you'll see to Miss Banbury's sleeping arrangements for tonight?"

McGonagall nodded. "I was thinking perhaps the fifth floor--"

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore, "Wonderful idea, Minerva!"

"She can't stay with us in the girls dormitory-- just for tonight?" Hermione almost looked mournful.

"No room, Miss Granger. And. . . well, it's best we put her up in her own chamber. And now Sophie, your friends will be needing to return to their classes. . ." Dumbledore stood up and walked slowly towards the door, Harry and the rest walking with him.

"Professor Dumbledore," said Hermione, "won't we be seeing her before she leaves?"

"Most unlikely, Miss Granger. Mrs. Banbury will probably arrive for her just as you're in the middle of your defense against the dark arts class. . . which reminds me. . . Mr. Potter, may I have a word? Minerva, please take Miss Banbury to her quarters directly and see that she's

comfortable, Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger, I expect Hagrid is wondering where you are right about now."

They bade their farewells to Sophie, Hermione looking upon her with an especially maternal glint in her eye (Harry reckoned that Hermione now viewed Sophie as a disciple of hers). Sophie followed Professor McGonagall, looking back behind her with a weak smile, visibly nervous about being alone with the imposing Professor McGonagall, and Hermione and Ron filed past Harry, looking every bit as curious as Harry felt.

Dumbledore closed the door once everyone had left and Harry looked up anxiously. *What have I done this time?* Dumbledore was beaming at him from overtop his lunar spectacles.

"So you think you'll enjoy your classes this year, do you?"

Harry nodded cautiously. "I hope so, Sir."

"Your new potions master is only temporary. You see, I've placed Snape on an . . . assignment for me. Just in case you were worried as to his whereabouts-- I realize that last you saw him he left quite abruptly. But hopefully he won't be too much longer--"

Harry did all he could to keep from yelling *'tell him there's no hurry. . .'*

"--And your defense against the dark arts professor. . ."

"Oh, yes!" Harry piped up immediately. "We all think he's brilliant!"

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed. Quite . . ." he placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You know. . . it's a funny thing about him. I could just *swear* that he reminds me of someone."

"Yes! That's exactly what I thought too!"

Dumbledore was nodding, thoughtfully. "Yes. . . actually, I rather think that he looks as though he could be related to your Godfather, Harry."

"Sirius?" Harry repeated blankly.

"Yes, Sirius. The same *face*, you know? As a matter of fact. . . if I didn't know any better, I'd say that it is Sirius. But that's if I didn't know any better."

"But you *do* know better, right Sir?"

Dumbledore said nothing. His smile, however, broadened.

"*Right*, Sir?"

He kept his smile. "It's getting late, Harry. I've kept you from class long enough."

** *

Chapter Six: The Stow-Away

Harry made his way down to his care of magical creatures class in a daze, trying to understand just what Dumbledore was trying to say. *It can't be Sirius. . . it just isn't possible . . . it just *isn't* . . .*

It was only the sight of Hagrid that brought him back to the present.

Aside from Ron, Hagrid was most definitely one of Harry's very best friends. Gryffindor was having their class with the Hufflepuffs, much to Harry's relief since it meant he didn't have to worry about Draco and his posse constantly badgering poor Hagrid. Hagrid smiled when he saw Harry enter the room: he stroked his long, wiry beard, and the deep eyes beneath his bushy brows twinkled. Harry found himself looking up at Hagrid-- every bit as enormous as he'd always been.

"Misplaced yer schedule, eh Harry?"

Harry chuckled as he took an empty seat next to Seamus Finnigan.

"It's alright-- we ain't been doin' much, really. Jus' readin' up on the history o' Smarples."

"Smarples," Harry repeated, suddenly loathing the possibilities of what exactly a 'smarples' could be: ever since Hagrid had become their care of magical creatures teacher, there hadn't been a time when one of the creatures hadn't spelled out disaster for the entire class.

"Yeah-- page ten in yer book, Harry. Go on Dean, finish readin' "

Dean Thomas nodded and continued from where he had apparently left off. . .

"Smarples have never been proved dangerous, although years of study has suggested it best to simply leave these creatures alone whenever one comes in contact with them. Should someone become stung by them, it generally takes one week of intense treatment for the victim to turn back to its natural color. . . "

Harry shuddered to think what that could mean. . .

'An' that ain't no lie!' Hagrid interrupted, "I seen it happen, I have! Right terrible lookin'-- the man was bright pink with yellow polka dots. Never lived it down to this day, 'e hasn't. Never fails he's sent jumpers and cloaks in bright pink and polka dots every birthdee!" Hagrid roared, and the rest of the class laughed along with him. Perhaps they were actually going to learn something in the class this year!

Harry, Ron and Hermione walked out of the class, still smiling.

"Hagrid seems to be much more comfortable this year, don't you think?" asked Hermione.

"Yeah," said Ron, "almost like . . . and actual *teacher!*"

They laughed-- barely noticing the sour voice that was intruding.

"Have a nice summer, *Potter?*"

Harry didn't even have to look. That voice was as recognizable as his own. Draco stood in the middle of the hallway, right in the middle of their path, his arms folded and his nose up in the air as it always was. Harry, Ron and Hermione merely walked around him without so much as giving him a second glance. And then--

"Psst! Harry!"

Harry froze, hardly daring to believe it was who he thought it was. He turned around slowly and sure enough, there was Sophie peeking her head out from behind a pillar.

"*Sophie?!?*" he squeaked. "What the--"

"I've lost McGonagall! The staircases-- they. . . they *changed* on me!"

Harry suppressed a laugh upon seeing the fear in her eyes. "It's all right, we'll find her. Best get you back to Dumbledore's office--"

"And who, or should I say, *what* have we here? Is this the latest in Hogwarts attire? *Muggle* clothing?"

"Shut up, Malfoy," said Hermione, putting a protective arm around Sophie.

"Who is she?" Draco sneered.

"She's a fifth year," said Harry, "and you've never seen her before because she's been studying from home."

Draco stepped closer. "What's your name?"

Sophie, who seemed to have the feeling that perhaps this Draco character wasn't exactly good news, stammered her answer. "Sophie. Banbury."

"*Banbury?*" Draco's eyes widened. "As in *Imelda Banbury?*"
Harry could see Sophie tense up.
"Not the *same* Imelda Banbury who married that muggle?"
"The same," she said proudly.
"Then. . ." Draco looked as though he couldn't believe it. "That means that . . . *you're* her *muggle* daughter!"
"*Obviously* she's not a *muggle*, Malfoy," Harry spat. "Muggles aren't *allowed* at Hogwarts!"
"Yeah Draco," Ron added, "You prat! Try using your brain once in a while!"
"But *everyone* knows that Imelda Banbury's daughter is a muggle! Everyone! My father told me--"
"Then your father needs to get his facts straight," quipped Hermione.
Draco could have killed her with the look he shot at her. His voice was incensed as he spoke. "Who are YOU to say ANYTHING about my FATHER, Granger!!"
"You can't threaten me, Malfoy."
"You have no idea what you're up against. If you know what's good for you, you'll watch your mouth, my dear. Or I'll have no hesitation to put you in your place-- remember, you can't change what's in your blood. Granger."
"I'd rather my parents be muggles like Hermione's than traitors like yours!" Ron roared.
Draco pulled out his wand and placed it at Ron's neck. "That goes for you too, Weasley. As far as I'm concerned, if you and Harry choose to be with mudbloods and muggles, then you're every bit as dirty as they are." His angry blue eyes drifted past Ron and landed on Sophie. He pointed his wand towards her. "*Especially that one.*"
"WHAT in Merlin's name is going on here!"
Everyone looked up to see Professor McGonagall standing not five feet away.
"You will kindly put your wand away, Mr. Malfoy."
Draco leered at Ron as he put his wand away, grimly.
"And Miss Banbury! I've been searching the grounds for you! Stick closer this time, won't you? Come on!" She turned on foot and Sophie hurried to follow her, throwing a smile at Harry, Ron and Hermione as she walked off, her shoes clicking on the floor.
Draco folded his arms. "I still stand by what I said," he said piously.
"Then you stand alone," Harry said. "Come on you lot, we're going to be late for class."
* * *

Neither Harry, Ron or Hermione had been able to see Sophie off when Mrs. Banbury arrived for her that next morning. Hermione was lamenting over her departure, repeating just how much she "liked that kid." Ron was still rather irritated at Sophie for having made such an irrational decision.

"Need I remind you," Hermione snapped as they walked to their first class, "that your track record hasn't been so great either. Flying a car to Hogwarts. . ."

"Okay, skip the lecture Hermione. I'd *much* rather have Professor Warwick give me one than you."

Hermione turned up her nose. "Hmph. And I bet that isn't the *only* thing that you'd like from her."

"*Herm!*" Harry shouted, falling into stitches.

Ron called Hermione a 'vicious troll', yet didn't bother to deny her comment either! Harry was the first one seated for the defense against the dark arts class. He listened to Professor Gray's lecture as best he could, but was paying more attention to Professor Gray *himself*. Studying every expression, every raise in the brow, every wave of the hand-- trying to find Sirius in him somewhere. If only those hideous glasses weren't hiding half his face!

After what seemed mere moments, the class was filling out-- except for Harry, who lingered. "I'll catch up with you two in a bit," he called to Ron and Hermione who exchanged confused looks.

He approached Professor Gray's desk.

"Ah, Harry," he said without looking up from his quill, "How can I help you?"

"Professor Gray. . ." he started cautiously, "Er. . . I . . . really enjoyed today's lesson."

He looked up. "Why thank you Harry! Really, it means a lot to me to hear that! I got the impression that most of the class found it rather dull."

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"For one, Mr. Seamus Finnigan's snoring."

"Oh, no," said Harry, "Seamus is always sleeping. Don't worry." He coughed nervously.

"Um. . . I bet, you've had lots of experience against the dark arts."

Professor Gray merely nodded. "Yes. Which is why I was delighted to take this job!

Besides, it was much better than what I was doing before."

"Where were you before?"

"I was working in London." He smiled peculiarly. "Vauxhall Road."

A memory bit Harry. The article he'd read about Sirius Black in Uncle Vernon's newspaper had said that Sirius Black had been spotted around Vauxhall Road!

"I. . . read in a muggle newspaper that Sirius *Black* was spotted there not too long ago."

Harry smiled. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you? Professor Gray?"

"Certainly, yes."

They stared at each other. Professor Gray removed his spectacles and Harry was met with those coal black eyes he'd missed so very much.

"SIRI--"

"*Ssshh!*" Sirius snapped promptly.

Harry's heart was racing at the wonderful, glorious truth! He kept his voice lowered.

"Wicked disguise, Sirius! And your voice! How did you--"

Sirius laughed. "Of all things: a *muggle* invention. He pulled down his collar and peeled off a silver looking tab from his neck. "A voice disguiser. Bought it in Vauxhall Road."

They were beaming at each other.

"Oh, just wait until Ron and Hermione find out--"

"NO! Oh Harry, no. No one must know-- not even Ron and Hermione! I know they're your best friends, but I must have you promise me that much. Dumbledore was hesitant about my even telling you!"

Harry nodded eagerly. "Oh Sirius, how--"

But Sirius was putting his glasses back on. "My next class is coming in, Harry. We can't talk now. But. . . why don't you meet me here for lunch?"

Harry would have thrown his arms around Sirius if he hadn't heard students filing in the room at that moment. Instead he nodded vigorously and left.

It was an eternity until lunchtime. Harry made a break through the courtyard, his feet hardly able to carry him fast enough to Sirius' classroom.

"Hey! Harry, wait up!" Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, two of his best mates since first year, were huffing and puffing after him. "Where you off to in such a hurry?"

Harry tried to hide his annoyance. "Erm-- the bathroom. Why?"

"Is it true?!?" Seamus demanded, grabbing Harry's arm.

"Is what true?"

"All the Slytherins are putting it 'round that you're *serious* with some *muggle!*"

"WHAT?!?" Harry stopped dead in his tracks. "Where did they get that from?"

Dean shrugged-- but they all knew. Malfoy.

"Dean, don't you think I'd tell you if I was serious with *anyone*--let alone a *muggle?*"

"Malfoy says he caught you two in the hall--"

"Muggles can't get onto Hogwarts grounds, Seamus. That girl happens to be half and half just like the both of you. *And* she's my neighbor."

"Ohhhh," Dean said. "Sophie?"

"Yes," said Harry irritably.

Dean and Seamus exchanged a naughty smile. "Not a bad choice if you were, Harry, that's for sure--"

"Dean--"

"I know, I know. I'm just saying. . . So. . . she's new here, then? That's funny, I could have *sworn* that she was a muggle--"

"No. She studies from home. . . it's a long story. But *no* I'm not serious with *her* or anyone else for that matter! I could just strangle that Malfoy--"

"Then why don't you? Dean offered brightly. "I'd be glad to help!"

"Thanks," said Harry with a smile. "Er. . . do you mind, lads?"

All three of them were standing inside the boy's lavatory.

"OH!" Said Seamus, "Right-- catch you at lunch, Harry."

Harry waited until he heard their footsteps clear and then made a dash for the defense against the dark arts classroom. He burst into the chamber, out of breath. "S-sorry I'm late--"

"Harry! I was beginning to think you'd forgotten!"

Harry threw down his bag and collapsed in a chair next to Sirius' desk. "N-no way." Sirius' desk had mounds of neatly stacked rolls of parchment and then a delicious looking tray of sandwiches and what Harry hoped to be a pitcher of iced pumpkin juice. Sirius was smiling as he poured Harry a goblet full of--

*Yes! It *is* pumpkin juice!*

"I thought that perhaps you were busy with your new girlfriend or something."

Harry choked on his drink. "Oh no. Not the teachers too--"

"Teachers are the first to know when it comes to rumors," he said happily. "Something that I think I am going to rather enjoy."

"Well, hopefully this one won't even last the week."

"What, the rumor or your girlfriend?"

"*Sirius*," Harry laughed, helping himself to a delectable looking sandwich. "Right," he said in between bites, "now how about you tell me just *what* you're doing here?"

"Honestly?" Sirius said in his low, satin voice. "I'm here keeping an eye on you."

Harry gulped. "*Me*?"

"Yes. See, after. . . everything happened last year, Dumbledore sent word to several people within the Ministry-- those whom he knew and trusted-- and explained to them what the grave facts were. Your friend Ron's father, Arthur Weasley, and several others were all notified. We met in a private location and discussed what was to be done. Of course, Dumbledore's main concern will always be the safety of his students here at Hogwarts. With Snape gone on an assignment, he wanted to have another on school grounds who was working along with him."

"They chose you, then?"

"Well. . . you can imagine the surprise when they saw *me*. Most all of them still believed me to be a murderer on the loose. So, it took much coaxing, but it was eventually agreed upon. I had more of a background in this entire affair than any of the others."

"Oh Sirius. . .if anyone ever found out who you really are."

"And no one will. Professor Simon Gray is the most unassuming, mild mannered man you'll ever meet."

"You've never taught before--"

"No. . ." he said quietly. "Although. . . when I was at Hogwarts I actually did consider it. It had always been something I'd kept turning about in my head. If . . . if everything hadn't happened with Pettigrew, then I probably would have done something about it."

"How did Snape take the news?"

There was a crooked smile on his face now. "Severus . . . well, it would have been worse, I'm sure, if I'd taken over his potions class." He laughed, "all you students think that he's been coveting the defense against the dark arts position. Hardly the case at all. He is fiercely proud of what he does and considers himself the best Potions Professor that Hogwarts has ever seen." He shrugged. "Who knows, perhaps he is at that. He knows that I am not dangerous, never have been, so he can't undermine me as he did with Remus Lupin--"

Harry burned with the mere memory of what Snape had done to poor Professor Lupin two years ago.

"--and of course, there is the in pardonable factor that we're working on the same team, now. I may not like Severus on an individual level-- or on any level, really. I may think he's a stubborn, closed-minded, frustrating weasel of a man, but I'll be damned if I've ever met anyone so dedicated to the cause as he is."

Harry looked down at the floor. "Then. . . *why* does Snape have to be such a . . . such a . . ."

"Go on, Harry, say it: such a *bastard*, right?" Sirius sighed. "He's quite good at holding a grudge. Ever since, well, apparently you don't know about that--"

"Oh yes I do! He blames my father for nearly killing him when he was at Hogwarts, but it was really my father who saved him!"

Sirius blinked. "Well . . . yes, that does *add* to his grudge, but. . . Oh come now Harry, what is the one thing that could have possibly kept a man so bitter after all these years? Isn't it obvious? Snape was in love with Lily, Harry."

"He was in love with my *mother*?"

There was a brief, disturbing image of Harry calling Snape 'Daddy' and then he shook it off, thoroughly disgusted.

"Yes, he most certainly was. He'd been in love with her throughout all seven years. Your father didn't notice Lily at all until fifth year and with James being the good looking Quidditch Captain he was, of course Lily had a tremendous crush on him, just like most every other girl in the school. So when he asked her to the Yule Ball she said yes, even though when Severus had asked her the day before, she'd told him she was already going with someone."

"Ouch."

"Yeah. It was the last straw for Severus. In all the years they'd been going to Hogwarts, Severus had tried his best to *beat* James. It had become rather an obsession, really. But no matter what he did, James always seemed to be *that much better* at it then he was. When James saved Severus' life, it was devastating for him to now actually *owe his life* to the one man he hated more than anyone else. And then when James started going with the only-- and I mean *only*-- girl that he'd ever loved, well. . ."

"Yeah, I get the picture."

"So, when you started attending Hogwarts, he could see so much of James in you. He could see that you were damn good at most everything--"

"That's rubbish, Sirius--"

--and everyone loves you, you're a *celebrity* for crying out loud and, well you have to admit Harry, you do get away with more than any other student probably would. He could see you following in the footsteps of your father and it almost felt like a mission for him to stop you-- to keep you from being the best. To humiliate you as he wished your father had been--"

"Even if it means *favoring* people like Malfoy? When his own father is a Death Eater and *against* everything that Snape believes in?"

"Jealousy isn't rational," said Sirius plainly. "However what you said last year about Lucius returning to Voldemort's side? That really hit Severus. In fact, everything you said really hit Severus. He had to admit that though he may not have any liking for you or your family whatsoever, what you did was something that not even most wizards our age could have done. And he knows that the only way we are going to win is by working along with each other."

Harry stirred uncomfortably as he always did anytime anyone spoke so highly of him.

"So," he said, clearing his throat, "I take it he's basically doing spy work right now?"

"I honestly don't know for certain-- it's between him and Dumbledore."

"And that Cornelius Fudge-- he's still being stubborn about it?"

"Stubborn as a mule. Thank the stars that Dumbledore is taking action now-- that way when Fudge is finally *forced* to recognize Voldemort's return, the Ministry won't be at a complete loss," Sirius' eyes darkened. "Him and Ludo Bagman both. How they ever received their positions, I'll never know. Their own silly pride and fear of popular opinion is the very thing working in Voldemort's favor-- their failure to make any decisive action is making it that much easier for Voldemort right now in these critical days-- we may have only weeks, maybe just days before he makes a move. . ."

Sirius must have seen the fear in Harry's wide eyes because he brushed Harry's hair out of his eyes fondly. "Which is why it's up to us, eh Harry?"

Harry forced a nod of the head and took another bite from his sandwich. It was cold and unappetizing.

"I'm glad you're here, Sirius," he said quietly.

"I know, Harry," said Sirius warmly.

But Harry knew Sirius had no idea just how much he really meant that. Sirius made Harry feel safe and protected-- as though just the knowledge of him being present served as a shield to anything that could be thrown Harry's way. Growing up, Harry never knew what it felt like to have a father take him by the hand-- to carry him through whatever was frightening him, safely to the other side. But he was sure that it felt quite

similar to what being with Sirius was like. It was the closest thing to having a father that Harry had ever known and it was exactly what he needed more than anything else in the entire world.

Chapter Seven: The Wind and the Weasleys

The days passed along peacefully - well, aside from the usual name throwing that had always existed between Gryffindor and Slytherin houses. The rumor of Harry's muggle girlfriend had lost its steam quickly, although Harry was certain that Draco was brainstorming on what he was going to do next to make Harry's year as miserable as possible. But October arrived before they knew it and the first Quidditch game of the year was fast approaching, so Draco couldn't say too much with the way Slytherin had so shamefully lost the cup the year before.

Angelina was a fantastic captain. Oliver Wood had been, well, rather obsessive about the game. Angelina was much more human about it. Although, as the players soon discovered, she was very . . . shall we say honest about their performances. "*Where's your head today,*" became a favorite of her catchphrases.

In fact, it was Angelina who sat beside Harry in the great hall during breakfast, going over an exciting new maneuver that the Weasleys had concocted.

"So it's right as we're pulling off the Porskoff Ploy, that will take away at least three Slytherin chasers from off our hands-- and you know how the crowd reacts to that one-- then you make for a Wronski Feint and--oh, post already?" Angelina looked down at her watch and shook it, as though it were too slow.

From amidst the swarms of owls circling the hall, Hedwig swooped downward and dropped two letters into Harry's lap, Angelina still rambling on about the maneuver. He was listening vaguely, but much more interested in the letters as they were both from the Banburys. One was written on the usual parchment, from Imelda, thanking himself, Ron and Hermione for being so kind to her daughter. The other was unmistakably Sophie's: she'd used muggle stationery and Harry was slightly embarrassed that, of all colors, she'd chosen pink.

"What in the hell is *that*," Ron demanded.

"Oh! I've got one too!" said Hermione, waving her pink letter. "Sophie's sent us both letters, Harry!"

Harry opened his, keenly aware of Ron peering over his shoulder. "Why didn't I get one?"

"My guess is. . . she doesn't like you," said Hermione. "Oh, and look! She's sent us a photo from her school."

Harry had received one as well: a muggle photograph, so the stationary Sophie was beaming into the lens, her arm around what Harry guessed to be one of her muggle girlfriends at school.

"Dear Harry:

*Hiya! Well, Dad took the news that I'm a witch very well. In fact, I think he even looked **pleased** because he knew how very unhappy I was. I received my first parcel from Professor Dumbledore just yesterday in the post. Our owl isn't used to heavy parcels, so she was a bit winded! Anyway, today Mum and Dad took me to Diagon Alley so that I could purchase the needed books--and I've my own wand now! Dad was quite intrigued by it all--he won't admit it though, but I think that Mr. Ollivander rather scared him. I'm supposed to be reading the first chapter in my History of Magic textbook, but I just had to write you instead. I hope everything is treating you well at Hogwarts!*

Keep in touch!

Yours, Sophie

p.s.: The Dursleys are back to being the same old sour pusses now."

Harry smiled and folded the letter back up again, making a mental note to write her back that evening after his homework was finished.

"What did she say in yours, Herm?"

Hermione had already tucked her letter away and was concentrating on what looked like a magazine. "What?" she said, looking up startled.

"Look," said Ron, pointing at what she was reading. "Where'd you get *that* from?"

She seemed quite flustered over Ron pointing attention to her.

"What is it?" asked Harry.

Ron swiped from Hermione's hands what appeared to be a magazine. The front cover had the title "*Sorceress Now*" in large, frilly black and purple letters, and the glossy front

photo was a famous French witch singer, Claudette DuBois, smiling and winking provocatively.

Ron seemed aghast. "Herm! Since when do you read stuff like this?"

"Since always, Ron. You've just never noticed."

"This is just rubbish, Herm! Parvati Patil and girls like that read this. . ." He perused the pages inside. "I mean, look at this: '*Getting What You Want : Part Two- Dealing with Guilt After a Bewitching*', '*How Can I Get Him to Notice*', oh and Harry look at this one, '*When Love Grows Cold: How to Rekindle That Old Magic*'" Ron was grinning at Hermione who looked downright embarrassed. "I mean, *really* Hermione."

She grabbed the magazine back from him and, unable to think of anything else, stuck her tongue out at him.

"Oh now that's really mature, Herm."

She pointed her gaze. "You watch it Weasley, or else I might just let it slip that you keep a photograph of Fleur Delacour tucked under your pillow!" She put her hand to her mouth. "Oops! Looks like I just did!"

Harry's jaw dropped. "Ron, do you really-"

"NOT ANYMORE," he shouted, shooting daggers at Hermione who simply smiled at him, perfectly reposed.

Over the next few weeks, Harry could depend on a letter from Sophie just like one depends on clockwork. Every Wednesday without fail, Hedwig dropped a letter from her into his lap and he was tickled to see how she'd quickly switched from pink, perfumed stationary to ink and parchment. (She was new at writing with a quill, obviously, as most of her letters had smudges and blots on them).

"Harry:

You asked how my lessons are going. All I can say is that Mum is an incredibly good sport about it all. I have to be the worst student in the world-I study incessantly of course, know all the facts and all the charms by heart. . . but it's just taking so long for me to have any success with it! Mum forbade me to use my kwickspell book, saying that I had to learn it the correct way first, but . . . I'm thinking I might just break down and take a quick peek or two. I swear, if I don't get this feather to levitate by weeks end I'm going to cry! Oh, wait, you made me promise no more tears. Okay, I won't cry: I'll just be thoroughly depressed.

I saw Dudley yesterday in the backyard and we spoke for a bit. He's in huge trouble at school: him and his friends all got a weeks suspension from school for trying to blow up the boys toilet! Can you believe that? I tried my hardest not to laugh: Mrs. Dursley has him outback pulling weeds every day!

Do you have any suggestions about my lessons? What am I doing wrong?

Yours, Sophie.

P.S.: In one of the books I bought from Flourish and Blotts, it talks about a game called Quidditch. You play that, don't you Harry?"

Harry was most eager to use writing her back as an excuse to put off his homework that night.

"Dear Sophie:

Sorry that you're having such a difficult time. Then again, it's not exactly easy stuff. But I think the best tip is concentration-really, it is the key. Just keep at it Sophie, you'll do just fine.

So Dudley's doing the yard work in my absence? That's the best news I've had all week! I only wish I could be there to see it in person! I doubt that Dudley's ever touched a weed before in his life.

You asked about Quidditch: yes, I am on the House team. If you've been reading up about it, then you know about all the positions-I'm the Gryffindor Seeker. It's tremendous fun and right now we've been training for our first match of the year. It's against Slytherin. You remember that Draco Malfoy who said all those horrible things the day you were at Hogwarts? He's a Slytherin. So you can imagine how anxious we are to beat him!

Must go! I have an exam in Arithmancy tomorrow and I have to meet Hermione and Ron to study.

Say hello to your Mum and Dad.

~Harry

He climbed from the common room up to his dorms, where everyone else was fast asleep: tomorrow was the first excursion to Hogsmeade for the year! He gave the post to Hedwig and climbed into bed, going to sleep that evening thinking about Sophie's ink blotted letters. . . maybe he could find a decent quill for her tomorrow in Hogsmeade, that might help her . . .

*

The fifth years were louder than usual as they piled out of the train station and into Hogsmeade. It was an unusually warm day which meant the ice cream vendors were out and about by the handful and inside Honeydukes, the beloved sweet shop, cool treats abounded. But of course, there was only one place that could satisfy their needs that day: The Three Broomsticks.

"Three butterbeers, please," said Harry to Madame Rosmerta who smiled upon seeing him again.

"All right then, Harry?" she asked happily, her pretty round face red from the heat of the day.

"Just great-- the place looks terrific. Cheers."

"Cheers, Harry," she called after him as he joined Hermione and Ron. Ginny, Dean and Seamus were at their table as well and they all chugged on the butterbeers greedily. The door flung open and in came Fred and George.

Harry waved them over. "Lads! Pull up a seat! Where have you been anyway--"

Fred and George, however, had other ideas. They came to their table and ordered them to their feet.

"Come on," George was saying excitedly, "we've got to show you something."

The company wasn't entirely thrilled about having to chug down their butterbeers (the drink is so delectable it needs to be savored) but Fred and George were insistent. Dean and Seamus were especially moody now as they all followed the Weasley twins down the High street towards the far end of Hogsmeade. Just after Dervish and Banges, the twins came to an unexpected halt.

"What's all this about, Weasley?" Dean didn't look too happy.

"*Voilà!*" said George, holding his hands up in the air. They were standing in front of a tiny store that looked like it had been boarded up for decades-- the wood was old and weather-beaten, paint chipped off the front door, and only who knows what kind of monstrosities were lurking inside.

Harry raised his brow. "What? It's a boarded up old shop."

"Tut, tut, tut," said Fred with a wink, "it may look like just any other boarded up old shop, but it's our boarded up old shop."

Ron was confused. "What do you mean *yours?*"

Fred dug in his trouser pocket and pulled out a large bronze key. He unlocked the shabby front door and stepped inside. "Come on," he ordered to the rest.

They exchanged uneasy looks, and Harry took an uncertain step inside after Fred. Once the rest were inside the pitch-blackness of the room (Seamus and Dean now very vocal with their irritation) George finally shed some light on the subject. Literally.

"*Lumos Totalitus,*" he said, and the room was suddenly drenched in light.

"Great Merlin," Ron breathed, "I can't bloody believe it."

Neither could Harry! They were standing on a squeaky clean blue and white tile floor, in the center of which a large red "W" was embedded into the tile. Around them were about five tall rows of large boxes. a couple chairs sat in the corner, a portable table as well, but other than that the room was bare.

"George. Fred. What is this," Ron was saying.

The twins looked like they were ready to burst from pride. "This," said Fred, "is our future."

"We bought it during the summer and the minute we graduate we're opening shop here. Ron-- this is the Weasley Wizard Wheezes."

Ron looked faint. "It . . . *can't* be! H-how could you possibly afford to buy anything like this. . ."

"Well, first of all, this was an offer we just couldn't pass up. And . . . well, Ron, you remember those new dress robes we bought you at the beginning of term?"

Ron blushed and the others snickered at the memory of those horrible dress robes he'd worn at the Yule Ball. "Well . . . it's the same money we used to buy this."

"*Where did you get the money!*" Ron shrieked, "I swear, if you two have been doing something *illegal* I'm off to tell Mum and Dad--"

"No, no, no!" George cried, "No Ron-- nothing illegal! Honest! You just have to swear you won't tell mum about the store."

"And why the hell not!"

"Because she'll fly into a rage! She wants us to go to the ministry or something like that-- if she knew we were working on this on the side, she'd probably have a heart attack!"

"I promise I won't tell Mum if you tell me where you got the money!"

The twins looked at Harry. Harry shrugged-- it was going to come out sooner or later. Fred nodded. "Right then, Ron. Remember Harry won the Triwizard Tournament last year?"

"Think I'm daft? Of *course* I do!"

"Well. . . he gave his prize money to us."

The entire company gasped.

"Harry!" Ginny shrieked.

"You didn't!" said Hermione.

"*All of it?*" said Dean.

"Are you mad?" Seamus demanded.

"He's flipping *mental!*" said Ron.

Harry expected this. "No, I'm not crazy, Ron. What was I supposed to do with it? I knew that Fred and George would actually be able to *make* something of it, more than I ever could, that's for sure. And they have! I mean, by the time they graduate, this place will be ready to open for business and it's gonna just knock away all the competition."

"That's right!" said George. "It's our dream coming true, Ron! Weasley's Wizard Wheezes is going to be a reality! It already is!"

"Of course," said Fred, "out bedroom is still our main invention laboratory, but we thought we'd use this as storage for the time being. Mom's always after us that we need to stop tinkering with our inventions, so we've moved a lot of them out and stored them here---"

BANG! BOOM!

"*Wicked!*" Cried Seamus. He was standing overtop an opened brown box, his hands black from ash.

"What was that?" asked Hermione.

"It was a *Quill Missile*," Seamus said, positively thrilled. "I mean, I just started to pretend to write me name, and it suddenly just shot off like a rocket-- bang! boom! Just like that, and then it exploded into a bright blue and red fire-- lads, that was amazing!"

"That one is George's invention," said Fred. "It's one of my favorites-- we've got a whole box full of them already, look!"

"Hey--" a new voice filled the room. "What's going on in here?"

They turned around and Parvati and Padma Patil, Hannah Abbot and Cho Chang were standing in the doorway cautiously.

"Girls!" said Fred happily, "come on in! You're just in time!"

They walked in cautiously, and the twins wasted no time in filling them in on the details. Dean had opened another box and in the next second he was shouting at the top of his lungs. "OUCH!"

Everyone crowded around the box, eagerly, which had pink and aquamarine steam rising from it. Dean massaged his fingers while Fred pulled out what he called 'The Venus Hand Trap.' "*This is my creation. The most brilliant alarm system, if I do say so myself. Watch!*"

He reached into the box and pulled out. . . well, nothing. He held his palm open as though he were holding something, but his hand was empty. He then recited a charm and suddenly, what had appeared to be nothing, slowly revealed itself to be a small burgundy box.

"You see, you put something of incredible value to you into it, the box turns invisible and any fingers that touch it which *are not your fingertips* are met with, well, Dean you see what it can do."

Dean was grimacing, still massaging his throbbing fingertips. There was another explosion, and then a terrible, pungent smell following. Harry scrunched up his nose in disgust, and Hermione looked ready to vomit. "What the hell was that," she demanded.

George laughed, "That! Well-- let's show you, really funny little thing--" "And just *what* is all this?"

Everyone stopped and turned around. Draco Malfoy was standing in the doorway with Crabbe and Goyle.

Ron folded his arms contemptuously. "What are *you* doing here, Malfoy." "I was just going to ask you the same thing, Weasley." Draco said as he walked in, his menacing eyes flashing to and fro, surveying the scene with keen interest.

"None of your bloody business," Ron snapped.

"*Out* Malfoy," George ordered sternly.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard. This is our property. We don't have to let anyone in if we don't want to. And we don't want you here."

"You own this property? *That's* rich! Your father can't even afford a decent home for his own family-how could his son possibly do any better?"

"I said *out!*"

Draco sniggered. "Come on, boys. They'll find out on their own soon enough--like father like son."

"Out!"

They left, their laughs lingering in the air of the now silent room.

Ron, of course, was fuming mad. "He prances about here like he bloody owns the universe."

"If what he says is true," said Hermione, "then Draco really is doomed to spend his life being a pompous jerk because that's all *his* father is!"

"Don't worry," said Cho softly, "no one listens to a thing Malfoy or his family says."

"Yeah, but still . . . it's infuriating."

"Please," said Seamus, "Malfoy isn't worth the effort it takes to *think* about him! Besides, he's just jealous because this place is gonna be abso-bloody-lutely *brilliant!*"

Fred and George were appeased by this, though Ron was still visibly on edge. They left the shop, Fred locking it up tight behind them, and once again it looked like a beat up old shack.

"Just one good punch, that's all I want . . ." Ron was muttering as they walked towards a new favorite store back at the beginning of the High street--"Ethel Ebbs Everything Emporium". It was an overwhelming monster of a store where Harry found himself bombarded with everything from self-brushing tooth brushes, to scented stationary, to designer hats, to canned goods. . .

He spotted some very nice quills for sale and remembered his idea to send one over to Sophie, perhaps as a Christmas gift-and then he spotted next to the tiny bottles of wand cleaner solution, a black leather-bound writing journal-simple and unassuming, with gold stitch binding and gold plated pages. He remembered Sophie's words 'I keep *everything* in a journal. . .' and this was simply screaming her name. He picked it up, and the quill, and walked to the sales counter, humming happily.

Of course, with the way news spreads amongst fifteen year olds, most of the train was buzzing about the soon-to-be Weasley Wizard's Wheezes. People kept coming into their train compartment during the entire ride, asking question after question.

It was a bit difficult to *not* feel an overwhelming sense of pride as they made their way back to Hogwarts. Even Ron seemed to have forgotten Draco's deriding words by the next day-and was walking with his head high in the air once more.

And then . . .

"Hey Weasley! You're a regular celebrity now! Famous Harry Potter and Famous Ronald Weasley. . ."

Speak of the Devil.

Harry didn't even turn around. He and Hermione urged Ron to keep on walking, not even giving Draco the satisfaction of them turning to face him.

"You're just jealous," Harry spat, continuing on his walk.

"Jealous?" Draco laughed piously, his footsteps close behind theirs. "Jealous of a Weasley? As though I wish I lived in that dumpster of a house, not a penny in the till, and that *embarrassment* of a father--"

Harry's fists clenched and he spun around, his eyes narrowed. "SHUT UP MAL--"

"I'd no sooner be jealous of a Weasley than I would you, Potter. Your stupid little scar and your stupid little fan club. At least *my* family *means* something in this world, Weasley. At least I *have* a family, Potter!"

Harry was reaching for his wand when Professor Gray appeared. Sirius was staring at Harry, his arms crossed. Harry slowly put his wand away, still glaring at Draco.

"That's more like it Mr. Potter." Sirius turned to Draco, "And I'm sure that you're going to be late for Arithmancy if you don't hurry along."

Draco sneered at Harry triumphantly and pranced away, Crabbe and Goyle breaking out into laughter as they went.

Harry scowled at Sirius. "*Why did you let him go? You heard what he said--*"

Sirius tightened his grip on Harry's shoulder. "You think I'm going to let Draco egg you on into another detention? You know as well as I do that with *your* record you cannot afford another occurrence. You and Mr Weasley both." He lowered his voice so that only Harry could hear. "And *I* cannot afford your being booted out of Hogwarts."

He was right of course.

"Do not let him *get* to you like that," he said earnestly.

Harry was still fuming, but he and Ron shrugged it off on the way to class.

The two were heading towards lunch later that day when they ran into traffic en route to the great hall.

They saw Hermione's head amongst the crowd and tapped her on the shoulder.

"What's all the commotion?"

"The Pennant," she said eagerly, pushing her way towards the front of the crowd, Ron and Harry close at her heels.

"The what?"

"Didn't you hear the announcement at the beginning of class?"

"No. We were busy with Draco," said Ron bitterly.

"Oh. Well-- go on, have a look!"

She pointed at a large sign that had been posted on the wall:

The Student Pennant

Open to 5th, 6th and 7th year students only. Students will compete in a three-day competition-- a battle of the minds. Subjects to study include history, arts and entertainment, literature and law. Students interested must enter their names, houses and complete the standardized questionnaire attached. Four representatives will be selected from each house and all will be expected to attend weekly study sessions with their assigned group leaders. Applications are to be taken to Professor Warwick directly-- deadline is this Thursday, Halloween.

Ron and Harry both smiled at Hermione.

"Oh, you're a shoe-in, Hermione! We've as good as won!"

"Stop it--"

"It's true," he insisted. "You're the smartest girl in the school!"

"W-well, w-what about you two? You're entering, right?"

"Right," Ron snorted. "They'd laugh at my application."

"You never give yourself due credit, Ron," Hermione scolded.

"She's right. Why not enter, Ron? You'd be great on the team!"

"What about *you*?"

"Me? Sorry-- Quidditch practice, remember?"

Ron seemed to be considering it. "Well . . . I'm not gonna get picked, so why even bother--"

"*Enter*," they both barked.

So on Halloween, after the last class of the day, they went with Ron to Professor Warwick's class to hand in his application. Ron tried his best to appear indifferent to the whole thing, though Harry could see right through it. He was playing his sympathy card: Hermione had taken to rubbing his shoulders supportively, walking very close to him, telling him in soft, dulcet tones how much of an asset he would be to the team. Harry

trailed behind them, unable to help the grin on his face-- the both of them had it for each other.

It was the first relatively normal Halloween that Harry had ever had during his stay at Hogwarts. No trolls in the dungeons, no Deathday parties or writing on the wall and there was no sign that they would have to spend Halloween night in sleeping bags in the great Hall as they did one year. They went down to the great hall and sat down to a magnificent feast that everyone was able to enjoy without one interruption or disaster of any kind!

Well, there was one thing that made the evening special-- in Harry's opinion anyway. It was the fact that during the *entire feast*, Ron and Hermione had talked only to each other. Harry was the only one who took notice and was now confident of the truth. Now wasn't the time to bring it up with Ron, he felt. But there was an infinite satisfaction in knowing that his suspicions were in fact correct.

*

The first day of November was ominous and dingy-- almost prophetic of the way Harry and the rest of his Gryffindor Quidditch teammates felt. After all, today was the first match of the year. The always pivotal Gryffindor versus Slytherin. Harry felt confident of their team under Angelina's guidance, though even she had to admit how . . . *different* things felt without Oliver Wood. Oliver had sent them an owl over breakfast wishing them the very best of luck and giving them his orders to beat Slytherin into the mud.

Harry smiled at the sight of the stands filled with students, the clamorous roar of their cheers giving him that lighter than air feeling he'd missed so much. He grabbed his Firebolt tightly and, after Angelina gave the team one final pep talk, they flew out onto the field. The Slytherins were looking particularly smug that morning, which of course only made Harry ever more eager to knock those smiles off their faces.

Malfoy in particular.

Having Draco Malfoy on the Slytherin team was the only thing that made Harry sometimes wish he was a Beater instead of a Seeker: for nothing would have given him more unadulterated pleasure than knocking that condescending smile off Malfoy's face. Then again, having Malfoy as the Seeker offered just as much an opportunity for Harry to show Malfoy *precisely* what he thought of him. Namely, by beating him to the Snitch! Madame Hooch's yellow eyes flashed between all the players as she delivered her pre-game speech and ordered Angelina to shake hands with the newly crowned Slytherin captain, Montague. Harry's fingers closed tightly around the end of his broomstick, and he could see Malfoy do the same. Madame Hooch released the Quaffle and the crowds roared:

Harry Potter was in his element!

Lee Jordan's familiar voice blasted through the arena, announcing the official start of the game, and the audience roared once more.

It was one of the most *intense* games Harry had ever witnessed.

Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet seemed to fly faster than they ever had before as did the Slytherin chasers as well. The bludger that kept coming Harry's way was relentless-- but then again, so were the beaters. And the snitch! It had always been a hell of a time finding it, especially in dark weather conditions, but now it seemed to be literally like finding a needle in a haystack. The snitch moved with such speed that it didn't seem likely the human eye could *possibly* ever spot it!

"And it's Gryffindor in possession-- Spinnet throws and-- Montague blocks! Slytherin in possession! Bole swerves to avoid Spinnet and-- Hooch, call a foul! No foul called and Slytherin keeps possession! Bole throws-- Slytherin scores again-- 60 points to 40!"

Harry couldn't bear it-- Slytherin was *beating* them! And this time there didn't seem to be any tampered bludgers, nor obvious outright cheating-- what was killing Harry was that Slytherin appeared to be winning fairly!

"What's the matter, Potter?" Malfoy circled around Harry tauntingly. "Are you *letting* us win or something? You can at least *try* to make it hard for us!"

"No," Harry breathed, "this can't be happening--" He threw a disgusted look at Malfoy, the sound of his high-pitched laughter positively *curdling* Harry's blood. And then a streak of gold ripped between them. Without so much as another *breath* Harry was off at full speed, searching frantically for the snitch. Within seconds he was keenly aware of

Malfoy was right at his tail-- his Nimbus Two Thousand and Two keeping up with Harry's Firebolt more than he would have liked!

"Potter sees the snitch! He's after it-- ohh, NICE save by the Weasleys! Bet you didn't see THAT one coming, did you, you slimey Slytherin--"

"LEE!" It was Professor McGonagall again, always ready to rope Lee back in when he got a bit too involved in his commentary.

I can't believe this snitch! It's unreal! Harry was diving, looping, climbing, falling sharply all in a desperate attempt to grab the snitch and he seemed to be making no progress-- it was somehow able to keep just out of his grasp!

"Spinnet Scores! Gryffindor and Slytherin are tied, 80 points to 80!"

Harry was reaching forward-- oh, if only his arms were just *that* much longer he would have it! And then, the snitch disappeared from sight once again! Harry let out a grunt of aggravation and then he saw it: Malfoy's face lit up and then he bolted off to the left.

He's seen the Snitch! Harry was right on Malfoy's tale-- his eyes gleamed with the sight of the flying gold ball and he put all his strength into reaching it!

There was a violent thrust against Harry's body, which nearly dislodged him from his broom completely! He held his grasp upon the handle although for a moment, he was quite sure he was going to fall. Fred and George must have missed the bludger because it had plowed into Harry at full speed. A gush of wind flew by Harry and he looked on in horror, powerless, as the Slytherin seeker reached out with his hand . . . the snitch . . .

"He's got the snitch! Draco Malfoy has the snitch! Slytherin beats Gryffindor 230 points to 80!"

Harry was in a state of shock. *No . . . it just can't be! I've never lost this way. . . this has never happened to me!* Malfoy was circling the Pitch, waving the Snitch triumphantly to the ecstatic cheers of the Slytherins. (and the lukewarm applause to everyone else).

Harry flew down to the field to join the rest of his teammates.

No, not Malfoy. It's just not possible. I can't have lost to Malfoy . . . The rest of Harry's teammates were obviously thinking the same, though Angelina by far looked the worst. She was mere seconds from crying.

"Wonderful game, everyone," she said in a trembling voice, "Absolutely brilliant, all of you."

Twenty feet away, the Slytherins were shouting, hugging each other and making no bones about staring at the Gryffindors, pointing their fingers and laughing at them. Malfoy laughing the loudest.

Harry could hardly breathe. A consuming guilt was overcoming him so severely it almost felt as though it was making him ill.

"I'm . . . so sorry--"

"Nonsense Harry," said George, "I missed that bludger completely! I should have had it under control, but I let it slip past--"

"George," Harry snapped, "don't you ever say anything like that again. It was my job was to catch the snitch and . . . I didn't."

The taunting from the Slytherins was too much to bear. They turned and trudged off the field for the changing rooms.

Harry's spirits were just about as deflated as the really ever had been. A fair loss to Slytherin - a fair loss to *Malfoy*--was probably the worst injury to his self-respect that he could possibly have imagined. He was convinced that he was now a completely crap Seeker, and moaned to Ron and Hermione about his complete uselessness on the team. Hermione was of course upset at this change in behavior and got Ron to help her do her best to keep Harry upbeat.

It wasn't easy.

For about five days it looked as though Harry Potter had forgotten how to smile. And what was making things a million times worse was the fact that every time Harry walked past a Slytherin (Malfoy especially) there was a large outburst of laughter, generally followed by a chorus of "loser!"

There was only thing that could have possibly made Harry smile and, thankfully, it came later in the week following the Slytherin defeat. It was a Thursday and Ron came crashing into the Gryffindor common room, waving a letter.

"*Guess what?*" he shouted out of breath.

Harry blinked and then burst into the first smile he'd had in a long time. "You made the team!"

"No," said Ron, his smile still brilliant. "I didn't, Hermione did-- big surprise. But I have been selected as the back up! You know, just in case anyone gets sick or something!"

"That's just as good as being on the team!" cried Harry, standing up and giving his friend a huge hug.

"Yeah! And I have to go to all the meetings-- it's a really important thing! *Wicked*, isn't it?"

"See? I told you Ron! Look at all the people you beat out!"

"Yeah," he said with a guilty smile. "Dean Thomas was fuming that he didn't get picked."

"Who else is on the team?"

"Well, it's Hermione, Lavender Brown, Katie Bell and a seventh year named Lars Lonnegan. Here you are--" He threw the sheaf of parchment onto the table and Harry picked it up:

The Hogwarts Student Pennant

Gryffindor: Hermione Granger Lavender Brown Parvati Patil Lars Lonnegan ** Ronald Weasley

Hufflepuff: Hannah Abbott Justin Finch-Fletchley Lucinda Flanders Ernie MacMillan **Beverly Barton

Slytherin: Draco Malfoy Pansy Parkinson Millicent Bultstrode Derrick Peters **Bole Veers

"*We're going to win!*" Harry shouted loudly. *Ah yes, another opportunity to beat Slytherin!*

"Damn right we are! After all I am on the team! Well, sort of anyway!"

Chapter Eight: Letters

"So who's our study captain?" Ron was asking Hermione on the way to Care of Magical creatures. Hermione, in a typical move, had spent the entire day gathering all the specifics on the tournament as she could and Ron followed at her heels like a disciple.

"Professor McGonagall. First meeting is tonight in the library-seven o'clock sharp."

"Who are the others?"

"I believe that Professor Flitwick is Hufflepuff's Captain, Slytherin has Professor Trelawney, and Ravenclaw's is. . ."

"Warwick," finished Ron, sadness in his voice. "Oh, why can't she be a Gryffindor?"

"*Actually*," came the voice of Professor Gray walking up behind them, "there's been a change of plans. Professor Warwick is going to be hosting the event. I am going to fill in for her, coaching the Ravenclaw team."

"*Professor Gray*," Harry repeated incredulously, "you are really?"

"Don't sound so surprised," he smiled.

"Ah, so you're a turncoat, are you?" Ron teased.

"Hardly, Mr. Weasley. But I must admit that I am quite chuffed that I'm to be coaching the smartest lot in the school. It'll make my job a lot easier!"

Hermione smirked. "Ha! We'll see about them being the smartest lot in the school."

"Miss Granger, even as a Gryffindor, I must admit that is the truth."

"Ah, but *we* have Hermione." Ron patted her on the back.

"Yes," he said glumly. "Listen Miss Granger: best watch what you eat--they really want you off the team."

"WHAT?" She looked faint.

He laughed and shook his head. "See you in class, you three."

The three smiled at his disappearing figure, Harry especially. "Great bloke, Sirius. Isn't he?" He smiled at Ron and Hermione, expecting an immediate concurrence. . . but he was instead met with two faces completely drained of color.

And Harry realized he'd made a *big* mistake.

Ron grabbed Harry's arm forcefully, his voice in a loud whisper. "*Sirius?* Are you tellin' us that Professor Gray is *Sirius Black?*"

Harry wished the ground would have just swallowed him whole.

"*How long have you known?*," Hermione demanded.

"Er . . . since the first day of class."

"And you never *told* us?!" Ron looked disgusted.

"Dumbledore *specifically* told me not to tell anyone-- not even you two!"

"But we're your best friends! And we love Sirius as well--"

"Even *Sirius* wanted me to keep it secret from you! He trusts you, but, well-- this is a big deal here, you know? One accidental slip and--"

"You mean an accidental slip like the one you just made?" Hermione's arms were folded in triumph.

Harry grimaced. "Just. . . be extra careful, all right? I mean. . . remember how people reacted when they found out Professor Lupin was a werewolf? Imagine how they'd act if they found out that Sirius *Black* is teaching their students."

*

"So how did the first study session go?" Harry asked.

Hermione simply gushed about how wonderful it was for about ten minutes straight. Ron did look excited, but perhaps decided to leave it to Hermione to do all the explaining.

"It's going to be *fantastic*, Harry. See, each week we focus on one of the featured subjects-- this week it's History, right Ron? So she gives us a study parchment with key dates and we break up into independent groups and research what we've been assigned and then talk about them for the rest of the study period-- it's lots of interaction. Just brilliant, really."

"It's a *lot*," Ron managed to get in. "I dunno how I'm going to get all of it done plus my normal work."

"Oh, I'll help you Ron, you know that."

It was a good thing Hermione offered it, because Ron really did need it. Ron had never been an excellent student, so the added workload really threw him off his balance. Ron

did have determination. . . though Harry was a bit worried when only two weeks into the Pennant sessions, Ron looked like he was ready to drop: it wasn't even Halloween yet and the Pennant wasn't until just before Christmas!

"I've been starin' at the same paragraph for the last ten minutes," he said as Harry took a seat beside him in the library. Harry had to laugh. Arithmancy was probably Harry's least favorite subject as well-- of course, with the exception of Divination.

Hermione walked into the common room, barely visible from behind her books.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, dropping her books down with a heavy thud. "Never seen the library so crowded before!"

"Hey-- Herm," Ron started. "Did you . . . *do* something . . . different?"

"To what?"

"I dunno -- to your hair, maybe?"

Harry looked back up at Hermione.

Ron was right.

There was most definitely something . . . different about her. Her brown mane of hair wasn't unruly and bushy. . . but tame. Her hair swept into very pretty, soft waves, reaching down her back. And . . . well, it was just her entire appearance altogether! Her soft, charcoal gray turtleneck sweater seemed to contrast with pallor of her face and the rosiness in her cheeks. Hermione was the sister that Harry never had and . . . well, he felt awkward admitting it, but the truth was that Hermione looked . . . *pretty*

Of course she'd never exactly been ugly, but then again she wasn't the type of girl a guy would generally loose his head over. . . or was she? Viktor Krum liked her, after all, and he could have had any girl he wanted. She'd taken several of the Gryffindors by shock last year when she showed up at the Yule Ball-- was it possible that Harry had been best friends with this very same knockout standing in front of them all this time?

Ron and Harry were gawking at her unabashedly.

She sat down, a visible flush to her. "It's rude to stare, you two."

Harry shook himself out of it, though Ron's eyes were still stuck on her. He had to kick Ron's shins under the table.

"Right, so I'm bloody lost here. My number chart's all wrong, I know it."

"Mine too," said Harry, pulling out his and handing it to Hermione who studied them both most intently. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ron beginning to gaze at her again and once again, Harry had to kick him to snap him out of it.

By the end of the evening, Harry was hoping that Ron wouldn't be black and blue in the morning from the amount of times he had to nudge him. But Ron simply couldn't seem to help himself.

And then it hit Harry!

Ron fancied Hermione!

Harry knew all too well whenever his dear friend Ron had flipped over a girl-and he most certainly had that same distant sparkle in his eye with Hermione. Now Harry wasn't an expert when it came to things like relationships, so just to make sure that he wasn't jumping to conclusions, he didn't say anything to Ron about it that night, but made a special point of watching Ron's every move while Hermione was around.

He wrote Sophie, of course, excited to share his discovery with someone.

"Sophie! I think that Ron fancies Hermione! He can't seem to concentrate on anything else while she's in the room! In Defense Against the Dark Arts class yesterday, Professor Gray asked him to read from the textbook TWICE before Ron snapped out of his trance! You write to Hermione all the time-- has she ever mentioned anything about Ron?"

Harry couldn't believe it when Sophie wrote back:

"Wow! Wonderful news, that! Hermione's never admitted to me in direct terms, but I really do think that she may fancy Ron as well! Whenever she mentions him, there's always an almost bitterness to it. She loves to call him names, dwells on his shortcomings, you know, all the things that girls do when they fancy someone and are trying to convince themselves they don't."

Harry hadn't been aware of that.

"But that doesn't make sense! If deep down inside they like someone, why would they try to appear as though they don't to the guys they like? That would only confuse they guy, and then he wouldn't know what to do, and then no one would ever get anywhere!"

Harry could almost hear the laughter in Sophie's response.

"Oh dear. Are you sure you're fifteen years old, Harry? I'm sure you would have caught on by now! That's how we are! Sure, there are girls who have no problem showing their affection, but a lot of times we spend hours upon hours going down all the reasons why we shouldn't like someone, all the reasons why they're wrong for us and why our lives will be better without them. We're just fooling ourselves, of course, and sooner or later we end up throwing that caution to the wind anyway."

Harry could barely write back fast enough.

"But wouldn't it make so much more sense to just SKIP THAT ENTIRE STEP, and just admit that you like the guy? From what I see, it would save everyone involved a lot of time and sanity!"

Harry laughed at Sophie's reply.

"Of course it would. But that's why we're women."

**

According to Ron and Hermione, the Gryffindor Team was going to be *stellar*. They were all incredibly serious about it-- even at lunchtime, Hermione, Lavender, Katie, Lars and Ron throwing out questions at each other.

It was an ordinary day in Potions when Professor McGonagall came in suddenly. "I need to speak with Mr. Weasley please, Professor Warwick."

"Of Course."

Harry turned, curiously following Ron with his eyes--Ron looked bewildered as well. His eye fell on Draco who was smiling. Upon seeing Harry, however, he quickly looked back down at his parchment.

As soon as class let out, Harry and Hermione bolted off to find Ron. Ron's face was fuming as he left McGonagall's office.

"Ron, what *happened*?" "I can't believe it, I just can't *bloody* believe it! The *bastards* who did this--"

"Did what?"

"The store! Fred and George's store! Someone *torched* it last night."

Harry was speechless. Hermione gasped.

"Ron," she breathed, "oh no. . ."

"Oh yes. It's all over the Daily Prophet! " He thrust a copy of the days paper into Harry's hands and he opened it up frantically, Hermione peering over his shoulder:

Hogsmeade Fire-Arson Suspected.

At least one structure in the popular holiday village of Hogsmeade was destroyed when a fire broke out late yesterday evening. Thankfully, the Ministry department of responded quickly to squelch the inferno, but not before one building on the main High street had been damaged beyond immediate repair. The Mayor of Hogsmeade is quoted as 'cooperating to the best of his ability with Ministry of Magic Investigators to catch whomever the culprits may be.' The burned building had been recently sold to new owners, but was as of the time of the fire, still vacant. There was no damage to the neighboring Dervish and Banges.

Harry couldn't believe his eyes.

"How are Fred and George?" Harry finally asked.

"How do you *think*. They're mad as hell-- I saw George flippin' get teary eyed for the first time in my life! So many years they've dreamed of it, it was finally starting to become a reality and now *this*."

"But Ron, it just doesn't make sense," said Hermione. "I mean. . why would anyone do that?"

"How should I know?"

"And *who* would do that?"

It was really almost like clockwork. No sooner had the words left his lips that they heard the teasing, taunting voice that never failed to make the hair on the back of Harry's neck stand on edge.

"So sorry to hear about the store, Weasley. Guess you're right back to being a nobody again."

Malfoy!

They turned and found Draco bearing a Cheshire cat grin. Ron threw his books down onto the floor with a loud *thud* that echoed throughout the hall. He marched to Draco and put his face into his, forcing him to take a couple steps backward.

"If I find out that you had anything to do with this, Malfoy, *anything at all*, I am going to make sure that you regret the day you were born."

Draco matched his stare happily. "Regret being born? Only if I were a Weasley." He looked past Ron at Hermione. "Or a mudblood."

Harry could *feel* Hermione snap at those words. Draco had gone too far-- not only cutting at Ron but Hermione as well. Draco should have remembered what had happened the last time he'd crossed the line with Hermione Granger: she'd landed him with a sock in the kisser. And before Harry could stop her, Hermione was running full speed ahead for Draco Malfoy. She jumped and threw her weight onto him, the both of them crashing to the ground.

"Hermione!" Harry and Ron shouted. They ran to try and pull her off, but Crabbe and Goyle had appeared and pulled them both into headlocks.

"**FIGHT!**" Yelled Seamus and at once, the entire hallway filled with students. From inside Goyle's headlock, Harry could see Hermione rolling around on the floor, screaming and punching Draco in the stomach. Draco was pulling at her hair and shouting "*Don't-make-me-hurt-you-Granger!*"

"Go on, do it! If you can set fire to a store, then what's hitting a girl?"

"I didn't--"

"**STOP LYING!**"

"HERMIONE! STOP!" Harry shouted again, and with a great heave, he threw Goyle from off him. Goyle blinked, surprised that Harry had thrown him off--as was Harry! He ran to pull Hermione off of Draco when a voice ripped the hall.

"ENOUGH OF THIS!"

Professor Dumbledore had appeared in the hall. With a flick of his wand, Hermione and Draco were lifted to their feet and Ron was released from Crabbe. Dumbledore did not appear pleased and ordered for them to follow.

"You six. Now."

They all entered Dumbledore's office and he stared at them overtop his spectacles, not a hint of amusement about him at all. No, he was most definitely upset.

"And the reason for that deplorable display was?"

All six started talking at once, much to Dumbledore's distaste. He held up one hand and the voices ceased immediately.

"Granger. What were you doing?"

"It was Malfoy, Professor Sir! He said some really horrible things about Ron and myself! He's always badgering us and I finally just got sick of it. I know I shouldn't have done so, and I am sorry about it, but. . . I just got so *angry*. I wasn't thinking clearly."

Dumbledore was an infinitely understanding man, never the sort to make a decision without thinking it through clearly, but in this case his mind was most definitely made up. He kept his frown upon Hermione and Draco, his voice stern.

"Miss Granger, such actions are strictly forbidden in the Hogwarts code of conduct. You understand that as such, I have no choice but to revoke your position in the Pennant race."

Harry saw Hermione's lip tremble-- she certainly hadn't expected that. The race meant everything to her. Kicking her off the team was just as bad as telling her she'd been expelled.

"Professor Dumbledore, Hermione--" Ron tried to speak up, but Dumbledore simply spoke over him.

"And Mr. Malfoy? Well, you may think that the faculty and myself aren't aware of the pet names you have for many of the students here, particularly Miss Granger, but we have been most aware of it. This, however, is the first time we have actually been able to catch you in the act and will not hesitate to show you *exactly* how the faculty views such behavior. *You* will relinquish your spot on the Slytherin team as well. And give up ten points from Slytherin."

Dumbledore gave them one last final, disappointed look, before walking off with Professor McGonagall close at his side. Malfoy stormed off and Hermione was left, looking

as though she were mere moments from collapsing on the spot. Thankfully she didn't, but Hermione dealt with the blow about as terribly as she could.

She barely touched her dinner that night, or the rest of the week for that matter, hardly spoke a word to anyone and went to bed hours before anyone would even think about it. Harry tried his best to cheer her up, but it wasn't exactly easy, and now he had Ron to deal with! Hermione's removal meant Ron was not officially on the team.

And he was on the edge.

"Harry, I never really expected to play! I can't take Hermione's place, no way! I mean, it's Hermione!"

"You have to Ron. Have Herm help you--"

"What?"

"You know-- tutor you. Maybe during lunch or something."

"Wha-- *alone*?"

Harry raised his brow. "Er. . . well, I'm not the one who needs the studying, you are."

"Yeah, but . . . what'll people think?"

"Huh? Ron, it's *Herm-i-o-ne*. You've done that countless times before! Why is it so different now?"

Ron was tongue-tied. "Well . . . nothing. Never mind."

Harry smiled. "Ron," he said slowly, delicately, "you *fancy* her, don't you."

Ron rolled his eyes and went for the door. Harry wasn't about to let the subject do and closed the door back shut.

"Go on then-- why don't you ask her out?"

"Off the top of my head? *Because I don't like her!*" Ron grimaced at Harry. "*And stop smiling at me like that!*"

Harry put his hands up. "All right, Ron. Fine. If you say so." Ron left the room quickly-- Harry still grinning from ear to ear.

It *was* true!

That night he sent Hedwig to Sophie's with a message:

Sophie:

We need to think of something! Ron and Hermione are both being stubborn mules about the whole situation!

Hedwig returned two days later with this reply:

*I have just the thing. My birthday is on December 24th and my family usually throws me a Christmas/Birthday Bash. This year I was thinking instead of inviting kids from my school that I would invite the Hogwarts crowd-- all you Gryffindors especially. What I'll do is have Mum conjure up some great invitations and put on there that an escort is required-- that's what muggles sometime call a 'date'. **Your** job, Harry, will be to make sure that Ron asks Hermione!*

~ Sophie

p.s.-- Who should my guest list include?

Harry wrote back eagerly:

I'm right on top of it, Sophie!

"Cor, Harry, you've been gettin' lots of letters lately, mate!"

It was lunchtime and Seamus Finnegan was staring at Harry as he took the envelope out of Hedwig's beak and ruffled her fur before she flew away.

"Pen-pal," said Harry plainly, focusing on the envelope. It was a crisp white envelope simply addressed with the words "Harry Potter" in frilly, glowing purple script-- in fact, the lettering kept changing from purple to pink to blue and back again. He opened it and pulled out what turned out to be the much anticipated invitation to Sophie's Christmas party:

to Mr. Harry Potter

You are cordially invited to attend a Christmas Celebration
on Saturday, December 24th at precisely 6:00pm,

at

the residence of Sophie Helene Banbury
3 Privet Drive, Little Whinding, Surrey

Formal dress is requested. All guests are to be accompanied by
an escort.

Harry beamed.

"Oy!" Came Hermione's voice from across the table, "Harry! I got an invitation from Sophie! It seems that she's throwing another party!"

"Yeah, I got one too!" It was Ron, examining the invitation.

There were several more similar shouts of exclamation from the other Gryffindors including Dean, Seamus and Neville-- all delighted at the prospect of being invited to a party where not only were you expected to dress to impress, but an *escort* was required!

"What does she mean by 'escort.'"

"She means a date," Harry explained-- perhaps a bit too eagerly, because it caused Ron to raise his brow. "I . . . heard Dudley talking about it once. . . "

"Well, it should be bloody wicked," Ron said finally, "Her last party was *brilliant!*" The Gryffindors chattered excitedly on the way to their next classes, showing each other their invitations, getting questions from the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws.

But even the excitement of an upcoming Christmas bash couldn't keep the class awake during Professor Binn's history of magic class. Once again Harry was fighting to keep his eyelids open as the unbearably boring Professor Binns droned on monotonously-- on and on he went, unaware that the students were in a state of comatose. It was about some famous confrontation between Morgan Le Fay and Merlin the Great, and it probably *would* have been rather exciting, if Professor Binns didn't have the habit of turning the affair into nothing more than an endless list of dates and vocabulary words.

The class was emerging from their state of sleepy stupor as the last moments wined down. After assigning their homework, he added, "and I have a surprise for you all." For Binns to bring up the word 'surprise' it must have been quite an important thing!

"It has long been a tradition here for fifth years to embark on a week-long excursion every spring term. It is known as the History of Magic Class Trip and for the week, students are brought to various places of historical magical interest. This year, we will be traveling to New Orleans, Louisiana in the southern United States, The Calefonian Forest and . . . " Professor *Binns* gave a dramatic pause, "the Bermuda Triangle."

A wave of delighted "ooohs" and "aaahhs" swept over the students.

"However this year, the format will change. Instead of the entire fifth year class journeying together, the faculty decided it. . . best to break up the class. Take out your quills and note these dates: Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws will be traveling 25 April - 1 May and Gryffindor and Slytherin will be traveling 20 May - 26 May."

He handed out a sheaf of parchment to each student with the details of the trip, along with an attached permission slip. Then news was unbelievable! Harry would have been bouncing off the walls, had it not been for that one, small problem . . .

Can you bloody believe our rotten luck," Ron was muttering as they marched towards the dorms. "*We* get stuck with the *Slytherins!* I've a right mind to not even go!"

"You *have* to," said Hermione. "Besides, have you read about these places? The Caledonian Forest? That's where Merlin was born, you know! And in New Orleans they have the worlds *only* all-wizarding amusement park! Oh, and I've always wanted to see--"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But with the *Slytherins?* No thank you."

Harry felt every bit as disappointed as Ron. How were they possibly supposed to enjoy themselves with Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle breathing down their necks!

"Can you *believe* it," Dean Thomas was cooing as they threw there bags down in the common room. "We're actually going to go to the *states!* And not only that, but *Bermuda* as well!"

"I can't bloody wait," said Seamus Finnegan.

"I know," said Parvati, "*incredible!* I only wish we were going with the Ravenclaws for the week instead of you-know-who."

"What's incredible?" asked George and Fred who joined them all in the common room at that very moment.

"The fifth year class trip," Ron gushed. "It's gonna be *wicked!*"

"Ohhhh," George breathed, "*that!*"

Fred shook his head. "Dunno, Ron. You might be better off staying at home. I mean, you *do* know that the trip is spooked, don't you?"

Ron scowled. "Spooked?"

"Yeah-- cursed. Every year *something* happens. Last year, for instance, remember that Ravenclaw fifth-year Pamela Birchtree? Ever wonder *why* she never came back to school? It was because when they went to New Orleans she had a run in with a dark witch and wound up getting slammed with a memory charm-- still hasn't a *clue* as to who she is."

"You're full of it," Ron muttered.

"And the year before that," George piped up, "there was a Hufflepuff fifth-year named Eugene Smartley. Nice guy-- bit of a bookworm, though-- and had a strange hobby of collecting rocks. So when the class went to the Caledonian Forest, he said he went off to pick up some interesting ones he'd seen and was *never seen again.*"

There was silence at the table for several moments.

It was Seamus Finnegan who finally spoke. "Lads?"

"Yeah?" said Fred and George.

"Piss off, eh?"

All the Gryffindors started laughing-- Fred and George howling the loudest.

Chapter Nine: The Pennant

He stumbled out of the toilet, his eyes red and tired and . . . he was green. An unearthly, sickly pale green.

"I can't do this, mate."

Harry put his arm around Ron supportively and walked him out of the toilet down the corridor towards the great hall.

"Of course you can. Come on, it won't be nearly so bad once you're up there."

"Easy for you to say."

"Oh Ron, you can answer these questions in your sleep. You really can-- I've heard you in the middle of the night--"

"Mr. Weasley? Are you ready?"

Professor McGonagall stood before them, her face looking more tense than usual. Ron managed a weak nod and she whisked him away with her.

Harry made a rush for the great hall-- or was it the great hall? For if it hadn't been for the enchanted ceiling (which tonight had a crescent moon in an overcast sky) the hall would have been unrecognizable! Four large stalls were set up at the front of the hall, each bearing the name of its respective house. The dining tables had been removed and in their places were four tiers of stadium-style seating. The room was pitch black save for the stalls which glowed bright blue and another stand, the announcer's box, which glowed white.

Harry was amongst the latecomers in the hall, all of which had pulled out their wands and said 'lumos' to see their way through the students, trying not to step over too many feet. Fred, George, Ginny and Hermione were waving for Harry to join them on the second tier, taking his seat between them and the rest of the Gryffindors.

"The hall looks fantastic, eh Herm?" He whispered.

Hermione was focused on the scene before her and muttered a, "Yeah."

"Nervous?"

She nodded. "Not nearly so bad as Ginny, though. She looks like she's gonna be sick!"

Indeed, Ginny was nearly as green as Ron had been!

The students were chatting eagerly in the moments before the pennant race began. There were quite a few name-calls and house-trashing between them.

The excited chatter was stopped by the appearance of Professor Warwick. Everyone cheered-- as well as some scattered catcalls from the boys, to which McGonagall's voice was heard sternly ordering "There'll be none of *that*, thank you!" The noise subsided and Professor Warwick, looking lovely in her purple robes, spoke to the crowd:

"Welcome!" Her voice rang in everyone's ears loudly-- must have been the aggrio charm--

"Welcome students and faculty to the Two Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Hogwarts Student Pennant Race!"

The students roared in response!

"This privilege comes once every four years only, so congratulations to all participating in this great, time-honored event! You the contestants are familiar with the rules, but for the benefit of our audience, I will explain them briefly:

Above center stage will appear the four categories of the day. The first team will select the first question. Each correct answer is worth twenty points. If answered incorrectly, the opportunity to answer is then opened to the remaining teams-- if they answer correctly they receive double the original points and possession of the game. There is one bonus round at the end of the game in which each question answered correctly is worth one hundred points and if answered incorrectly, the teams' scoreboard is wiped to zero. Hufflepuff won the pre-game draw, therefore we commence with them. Contestants ready?"

The contestants clapped, and the students in the hall filled the room with clamorous support. Professor Warwick clapped her hands and the subjects appeared above them in smoky, magenta lettering: *Merlin the Great*, *General History*, *The Ministry* and *Geography*.

"Hannah Abbot, you may begin."

She took a shaky breath. "G-geography."

"The question is: What North American state was the sight of the most vicious witch hunt in Wizarding history?"

"Er. . . M-Massachusetts?"

"Correct. Twenty points to Hufflepuff."

"Same category, please."

"The question is: Which country is home to the Caledonian Forest, birthplace of Merlin the Great?"

A fellow Hufflepuff whispered the answer. "Er-- Ireland."

"Incorrect. Open to the other teams."

Slytherin spoke up first. Pansy Parkinson smiled. "The answer is Scotland."

"Correct. Forty points to Slytherin."

"The Ministry, please."

"The question: What is the common name given to those who work in the Ministry of Magic's Department of Mysteries?"

"Unspekables."

"Correct. Twenty points to Slytherin."

What? Thought Harry, No, please don't let Slytherin get into the lead!

"Same category, please."

The question: Who was the first elected Minister of Magic and what was the year of his election?"

"Oliver Ladskey, 1650."

Hermione squealed with delight, and Harry knew that Pansy was wrong.

"Incorrect. Open to the other teams."

Hermione stared at Ron from the stands. "He knows this. . . we've talked about it thousands of times. . ."

Ron cleared his throat. "Altunas Mallory, 1656. Ladskey was not elected to the office."

"Correct. Forty points to Gryffindor."

"Merlin the Great, please."

"In what year did the Great Merlin defeat the Dagon of Raithe?"

Ron hesitated one second too long as did the rest of the team.

"Time's up. Open to the other teams."

Pansy smiled and said, "The year 582."

"Correct. Forty points to Slytherin."

Harry groaned in anger, as did the rest of the Gryffindors.

"General History, please."

"Name the Danish Wizard whom in 1321 defeated an entire legion of trolls with only one incantation and name the incantation for ten extra points."

"Londenverg the Valiant, the incantation was 'anivaritus manni magni'."

"Correct. Thirty points to Slytherin."

"How did she know that," Hermione whispered to Harry, "even I didn't know that!"

To their utter dismay, Slytherin continued their winning streak throughout the entire game. Hufflepuff was deflated, Gryffindor was annoyed and Ravenclaw was just plain *angry*.

"Slytherin wins game one of the Pennant Race with 520 points. Ravenclaw comes in second with 320 points, Gryffindor is in third with 290 points and Hufflepuff is in fourth with 220 points. Slytherin, Ravenclaw and Gryffindor advance to Game Two!"

The stands erupted into cheering-except for the Hufflepuffs who looked thoroughly deflated. It was obvious that Hermione had been expecting Gryffindor to take the lead, not come in third place, but she and Harry both showered Ron and the others with commendation.

"Great job, Ron," Hermione was saying as they crowded around the team, "You kept Gryffindor in the running!"

Ron didn't seem too thrilled. "I can't *believe* that Slytherin is ahead of us *and* Ravenclaw!"

Hermione nodded, "It's just not possible- everyone knows how stupid they all are! I was expecting *Hufflepuff* to beat them, actually! They've got some great Academics on that team-- poor Hannah Abbott."

It seemed that the blow actually hit Ron harder than Hermione. "This," he said as the groups slowly filtered their way out of the great hall, "is war."

Harry, Hermione and the rest of the Gryffindors sat in agony that next evening. Apparently the Slytherin's lucky streak was turning out to be more than just luck. They were *good*. The Gryffindor House was putting up a valiant fight, as were the Ravenclaws-both teams most likely wanting to make absolutely sure that Slytherin wouldn't make it to the finals.

Ginny was exasperated-every time Gryffindor pulled ahead, Slytherin swung back and scooped up a bucket load of double points. "How are they *doing* it," she sighed, shaking her head. Ginny and Hermione had been up all hours of the night just with Ron and the team in the library, the Ravenclaws had assembled as well, but Slytherin had apparently decided they didn't *need* the extra study.

"How can they do this without lifting a finger in study," Hermione cooed.

"I don't know," Ginny whispered. "But last night after everyone had left the Library, I had to stay late to help Madame Pince, and in strolled Draco Malfoy."

"*Draco?*" All three repeated.

"Yeah. . ."

"What was *he* there for?" Hermione demanded. "I didn't know he even knew there is a library here!"

"I don't know! And he was only there for ten minutes and then left! Weird . . ."

At the end of the bonus round, Professor Warwick's disappointment was obvious, but nevertheless she had to announce, "Final Scores: Slytherin with a two day total of 1,040 points. Gryffindor is in second place with a total of 680 points and Ravenclaw in third with 650 points." There was reluctance in her voice. "S-Slytherin and Gryffindor advance to Game Three."

The Ravenclaws were *devastated*. Padma Patil looked like she was ready to cry! For the smartest house in the school to loose to Slytherin was almost a matter of shame. Harry tried to be as sympathetic as possible, but it was a bit difficult since he was so thrilled about Gryffindor getting to the finals!

Once more, they rallied around the team, Ron looking thoroughly relieved. The Ravenclaws had joined them as well, congratulating them like the fantastic sports they were.

Cho was shaking Ron's hand. "Great save on that bonus question, Ron. That really threw those Slytherins off guard. You just have to make *sure* that you beat them tomorrow."

"Yes," said Padma, "please. It's up to you, now."

"With pleasure," Ron said to the delight of the Ravenclaws.

"Good game," came Pansy Parkinson's voice. "But if I may suggest forfeiting now? It'll save you all a lot of time and embarrassment."

"You're going to eat those words, Parkinson," said Fred angrily.

"Perhaps," she said and then pranced off.

Ginny, still having a perplexed look about her, shook her head once more. "How are they doing it?"

Hermione grunted. "I, for one, smell a rat."

*

It was the last day of the competition and Harry, Ginny and Hermione were giving Ron his pep talk.

"*You-can-not-let-Slytherin-win*," Hermione was pleading. "You know *all* the answers, Ron."

"So do the Slytherins, it would seem." He moaned.

"Yes, but you've worked harder for this, therefore you *deserve* it more than they do!"

"Besides," said Ginny. "I think that the Slytherins are up to something."

Hermione spun around, "So do I!"

They gave each other a knowing wink.

"Ginny my dear? What do you say we do a little . . . digging?"

"Oh dear," said Ron. "I'm out of here before you two blow up the school or something."

"Good Luck!" They called after him.

"Listen," said Hermione, grabbing Ginny's arm. "Last night, did Draco come into the library again after everyone else left?"

Ginny grimaced. "I . . . didn't notice him."

"Well, when you *did* see him the night before, what aisle was he in?"

"Um. . . he was in the geography aisle. By the atlas', I believe."

Hermione grabbed Harry's arm. "Harry! The Maura-" she stopped and looked at Ginny. "Er. . . that map that you have. . . can you remember any secret passageways that lead out of the library?"

"Possibly. . . why?"

"Let's fetch it! Quickly! And we'll probably need your cloak as well!"

Harry was thoroughly confused, but Hermione wasn't letting him stop her. She pulled him along with Ginny down the corridor.

"Hermione, the game is *starting* now-"

"If I'm right, then we'll be able to save our team!"

They ran up to the Gryffindor common room, the Fat Lady eyeing them suspiciously, asking them why they weren't down at the Pennant. Harry fetched his map and cloak and then hurried to meet Hermione and Ginny back in the common room.

"Here," she said, looking at the map, "there *is* a passage in the library that leads practically to every room in the castle-as well as directly out of Hogwarts-right next to the Geography aisle-

"That's where he was when I saw him," said Ginny.

"Hermione, you're talking in circles," said Harry exasperated.

"*Somehow*, Draco Malfoy is getting the answers for his team."

"That's a pretty heavy accusation, Hermione, on just a hunch alone."

"When have my hunches ever been wrong, Harry?"

"Hmm. Would you like that alphabetically or chronologically?"

Ginny snickered, but Hermione was insistent. "We don't have much time-"

"Let's say he did get the answers-- it's too late now. He'll never confess to anything if we don't have any evidence."

"That's why we have to hurry! Hand over that cloak Harry, we have to get to the Slytherin wing now."

Harry protested as Hermione threw the cloak over them. Ginny was taken aback, having never seen an invisibility cloak before, but seemed most in favor of Hermione's idea.

Harry was most definitely irritated as they ran towards the Slytherin wing. "We don't know the password, Hermione-"

"Ginny, give the password."

Harry stared at Ginny in disbelief as she whispered to the portrait, "Ether" and the door opened.

"How-"

"I know *all* the passwords," she said proudly. "One of the perks of being a library assistant."

They stepped inside and Harry shuddered. "Blech. I thought I'd never have to see *this* place again. All right, O Wise One, what do we do now?"

"We snoop." Hermione threw off the cloak and began surveying the common room. "I wonder where the Slytherins keep their study notes. . . probably with Pansy Parkinson, she thinks she's so smart. I'm gonna run up to the girls' dorms and see if I can find anything in her stuff."

"Wait a sec!" Ginny cried. She was standing at a large red armchair next to the sofa. "Oh this is just too easy," she picked up a large folder from off the chair, smiling triumphantly. "It's their notes. . . or what they have of it! I saw Ron's notes—they were *twice* this size."

"That's because they didn't need to study," said Hermione, jumping to Ginny's side.

Harry peered over their shoulders as they flipped through the sheaves of parchment - all of which were untidy and ill prepared notes copied from encyclopedias. And then. . . three blank sheaves.

"That's odd," said Ginny.

Hermione snickered. "No it's not." She pulled out her wand and said "*Aparecium!*"

Suddenly thick, sloppy black writing appeared on the parchments.

All three of them stared in silence.

"I can't believe it," Harry whispered, "those are all the questions for the Pennant Race."

Indeed they were: each sheaf was titled either 'Game One, Two or Three,' including bonus questions.

Ginny shook her head. "But only Professor Warwick and the judges are supposed to have copies of these! There's no way a student could get a hold of these! It's *impossible!*"

"For a Slytherin?" Hermione challenged. "Hardly. *Especialy* when we have Goblins for judges. Calculating, greedy little buggers. There isn't too much that they won't do for money. . ."

"Money," Harry repeated. "It must have been Draco, then, that paid one of 'em off! And that is definitely Draco's handwriting. I'm guessing he used that passageway in the library to meet up with one of the Goblins to get the answers."

They all stared at each other before Harry finally shouted, "What are we waiting for? We have to get these to Dumbledore *now!*"

They ran back as fast as their feet could carry them and stumbled into the great hall which was deep into the final game. Harry's heart sank when he saw the scoreboard: Slytherin leading Gryffindor 140 points to 70. Ron looked ready to keel over.

They stepped on several first years in order to make their way to where the faculty was sitting. Harry yanked on the skirt of Dumbledore's robes.

"Sir!" Harry whispered.

Startled, Dumbledore looked down.

"Harry?"

"*Sir! The Slytherins! They have all the answers!*"

"The certainly do," he said, audibly surprised.

"No! They've been *cheating!* Look!"

Dumbledore took the parchments from Harry's hands and flipped through them, his eyes ever so slightly betraying their shock. He looked at them for a moment thoughtfully, and then back down at Harry.

His voice was low. "I'm not going to ask you where you got these, Mr. Potter, although I probably should." He stood up and exited the faculty row. Harry, Hermione and Ginny looked on in anxiety as he called a meeting with Professor Warwick, just as they were about to enter into bonus round. From where they stood, they could see the shock in her eyes and then she nodded, returning to her announcer's box. This time she was sporting a terrific smile on her face.

"As we enter the bonus round, I must remind you all this is still anyone's game. As you know all correct answers are worth one hundred points, any incorrect answer will wipe the

scoreboard to zero. I think you will all do very well in this round for the committee has updated the final questions to better suite the strengths of the contestants. Slytherin is in the lead, therefore Slytherin chooses first. May I have 90 seconds on the clock please? This is it-- for the pennant-- *may the best team win.*"

The buzzer sounded and the subjects apparated.

Hermione grabbed Harry's arm. "*Harry!* Ron knows all these!"

The categories were Potions, Vocabulary and Sports.

Pansy went first. "Um. . . vocabulary."

"What is the incantation for a human apparition?"

"Erm. . . . apparatitus?"

"Incorrect." Professor Warwick's smile broadened as she saw the Slytherin scoreboard wipe to zero. "Over to Gryffindor."

"Appareo!" said Parvati.

"Correct. One hundred points to Gryffindor."

"Potions, please."

"What is the key ingredient in a Polyjuice Potion?"

Ron was the first to answer. "A piece of whomever one is wishing to transform into."

"Correct. One hundred points to Gryffindor."

"Sports, please!" Ron shouted--the buzzer was almost out. Harry saw that even though they were in the lead with points for the day, they still trailed Slytherin's two day total by. . . one hundred points.

"Hermione! He gets this question and we win!"

There was urgency in Professor Warwick's voice. "In hours and minutes, what was the duration of the longest quidditch game?"

"72 hours exactly-- 15th March 1978."

Professor Warwick's face fell. "Oh. . . that's. . . incorrect, Mr. Weasley. The answer is 74 hours."

Ron's mouth dropped. Harry watched in horror as the Gryffindor scoreboard wiped to zero.

"I have the duty to announce that S-Slyth--"

"WAIT!" Ron shouted, "Those two extra hours didn't count as game time! The game was off during those two hours due to inclement weather! The match itself was 72 hours, so says Zambini's Encyclopedia of Magical Sports and Recreation, page 323!"

Everyone held their breath. Professor Warwick beamed and turned to the Goblin's panel.

"Judges?"

The Goblins murmured amongst themselves. "Mr. Ronald Weasley's answer is correct: the total duration of game play was 72 hours."

"*Gryffindor Wins!*" Professor Warwick shouted. "Final Total Scores 1300 to 1200! Gryffindor wins the Pennant!"

Harry jumped to his feet and shouted at the top of his lungs--as had the rest of the auditorium!

He threw a bear hug around Hermione and Ginny and gave them both a kiss on the cheek.

Harry didn't have time to realize that Ginny was seconds from fainting from his lips actually touching her face, because Hermione had taken hold of his hand and was pushing past everyone to get down to the main floor. She quite literally plowed over everyone in her path and in an instant had her arms thrown around Ron and was hanging onto him, laughing wildly, tears in her eyes.

"*You did it Ron!*" She kept saying over and over again, "*You won us the Pennant!*"

Harry had to nudge Hermione out of the way so that he could give Ron a bear hug too and then all three held onto each other--laughing so hard they could hardly breathe.

"Can you believe it Harry," Ron was yelling over all the din, "Can you--"

"*Yes! Ron! That was incredible! You did it!*"

"**We* did it!*" He shouted and all three embraced again.

"Uh oh," said Ginny who'd appeared next to them with Fred and George. She nodded towards the Slytherin side where the Draco and Pansy were pointing fingers and arguing with Professor Warwick.

"It was *rigged*," Malfoy was shouting. "You rigged it! We didn't know any of those answers-you did that on purpose! You cheated!"

"That's ridiculous! The very idea! And anyway, I'm a *Ravenclaw*. Why would I want Gryffindor to--"

"You cheated!"

Professor Warwick smiled. "All I can say is this," she pulled out the piece of paper that Ginny had given to Dumbledore. "You're calling me a cheat? Well, it takes one to know one."

They went quiet.

"And in case you're wondering, yes, Dumbledore knows all about this. Tell me . . ."

"Detention," Ron whispered excitedly, "she's gonna give 'em detention, watch!"

"How does . . . *detention* sound to you? For the next week?"

Ron laughed. The Slytherins stared at the ground and Professor Warwick, looking extremely pleased, put the papers away and walked over to where Ron and the rest of the gang stood and started in on the congratulations. And of course, Fred and George were just beside themselves with joy at the turn of events-anything that could make Malfoy's life a misery was okay with them! (although no evidence had yet to be produced, they were all still certain that Malfoy had something to do with the shop burning down.)

Harry couldn't help but notice that Ron kept his embrace around Hermione just that much longer than with anyone else.

It was enough to give Harry the courage to confront Ron about the situation. Time was waning-- Christmas would be there before they knew it and Ron *still* hadn't asked Hermione to the party! The subject actually came up one afternoon after the last class of the day. Harry came right out with it:

"Ron . . . I think you should ask Hermione."

"*Herm*? Harry . . . you still don't think that I have a yen for her, do you?"

"Call it intuition."

"Well your intuition is *pants*," he snapped. "You're wrong, you--"

"Hey, you guys! Wait up!" it was Hermione, joining them happily. She looked lovely, the way the sun seemed to catch her hair *just right*. Harry saw Ron's ears go red.

"Hi," he said quickly, and then turned to Harry. "Right, I'll see you upstairs, all right?"

And he disappeared.

Hermione looked hurt. "He's been doing that a lot lately," she said quietly. "He's . . . mad at me, isn't he. I've done something wrong."

Harry smiled and playfully socked her shoulder. "Hardly. Actually it's the opposite: you've done something *right*."

Her eyes landed on Harry and she smiled. "You going with anyone to Sophie's party yet?"

"No," he said slowly. "Not yet."

"You're joking. You haven't asked *anyone*? Cho? Ginny?"

Harry cleared his throat Hermione's purposeful mention of those two girls in particular. "No one, Herm."

"Oh. Well, want to go with me then?"

"*What?!?*"

Hermione looked as though he'd sprayed arsenic at her. "Well don't look so *thrilled*! It's just that no one else has asked and--"

"Sorry! I didn't mean it like that, Herm. But . . . I can't go with you. . ."

Hermione folded her arms, visibly not accepting his apology. "Oh?!? And just *why* is that?"

"Because Ron would kill me."

"Ron?"

"Yes. . ." Harry couldn't believe he was saying it. "He likes you."

Apparently Hermione couldn't believe it either. "Ron?"

Yes! He really does! It's just that, well, he's a bit shy about it--"

"Ron?!?"

"YES!!!" Harry shouted back.

Hermione blinked. "You're off your rocker, Potter. I'd rather you just be honest and tell me that you don't *want* to go with me instead of making up--"

"You don't believe me? Fine. I'll prove it to you, then. If I'm right, then mark my words, Ron will ask you by Monday. If I'm wrong, then I'll go with you the party, all right? Either way you get a date."

"And what if I don't *want* Ron to ask me?" She challenged.

"You do."

"How do *you* know? As far as I'm concerned, I couldn't care less if Ron liked me or not!"

Harry smiled. "Oh, but you do! Because that's how girls are! You always *say* you don't like someone just to try and convince yourself you don't, even though deep down inside you really do! Oh I know all about it. So we have a bargain, right?"

Hermione grimaced. And then . . . "Fine."

She turned on her heels and marched off, the sun still glinting in her hair.

Chapter Ten: Dudley Dursley

The plan wasn't going to be as easy as Harry had originally thought. He soon discovered just how stubborn of a person Ron Weasley was. He tried everything -- positively *everything* in a desperate effort to convince Ron to ask Hermione. By the last week before Christmas break, all the Gryffindors had their dates lined up-- even several Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were now going as well. There were only three dateless people: Harry, Ron and Hermione. Looking back, Harry realized that he probably overdid things-- hinting to Ron at every possible opportunity that Hermione had been staring at him, smiling at him, practically inviting him to come and ask her to the party.

And then, Thursday morning, he could have kissed Professor Warwick. She arranged for the students to pair off in a study group and she placed Ron and Hermione together. Harry almost butchered the potion he was making with Neville, because he kept staring at the interaction between the two: he saw a smile-- a *smile* from Hermione! There was hope after all!

The class adjourned and Harry bounced out after them, pushing through the other students. When he reached Ron, he couldn't see Hermione anywhere.

"So?" Harry prodded.

"So what?"

"You two looked rather cozy there--"

To Harry's surprise, Ron stopped dead in his tracks. "This is the *last bloody time* that I'm going to tell you this, Harry, so listen with both ears! ***I-do-not-like-Hermione-Granger!*** I don't care if you think she likes me, and I really don't care if you're convinced that the two of us have some kind of cosmic destiny-- *I don't like her!* And what's more, I wouldn't ask her to that party if you paid me a hundred Galleons! So *just drop it, all right?!*"

Ron stormed off in a fury, leaving Harry quite speechless.

And then there was a horrible, loathing pit forming in Harry's stomach. He slowly turned around and saw Hermione standing right behind him, her hands clutching her schoolbooks tightly, her eyes wide and watery-- she looked as though she'd just been slapped across the face. And really, with Ron's scathing words, she may as well have.

Their eyes met for a brief moment and Harry's heart sank to the floor as Hermione closed her eyes and silent tears streamed down her face.

"I told you that you were off your rocker, Harry," she managed to get out before taking off in a dash through the corridor.

Harry thought back to the last time something like this had happened: it was their very first year at Hogwarts, and Hermione had overheard Ron calling her names and she'd run off in much the same manner she just had. Hermione, for all her tough exterior, was still just as sensitive as any other fifteen year old girl. The last time she'd run off, she'd locked herself in the girls' toilet. Harry was almost positive that's where she was headed once again.

He ran after her.

He ran to the girls' lavatory closed to the Gryffindor common room, bursting inside, not caring whom he offended.

"Hermione? You in here?"

Parvati Patil screamed.

"I'll take that as a no."

He heard Parvati call him a 'snake' as he ran out. The only other option was . . . Moaning Myrtle's toilet-- a place he hadn't been to since his second year. He ran

down three flights of stairs to the toilet, ignored the "out of order" sign that still hung on the door and burst inside. At first he thought it was Moaning Myrtle making the noise. . . but then he realized that those cries most certainly did not belong to a ghost.

He threw open a stall and found Hermione leaning against a wall, her arms folded tightly, eyes downcast.

"Go away, Harry."

Harry, still rather winded, took a deep breath. "No."

She looked up, her eyes read and then, without warning, rushed past him out of the toilet.

"Hermione!" He called after her. She should have known he would catch her, and when he did, he clung to her arm. She pulled with all her might, shouting for him to let go, but it was no use-- he was much too strong for her.

She surrendered to this fact, and still breathing heavily, brought her hands down to her side. They were standing in the deep shadows of a hallway, slits of light from the large windows at the end of the hall weaving in between the dark shadows like cross-stitching. The only sound was the deep breathing between the two of them.

It was Hermione who spoke first. "I shouldn't have listened to you, Harry. You actually made me . . . believe that it was possible."

Harry was careful, knowing he was treading on thin ice. "So . . . I was right. You do like him."

"Well of course I like him!" She nearly shouted, the tears welling again. "I've liked him since. . . oh hell, why did he have to be such a git last year."

"You liked him last year?"

Yes, I *fancied* him, all right? But now. . . oh Harry, why is he so cruel to me? Doesn't he know that I . . . feel the way I do? Is he really that bloody thick?"

Harry was perfectly quiet and let her get everything out.

"I mean, all he had to do last year was ask me. That's all-- I would have backed out on Krum in a heartbeat. But Viktor, well, he paid me the attention the Ron never would. He spoiled me and treated me in a way I knew Ron never would. And I reasoned that I was stupid to wait for Ron to change his mind about me-- I knew that was impossible. So I forced myself to like Viktor. And for a while, Harry, I really did like Viktor. He was so . . . *good* to me. 'Herm-own-ninny' and all that. Ridiculous, eh? But, all the while, I knew I was fooling myself. All Ron had to do was ask-- but instead, what was I? A last resort. And he completely shunned me."

"He was jealous, that's why."

"I don't care what he was, he was downright *mean*." She ran her hands through her hair, the sunlight still finding its way into her locks-- even in the darkness, she was still lovely. "Bloody hell, Harry, things are just so damn confusing."

"Confusing," he repeated slowly.

"Yes. . . one minute I'm dancing on air because he's actually smiled at me, the next I'm writing in my journal, tearing myself to pieces, telling myself that I'll never be good enough, then the next minute I'm convince I hate him, and then. . . and then . . ."

"Then you're right back to liking him all over again."

"Well . . . yes. . . and, well . . ." her tired eyes rose to meet his. ". . . then there's you too."

Harry felt his knees nearly go out from under him. His voice was caught in his throat, but he finally forced out the words "What do you mean"?

Hermione was visibly having just as much trouble getting her words out as well . . .

but once she finally found her voice, she closed her eyes tightly and blurted it all out:

"I mean . . . well, oh hell Harry, to be perfectly honest, I fell for you the very first time I

met you on the stupid train. I was star-struck, as deplorable as that sounds, it was the truth. Every bit as bad as Ginny-- only I was much, much better at hiding it. I could get myself out of it, and then you'd have to go and do something so damn wonderful. Something so damn *heroic*. Last year after the Triwizard Tournament, I kissed you on your cheek and I felt as though I could have died on the spot."

Harry couldn't believe his ears. No, this couldn't be *Hermione* telling him this! After all the years they'd been such close friends-- it just wasn't possible.

She opened her eyes and held Harry's stare. "I know there's no point in telling you this . . . and I think tomorrow morning I'll want to kill myself for ever admitting *any* of this to you. But . . . a girl can only keep so much inside before she bursts. And what Ron said today, well, I guess that just did me in." She took a deep breath. "But, at least now I know the truth."

"The t-truth?" Harry stammered-- his heart was beating so violently, he was sure Hermione could hear it.

Or was that *her* heartbeak?

Yes. At least I can get on with my life now. After all this time of agonizing over Ron, I know exactly how he feels. And . . . well, now I know how you feel also." She looked down and bit her lip. "How a terrible a person am I Harry-- last year with Viktor, when I closed my eyes and let him kiss me for the very first time in my life, I couldn't decide who I'd rather have it be: you or Ron." Another tear threatened to fall down her cheek.

Harry didn't know why he did it. Maybe because there in the shadows, Hermione looked so very pretty-- like an angel-- and he knew angels weren't supposed to cry. Or was it because deep down inside he'd wanted to do it every bit as much as her? Whatever the actual deciding factor was, he let his hand come to Hermione's cheek and wiped away the tear with his thumb.

With every silent tick of the clock, his gaze upon her intensified, until he felt himself slowly-- oh so slowly-- bending down over her. He brushed her cheek with his lips, placing a soft, safe kiss there. Hermione's hand grabbed hold of his sleeve and she clenched it tightly.

"No, please Harry, please. I can't take it any longer." She stood on her top toes and placed her lips firmly on top of his.

Harry had most *certainly* never felt what he did at that moment. Every last sensation in his entire body was thrown into its highest state of awareness. Senses he didn't even *know* he had. The softness of her supple lips against his was a thing he'd never known-- and at the same time, it was as though he'd known it all his life. Somehow, he knew what to do. His left hand found its way through her hair, the vast softness of her locks, and he stroked it-- it was almost as pleasurable as the tingles shooting like fireworks throughout him. She was sweet to the tongue-- so warm and *real*-- and he wanted nothing more than to keep her in his embrace, pressed so closely to his body, and to taste her in all her loveliness as he was then.

And then . . .

"No," he said, softly at first, his voice muffled by Hermione's kisses. He opened his eyes and said in a firmed, undeniable voice, "*No*, Hermione."

Hermione, out of breath, stopped and looked up at him. He released her. It took every ounce of self-control in his body, raging with sensory overload, but he released her. She was staring up at him, bewildered.

Harry cleared his throat. "This isn't right. You know it, just as much as I do. This just isn't right. I can't do this to Ron. He's the one who is in love with you. It isn't fair-- not to Ron, to you *or* to me."

Hermione was silent. Her eyes were studying him, trying to understand.

Finally, she let out half of a smile and said, in a quiet voice, "Noble Harry Potter." She sighed and looked down. "Please don't hate me for that, Harry. I don't know why I did that to you--"

"No, Herm, don't apologize-- it's just that--"

"I know. I know. And you're right, Harry. Of course you're right. I . . . lost my head for a moment and . . . I'm sorry." She paused. "You . . . don't have to worry about what we agreed earlier about your taking me to the party if Ron didn't ask me. I understand--"

"No," Harry insisted quickly, "No, Hermione, you know I'll be happy to take you. I told you I would and I will." He smiled. "We'll have a blast!"

Hermione smiled, looking thoroughly relieved. She nodded. "Right. . . okay, then. Er . . . see you at dinner, then."

Harry watched Hermione disappear down the hall into the blackness of the shadows, his heart still pounding in his chest, barely able to believe that he'd just had his first kiss.

He couldn't even feel his feet on the floor as he walked down the corridor, alone, his mind reveling with everything that had just happened. And whom should he find walking briskly towards him, but Sirius!

Great-- I actually need to talk to someone right now!

"Sirius!" Harry said, smiling, "am I glad to see you right now--"

But Harry's smile faded almost immediately and he knew something was wrong. *Very* wrong. "Sirius? What is it?"

Sirius slowed his pace and looked down at his Godson, his face was pained and his mouth thin and solemn. At that moment, in the darkness of the corridor, he looked as troubled as he had when he had first escaped from Azkaban. The silence was absolutely unbearable.

Sirius removed his glasses and took a deep breath. "There's been . . . a development."

"W-what sort of development."

"I've just come from Dumbledore's office. He summoned me to his quarters just this afternoon with urgent news. It appears that there has been an escape from Azkaban."

Harry's heart stopped beating. "An escape? But then-- oh Sirius, no! Azkaban hasn't been--"

"No, it hasn't been opened up, no. In fact, there isn't any evidence directly relating the escape to Voldemort at all except for *who* the escapees are."

Harry's stomach was churning, dread consuming him. "Who was it who escaped?"

"The Lestranges."

Harry remembered Voldemort's voice as clear as though he'd said it only yesterday, *'The Lestranges will be honored beyond their dreams.'*

"Oh Sirius, he *must* be behind it! I heard him say that he was going to release the Lestranges! I *heard* him--"

"I believe you, Harry, and Dumbledore and myself both know that he is behind it all."

"Well! What about the Ministry? Aren't they going to *do* something about it?"

Sirius sighed. "That's doubtful, Harry."

"*Doubtful?! But where do you think the Lestranges are going to go now that they've broken out? Straight to Voldemort! The ministry has to do something now!*"

"I know that! You know that! But Fudge? Oh you know how he is, Harry . . ."

"Is he still being stubborn?"

"As stubborn as ever."

"But *why*?"

"He's scared." Sirius sighed. "And so am I. Look Harry, Dumbledore is going to want to tell you personally, but he thinks it best for you to go home for the holidays. You know, with the Dursleys."

It was the worst news he'd ever heard in his life. "*What?* Sirius, please--"

"I know that's upsetting, but Dumbledore would just feel better with you safe at Privet Drive right now-- "

"Why," Harry said anxiously, "is something horrible going to happen--"

"Don't fret, my boy," said Sirius, smiling for the first time. He squeezed Harry's shoulder supportively. "It's just a precaution, that's all. Dumbledore, myself and others you don't even know of are working tirelessly to make sure that . . . that nothing happens. I assure you of that: we're working *tirelessly*."

Harry nodded and after a hug, the two separated their ways. He trudged back up to the common room, his spirits utterly deflated.

Hedwig was the bearer of bad news that evening to Sophie.

Well, it looks like our plan has backfired. Today said in no uncertain terms that he did not like Hermione. It looks like I'm going to be taking Hermione to the party instead. It was a great idea, Sophie, it just . . . wasn't meant to be, I guess. And by the way: I'll be staying at Privet Drive for my entire Christmas holiday, so I'll get a nice visit with you all.

The next day, he received this reply:

Don't worry Harry, I understand completely. I just received an owl from Ron asking me if he could act as my escort to the party. He practically begged me, so I couldn't say no. I can't pretend that I'm not disappointed, though. I wanted someone else to ask me . . . but what can you do? Oh well, we tried, right? Delighted to hear you'll be staying here at Privet Drive! Can't wait to see you next week!

Love, Sophie.

It was the strangest feeling: Harry sat on the half empty Hogwarts Express, heading back towards the Dursleys at a time when he was used to celebrating being away from them-- Christmas. He reluctantly stepped out of the train and back into the Muggle world, the weather bitterly cold and the faces of the passer-bys focused and unfriendly.

He scanned the crowds hoping against hope that Imelda and Roger had come to take him back. But scanning the crowds he found no one-- not a single soul that he knew. Exasperated, he parked his case at a bench underneath the sign "Platform 9", took a seat and waited . . .

and waited.

Nearly two hours had passed by the time he realized that someone was talking to him.

It was Aunt Petunia, face rigid and cross as usual. "Get up, you lazy loafer, let's get going! I haven't all day!"

Wordlessly, Harry stood up and with his suitcase in one hand, Hedwig's case in the other, followed her through the crowds out of Kings Cross Station and towards where she had parked the car. Harry knew better than to ask where the rest of the family was-- any questions posed by Harry were viewed by Petunia as disrespectful and rude.

They arrived at Privet Drive and Harry was stunned to find that the Dursley's living room looked . . . festive. There was a large Christmas tree covered from top to bottom in sparkly ornaments, piles and piles of meticulously wrapped packages lay beneath

it and the house just smelled of . . . well, of Christmas. Of course, it was no Hogwarts, but it was a pleasant surprise nonetheless.

"Don't see *why* you need to bring that *ruddy* bird with you *everywhere* you go-"

Petunia was muttering angrily as Harry trekked upstairs. Dudley came out of his room and-

Harry had to do a double take!

Dudley looked . . . *thinner*. It wasn't a drastic change or anything, but it still took Harry by surprise! There was a shape to his face now, one of his chins had disappeared completely-

"What are *you* staring at," Dudley challenged.

"Y-you . . . look really good, Dudley." Harry winced somewhat, expecting a violent reaction from Dudley for even *speaking* to him. But instead, Dudley just looked walked past Harry and muttered "thanks."

Harry went into his room and sat on his bed in complete shock. "*Thanks?!?*" Dudley never even said 'thanks' to his *parents* let alone to him!

You must have heard him wrong, Harry. No way that Dudley actually told you thanks.

. . .

When Petunia called for dinner, Harry was careful with everything he said to the Dursleys-Dudley in particular! That small gesture of civility had really scared Harry! After dinner (which Harry was sure to compliment Petunia on) he washed down the dishes and tidied up the kitchen before venturing into the living room.

Dudley sat alone in his usual spot, feet on the coffee table, watching some silly sitcom. Harry walked quietly to the furthest chair away from him and took a seat.

They watched the television in silence for a good deal of the evening.

Then Dudley spoke. "You have your own telly at school?"

It was so unexpected that Harry at first thought that he'd simply been imagining it. But when Dudley repeated the question, Harry just about had a heart attack. *Dudley Dursely* was talking to *him?*

He managed to find his voice. "N-no. No television there."

"That must be boring."

"N-no," Harry could have told his cousin that a lot of wizards have never even touched a television set, but he decided it a lot safer to simply say, "there's other stuff to do."

"Like what?"

There wasn't exactly an overwhelming interest in Dudley's tone, but that wasn't the point! Dudley was carrying on a *conversation* with Harry! One that didn't involve screaming the words "git" or "prat"! And what really blew Harry's mind, was that Dudley was asking questions about *Hogwarts*-- a place that was *never* talked about in the house!

Why was Dudley doing this? Harry was still trying to keep his cool. "Oh, well. . . there's a really popular sport everyone gets into-it's like a huge rivalry between all the houses."

Dudley didn't say anything right away, but then he said "And?"

And? He wants to know more?

"Er . . . w-well, on weekends we get to go visit a nearby village with lots of shops and sweet shops and the like." Harry smiled at the thought of Hogsmeade. "I have some friends who are going to be opening up a joke shop there soon-and there's this drink they have called "butterbeer" that is absolutely brilliant."

Harry sensed that he was perhaps saying too much, so he quickly stopped.

After another long silence, Dudley said "cool."

COOL?!? Dudley Dursley thought that something to do with the wizarding world was cool?

Oh no, I must be hallucinating! There's no way that he's actually saying these things! And just like that, it was over. Dudley got up from his chair and walked up the stairs for his room, leaving Harry wondering if he was losing his mind or not. . .

The next morning Harry awoke to Aunt Petunia barking at him to cut her bushes back in the garden. He'd wanted to drop by the Banbury's that morning to say hello, but he instead went outside into the freezing cold to pull back Petunia's severely overgrown bushes.

"Psst! Harry! Is that you?"

Harry looked up to find Sophie peeking at him from overtop the fence-she was on her tiptoes and all Harry could see were her hypnotic brown eyes. Everything inside of him leapt at the sight of her. Which was most odd because that only had ever happened before with Cho. And he definitely didn't like Sophie the way he'd liked Cho . . . right?

"Sophie!" He cried, standing up to meet her at the fence. "How *are* you?"

"Brilliant--oh it's so nice to see you again!"

"And you."

"Come on in! Mum's at work, but Dad has the day off work and we'd love to have you for tea-"

"Oh," Harry paused, "Er. . . I'd love to, you know, but I doubt Aunt Petunia would be too happy with me 'spreading my germs' as she calls it."

Sophie shook her head. "Oh dear, I dunno how you can stand it, Harry."

"That makes two of us. . ." he paused, "Hey, have you noticed anything . . . *different* about Dudley lately?"

There was a twinkle in Sophie's eyes. "Ohhhh. You mean the new and approved Dudley Dursley?"

"So you've noticed it too?"

"Well," she started. "Er . . . wait a sec." Harry watched her turn a garden bucket upside down and stepped on top of it so she could see the whole of Harry's face.

"See. . . it all started after you went back to Hogwarts. He came over and he . . . asked me out on a date."

"No," Harry oohhed. "Dudley Dursley asked you out on a *date*?"

"Yup. He certainly did. So I sat him down and had a nice chat with him. I told him how very flattered I was as I never really had been asked on a proper date before, but I simply wasn't ready for any kind of relationship at the time. He asked me if I thought that when I was ready for a relationship, would I be ready for one with him."

"What did you say?"

"I told him the truth. I said to him, 'In all honesty, No, Dudley. I wouldn't.' I told him that we were two very different people-"

"You can say *that* again!"

"--- and that if I were ever to want a relationship with someone, it would be someone who shared similar interests and ideas as me-and someone who treated others with the same kind of respect he'd show me." Sophie winked. "I threw that in, of course, just to let him know that I did not approve of the way he treated you."

Harry blushed. "W-what did he say?"

"Well, he took it very well, and I told him that I'd love to be friends, and he said 'of course.'"

"Sophie Banbury! You broke Dudley Dursley's heart!"

She ignored him, "and anyway, after that . . . well, he started changing. He wasn't into trouble at school near so often as he was before. And when he talks to me, he. . .

. I know this is going to sound outrageous, but he acts as though he's *really interested* in how I'm doing!"

Harry shook his head in disbelief. "I just can't believe it. . . he actually asked about Hogwarts last night."

"No!"

"Yes! Unbelievable! If only he knew that the girl he likes is a witch!"

They laughed.

"Now tomorrow night, everyone's arriving by Floo Powder, Mum's arranging for our house to be added to the network again, and I expect you have devised a way to get out of the Dursley's house?"

"I figured I would just tell them that Roger wants me to help with some handiwork about the house. They'll *always* let me out if it involves my working."

Sophie smiled. "Good. See you tomorrow then!"

"Of course!" Harry lingered for a moment. . . he'd wanted so very much to ask her who she'd *wanted* to be her escort, but decided against it. It didn't matter because he didn't like her that way. . . right?

*

That is precisely what Harry repeated to himself all evening up in his room. He took out the invitation and stared at it absently, his eyes lingering on her name. . . no, he most certainly did not think of Sophie that way . . .

The door opened and Harry nearly let out a yelp when Dudley walked in. He quickly put the invitation under his pillow, but not before Dudley spied it. It was rather hard to hide: the glowing letters were turning Harry's pillow purple and pink!

"Hey," said Dudley quietly.

"Hey." Harry scanned the room quickly for anything he could use in self-defense in case Dudley decided to pounce on him.

Dudley was staring at Harry's pillow, his eyebrow raised. "What's that under your pillow?"

"Huh? *Oh!* Er. . . nothing, just . . . something from school."

Dudley took a step forward. "Can. . . I have a look?"

"NO!" Harry shouted immediately, and then added quickly, "no, er. . . really, Dudley, it's nothing. It's from *Hogwarts*." Harry clearly enunciated his school purposefully, hoping to repel him away.

But Dudley remained focused. "Really, I'd . . . like to see it."

"No, don't think you do, Dudley!" Harry couldn't let Dudley see it! Sophie's name was on it! If he saw the invitation, then he would know that Sophie really wasn't the muggle he thought she was! And who *knows* what would happen!

"Oh come on Harry," said Dudley. And then. . . he took a breath and said the word Harry *never in his wildest dreams* thought he'd hear from Dudley:

"Please?"

PLEASE?!? What in the hell had come over that boy! That simple, small word rendered Harry speechless and before he realized it, Dudley had reached under the pillow and pulled out the invitation.

Dudley's eyes widened upon seeing the glowing letters. Harry almost thought he saw him mouth the word "wow" but he wasn't sure. Harry winced again and braced for the reaction. . .

"Sophie?" Dudley repeated quietly. "She's having a Christmas Party tomorrow?"

Harry was mortified.

"I didn't get an invitation."

"Well," said Harry nervously. "That's the thing, Dudley. You see . . . only, er, a certain sort of people are invited."

Dudley blinked.

"Only . . . er . . . *my* sort of people."

There was something in Dudley's eyes that seemed to tell Harry he understood this.

"From your school," Dudley said.

"Yes." Harry ran his fingers through his hair. "Oh hell, Dudley, I wish that I didn't have to be the one to tell you this because . . . I know how fond you are of Sophie and how your Mum is so fond of Mrs Banbury. . . but . . ." he took a breath, "Mrs. Banbury and Sophie are . . ."

"They're witches," Dudley finished.

Harry stopped and stared at his cousin. "Y-yes."

"Yeah. I thought so."

"You thought . . . but . . . how?"

Dudley looked back down at the invitation, his expression still difficult to decipher.

"By accident."

Dudley let a mischievous grin slip out, and Harry was at once *very* interested. "D-Dudley? What did you do?"

"Well . . . my bedroom happens to be parallel to Sophie's."

Uh oh. "So . . . well, she's been known to leave her curtains open by mistake."

"You spy on her?!?"

"It was only one time Harry, I swear to God. And she was writing with a quill on a roll of brownish paper. I've only ever known you to do that. And then I saw Mrs. Banbury walk in with this barn owl on her arm, and Sophie put the letter into the owl's beak!

And. . . I know that's what your owl does when you want mail delivered. . ."

Harry swallowed. "So then. . . you knew she had to be a witch."

He nodded. "I was almost positive. I just wanted to hear you say it."

"And yet you . . . still fancy her?"

He nodded again.

"Even though you know what she is?"

"I know. . . Mum and Dad would kill me."

Harry couldn't help it--he really couldn't! He smiled at Dudley and said, "No-Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon would kill *me* first. *Then* they'd kill you." It was a tremendous moment. The two cousins looked at each other and . . . laughed! Dudley barreled over and let out great, heaving laughs and Harry threw his head back and grabbed his stomach. Harry spoke the honest truth and they both knew it: for the first time in their lives, they shared something in common! They held a common link! Harry was agog with it all-if this was a dream as it simply had to have been, he glad to be having it!

Dudley finally calmed down and wiped a tear from his eye. He still couldn't look at his cousin in the eye, but he was now able to say what he meant. "It's been hell, you know. These past three months you've been gone, I've had to keep this secret to myself. . . just glad it's out."

"Listen," said Harry, "Er . . . you and I . . . we haven't exactly been what I would call friends."

"Not in the slightest," Dudley nodded.

Harry did not want to ruin the moment, and it was such a complicated situation so instead of gushing on about *feelings*, he said "and there's . . . so much between us, namely your Mum and Dad, but . . .this is good. Just talking. Not feeling obligated to have a relationship, but . . . just talking."

Dudley finally was able to look at his cousin. "Yes. Talking is good." He paused, "and . . . since I found out what Sophie was and realized that I've fallen for a girl who is

just like someone I've spent most of my life hating . . ." he took a breath. "I owe you an apology."

Harry's mouth fell. "N-no, Dudley-"

"Oh just shut up Harry, because I'm not gonna say this again, all right? I've been getting myself ready for this for the past two months and you're not gonna ruin it." He took another breath. "I'm sorry."

Harry wanted to say a million different things. (and yes, 'It's about time you bloody prat', 'you have the nerve after what you did to me' and 'you ruined my life, go eat slugs for all I care' were all amongst his choices.) But he knew that no words were the best words.

Besides. . . the most amazing thing had started to happen . . . Harry was feeling *compassion* for the bugger.

And then, just when Harry thought that no more surprises were possible, Dudley said to Harry, "So. . . er, do you think Sophie would mind if I came to her party tomorrow?"

Harry cleared his throat. "Oh! Er, well, I dunno Dudley. You do realize that the only mugg-er, I mean, non-magical people would be yourself and Mr. Banbury."

"Obviously, yeah."

"A-and you're *okay* with that?"

"Yeah. It sounds like . . ." Dudley searched for the right word, "it sounds like fun."

"Fun," Harry repeated, still trying to believe he was talking to the same person he'd grown up with.

"But, you know, you're the one who is invited. I doubt you'll want your. . . what's that word you use? "Muggle" cousin around . . ."

Dudley *did* have a point. He was looking forward to spending time with his friends. . . but with the given change of events . . .

"I'm sure Sophie will be delighted to have you come."

**

When Harry told Sophie everything that had happened the night before, Sophie was every bit as stunned as Harry. She said that there was no reason why he couldn't come, but she was more concerned with how Harry would handle it than anything else.

Harry told her not to worry. With all the blackmail Harry now had on him, there was no way Dudley was going to cause any problems with him around.

Dudley had told his parents that he and Harry had been invited to the a Christmas Party at the Banbury's for the evening. Vernon and Petunia seemed apprehensive to let Harry go along, but Dudley insisted and they, of course, ceded.

Harry had pulled out his best black trousers and a charcoal gray jumper he rather liked. He was never impressed with what he saw in the mirror, but admitted that tonight he wasn't *entirely* hopeless looking.

Dudley had spent an incredibly long time getting ready. He came down in dressy black trousers and a dressy deep maroon shirt, with his shoes shined to the finish. It didn't *look* like the same Dudley any more than it *sounded* like him.

Harry met Dudley at the bottom stair and all Dudley said to him was, "So when are you going to get rid of those bloody ridiculous glasses?"

They left the house together and Harry smiled. "I happen to *like* these bloody ridiculous glasses. Oh, wait here."

Harry looked anxiously out into the street. "I told Hermione to meet me here at exactly five minutes till."

"You told Hermy *who*?"

"Hermione-she's my date for tonight."

Dudley let out a grunt. "Soooooo. Harry's got a little girlfriend, does he?"

"No, it's not like that."

"Let me guess-- she's one of your best friends, right?"

"Well, she is!"

"Right."

"--*actually*, tonight was a set up to get her and my other best friend together. The plan didn't exactly work out, though. So I'm her date--where is she?"

And just as the words left his lips, a car came driving up the block. Sure enough, Mr. and Mrs. Granger were driving and as it pulled to a stop, Hermione jumped out of the back seat. "Be back around eleven, Mum! Bye Dad!"

The Grangers drove away and Hermione hurried to Harry's side, shivering in her black overcoat. They gave each other a hug.

"Sorry-- Mum and Dad had a hell of a time finding this place." She made a very obvious point of looking Harry up and down. "Wow! Harry! You look *fantastic!*"

Harry blushed and, sensing his unease, Hermione quickly added lightheartedly, "Didn't think you had it in you!"

"Oh s-stop it, Hermione. And of course you're lovely as always--er, H-Hermione, I'd like you to meet . . . my cousin."

Hermione's eyes grew wide staring at the smiling blonde boy in front of her. "*This*," she said in disbelief, "is Dudley?"

Harry realized that Hermione, along with everyone else at Hogwarts, knew Dudley as his insufferable, bully of a cousin. He gave her a look that said 'its okay'. "Dudley, this is Hermione."

Dudley raised his eyebrow, "Sorry? Did you say Herm. . ."

"Herm-eye-oh-nee," she said phonetically. Don't worry, no one ever gets it right."

They shook hands. "Can we get inside? Before I die of frost bite?"

Harry took her arm and the three knocked on the Banbury's door. Sophie flung the door open, all smiles.

She looked positively . . .

"Wow," Dudley whispered in Harry's ear.

Wow indeed! Sophie was wearing a dress that was hopelessly muggle: spaghetti straps, soft pink and it flared gently at her knee. Her hair was pinned up intricately with pretty silver pins. Harry's voice caught in his throat.

"Hi," he said as easily as possible, and Sophie greeted him with a kiss on the cheek.

She smells so sweet . . .

"And you too, Dudley, wonderful to see you." She gave Dudley a peck on the cheek also, and then looked at Harry again--a twinkle forming in her eye similar to Hermione's.

"Looking *suave* tonight, Harry!"

"Doesn't he?" Hermione piped up, "I told him that too! And Sophie, I love your dress."

"Oh! Thanks! You know that muggle store *Zara*, right? Here let me take your coat . . .

."

Sophie and Hermione embraced like long lost sisters and Sophie took her coat from her . . .

And when Harry saw Hermione, well, talk about being rendered speechless. It was the Yule Ball all over again, only this time she wasn't hiding beneath those dress robes. Standing before him was a Hermione who was a mere ghost of the little girl he'd known before. She was wearing a long black dress that seemed to fit in all the right places just as the sun always seemed to hit her hair in all the right places. It scooped low in the front, showing off her creamy skin and her soft, sun kissed tendrils climbed luxuriantly down her back.

Hermione was obviously aware of Harry's shock, so she merely kept on conversing with Sophie.

"Impressive, Harry," Dudley was whispering. Harry gave him a look that warned '*shut up!*' A loud boom sounded from the fireplace and the familiar green smoke rose into the air. Dudley had suppressed a scream and Harry turned to him,

"It's okay. It's called 'floo powder'. Lots of our kind travel using it-- inexpensive and easy, although I don't particularly like it."

"What, they just *poof*-- appear in fireplaces just like that?" Dudley's mouth was hanging open as he saw four people step out of the fireplace and start to wipe the soot off their cloaks.

"Well . . . it *is* magic, Dudley."

Speaking of magic-- the Banbury's living room was absolutely swimming in it. Gone was the semblance of their living room. Instead it had been transformed into a large room that was bathed in soft, warm light, snow framed the windowpanes even though no snow had fallen yet, and a gorgeous crystalline chandelier hung in mid air, rainbow reflections bouncing off the walls. In the corner of the room was the Banbury's enormous Christmas tree-- which was also covered with snow-- and red stockings, stuffed full with stocking stuffers, hung across the mantle place. Happy, festive music mingled in with the gentle chatter between the friends who had already arrived, and the periodic "Ahhs!" when someone new came in through the fireplace.

"And who is that," said Dudley upon the latest puff of green smoke. A pretty girl in a deep navy blue dress was running her fingers through her siren red hair.

Harry smiled. "*That* is Ginny Weasley. . ." he paused. "Oh. . . er . . . Dudley, you've actually met her before. . ."

"No, I would remember meeting her--"

Harry was suddenly worried. The Weasleys hadn't exactly left a good impression with Dudley when they'd last met. Fred and George had cast a spell which made his tongue swell to frightening proportions and it was quite a task for Mr. Weasley to put it right.

"*Them!*" Dudley cried as Fred and George came out after Ron (Angelina Johnson had arrived with Fred and Padma Patil came with George.)

"Hiya Harry!" said Ron gleefully upon sighting his friend and came swiftly to his side, the Weasleys close behind. "All right? Any--" his voice trailed and he stared at Dudley in complete disbelief. George had begun to shout 'what the hell is he doing here' but seeing the look in Harry's eye, he held his tongue.

"You all remember Dudley, of course?" said Harry pleasantly.

"Of course," said Ron, throwing Harry a 'what the hell' kind of look.

"Hello," Dudley said, with much difficulty to sound as civil as possible.

"And *hello* to all of you."

Harry turned around to see Imelda Banbury standing next to him, dressed in that favorite lavender dress of hers, with Roger at her side. The dress looked different, however-- it hung as it hadn't before. Indeed, Imelda was looking quite thin and there was a tiredness about her eyes that was very noticeable. Her hair wasn't it's usual, soft, floppy self, but was much straighter and shorter. In short: she looked as though she'd had a very rough past few months.

Harry was determined not to show Imelda that he noticed the change, and threw her a hug. "It's so good to see you," he said.

"And you," she said and then took her hand to his face. "Let me look at you." She smiled upon his face-- her eyes staring at him just long enough to make Harry a bit uneasy what with all his friends watching. "Yes, yes," she said, "all grown up already."

"It's only been three months!"

She shrugged. "Has it? It feels like an eternity." She turned to Dudley and the Weasley clan. "And . . . I do not believe I know all of you."

Sophie cut in, "I've only just been meeting them as well. This is Angelina Johnson, Padma Patil and Colin Creevey. And of course you know the Weasleys already, and Dudley."

"Dudley," she repeated, "I don't remember his name on your guest list-- but I am glad you decided to come, my boy."

Dudley smiled. "You've done wonders with the place, Mrs Banbury."

"No, credit goes to my little Sophie, not me."

Poor Imelda, thought Harry. *She even sounds tired. As though she's really a million miles away.* Harry could only guess how hectic life was at the Ministry now that the Lestranges had escaped. If he'd had to deal with cleaning up Cornelius Fudge's mess, he'd look just as shattered as Imelda did.

Sophie stuck to Ron as her escort, although Ron did look rather helpless as to exactly what he was supposed to do. What really humiliated him was when Dudley had to finally go and get Sophie a drink after Ron had failed to get her several hints about it. Hermione and the Weasleys were both stunned at the news of the unexpected metamorphosis of Dudley Dursley. Fred and George still didn't seem entirely convinced, but all of them had to admit that it was a vast improvement. And Harry even admitted that it was rather fun watching Dudley's wide-eyed wonderment at everything he saw: from the hanging chandelier to the snow on the window panes to the conversation that he listened to, filled with words he'd never heard before. And when Seamus arrived (the last one to arrive actually) with Hufflepuff Hannah Abbot, Dudley was at once convinced that kids were kids-- whether wizarding or muggle-- because Seamus made the announcement that now the *real* party could start as he had brought a bountiful supply of Butterbeer. The kids *roared* in excitement and there was a rush for the delectable drink. Harry watched happily as Dudley took his first sip, his eyes went wild with excitement, and he chugged the rest of it down.

Dudley had found a talking partner in Dean Thomas as Dudley's favorite football team was Liverpool, and the two had a terrific time going back and forth over the reasons why Fulham was pants compared to Liverpool or vice-versa.

"Having fun, my dear?" Imelda was talking to Harry once again and he smiled.

"Absolutely."

Imelda took her fingers and brushed Harry's hair away from his eyes. Her voice was hushed. "So very like your mother."

Harry snapped to attention. "My mother? You knew my mother?"

Imelda's smile was tired, and her voice distant. "Yes. . .we all knew your mother.

People say you look like your father, but I see your mother-- you have that innocent beauty she had. . ." Imelda was a million miles away. "We went to school together, did I ever tell you?"

"No." Harry was hanging on every word.

"Yes. . . I admit that she and I were not the best of friends. . . I suppose I thought myself better than she. . ."

"Oh," said Harry, remembering his mother was muggle born. "Is that because of who your family was?"

"When we are young, we never see things clearly," she said quietly. "It is only with time that we see the entire picture and realize how important *that* is."

Harry wasn't too sure what she was trying to say, but he agreed nonetheless. After one last look, she smiled and walked away.

"Hey," said Sophie coming up beside him with Ron. She was holding onto a half empty bottle of butterbeer and nodded towards her mother, "she looks terrible, doesn't she."

"I didn't want to say anything, but . . . yeah."

Sophie grimaced. "The change was all very sudden-- very drastic. I think that everything going on with the ministry has really hit her hard."

"My dad as well," said Ron glumly. "Fudge is in a panic over what to do about the LeStrange's escape."

"He should have listened to Dumbledore," said Harry. "he *warned* him that something like this would happen."

"Something like what?" said Dudley happily, joining the conversation.

Sophie gave him a warm smile, "that we'd run out of butterbeer so early in the evening! Seamus should have known to bring more!"

"Oh, it's bloody *fantastic*, this stuff!" Dudley had most obviously had more than he should have: his face was turning bright red and his voice was quite loud. "They need to sell this stuff in our stores! Make a bloody fortune, it would!"

"Hey," said Ron, "anyone seen Hermione?"

Harry shook his head.

"Hmph. Some escort *you* are, Harry," said Ron.

Sophie's face brightened and she threw a wink at Harry. "Er. . . actually Ron, I think I sent her to help my Dad with something out back-- would you mind checking to see if they have everything under control? Please?"

Ron didn't protest and promptly left for the back garden.

Harry and Sophie smiled at him as he left. "See?" She said, "He just dropped *everything*. I don't care what you say, Harry, the boy is obviously smitten."

"I'll say," Dudley spoke up, "his eyes have been on nothing else all night. What, he's trying' to prove to the world he doesn't fancy her?"

They nodded.

"The silly sod. He's doin' a right sloppy job of it."

"I wish he'd just get over his pride and *admit* it. . ."

"He'd better hurry," said Dudley, looking irritated that his butterbeer bottle was now bone-dry. "*Someone's* gonna snatch up a looker like her sooner or later. That reminds me, Harry, you will give her my phone number if Ron ever moves on to someone else."

Sophie snickered. "Men. Muggle or Wizard, they're still the same."

*

The party gradually fell to a close-- it was well after midnight when the last guests left the Banbury's. Hermione's parents had come at half past eleven and she'd given Harry a bear hug and a 'thank you' for what she called a 'wonderful evening.' The Weasleys filed out and soon after them, Harry and Dudley decided to embark on that treacherously long jaunt home.

"I'll tell ya one thing, Harry," said Dudley as they walked through the slumbering Dursley household and climbed up the staircase, "Hogwarts must not be all that bad when you've got talent like *that* there..."

"*Dudley*," said Harry warningly.

"... I mean, there's Sophie for one thing, that Ginny-- too bad she's a Weasley. They all think I'm evil-- dunno, maybe I am. And of course, there's your 'not-a-girlfriend'..."

"I mean it," he said again, trying to blow over the fact that Hermione's appearance *had* disturbed him more than he wanted to admit.

Dudley laughed and opened the door to his room. "Night, cousin." He shut the door and then swung it open quickly again, just enough to reveal his still red face. "By the way-- Happy Christmas." The door slammed shut quickly leaving Harry alone. "Happy Christmas," he whispered quietly in the hall. He walked into his room, a smile still on his face, wondering if in the morning Dudley would return to his former terror and hoping against hope he wouldn't-- it was nice having a friend so nearby.

Chapter Eleven: The Christmas Presents

Christmas morning in the Dursley household was. . . strange. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, of course, said nothing to Harry at all. Dudley, however, was speaking quite freely, unwrapping his cornucopia of presents as though he were on autopilot, not bothering to oooh or aahhhh over any of them.

"Oh yeah Mum, it was a lovely party. Lots of friends from Sophie's school were there. Mrs. Banbury is still looking horrible--"

"Oh it *must* be the weather--"

-- and of course she wanted me to tell you hello. We had a good time, didn't we Harry?"

Harry didn't want Dudley to include him in the conversation, but nodded anyway. Dudley's hands paused over a small, badly wrapped gift. He looked up at Harry and Harry blushed. If there was one person who could have done without another present, it was Dudley Dursley. But that morning something inside of Harry compelled him to search through what meager possessions he'd brought with him and give Dudley a present. Harry hoped, that if Dudley really had changed, he would understand that this gift which was being given out of pure goodness of heart, was worth infinitely more than his parents' gifts that were really given only because it was expected.

Dudley slowly unwrapped the silver paper and stared for a long time at the contents of the box. It was the quill he had purchased in Hogsmeade that he'd first intended to give Sophie-- but given the changing circumstances, he wanted to see what Dudley would make of receiving such a gift.

Dudley held the long, delicate, gold and deep violet quill in his hand. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were staring at it, mouths open: it really *was* a beautiful quill.

Finally, Dudley spoke. "Harry. . . you realize I won't be able to make heads or tails of it. I've terrible penmanship."

"Then you can just keep it on your desk, if you like."

"*You*," said Vernon. "You gave Dudley *that*!"

"Of all the *preposterous* things!" Petunia shrieked. "What will Dudley do with a *quill*? You *didn't* get it from any of *your* stores, did you? If so, Dudley will be giving it right back--"

"Like hell, I will! This is better than any of those crap presents you've been giving me."

The Dursleys shrieked. Harry beamed: Dudley *had* changed.

"Dudders! We spend good money on those! Look, it's play station2 and--"

"I already have that, you know mum. And what the bleeding hell am I supposed to do with this?" he said, holding up a flashlight wrapped in a red bow. "A *flashlight*? I mean, are the two of you that flipping mental? What the hell do I care? *This* is the best present I've had in years," he said holding up the quill. "And it's not because it's anything cool or trendy or expensive--"

Actually, it was, thought Harry. . .

--it's because he gave it to me because he *wanted* to. You two just give me presents because you know bloody well I'll raise Cain if you don't."

"*Dudley Dursley! Don't talk to your mother that way--*"

"And you should talk?" said Dudley. "After the way you talk to Harry? How can you have the gall to lecture *me* on my manners when you've been flipping Adolf Hitler to him his whole life." Dudley stood up, his face twisted in anger. "Come on Harry, let's go for a walk. Get out of this place before I *really* lose my temper!"

Petunia and Vernon were staring at Harry, murder in their eyes, and Harry simply followed his cousin, the both of them grabbing their coats of the coat rack and walking out into the frigid December air.

It was very quiet between them for the longest time. Finally, after they had rounded off Privet Drive onto Martin Close, Harry said, "Thank you for all that back there."

"Oh that? Please. It's nothing those old fogies don't know already." Dudley dug into his pocket and pulled out a carton of cigarettes. "Ciggie?"

Harry shook his head and they kept walking.

"Hey, thanks for the quill. It's wicked." He let out a puff of smoke that lingered in the air thickly. "Sorry I didn't get you anything."

That's twice in the past two days that Dudley Dursley has apologized!

"Don't mention it."

His cigarette butt glowed red as he took another puff. "I try so hard to piss Mum and Dad off, you know? To have them yell or slam me down or do *something* to show that they understand I'm not their little eleven year old bundle of joy. I'm really their fifteen-year-old troublemaking ass. But. . . they really don't care. I could probably blow up all of London, and Mum would still pinch my cheeks and tell me I was just absolutely bloody perfect. The psychopath."

Harry smiled. "I seem to have no trouble pissing them off."

"Well they have to take it out on someone, I suppose." He shook his head. "Wish they'd just croak, the both of 'em."

"Ah, you don't mean that."

"Don't I?"

"No," said Harry seriously. "I mean it. Remember-- *my* parents are dead. I wouldn't want that for anyone. Even if your parents are the Dursleys." He paused. "Maybe a couple broken bones, a long term illness even-- but not immediate death, no. Never."

Dudley laughed. "Pub?" he asked as they crossed the High street. Harry nodded, and the two ducked inside the tiny, comfortable pub, taking shelter from the bitter cold. They were the only patrons (except for a man slumped over the bar) and they sat at the hard wood chairs, ordering a coke each.

"Blech," said Dudley, cringing as he drank his. "I'd give anything for a butterbeer right now. So. . ." he said slowly. "Speaking of. . . all that."

"All what?"

"Your parents. You know what I've always wondered is. . . *where* did you get that scar from. I know that somehow it's tied in with your parents. I mean, I know that they were killed by someone, some kind of crazy lunatic, I've caught bits and pieces over the years, but. . . I've never heard the real story about it. I mean, hell Harry, it's flipping unreal, that scar."

"You really want to know?"

"Absolutely."

So, taking a sip from his drink, he leaned forward in his chair and told him. Everything. About the student named Tom Riddle who became Lord Voldemort. About his parents being forced into hiding and his mother giving her life for his. He explained how that spell had made Harry impenetrable by Voldemort's death curse, giving him only the scar on his forehead. He told him in detail about Voldemort's painful, half existence, living as a parasite, drinking unicorn blood-- and then he related the nightmare of last year when Voldemort returned to full power. He described the horror of watching Cedric die. And then of course, he gave the story of Peter Pettigrew, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black.

Dudley had nearly finished his pack of cigarettes by the time Harry had finished.

"H-Harry. . ." he whispered. "My God. It doesn't sound possible. It sounds like. . . like a movie or a book or something."

"Believe me, it's no book. It's my life."

"And this whole area has been protected from Dark Wizards our whole life? That should make you feel relieved! Knowing that Vandermart can't just barge in and take you."

"Yeah. . . but up until this past week, there was nothing I hated more than coming here."

Dudley kept his stare on his cousin-a flicker in his blue eyes. "I. . . had no idea. I dunno what I thought you did at your school, but. . . *Jesus*, Harry!" And then he smiled. "That old scum

Vandermart-- shown up *three* times by a kid in school! Ha! Some all powerful wizard he is, eh Harry?"

Harry smiled slightly, but there was no way he could make Dudley understand just how powerful Voldemort really was.

They finally started on their jaunt back home, Harry listening quietly as Dudley rambled on and on about school, how much a waste of time he thought it to be, and everything else in the world that really ticked him off.

"Wow Dudley, is there anything in the world you *do* like?" asked Harry as they rounded onto Privet drive once more.

"Yeah," he said in a much more softer tone. "And she's standin' right there."

Harry looked up to see Sophie walking towards them briskly, her face bright red from the cold, smile wide.

"Hey you two! Where have you been all day? We've got presents for you, you know!" She linked both her arms through theirs and walked them towards number three. "And I want to thank you both-- I adored your presents. Harry, the writing journal was absolutely *beautiful*. And Dudley," she wiggled her fingers, showing off a simple, small silver band. "It's a gorgeous ring, really. You've good taste, you know."

Harry couldn't see him, but he was sure Dudley was turning pink. Inside the house, Imelda was busy setting down cups of tea on the coffee table, a tray of shortbread awaiting them.

"Merry Christmas boys," came that soft voice that just seemed to make Harry's heart break into pieces.

"Merry Christmas Mrs. Banbury," said Dudley respectfully.

She greeted him with a hug and then to Harry, she embraced him-- once again letting her fingers play with his hair as she had the night before. Harry wasn't particularly comfortable with this and found himself letting her free from her hug, still smiling.

"Please, help yourself to the biscuits, you three. We called earlier, but you'd left-- where have you been?"

"Oh, out and about," said Harry. "Just talking."

"Ah. How wonderful to see you two are so close. It's such an important thing-- family. Not a day goes by that I don't think of my own dear sister . . ." her voice trailed off and Sophie stared at her expectantly. Harry well remembered Sophie telling him that Imelda *rarely* ever mentioned her late sister, and when she did it was an *extremely* awkward thing.

Dudley was apparently ignorant of this and asked, innocently, "Really? What was she like?"

Imelda was quiet. "I admit-- I never truly knew her." And then she looked over her shoulder. "Roger?"

Roger appeared, carrying four gift-wrapped boxes and handing them over to the boys. "Merry Christmas."

They both let out a surprised cry and gave each other a fiendish smile before ripping open the wrappings.

"Easy, there!" Sophie was laughing.

Dudley was holding a shirt with the Liverpool Football club logo on it, and a matching cap.

"Actually I need this! All my other shirts are a bit too baggy, really-- this looks just right."

Harry, however, was in a state of shock. Sophie had gift-wrapped a *very* top of the line broomstick slip cover to keep his Firebolt inside of specifically-- the lined cover even had the Firebolt insignia on it. But it was Imelda's gift that had left him speechless: a gold ring. Not just any gold ring-- but one that looked as though it were a wedding band. Yes. . . he was *certain* it was a wedding band. And he was almost certain of whose it was . . .

"Yes Harry," Imelda said almost as if she were reading his thoughts, "it was your mother's wedding ring."

"My *mothers'*," he whispered, holding it up in his trembling hands. "B-but how d-did you ever--"

"I've been with the ministry for many years. There is, in the department of special investigations, a sort of vault, if you will. Every piece of evidence in every case we have investigated is tagged and marked and kept under lock and key. Of course, the Lily and James Potter case is amongst the many. I have been fighting, ever since I moved here, to convince Fudge that this should rightly belong to you, and at long last he agreed."

Dudley and Sophie's eyes were focused on him, but Harry was only vaguely aware of them.

He was staring at the lightweight piece of gold in his palm, transfixed.

"Her fingers were so tiny," he breathed, his vision blurring with the tears forming his eyes. He felt his chest tighten up and he clenched his fists, holding the ring firmly in his grasp. He closed his eyes, willing the tears not to come, but a single tear had found its way out and was falling down his cheek alone.

No, this is too much to take . . .

"Thank you," he whispered, his voice shaking. "I . . . I'm sorry Mrs. Banbury, I don't mean to be rude, but . . . I have to go." He stood up, not making eye contact with any of them. He bolted for the door, barely hearing Dudley calling after him 'Hey! Wait up!' He ran to number four, dashed upstairs and threw himself on the bed.

And he let the rest of the tears come-- silent, yet plentiful just the same. He stared at the ring-- his *mother's* ring-- something she had once worn . . . something she'd been wearing when Voldemort had murdered her . . . something that was amongst her most cherished possessions. . . and now he had it.

*

Dudley had been even more understanding than Harry would have ever thought to give him credit for: he never brought up the ring with Harry. All he did, after Harry had finally let himself out of his room again, was say "All right?" Harry had nodded, and that had been the end of it. And that was exactly what Harry had wanted.

The Christmas holidays were ending, and soon Harry was packing up his suitcase to head back to Hogwarts. Only this time it was different. He didn't want to stay at Privet Drive, yet he couldn't quiet the nagging feeling that he was going to . . . *miss Dudley Dursley*. It was a new emotion-- this affection for his cousin-- and it was a confusing one. He wasn't sure how to deal with it, and on the morning of his departure, he didn't know what to say to Dudley. Fortunately, he didn't have to. Dudley had a way of saying exactly what they both were feeling without having to come right out with it.

"Bloody lucky bastard, you are. Gettin' out of this deathtrap. Don't reckon they'd let me in with you, eh?"

Harry snickered and picked up his suitcase, walking towards where Dudley stood in his doorway.

"Erm, no, don't reckon they would." Harry paused-- just six months ago Dudley would have thought such talk completely absurd, and now there he stood saying it! "Dudley-- you know, this is kind of--"

"I know," said Dudley, obviously feeling just as awkward about this new. . . stage of their relationship. "And remember? We agreed, you and I, that talking is good."

"Yeah," he said nodding. "Talking is good." He paused. "Er. . . did we agree that writing was good as well?"

Dudley laughed. "Mum and Dad would fly into a spastic rage if I started receiving letters from you. So . . . in that case, yes. Writing is good as well!"

They both laughed just as Aunt Petunia appeared, her face cold and eyes pure venom. "Let's get going, then, I've things to do today."

She disappeared down the stairs and Dudley stuck his tongue out at her.

Harry shook his head. "Have fun," he said as he slowly left to follow her.

Dudley nodded. "Right. And by the way, while you're at school you might want look into contacts or something-- get rid of those bloody ridiculous glasses--"

"I *like* these bloody ridiculous glasses, thank you."

They smiled at each other and held their stare. Finally, Harry simply punched his shoulder playfully and then headed down the stairs after his Aunt.

Ron and Hermione couldn't believe any of what Harry told them. The New and Improved Dudley Dursley just didn't seem possible to any of them. Harry of course understood their skepticism, and after so many years of complete *brutality*, Harry was still admittedly a bit skeptical. However he was welcome to a shot at some sort of friendship with him-- and that fortnight at Privet Drive had been a fantastic start.

The time bonding with Dudley, if that is the right word, was great-- but Harry was most definitely ever so happy to be back at Hogwarts. To be home. Harry felt as though it had been years since he'd seen Sirius, and was bursting with anticipation to see him again the next day in class, as he was with Hagrid as well-- yes, even Professor McGonagall.

Walking into their first class the next day, Potions, Harry felt on top of the world being back into the swing of things again. That is until he heard a voice say "Good Morning, Class," that was most definitely *not* Professor Warwick's.

Harry spun around in his seat to find Professor Snape gliding towards the front of the classroom, his old scowl firmly in place and menacing voice still as chilling as ever. The rest of the class held similar confused countenances-- even the Slytherins. It was most definitely a rude awakening: expecting to see the stunning Professor Warwick in her gorgeous robes, and instead being met with stern faced, ill humored Snape.

Harry's mouth was agape in surprise. Professor Snape must have been aware of the cumulative shock of the classroom because before diving into the lesson he decided to furnish them with an explanation. "Professor Warwick was called away most unexpectedly during the Christmas Holidays due to personal matters, and though I was not slated to return until Spring, I was of course most willing to take the reigns once more. I do hope everyone enjoyed their holiday as we are now back to work. I see Professor Warwick did cover *most* of the material, however it does appear there will still be some catching up we will need to do. At this point I would suggest you allot yourselves an extra hour of potions homework every night so that we may catch up to where we need to be."

Harry saw Ron and Hermione's faces fall, as indeed the rest of the classes had at the news. A double whammy: The return of Snape and extra potions homework. Harry managed to not lose any points from Gryffindor during that first lesson, which was a relief to him considering Snape's usual compulsion to do so. Perhaps if he just kept extra quiet in class, the two of them could have a relatively *peaceful* term. There was even a glimmer of hope in Harry that, given the miraculous change in Dudley, perhaps the same could happen with Snape! After all, last year Dumbledore had said that they were all on the same side now, right?

Right! Walking into Potions the next day, Harry was feeling decidedly more confident about Snape's return. He even went so far as to give Snape a smile and amicable nod as he took his seat. Snape had merely stared at him and then returned his attention to his lesson plan. The minute the rest of the class had assembled, Snape wasted no time in proving to Harry just how wrong he was.

"Mr. Potter, since you seem to be in a particularly cheerful disposition this morning, I thought perhaps you might share with us by way of reminder what the basic points of the Garvarian Theory are since we will be building upon this basic theory in the next lesson."

Harry blinked. "The G-Garvarian Theory? Actually, Professor Warwick didn't cover that. We didn't get that far."

"Of course you didn't, however it was covered in the homework I assigned last night, that is of course provided you actually *did* your homework last night."

"But Sir, I thought that you said we had until Friday to read those chapters--"

"Miss Granger, of course *you* read the assigned chapters, did you not?"

"Y-yes, but it wasn't--"

"Then would you please provide the answer for the rest of the class as Mr. Potter seems inept to do so."

Hermione blinked and gave Harry a sympathetic look. "The Garvarian Theory, developed by the 4th century Balkan sorcerer Ulysees P. Garvarian is the still controversial belief that all potions regardless of their complexity have their true greatness weighted by the "y" variable, time, in the standard potions formula $a + b \times y = x$."

Harry was grimacing on the way to Defense Against the Dark Arts.

"He's baaaaack," said Ron good naturedly, knowing that how fuming mad Harry was.

Harry shook his head. "Whatever. I'm not gonna loose sleep over the fact that he's still as much a jerk as he's always been."

The sight of Sirius provided an immediate relief to Harry. Professor Grave gave a quick, inconspicuous wink over his glasses to Harry as he found his seat, which somehow made Harry smile, even though he certainly hadn't felt like it.

"For the next month," said Professor Gray, "this class, your history of Magic class and your Potions class will all be focusing on a special curriculum that is geared at preparing you for your upcoming class trip. You might want to take notes on this, as we'll be talking about nothing else for the next four weeks of your life! As you have probably memorized by now, the class trip will be making three stops: New Orleans, The Bermuda Triangle and The Caledonian Forest. Therefore, we will be focusing on learning about dark arts activity and history in these three places-- your history class will be focusing on the magical history of these places, and your potions class will be focusing on potions composed of ingredients found only in these places. All of course, a reminder that this trip isn't going to be a leisure one, contrary to popular belief . . ." he smiled at the class, "although it *will* come close, I promise you."

The class eventually dismissed and, as Harry had hoped, Professor Gray called out, "Mr. Potter, might I have a word with you?"

They waited until the class was empty and then embraced each other heartily. Sirius took off his glasses and beamed at him.

"So *glad* you're back, my boy. You must tell me all about your holiday with the Dursleys. I can only imagine the horrible nightmare it must have been."

"Oh Sirius, you will never *believe* what's happened!" He took a seat on the edge of Sirius' desk. "My cousin Dudley? He's . . . he's a completely different person! I know this sounds crazy, but . . . he's *changed*! He's always been downright violent if ever I mentioned Hogwarts or anything to do with our kind and all of a sudden he started asking me questions! And . . . being nice to me! *Defending* me in front of my Aunt and Uncle!"

Sirius' eyes were wide. "But . . . *why*?"

"Well," said Harry eagerly, "as it turns out, he's in love with the girl next door! For the past three months he'd been undergoing this massive shift in character to become the sort of person she'd like! You wouldn't even recognize him Sirius, he's lost weight and doesn't wear that horrible frown on his face all because of this girl. A girl *who just so happens* to be a witch!"

"No!"

"Yes! He found out quite by accident and that was all it took to sober him up, I suppose! He realized that he was head over heels in love with one of our kind! So when I came to visit his attitude was *quite* different!"

Sirius' face was alight with intrigue. "Who's the girl? Do I know her family?"

"Er--probably! Sophie Banbury-Imelda Banbury's daughter? She works for the Ministry."

"Oh yes," said Sirius in a drawn out voice, "Imelda *Banbury's* daughter? Isn't she a Muggle?"

"No. She's a witch-- she actually takes classes here via correspondence. "

"Of all people for Dudley to fall for-- Imelda *Banbury's* daughter." Sirius shook his head, still looking thoughtful. "Tell me--how is Imelda these days?"

"Oh, all right I suppose . . . dunno, she's been acting really depressed lately. She looks like she's under a lot of stress . . . she's just so *different*. Sophie says it has to do with everything going on at the Ministry."

"I should think so," said Sirius, "especially because it was the Lestranges who escaped."

"Sorry? Why does that especially matter?"

"What, she never told you who her sister is? Her sister is Delphine Lestrangle."

Harry's mouth fell. "*What?* But I thought her sister was . . . dead."

"Can you blame her for saying so? When Delphine fell in love with that no-good Marcus Lestrangle we all feared the worst. It was such a disgrace to the Arlington's-- that's Imelda's family name." His voice grew quiet. "Besides, anyone in Azkaban is as good as dead. . . you have no idea, Harry."

"So . . . with Delphine Lestrangle freed from Azkaban . . ." Harry shook his head. "Oh my goodness, poor Imelda. No *wonder* she looks like she has the weight of the world on her shoulders. Sophie never told me about any of that--"

"Sophie probably doesn't know," said Sirius plainly. And then there was a twinkle in his eye.

"And you sure seem to know an awful lot about this Sophie girl . . ." he leaned close to his Godson. "Are you sure that maybe you and Dudley don't have something else in common?"

Namely, this intriguing girl next door?"

Harry laughed at the accusation. "Oh Sirius, you don't know what you're talking about. Sophie is a friend, that's all! She's . . . she's like a *sister*, really!"

Sirius didn't argue, but kept the same grin. Inside Harry was in a panic:

He'd just said *precisely* what Ron had said about Hermione.

Chapter Twelve: Bermuda or Bust

The class trip was getting closer with every passing day, and the excitement amongst the fifth years reached unbearable proportions. Hermione of course had checked out every book to do with the Bermuda Triangle, New Orleans and the Caledonian Forest and spent her time spouting out facts and travel tips on their journeys between class. Parvati Patil, and the rest of the Gryffindor girls, seemed more concerned with what the heck they were going to wear! Wardrobes were being planned weeks in advance! Quidditch matches were suspended until the completion of the trips as a great deal of the players were fifth years, and all of the teachers, including Professor Gray, were a bit irritated that the fifth year students were now hardly paying any attention during lectures. And apparently Fred and George thought it would be funny to let Peeves know that the class trip was supposedly 'Spooked' which meant that now Filch had to deal with Peeves screeching through the hallways asking various fifth years if they'd care for him to start arranging their funeral services.

The Ravenclaws and The Hufflepuffs left for their trip the last week of April, faces wrought in excitement as they departed for the Hogwarts Express. Professor McGonagall handed out the trip itineraries which were poured over by the students:

Fifth Year Class Trip Itinerary

Gryffindors and Slytherins

1 May

08:30 Depart Hogwarts aboard Hogwarts Express

13:30 Arrive Newcastle Seaport

14:00 Depart aboard SS RebelRouser

2 May

10:00 Arrive New Orleans, Louisiana, USA -- Accommodations at the Oleander House

11:30 Lunch

13:00 Historical Walking Tour-- *The Garden District*

18:00 Dinner at the Oleander Banquet Room

19:30 Bayou Boating Tour

3 May

08:00 Breakfast

09:00 Historical Walking Tour -- *The French Quarter, Vieux Carre*

11:30 Lunch at Le Magicienne

12:15 Mystic Pier

18:00 Dinner

Free Evening (however, all outside excursions are to be Chaperoned! No Exceptions!)

4 May

08:00 Breakfast

08:45 Depart New Orleans Harbor aboard SS RebelRouser

12:00 Arrive Bermuda Triangle -- Accommodations at the Bermuda Inn

12:30 Lunch

13:30 Flying Tour of the Island

16:00 Mineral Pools and Coast

18:30 Dinner

5 May

08:30 Breakfast

09:00 The Bermuda Maritime Museum

12:00 Lunch at the Triangle Terrace

13:00 The Bermuda Triangle Museum of Modern History

18:00 Dinner in the Bermuda Inn Banquet Room
Free Evening, however all outside excursions are to be Chaperoned! No exceptions! Flying Tour of the Island
6 May
08:30 Depart Bermuda Triangle aboard SS RebelRouser
7 May
12:45 Arrive Inverness, Scotland
13:00 Lunch
14:00 Depart aboard the Inverness Coach Express
15:15 Arrive the Caledonian Forest. Campsite will be set up promptly.
19:00 Dinner
23:00 Merlin's Birthsite.
Houses are to stay within tents after hours! No exceptions!
8 May
09:00 Depart Caledonian aboard Inverness Coach Express
09:30 Depart aboard Hogwarts Express.
12:30 Arrive Hogwarts.

Hermione was intrigued. "How in the world are we supposed to travel so much ground in such a short period of time!"

"Professor McGonagall explained it all to me," said Ron, obviously happy he knew something Hermione didn't. "The SS RebelRouser is one of the fastest ships around. Apparently, the captain is some older-than-dirt wizard-- I think he's about two hundred years old and just as sprightly as ever. She said that he's obsessed with the sea and spent his entire life dedicated to building the perfect sea ship."

Hermione looked impressed.

The Hufflepuffs and the Ravenclaws were the envy of the school as they left the last week in April to embark on their adventure. It was murder awaiting their return. They finally arrived back on a particularly warm day and there was a mad rush by the remaining fifth years, all asking the same questions: "*What was it like? Was it fun? What did you eat? How was the weather? Was it beautiful in Bermuda? 'What are American Wizards like?'*" and of course:

"Were the magnetic forces at the entrance to the Bermuda triangle every bit as accurate as they've written in--"

"*Hermione!*" It was Padma Patil, shaking her head at Hermione in disbelief.

"Well! I want to know--"

"Please, Hermione. It was a *tropical island!* Wait till you see it. It's a paradise-- plain and simple. Heaven on earth, it is."

"Oh, and Mystic Pier in New Orleans is *wicked!*" said Justin Finch-Fletchley.

"Bloody fantastic! *Worlds* better than Hogsmeade!"

"You have a campout in the Caledonian," said a Ravenclaw, "that was terrific."

"There are these mineral pools in Bermuda," Hannah Abbot was gushing, "you can jump off cliffs or slide down natural slides right into them!"

"Wicked!"

"And no one died, eh?" asked George with a sardonic sneer.

Padma put her hand on her hip, "Sorry to disappoint you, but that is just a silly old superstition. Nothing happened to anyone!"

George nodded and then, with a hand on Ron's shoulder said, "Well, that must mean it'll happen on *your* trip."

Ron responded with sock in his brother's arm and everyone, especially George, fell into laughter.

And then finally, to Harry's relief, it was their turn.

Of course, *no one* in the dorms got a real wink of sleep that night. There was much too much excitement in the air. Harry and the rest of the fifth year Gryffindors

chattered throughout the late hours of the night and into the early hours of the morning (which by that time was nothing more than hysterical, mindless gibberish). Even the *prefects* were caught up in the excitement of it all-- Dean was the central reason the conversation flowing all night.

Of course, when it came time for breakfast, they were all completely shattered with fatigue.

"Hermione! Put that book down!" Ron was scolding over his oatmeal. "Think of this as a *holiday! Enjoy it!*"

"I fully intend to, thank you very much."

"Right," he took the book from her hands. "Spending it with *The Bermuda Triangle-- History Versus Myth*. It should be ripping good fun, old girl."

"Oh hush up," she said, betraying a smile. Ron returned it eagerly.

To Harry's delight Seamus leaned over and whispered, "Must be spring, eh? Ron and Herm are lookin' cozy, don't you think?"

Harry was tempted to unleash to him everything about all the going-ons between Ron and Hermione, but was interrupted by Professor Dumbledore's calling their attention.

"Now,now, quiet please."

They obeyed.

"I trust that our fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins are most anxious to leave. But before they depart, I should like to make an announcement. We have a last minute addition to the entourage. In addition to our dear Hagrid, Snape, McGonagall and Gray, I am delighted to say that Professor Arianne Warwick will be accompanying them as well."

There was a chorus of surprised 'oohhh's from the crowd, and Professor Warwick entered at that moment through the great hall doors.

"She was most disappointed at having to leave without attending the trip, and we are excited to have her with us once again."

Harry's eyebrows raised and he looked on in a delighted sense of shock as Professor Warwick beamed brightly before them. Ron gave him a devious grin. "All *right!* A whole week with her--"

"Aye," Seamus was drooling, "I hope I'm assigned in *her* group."

Hermione slammed her book shut with a loud *clap*, scowling at the boys. "You're all horrible."

They smiled and didn't bother denying it.

After breakfast the Gryffindor and Slytherin fifth years gathered in Hogwarts main entrance. Harry's stomach was doing somersaults out of anticipation, indeed, the entire room was seething in a near state of kinetic frenzy!

And poor Professor McGonagall was already looking stressed, going through the daunting task of checking everyone's luggage and magicking them onto the train.

"No--Miss Parkinson, line up to the *left* please--your *other* left, yes that's right. Mr. Finnigan, what do you think you are doing with four pieces of luggage? You'll leave two of those behind, thank you very much. *Crabbe! Goyle!* Put those doughnuts away! Why of all the-- *Margaret!* I'll thank you to stop that ridiculous dancing--" and then she finally snapped.

"*That's it! Everyone will please be QUIET!*"

Silence.

"Thank you." She put her hand to her chest and took a deep, steady breath. "Now, Professors Warwick and Snape, if you will please lead the Slytherins outside to the train, single file please. Once the last Slytherin has left, Professor Gray and Hagrid, you'll lead the Gryffindors, please. I'll be following presently."

And that is precisely the way things took place—all the students seemed a bit frightened by McGonagall's outburst. They found the Hogwarts Express as shiny as ever, glinting in the bright sun, awaiting their arrival.

"What in Merlin's name is *that*," said Professor McGonagall behind Harry and he at once saw what she was talking about: A banner reading *Bermuda or Bust* was hanging from the side of the train in large, glittery letters. Harry knew that handwriting well—it had to have been the work of Dean. Indeed, Dean and Seamus were beaming.

"Muggles used to do things like that," Dean explained to Professor McGonagall who looked like she was ready to hand in her resignation papers. Snape's brow was furrowed in annoyance, while Professor Warwick and Professor Gray struggled to hide their amusement.

Professor McGonagall sighed loudly and ordered them on the train. They did so, voices loud and raucous, the compartments writhing with excitement. For the moment anyway, it appeared that the Gryffindors and Slytherins had forgotten they were enemies.

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Captain Peel turned out to be every bit of a batty old man as Harry and Ron had first suspected. They arrived at the Newcastle seaport to find the SS RebelRouser awaiting them— an impressive piece of glinting machinery that resembled a pirate ship more than anything, complete with high billowing white masts, but was made of an unmistakably modern material that made it shine metallic silver. As the students filed on board, he greeted them dressed in a captain's uniform directly out of the mid 1800s, his beard every bit as long and white as Dumbledore's, his face a sea of ancient wrinkles, but his voice was unmistakable full of life -- gruff and loud and commanding attention.

"Welcome aboard me Maties! Ye be in fer the time of yer lives! This here be the bloomin' greatest ship on the face of the planet-- christened the girl meself in 1842 and she's since grown into the masterpiece yer standin' upon."

It was an impressive ship, with every convenience one could imagine. Harry was tempted to use their Owlery to send a post to Sophie and Dudley—but they had barely *started* their journey!

As it turns out, Hermione had been correct about the RebelRouser being the fastest ship on the seas, because by the next morning, Captain Peel was happily announcing they were steering down the Mississippi River, ready to pull into port. The minute that Harry and the rest of the fifth years stepped off the ship and onto solid ground, they found themselves in the middle of a heat wave. It felt as though Harry's robes were melting onto his skin-- the air around him was thick and heavy and hot and it made him feel sluggish.

"Humidity!" Captain Peel said happily. "T'was always what gave this city her character!"

Harry was unaccustomed to this, and Ron yanking off his tie and rolling up his sleeves showed that he wasn't the only one. Professor McGonagall called the Gryffindors into line (her face flushed from the heat) and ordered them to follow her. Snape did the same with the Slytherins while Hagrid, Professor Warwick and Professor Gray brought up the rear.

They stood on the shore of what looked to be an old, forgotten harbor. The SS RebelRouser looked out of place at the battered pier, her silver glinting in the sun amongst the shabby old sea shanties. But as they followed Professor McGonagall, the scene changed (although the temperature didn't) and they were walking along a lovely tree-canopied lane, crowded with enormous plantation-like homes.

"This is one of the most haunted roads in the whole of America," Hermione narrated. "Every one of these homes has at least two ghosts that haunts it."

They arrived at one such home with high red brick front steps and a roadway lined with enormous magnificent Oak trees. "Oleander House" was written on a sign outside the towering white front door. The students broke out into a cumulative gasp when the door opened to reveal a stunning foyer all in white marble with a sprawling, spiral staircase and countless clusters of Oleander in large white vases, hanging in mid-air.

"Welcome Students, Welcome!" The strong accent caught their attention and they looked up to see a tall, leant with simple black robes, and long auburn hair. She was smiling, "I am Mrs. Bianca, Landlady here at Oleander House, and on behalf of the staff I want to welcome y'all here! We're simply thrilled to have you with us! Of course you must be starving after such a long journey, so without further ado, our resident ghosts will lead y'all to your rooms and then down to lunch!"

Harry was at once in love with her accent. Two ghosts appeared-- both men in late 18th century garb and powdered wigs-- and bade the students to follow. Hermione was twiddling her thumbs excitedly as they ascended the staircase and Harry could hear Parvati Patil "ooohhhh"ing and "aaahhhh"ing behind him.

Harry, Ron, Neville and Seamus ended up sharing the same room-- a large chamber with wood floors and two huge beds that--

"Whoa," Ron cried as he sank onto the mattress, "it's all made of feathers!"

"Nice," said Seamus, throwing himself onto the bed.

"And look," said Harry, pulling open the window, "you can even see the river from here!"

"Oh, aye?" asked Seamus, "what did Peele call it again? The Sippimissi. . . er, the Missippi?"

Harry was laughing. "The *miss-iss-ippi*."

"Well whatever it's called, how about keeping that window open to let in the breeze," Neville barked, his face still sweaty, "it's an *incinerator* in here!"

They stuffed their faces at lunch, being presented with a magnificent spread of home cooked southern fare: lemonade, dutch apple pie and something called "biscuits and gravy". Mrs. Bianca had them laughing at the subtle differences in American and British lingo.

"You see, y'all turned up your noses when you heard you'd be eating "biscuits and gravy." But here in the states, what you call "biscuits", we call "cookies." And what you call "muffins" we call "biscuits!"

They laughed.

"And what you call "scones", we call "muffins"! And there's a slew more where that came from!"

They laughed again and with full bellies, assembled outside in their groups. (Harry was relieved that he'd packed short-sleeved shirts since they were to be walking miles in the murky heat. Talking to Hagrid and the rest of the Professors was a short, red-faced wizard who reminded Harry of Professor Flitwick. He could have been his brother-- except for the accent!

"Glad to have y'all with us and hope you've been enjoying' N'Awlins so far! I'm Mr. Douglas Calhoun, a teacher here at N'Awlins' prestigious Wellington School for Wizards, and have the pleasure of being your tour guide for the next two days!"

They explored the Garden District under Mr. Calhoun's vibrant narration, until their feet were aching and we ready to keel over from the heat. The return to the hotel was *most* welcome.

The next morning they set out early on foot, the lively French Quarter taking up most of their morning. Lunch was on Bourbon street in a hidden restaurant called *Le Magicienne*. Harry was in love with the city-- so exciting and so *different* from everything he'd known! They explored the *Vieux Carre* under Mr. Calhoun's vibrant narration, until their feet were aching and we ready to keel over from the heat. Then it was out to *Mystic Pier*.

"It's the only all-wizarding amusement park in the world!" Hermione cooed as they made their way.

"Like an American Hogsmede," said Ron, "only better!"

They explored the under Mr. Calhoun's vibrant narration, until their feet were aching and we ready to keel over from the heat.

"Yeah," said Dean, "the entire park is on one pier!"

"Which one," frowned Pansy Parkinson, turning up her nose as they approached a deserted sea shanty next to the weathered, ruins of a pier.

Mr. Calhoun knocked three on the broken door three times. The door slid open and he beckoned for the kids to follow. They did so, and entered into a large, bright room that was filled with people: ahead of them was a fancy pink and cream-colored booth with a sign reading "*Admissions - 10 Knuts*" in blinking lights. A smiling wizard in the booth was happily handing tickets to the patrons who passed through the queue.

Wizards and witches were holding hands with their children who were bouncing on their feet eagerly. Harry felt just as excited as they did and it was funny to see the adults just as eager to get in as the children. Well, except for one older American wizard up in front who was grumbling about the apparent raise in price. "*Ten Knuts? Why, I remember when admission was free!*" He was growling, handing over the ten knuts angrily. Harry wished he'd hurry-- he was holding up the queue! "That was *before* that gosh-darn Secretary General Mumsby got into office and hiked the prices on everything! Give me our old Secretary Feldling any day! It's all these higher-than-thou *Maulers* in office! If the *Deevers* were still in power--"

"So write to the SC about it!" The man in the booth was annoyed. "You're holdin' up the line!"

"Mr. Calhoun," asked Hermione, intrigued, as they slowly inched closer towards the ticket booth. "What was he talking about? Who is the SC?"

"It's a lot like your Ministry of Magic. Here in the States, it's called the Sorceric Congress. There are two parties: the *Deevers* and the *Maulers*. *Deevers* are more into domestic affairs-- do lots for education and things like that. Very liberal party. The *Maulers* are staunch conservatives-- money is what they know best. Rumor has it that they've got it in for non-purebloods. And man-oh-man, do they ever hate muggles!"

"Sounds familiar," said Harry sadly.

". . . and the *Maulers* are in control of Congress right now. Secretary General Mumsby is trying to pass a new bill that would raise taxes on all properties owned by a wizard who earns *under* 10,000 Galleons per year."

"*Raise taxes on the poor?*" Harry was aghast.

"*Why,*" Ron demanded.

Mr. Calhoun was audibly passionate about this. "Because everyone knows that the majority of poorer wizarding families aren't pure-bloods. And they're all *Deevers*! It's politics, y'know? He's actually trying to punish them for not being pure bloods, and what he calls 'muggle sympathizers.'"

"Sounds reasonable to me," Draco huffed just loud enough for only Harry to hear. And then he added, louder, "Wow, Granger. If you lived in the states, it looks like you'd be taxed out of a home!"

Mr. Calhoun sense Draco's cynicism. "Well, it would only apply if the breadwinner of the family is a wizard, Mr. Draco. Obviously the SC can't tax something that belongs to the muggle government. That's just common sense."

Hermione stuck her tongue out at Draco just as she was handed an admission ticket. Harry's jaw dropped as they stepped out onto the pier. The pier stretched ahead for what seemed to be an eternity, enclosed by an enormous glass dome. To their left were vendors selling heaping ice cream cones and other delectable goodies. To their right were souvenir shops selling mostly (from what they could see) shirts and hats with *Mystic Pier* logos.

And then there were the rides! Harry had never seen wizarding rides before, so it came as quite a shock! Cars holding passengers whizzed through the air without the use of tracks. The cars all apparently knew their routes and zoomed to and fro, looping, falling and filling the heights of the dome so that it resembled a muggle free-for-all motorway than anything else!

Professor McGonagall spoke sternly and briefly. "You are all to report back at the main entrance no later than half past five."

And with that, the kids dispersed in every direction.

"*All right*," Ron was shouting, rubbing his hands together. "Come on, Harry!"

"Hey! Wait for us!" Hermione, Dean, Seamus and Neville were right behind them.

Ron lead them towards a large ominous looking sign reading *Monster Zoom*. "My brother Charlie came here once and said that this ride almost made him pass out!"

Harry and Seamus exchanged smiles. "All right! Let's go!"

Hermione looked hesitant: the purple cars for *Monster Zoom* climbed higher than any of the other rides on the Pier, and seemed to have several loops and drops.

"Er. . . y-you lads go on. I'll just watch."

"Nonsense, Herm!" said Ron. "Come on!"

"N-no, r-really, I'm fine down here."

"Oh you're not afraid, are you? It's only a ride after all!"

"*Only a ride?!?* Ron, are you completely *mad*? Look at how high that thing is! Charlie wrestles with Dragons for a living and you want me to ride something that even *he* gets sick on?!?"

"He doesn't wrestle--"

"I don't care!" she shouted. "No way am I going!"

Ron grabbed her by the waist. "Oh yes, you are!"

"Nooooo!"

He lifted her up, her legs kicking above the ground. She put up a valiant fight, but was no match against Ron.

There were a few moments on the ride when Harry had to admit that Hermione was right. *Monster Zoom* was the worst 153 seconds of his life! By the fifth loop, Harry was feeling every meal he'd ever eaten in his life creep its way back up. And having Neville Longbottom's arms wrapped around his neck for safety didn't help the situation.

Ron literally *crawled* off the ride on all fours. Hermione, however, bounced off quite cheerfully.

"Wicked good fun, eh lads? Who's up for another go?"

Ron responded with retching noise and then it all *did* come up right there on the floor.

"Oh you're a right bunch of little girls aren't you," she teased happily. Her eyes spotted a nearby vendor selling treats and she announced, "Right, then! Who's hungry?"

Seamus and Neville both collapsed alongside Ron. Harry managed to reach the nearby men's' toilet, thankfully. Ten minutes later, he walked out, shaky, joining the

others who sat on a bench looking pale. Hermione, on the other hand, was very happily lapping away at a monster sized ice cream cone.

"Hermione," said Harry, not able to even look at the ice cream without getting queasy, "would you mind not making those slurping noises? You're making my stomach churn."

Hermione grinned deviously and took an extra long, drawn out slurp on the melting ice cream. Harry was about to call her a heartless brat, when a friendly, southern accent interrupted him.

"Hey-- you're those students from overseas, right?"

Harry turned around to see a smiling boy with freckles, floppy blond hair and hazel eyes. He wasn't wearing robes, but it *did* look as though he wore some sort of school uniform: light gray trousers and an untucked white dress shirt.

Harry nodded in answer to him. "That's right. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"That's in England?"

"Most of us are English, but the school is in Scotland."

"Well, it ain't every day we get visitors from out of town. The name is Jake Dugan-- from *Spaulding's School of Sorcery*. It's really nice to have y'all here! Havin' fun in N'Awlins?"

Harry shook hands with him. "I'm Harry. This is Ron, Seamus, Neville and Hermione. And yeah, we're having a fantastic time here. Everyone has been so kind, it's unreal!"

"Yeah, we're kinda known for that down here. Seen a lot of the city?"

"Well, we've been seeing all the historical sites, you know. This is really the first non school related thing we've done."

"Oh man, you serious? Have you been to Bourbon Street yet?"

"Actually, we had lunch there today at 'Le Magicienne.'"

Jake shook his head, "Nah, that's just tourist stuff. You gotta see the *real* N'Awlins! His hazel eyes twinkled. "Say-- what y'all doin' tonight? Say around eight-ish?"

"Er . . . dunno. Nothing, it's a free evening."

"Well, why don't y'all come on down to The Basement-- number nine Bourbon Street. You'll have a blast!"

"The Basement?" Ron repeated, warily.

"Oh yeah! Everyone at Spauldings' hangs out there. You'll get to meet a lot of new people! There's music and food, and it's just lots of fun!"

"Well . . ." Harry started, only to be interrupted by an excited Ron.

"Sounds brilliant! We'll definitely see you there!"

"Great. See ya then!" He turned and left.

Harry stared at Ron.

"*What*, Harry? It'll be fun!"

"Ron, you know that all excursions are to be chaperoned. How silly are we gonna look walkin' into a hangout with a professor!"

"They'll think we're all pansies," said Seamus dryly.

Ron lowered his voice and gave them all a knowing wink. "Not if we take Professor Warwick! They'll think we're all bloody *heroes*!"

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Professor Warwick appeared to be simply *delighted* when Ron asked her to accompany them to the Basement. She went on about how it had been simply ages since she'd gone to a purely social setting, and seemed most concerned with what she should wear to make the proper impression. (Ron whispered to Harry, '*nothing at all, if you want to make a *real* impression*' which won him a severe jab in the side.)

They found number nine Bourbon Street amid a vibrant community of lights and music. The "9" was barely visible on the dingy door and they pushed it open and descended the dank, dark, narrow staircase. A warm, soft yellow light greeted them when they reached the bottom landing. The Basement very much resembled its name: the room had wood floors and its walls held no special decorations. A few sofas were thrown about casually and then there was the simple bar with a particularly gruff looking wizard taking orders from what Harry supposed were Spauldings wizards and witches. They were not wearing the light gray and white uniforms from earlier in the day, but dressed casually and, as Harry thought, quite a bit like muggles.

"Hey!" came the familiar friendly voice from one of the sofas. The freckled blond was at once at his feet, rushing to meet them. "You came! Great! Hey, you guys," he said, calling to his friends on the sofa, "I want you to meet these kids from overseas! This is . . . what did you say your name was again?"

Harry re-introduced himself and the others. Then he added, "and this is actually our Professor Warwick."

Harry saw Jake's eyes grow wide at the sight of her. "Your p-professor?"

Professor Warwick shook his hand. "Yes. I do hope you don't mind an old woman tagging along."

"N-no! Of course not!" Jake was obviously taken with her. He turned back towards the kids and said, "Well, that there's Pam, Jan and Lu. That's Cody-- we call her California Cody-- Dewey, Lola and, oh hey, Dewey? How about gettin' the folks some drinks?" He turned back to Harry, the shock of Professor Warwick's stunning appearance wearing off. "What grade you kids in?"

"Er . . ." Ron was slightly distracted by 'Lu' who was smiling in his face. "W-we're all fifth years."

"Fifth years?" said Lu, "What in the hootenanny does that mean? Y'all Juniors?"

"It's different there, Lu. See, we're all juniors here. At Spauldings, we start at ten years old: it goes first grade, second grade, third grade, freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors. The first, second and third years stay in a separate wing than the older kids."

"At Hogwarts, we start at eleven," Hermione explained, "but we aren't separated by year. We're all sorted into a house- there are four houses at Hogwarts. We're all Gryffindors, for example, and we all stay in the same wing. Don't you have houses at Spauldings?"

"Nope, no houses. We just say with our grade."

"I love your accents by the way," said Dewey as he handed them their drinks.

"Yes," said another voice, this one with an accent Harry hadn't heard before. "Most charming."

He was a very good-looking, sandy brown haired boy around sixteen, his hand outstretched. "I'm Jimmy. Jake here seems to have forgotten his manners. What's your name?"

Jimmy enunciated words very flatly: manners was "maaan-uhs" and forgotten was "fuh-gaaaaten."

Harry smiled. "I'm Harry. This is Ron, Seamus, Neville, Dean, Hermione and our Professor Warwick."

Jimmy's eyes lingered, not on Professor Warwick, but on Hermione most pointedly-- enough to make her drop her eyes nervously.

"You're all English, aren't you?"

"Yorkshire for me, actually," said Seamus defensively.

But Harry could tell that Jimmy didn't care there was a difference between the English and Scottish. He was only interested in Hermione-- those tumbling locks and blushing cheeks.

"Y-you're not from the south, then? asked Harry, trying hard to attract Jimmy's attention away from Hermione.

"No, I'm from Salem-- that's up north in Massachusetts."

"Oh wow," Harry oohed, genuinely impressed.

"Yeah. There are a quite a few of us at Spauldings who come from Salem. Next to New Orleans, Salem has one of the largest wizarding populations in the country." Jake was looking displeased with Jimmy's arrival.

"Yeah," Jake said with more than just casual cynicism, "it's also made up of nothin' but Maulers--"

"Better that than *Deevers*," Jimmy quipped back, his eyes intense on Jake. For the briefest moment, Harry could have sworn it was Draco Malfoy talking.

"*Most* Maulers go to Wellingtons' School up in Pennsylvania. Dunno why they bother comin' down here," Jake began to explain.

"We can't *all* go to Wellingtons. We have to keep the population *balanced* at the other schools. Someone needs to keep all these *Deevers* in line. Imagine what Spauldings would be like if only all you muggle loving *Deevers* ruled the place."

"You know? People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, Jimmy. Your silly little Mauler institution Wellingtons has *never* ranked number one-- never. Not for anything-academics *or* sports. It's a joke, that's all Wellingtons is."

Jimmy grimaced at Jake and turned his cold eyes back on Hermione. "And I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

"H-Hermione."

"Oh, I once knew a girl named Harmony too. Not nearly as pretty as you, though."

"It's Herm-eye-oh--"

"Tell me. Is it customary in England for a guy to buy a girl a drink?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Mack!" he called to a small, frail looking boy at the bar. "Get me two Quigleys!" His smile was sickening. "You'll love it. Best beer in the wizarding world!"

"Actually, I don't like b--"

"A bit crowded, wouldn't you say, Harmony? Let's have a seat, you and I." He looked back up at Harry, who was scowling by that time. "Nice meeting you all. If you're ever in Salem, stop by, won't you?" He wrapped his arm around Hermione, who recoiled at his touch.

She looked up at Harry pleadingly. Harry opened his mouth to speak, but it was Ron's voice that came out.

"*Actually*, Jimmy, Hermione'll stay right here with us, thanks."

Ron's arms were folded and he was giving Jimmy a look that simply dared him to push the issue. Jimmy, however, seemed quite up to the challenge.

"Oh really? So who are you, her *boyfriend*?"

Harry held his breath. So did Hermione, whose brown eyes were searching Ron's. Ron cleared his throat, "Yeah. That's right. I'm the only one around here who buys her any drinks."

"Maybe in England, bud, but here things are a little different." He tightened his grip around Hermione's waist who, by this time, looked terrified. Jimmy laughed (and once again Harry swore he was looking at Draco) and then shook his head at Ron, nudging Hermione away.

But Ron wasn't going to have any of it. In the next instant, Ron had taken hold of Jimmy by the collar and was an inch from him-- his face wrought with anger, fists clenched threateningly.

"Apparently, '*bud*', you didn't quite hear what I said!"

It took Jimmy a moment to regain his composure. He met Ron's stare and reached into his back pocket for his wand. Harry knew what he was up to immediately and pulled out his wand, pointing it at Jimmy.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," and then he added on impulse, "*bud*."

Jimmy's eyes were *deathly* in their sting-- but then again, Harry was quite capable of a penetrating stare himself! Maybe it was just his imagination, but Harry thought that he saw the slightest flicker of fear in those cold eyes. Just as soon as he thought he saw it, it was gone and Jimmy was once again regaining his assertive air.

He raised his hands slowly. "No need for any of that," he said dryly. "Right, Mack?" The small, frail boy who'd been sent to fetch the drinks was at Jimmy's side and, before Harry could do anything, he shouted '*Expelliarmus!*' and with a burst of light, Harry flew backwards, disarmed.

Jimmy grabbed his wand, but Ron was quicker on the draw and shouted, "*Immobulus!*" Jimmy and Mack both became living statues, leaving the room quiet. Everyone stared at them. And then . . .

"All Right!" Jake broke out into applause and soon the rest of the kids were joining him. Ron looked bewildered by the reaction, as was Harry.

"That was *awesome*," said California Cody, beaming boldly. "We've been wanting to do that for years!"

"He's had it coming," Dewey was saying, "that no-good, stuck up, conceited, son of a--"

"That was great work, Ron," said Jake loudly, shaking his hand. "Hey! Dithers! Another round of *Quigleys* for Ron and his friends!" Jake smiled at Ron and Harry. They blushed, and Harry turned around to see Professor Warwick looking thoroughly amused. He'd entirely forgotten about her, and was a bit worry she'd scold them for what they'd done. But she merely smiled and spoke up, "I'll be having one as well, won't I? I've been wanting to try your American beers!"

Jake laughed. "Of *course!* Oh man-- that Jimmy Slatherly. He's a real piece of work!" He was staring gleefully and the motionless figures before him. "I've been wanting to stun him since first grade!" He raised his beer bottle to Harry and Ron. "Here's to ya!" Harry, being handed a bottle of *Quigleys*, raised his drink along with his fellow Gryffindors. "Cheers!"

They all drank to it and Jake pat Ron on his backs. "We could use a nice tough-guy like you in school!"

Harry was laughing, and Ron was going pink from all the adulation. Hermione was smiling as well, and Harry knew why! Ron had said that he was her boyfriend! Even though it had been to get at Jimmy, the fact is that he *said* it.

"So!" said Jake, putting his arms around Ron and Harry, "what are you two into? Do you play Quidditch or anything?"

"Harry does-- he's our seeker."

Jake looked impressed.

"Yes, but *Ron* here actually just won us our house its' Pennant!"

"Oh! You have Pennants at Hogwarts?" gushed Lu. "So do we! I hear they're conducted pretty much the same. I have a cousin in France that attends a wizarding school there and *she* says that Hogwarts is the only wizarding school in all of Britain!"

"Well how many schools *are* there here in the states?"

"There's three."

"*Three?*" Neville squeaked.

"Bear in mind that California alone is the size of your country! There's Hilliard's which is out in California and then Wellingtons up in Pennsylvania." Jake's face went sour.

"Not the nicest place, that Wellingtons. The students are downright mean. You should see it when we play Quidditch: they're dirty, rotten liars, all of 'em."

Seamus was nodding. "Sounds a lot like one of our houses at Hogwarts-- Slytherin." Lola shuddered. "Eew. They even sound nasty."

"Speaking of Quidditch," said Lu, "my cousin says that the Quidditch rules here in America are somewhat different than over where you are."

"That's right," Ron piped up, obviously having extensive knowledge on the subject.

"and that's why at the Quidditch World Cup, it's rare to ever get an American team in the running. They have to go by the European rules, which is a bit difficult to do when you've been playing another way all your life."

"Yes," Hermione spoke up, "the last time one was in the running was in the mid 19th century, I think."

Jake gave Hermione a soft, thoughtful look. "So . . . Herm-eye-oh-knee, right? How long have you and Ron been going out?"

Harry nearly choked on his *Quigleys*. Ron laughed nervously, "Oh, th--that. Well, actually w--we're. . ." he stirred beneath Hermione's stare.

"Oohhhh," said Jake with a devious grin. "I get it. You're just *friends*, right?" He winked and nudged Ron's arm. "That's cool. I was the same way myself for many a year." He winked at Ron. "But it's only a matter of time. Isn't that right Lola?" He threw his arm around her and the two kissed each other eagerly.

Harry thought Ron would *die* of embarrassment! And Hermione's bright flush to her cheeks didn't fade for the rest of the night.

Ron, of course, didn't bring up what he'd said that night. He very expertly avoided the subject and Harry didn't press it. Although, doing such meant that the air between them hung in suspense-- each one wondering who would be the first to bring it up-- and when.

The students were reluctant to leave New Orleans-- especially given the new friends they'd made. Jake, Lola and the rest of the Spauldings crowd promised to keep in touch by owl, as it was highly unlikely that either party would be visiting the other anytime soon.

"I for one wasn't at all impressed with New Orleans," Harry heard Draco sneering to Crabbe and Goyle just as the RebelRouser was pulling out of port, slowly sailing down the Mississippi. "I met those Spauldings and I have to say, was rather disappointed with them. Did you know that they even have a *mandatory course* dedicated to *Muggle Studies*? Absolutely disgusting. And did you see the way some of those Wizards were dressed? Couldn't hardly tell a difference between them and muggles!"

Harry grimaced. "A Spauldings told us its because their school is in the heart of a huge muggle city-they *have* to blend in or risk exposure of their school."

Draco ignored Harry. "Absolutely disgusting," he repeated. "I'll tell you one thing: if *Hogwarts* ever admitted riff raff like that, I'd have father put me in for a transfer straight away."

Harry couldn't resist it. "Why wait?" he said with a smile, and walked off with Ron and Hermione, laughing their way down the deck.

Chapter Thirteen: The Trouble With Harry

Bermuda. The first word out of Harry's mouth was "wow." They pulled into the harbor, the water twinkling happily in the late afternoon sunlight. Harry had never been to a place with Palm trees before, so upon seeing the rows and rows of towering palms that lined the boardwalk, he came to the conclusion that this place simply had to be paradise.

"Oh my stars," Hermione cooed. "This is absolutely *gorgeous!* And I've been to lots of places and this is just unbelievable!"

They arrived at The Bermuda Inn, which turned out to be a high-rising, sweeping wooden building that was nearly hidden from view off the main street by a cluster of palms. The students entered the Inn, a ceiling of glass rising high above them, towering tropical plants crowding the foyer and lobby along with the sitting sofas. A grand staircase led them up to their rooms-- this Inn was so spacious that the students were assigned two to each. Ron, of course, was Harry's roommate and they flung themselves onto the springy beds giggling with pleasure.

Harry and Ron didn't have too much time to explore their floor, or any of the hotel really, because they were due back downstairs to depart for a tour of the Island. Ron rambled on excitedly as they changed into suitable touring clothes, leaving their Hogwarts cloaks behind due to the warm weather.

Professor McGonagall was wearing thick, black sunglasses, and raised her hands. "Attention, please! We shall be leaving presently, but first I should like to introduce you to our tour guide--"

The lights in the foyer dimmed, cutting off McGonagall's words. She whipped around, visibly startled, as was Harry. A bright lavender spotlight had appeared at the top of the staircase and loud music seemed to be coming from nowhere. A thick French accent boomed overhead: "*Mesdames et Messieurs! I have ze pleasure to annonce to you ze beautiful, ze amazing, ze one et only-- Claudette DuBois!*"

Harry's mouth fell and a chorus of *Aaahhhs* jumped out from the students. Claudette DuBois?!? Every wizard in the wizarding world had, at one time or another, a crush on her! According to what he'd heard of her from Ron, she'd made a very popular song about ten years earlier and became the brightest celebrity in the world-- even outshining Gilderoy Lockhart in sales for one glorious year-- and then was never heard from again.

So *this* is what she'd been doing since then-- working for the Bermuda Inn?

Ron's tongue was hanging out of his mouth: the music had grown louder and a very pretty witch descended the staircase with robes of pink and salmon flowing behind her. Harry removed his glasses to make sure he wasn't seeing things. Professor Warwick and McGonagall, however, both appeared revolted. And even though Claudette DuBois was very pretty, there was something altogether *unattractive* about this showy introduction. It was much the same way he'd felt about old Gilderoy Lockhart.

The French announcer was still speaking. "*She has woo-ed audiences ze world over with her wit et charm, bewitched zem with her beauty et grace, and has made zem cry at ze serenity of her voice. And now Claudette DuBois, ze most famous personality on ze wizarding music scene has come to you lucky guests here at Ze Bermuda Inn!*"

The music climaxed, then stopped, and Claudette stood before them, hands raised as though ready to calm a riotous crowd. The reaction from the students which had, at first, been quite clamorous and excited, had since died down to somewhat lukewarm applause. Harry saw Hermione clench her fists.

"*Thank you, thank you mes amies!* It is indeed most wonderful to meet you all and I am sure you have all been most interested to meet me, no? We shall have a magnificent adventure today as I show to you all the mesmerizing wonders of this island as only I can!"

Harry raised his brow-- not entirely convinced with her French accent.

"Five sickles says that her real surname is *not* DuBois."

"She's no more French than I am," Hermione muttered.

"I'm wondering if she knows Gilderoy Lockhart, myself," said Ron with a smirk.

Harry snickered. "Bet he's her designer. Wasn't that his favorite shade of pink?"

Of course, the tour was every bit as horrible as they'd feared. Claudette DuBois never did quite de-mount from her high horse. The students boarded the double-decker tour bus to incredibly irritating "entrance music"-- which happened to be an old hit of Ms. DuBois' called '*Lament of the Bewitched*."

The bus took flight to give them an aerial view of the Island and, really, it was so breathtaking that even Claudette DuBois' tendency to break out into operatic song during her narration seemed muted. And thankfully, Professor Warwick sat nearby to them and they could listen into the commentary she was giving as they passed over the island.

"To call the Triangle 'bewitching' is an understatement. Men have stumbled here unintentionally and, upon witnessing its wonders, never once desired to leave her shores again. Here, people become what they have always desired to be and do what they have always desired to do. A 16th century wizard named Gustav van Zeigler called it 'the very definition of witchery itself.'"

Harry, Ron and Hermione were leaning in close to hear her as best they could.

"The Triangle was settled mainly during the middle ages, as natural phenomena made it undetectable by muggle navigation devices and it remains so to this very day. Muggles only very recently -- as of the last century -- became truly aware of its existence and were able to pinpoint its exact location on their maps. Of course we all know that muggles will think of anything to try and explain magic-- many have simply called this place a 'mystery' or a 'myth.' They have given 'rational explanations' to mysterious disappearances of muggles here and, perhaps it is best they have done so."

She peered out the window and pointed, "Ah! We are actually flying over what is known as "Muggle Mile" where the muggles all live-- it's a surprisingly large community and a happy one. All of the muggles here are ones that have been stranded and, when given the option by the Mayor here of either returning home or staying, decided to stay." She laughed. "They're smarter than we think, those muggles."

Claudette DuBois' terrible French accent was getting louder-- she had become aware of Warwick stealing the show. "*And we are now flying lower to get a better view of what is ze Island's most impressive feature-- Ze Mineral Pools.*"

Harry was speechless as they flew by. A cliff-like crag climbed high into the air and a few other crags alongside it. They edged closer and saw natural slides had been formed (over the course of many untold centuries, as Professor Warwick informed them) they braided, and intertwined, winding their way down towards the large sparkling springs below.

"Unbelievable," Harry shouted, "Ron! Did you *see* that one bloke? He must've plunged thirty feet right into the water!"

The bus landed at the top of the highest peak and the students filed off (Claudette providing "exit music" for their enjoyment)

The students were already running for the long queue to go down the slides.

"Come on, Harry!" Ron shouted, having already magicked himself into what was the standard wizarding swimming attire: white undershirt and white swimming shorts. Harry took a step back, not so sure he wanted to after all.

"Ready, Harry?" Sirius was right behind him.

"Ready?"

"You *are* going to test it out, aren't you? Can't come all the way to the Triangle and not try out the mineral slides!"

"I . . . dunno."

"Oh come now! Of course you will! Here, I'll hold your wand for you."

Harry was thoughtful for a moment and then caved him. He magicked himself into the same swimming clothes as Ron and then ran to join them in line. Hermione and Parvati teased him gently about his reluctance to have joined them. Both girls had donned black two-piece suits and a very muggle accessory: the sarong.

Harry and Ron *both* went quiet upon sight of Hermione. Harry should have known that beneath those Hogwarts robes and cloaks there was a beautiful woman-- indeed he'd noticed it all year-- but never as incredibly obviously as it was right then. Hermione, however, quite oblivious to the effect she was having on them (Harry even saw a Slytherin or two gawking at her) and continued chatting with Parvati. If Harry was having trouble focusing with Hermione's presence, he could only *imagine* what Ron was going through!

It was the suddenly very sporting Hermione Granger who went down the slides first, followed by Parvati, Seamus, Ron and then Harry. It was slick and smooth and he gained speed with every passing second. He heard Ron's familiar screech somewhere down below him, but his was very much alone, the cold wind stinging his face, a branch every so often snapping against his arm-- it was exhilarating! And then, *splash!* Warm water enveloped his body, the world around him turning aqua blue. The images above him were distorted as he made a swim for the surface.

"*Alllll Riiiiiiight!*" He shouted as he burst above the surface. He was laughing, as were Ron and the others.

"Bloody *amazing*," Ron was saying, excitement crackling through his voice.

Hermione and Parvati were similarly ecstatic and Hermione let the water rushing down from the slides splash upon her face.

"That-was-incredible," Harry was panting, his heart racing, and adrenaline pumping. They laughed and splashed each other-- Harry reveling in the warm loveliness of the waters. He threw a splash at Ron, who retaliated with ten times the force which, of course, sparked a massive battle of the splashes between everyone.

Harry was laughing so hard that he didn't even hear it at first-- a shriek coming from above them.

"*It's Neville!*" Seamus was shouting, pointing above them.

Harry looked up, squinting to see properly. Neville was shrieking in pain-- even from Harry's distance and bad eyesight, he could see the pain in his face. On his way down the chute, just before he was about to drop into the pools, Neville's arm had somehow tangled up into the branches of an overhanging willow tree and he was caught. His arm bent behind him unnaturally-- it was surely going to break if it hadn't already.

"Someone *help* him!" Parvati shrieked.

"No one has their wands," Hermione answered quickly.

Harry could hear a couple of Slytherins behind them let out amused chuckles. Harry shot them evil looks and then turned to Ron.

"Someone go tell a Professor! I'll go--"

"But they're all the way up at the top of the peak," said Dean. "There's no *way* we can reach them!"

Harry's gaze was intensely fixed upon Neville flailing about haplessly, like a fish out of water. His heart was breaking and the laughter trickling over from the Slytherins made his anger boil over like a potions cauldron. He was wishing he had his wand to get Neville to safety and then to blow those filthy, slimy Slytherins out of the water.

Oh Neville-- if only I had my wand! If only I could help you!

You can help him.

Harry shook his head, arguing with the thoughts rushing about in his head.

Don't be ridiculous--

Of course you can. You already are.

And then-- right at that moment-- something funny started happening inside of Harry. It was perhaps more to do with the anger he felt towards the Slytherins than anything else, and something odd started coursing through his body. Ever inch of his body grew tense, and then. . . right before his eyes, the branches seemed to gradually loosen themselves around Neville, delicately, until Neville let out a huge shriek and went pummeling down to the waters below. "He's loose!" Seamus shouted, rushing towards him. "The branches-- did you see that? They unraveled themselves!"

The rest cheered (except for the Slytherins) and they splashed their way to Neville's side. They threw out questions at him, all at once, Neville assuring each of them that his arm felt perfectly fine!

"It was the strangest thing," said Neville, still visibly shaken, "It was like someone was meticulously untangling them--"

"No one had their wand, Neville. Perhaps the tree itself is bewitched-- that's the only explanation."

"I'm glad you're all right, mate," said Ron eagerly, "it could have been a lot worse, you know. A *lot* worse!"

Harry was very subdued as the rest of them rambled on about the strange event. The curious sensation had disappeared just as quickly as it had begun, but it had surprised him so severely that he could barely move. There was an awful, gnawing feeling that. . . *he* had done it. He hadn't a wand, so the very idea sounded ludicrous, but. . . he was sure he'd done it . . . he'd *felt* it . . .

Neville enjoyed himself immensely in the mineral pools and everyone seemed willing to spend the rest of their *lives* there-- except for Harry. The incident with Neville had most definitely frightened him. When Professor McGonagall appeared to announce that the bus would be departing back for the hotel, Harry was the first one on board.

The only one who noticed Harry's drastic change in demeanor was Sirius who took a seat next to Harry on the bus whilst the rest of the kids carried on. Harry didn't even look at Sirius-- he was too busy replaying the images of the branches inexplicably unraveling themselves.

"You know Harry, when your father used to get this quiet, I used to sit beside him and just wait until he told me what was wrong."

Harry pulled his gaze up to Sirius. Sirius' countenance was immediately soothing, but Harry couldn't bring himself to tell Sirius what he thought he'd done. The very idea-- Sirius would have probably wanted to check Harry into a hospital straight away.

"I'm just . . . confused."

Sirius waited patiently, the silence tempting Harry to unleash his feelings.

"That thing with Neville today. . . I think that I did it. I mean, I think I'm the one who got him out of the branches."

"I had your wand, Harry."

"I know. And that's why I'm so confused. As it was happening there was this voice in my head *telling* me I could do it. It was like I was telling myself I could do it. But. . . that's impossible."

Harry felt like he wanted to scream out of frustration. "I didn't have a wand!" Sirius' expression was unreadable, but his voice placid. "Accidental magic isn't entirely uncommon, Harry."

"But it wasn't *accidental*. I wanted it to happen and it did. I've done things before: I set a boa constrictor loose in the London Zoo, I turned my Aunt Marge into a balloon-- *those* were all on accident. This is the first time I've ever done anything like this, Sirius. Even *with* a wand, that spell isn't exactly an easy one, and I did it without even an incantation." Harry's voice was shaking as were his hands. The anxiety was so intense that he felt like he was going to throw up.

The bus had landed and the students were filing off. Sirius squeezed Harry's arm. "Let's go in the back entrance." They did so, the air still pleasant and warm as the sun began to set.

Sirius' voice was soft but serious. "It is possible to do what you did today, Harry. But I must stress to you that very, *very* few wizards can do it. I only know three Free-Handers personally-- and they were only able to do it on rare occasions. Only when the moment called for it-- when there was no other option. And even then, it isn't *always* successful."

Harry felt dread eating away at him. "Please don't tell me one of them is Voldemort."

"You know it is, Harry. But so can Dumbledore and so could your *Father*."

Harry's heart skipped a beat. "My father?"

Sirius nodded. "I saw it once myself. Most fascinating thing I'd ever seen. He actually disarmed a death eater by shouting 'Expelliarmus' *only*. His wand had been destroyed and we were both sure it was then end of our lives-- only he managed it." Sirius smiled. "Old Snape never knew what hit him."

"It was Snape?"

Sirius struggled to keep a straight face. "I'd never seen him so shocked!"

Harry smiled weakly. "I just . . . I wish it wasn't *me*. I wish I were. . . normal. I don't like these surprises-- discovering I can speak Parseltongue, finding out I'm a free-hander or whatever you called it--"

"Surprises are a part of life-- especially yours. You are who you are, Harry. And the fact of the matter is that you are special. You can't change it, so you're better off *embracing* it instead of fighting it." Sirius smiled and gave Harry a hug. He buried his face in Sirius' robes, thankful to have someone who understood.

Harry climbed the immense staircase to his room, in a much better frame of mind. The room was empty because everyone was downstairs at dinner. Harry wasn't hungry at all-- no, there was much too much to think about. He plopped down on his bed, itching to do something.

That's when he spotted the purple and orange *Mystic Pier* souvenir bag peeking out from his suitcase. He took it out and retrieved the postcards from inside-- at the pier a vendor had been charging 3 sickles for photographs and 2 extra for turning them into postcards. He smiled at the waving images of himself, Ron and Hermione. It was the perfect time to send an update to Sophie and Dudley.

Sophie:

You would have adored New Orleans! We took these at a wicked amusement park. Right now we are at the Triangle and should reach the Caledonian Forest by Friday. I've been taking lots of photos to show you when I get back! Wish you were here!

Love, Harry

and the other one read:

Dudley:

*You're always going on about Pleasure Beach in Blackpool? I bet it's *pants* compared to Mystic Pier! Ron and I even threw up! We're having a brilliant time and today we took a tour of the Bermuda Triangle. Talk about heaven!*

--Harry

Harry opened the door to go downstairs to the Owlery, only to be met by Ron who was smiling contentedly.

Harry smiled and tried to scoot past him. "All right there, Ron?"

"There you are, Harry! You all right? We missed you at dinner-- oh did you ever miss a good meal! There was a whole *table* full of desserts! Oy-- where are you off to then?"

"The Owlery."

"Ohhh, are those the ones from Mystic Pier?" Ron took them out of Harry's hands eagerly.

"They came out good, eh?" He turned them over and he chuckled. "Should've known you'd be writin' to Sophie."

Harry snatched them back.

"Admit it Harry. You fancy her."

"Sophie? Oh come on. She's like a sister."

Ron sniggered. "Right. A sister. I don't spend near as much time talking to Ginny as you do with Sophie."

"You know what, Ron?" Harry challenged, stepping back inside the room, shutting the door behind them. "To quote Jake Dugan, people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. Here you are, pointing a finger at me when *you're* the one who doesn't have the guts to admit that you like She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. *Especially* after what happened that night at The Basement!"

Ron stared at his friend and then walked away towards the other end of the room. He ran his fingers through his hair and took a seat on his bed.

"I really do like her, Harry."

Harry had to muster all his strength to keep from shouting out in relief! Instead he joined Ron's side and said, oh so coolly, "You do, really?"

"You have no idea."

Harry was completely still-- not wanting to move too quickly for fear of breaking this most uncommon spell of Weasley candor.

"I liked her last year too, but there was that lousy Krum. And then this year. . ." Ron shook his head.

"*What?*" Harry prodded, betraying his eagerness.

"it may sound daft, but . . . I thought she liked you, Harry."

"*Me?!?*" Harry nearly sprang to his feet. "Ron, she's liked *you* since last year! I tried telling you, but--"

"I know, I know," said Ron grimly. "but I was . . . stubborn. You've always been so close to each other, and when you took her to Sophie's party she looked so happy--"

"I'm close to her like a *brother*, Ron! And she only went with me to that party because you didn't ask her-- she was happy because you actually paid *attention* to her that night!"

--and then I kept telling myself 'no way in hell you're good enough for her, Weasley. She deserves someone important and heroic like you, Harry. Not some penniless nobody like me.' Harry was in disbelief. "*Ron!* She needs someone like you! You care more about Hermione than anyone else in the world! *You're* the one that deserves her! You can give her what I can't- - what *no one* else can for that matter!"

Harry was pleading with his eyes-- Ron *had* to believe him.

Ron's voice grew quiet. "You know, Dean told me that just before Christmas break, he . . . saw you and Hermione in the hall."

Harry's stomach plunged. "Oh . . ." he dropped his voice. "That."

Ron nodded. "And. . .hell, you're my best mate, Harry. I would never . . . I thought you liked her. I couldn't possibly *tell* her how I felt. Not when I thought you liked her and vice versa."

"Ron, you couldn't have been more mistaken if you tried! That kiss, it . . . it didn't *mean* anything. She'd just finished gushing to me about how much she *wished* you'd care for her and I was being the comforting big brother and . . . we got a little too emotional, the both of us. I stopped it, actually, and told her I couldn't do that to you, Ron. I couldn't when I knew that you two were meant for each other."

"You knew--"

"I knew, yes, of course. And it's been bloody *infuriating* to wait for you two stubborn mules to admit it to yourselves!"

Ron looked severely troubled. "None of that matters anyway. There's nothing I can do about it now. She'll never--"

"Hermione's feelings haven't changed," said Harry delicately.

Harry and Ron held their stare. Finally, Ron kicked off his shoes and started going about the business of getting ready for bed.

"Crazy what happened today with Neville, eh?"

Harry cleared his throat, not too comfortable with this change of subject. "Y-yeah. Weird."

"I guess maybe Fred and George were right-- the trip is spooked."

"Oh, I'm sure there's a logical explanation."

"Yeah? Such as?"

Harry bit his lip. Should he tell Ron the truth? That it was him? That he's a *Free-Hander*? No-- Harry could hardly admit such a thing to himself, much less to Ron. Ron had been so very supportive to Harry over the years-- but Harry feared that telling Ron he had a power only shared by the likes of Dumbledore and Voldemort would be a bit too much to swallow. And it certainly frightened the hell out of Harry.

"I . . . dunno," Harry answered finally.

"Oh well, it's over now. Those Slytherins, though. Laughing the way they did at poor Neville. Lucky thing I didn't have my wand, because I'd have blown them right out of the water."

"Me too," Harry agreed eagerly, getting into bed.

Ron carelessly muttered 'nox' and the room fell black and quiet.

Harry finally spoke up. "Ron . . . about Hermione? I meant what I said. Her feelings *haven't* changed. You just have to trust me on this one."

Ron's voice came quietly, almost at a whisper. "I trust you, Harry."

Chapter Fourteen: Into The Woods

The boat ride from Bermuda to the Scotland hadn't been a smooth one. As a result of the tossing sea, most of the students were either sick or in a very bad mood. Which meant that tensions were especially high between the Slytherins and Gryffindors. *Especially* when Neville, who was perhaps the most sea sick of all the students, made the mistake of throwing up *all over a Slytherin*. And not just any Slytherin, no.

Malfoy.

Draco was convinced that Neville had done it deliberately and by the time Harry and Ron reached the commotion, Draco had Neville in a headlock. It took Harry, Ron and Seamus to pry Neville away from Draco and when Ron shoved Draco in the chest, calling him a 'bloody bastard', a massive brawl broke out right there on the deck.

(Harry's glasses ended up being snapped yet again during the fray.)

Hagrid appeared, his face angry at the students' behavior.

"All of yers just need to calm down, y'hear? Thar'll be none of 'at otherwise I'm tellin' Cap'n Peel to turn this boat straight around and we'll head straight back to Hogwarts! I *mean* it! Act yer ages, *all* of yer!"

Now, Hagrid was the most physically daunting fellow any of the students knew, so you can imagine how little arguing there was against his words.

They reached Scotland's shores and Harry was somewhat saddened by it: they had been to such wonderful, tropical climates, and now they were right back to shivering inside their robes again. It took the students a good hour to reach their destination by bus, and Hagrid and Professor Gray went about the business of setting up camp.

Their campsite rested in a spacious clearing, surrounded by the towering, majestic Evergreens belonging to the Caledonian. The Gryffindor tents were dark orange and the Slytherins were deep green. It was most obvious that the tents had been set up to avoid as much inter-house meddling as possible: there was a good one hundred feet between either side of the campsite. Hagrid was in jovial spirits.

"T'ain't nothin' like the outdoors," he said as he made an enormous pit for the fire. "The fresh air, the nature wild an' free--" he took a deep breath. "Nothin' else like it!"

Harry smiled at his friend. "You don't need help with anything, do you Hagrid?"

"Nah, thanks Harry. Best go and get yerself ready-- we're gonna be havin' supper soon and then it'll be out into the woods."

It *was* very exciting. By 11:00 pm exactly, the fifth years had finished dinner, relaxed a bit, and were now standing in the center of the campsite, Hagrid's fire emanating warmth and towering high into the crisp night air. Harry pulled his robes around him tightly-- the lovely tropical temperatures of the week had obviously been spoiling.

Professor Snape stood before them all, his usual cross countenance firmly in place.

"It is imperative that every last one of you demonstrate your awareness of the importance of what we are about to see. That means, of course, there is to be no tom-foolery of any kind on our journey."

He walked along the straight lines of students, his black eyes meeting each student with a threatening glare. "Anyone, and I do mean *anyone*--" his gaze lingered on Harry, to no one's surprise, "who so much as *speaks* out of turn, will most assuredly pay dearly for their actions." He spun around and marched forward. "Follow."

The prefects led the students, Harry, Ron and Hermione trying desperately not to laugh as Seamus did his flawless imitation of Snape behind his back. Professor Warwick appeared from behind and smacked Seamus on the back of the head.

That really set everyone off laughing. Snape wheeled around and sneered vehemently. "What is--"

"Oh calm yourself, Professor," said Professor Warwick joining his side. "It was just me, that's all."

They reached a clearing after what seemed an eternity of walking. The full moon overhead seemed exceptionally bright, making it quite easy for Harry to see the faces of the other students. The world around him seemed to simply *glow* white. Snape's usual pallor, amplified by this moonlight made him appear ghostly.

"This ordinary looking clearing is indeed the birthplace of our kinds' greatest wizard. He was born here, nearly two thousand years ago. It appears to be nothing of immediate importance, this place. But at midnight only on the night of a full moon such as this, a spell that Morgan Le Fay cast here after Merlin's death comes to life." He paused. "It starts even now."

Harry could see brief, but very bright streaks of blue begin to fly past him. Within moments, it seemed that beams of blue light were raining from the sky. Then yellow, then red until a huge burst of light shot out of the middle of the clearing, forcing Harry to shield his eyes from the intensity. And then there it was-- the face of Merlin himself, glinting silver and motionless. It was somewhat translucent-- Harry could see the forest behind it, but just barely. The face, so large and magnificent and oddly life-like sent a shiver down his spine.

No one dared to even *breathe*.

And then a white, silver-ish steam seemed to rise from the face and it began to disintegrate. The students stood in awed silence. Even the Slytherins, for the first time ever appeared impressed. Snape's solemnity was somehow appropriate.

"Le Fay wanted an eternal memorial to Merlin. She wanted his face to be remembered for all time, here in the place where he was born."

The awesome sight had rendered Harry speechless. The journey home was thus spent in near silence-- the students all still stunned to the core by what they'd seen.

They arrived back at the campsite, fatigue creeping upon Harry rapidly. Ron told Harry he'd catch up with him and the others in the tent-- apparently a loo was in order. So Harry joined the other lads and collapsed inside the toasty warm tent, his sleeping bag feeling every bit as comfortable as the unbearable softness back at the Oleander House.

Neville, Dean and Seamus had already fallen fast asleep and Harry was just starting to nod off when he heard voices from outside his tent. Two voices that he knew very well-- Ron and Hermione's. He slipped his glasses back on and rolled out of his sleeping bag, tip-toeing carefully so as not to wake the others. He crept outside and around to the back of the tent, the voices getting clearer. It was Ron and Hermione without a shadow of a doubt. Harry strained his ear desperately to listen.

"I'm sorry Herimone," Ron was saying. "I'm sorry for having been such a jerk all this time. I honestly just didn't know how to act."

"Please don't apologize. All that is in the past now-- it doesn't matter. What does matter is the here and now."

"I know, and you're right of course, but I can't help it. I feel so guilty-- all the time I've wasted."

Harry shook his head, barely daring to believe his ears! He had to throw his hand around his mouth to keep from shouting out loud in celebration! He edged further along the tent, bubbling up in excitement, when he heard a snap. It sounded like a twig snapping beneath someone's feet, only it hadn't come from Ron and Hermione's direction. It had come from behind him, back towards the entrance of their tent. Harry turned and crept slowly back towards the direction of the noise.

It looked odd at first: three figures disappearing into the tent, dressed in what looked to be a funny sort of costume. He top-toed closely behind them, trying to understand, and then the smallest of the three spoke up.

"There's Longbottom! Right, you two ready?"

Harry knew Draco's voice anywhere. He also knew that sneaking into a tent, dressed as a monster to scare Neville was *precisely* the sort of thing he would do. Harry pulled out his wand, ready to give all three of them exactly what was coming to them.

But he didn't have time.

Within moments, the screams of Neville Longbottom were filling the tent, soon joined by the screams of Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnegan. Harry looked on helplessly as all three jumped to their feet, wands extracted and pointed at their assailants. Harry could hear shouts from the other tents and could see lights pop on around them.

Face to face with three wands must have frightened Crabbe, Goyle and Draco because they stumbled backwards, knocking Harry to the ground. Harry grabbed hold of one of their legs (judging by its' thickness, it must have been Crabbe) and wrestled on the floor with him.

"*Get OFF!*" Crabbe was shouting and his elbow went flying and hit Harry right on the head. "*Ouch!*" Harry bellowed, releasing Crabbe to rub his forehead. Crabbe scrambled to his feet and made a break for it. And then--

"*Ouch!*"

Harry winced again. Only this time the pain was a much sharper one-- a throbbing on his scar. It was a pain he hadn't felt in quite some time-- not since the night that Cedric had died. . .

"*WHAT IS THE MEANIN' OF ALL THIS?*"

Harry didn't have time to worry about his scar, because Hagrid had appeared, his face very upset. The screaming and shouting stopped and in the blink of an eye, Hagrid was ushering everyone outside. The entire camp was now awake, all of them looking worried-- even a few of the Slytherins looked disturbed.

"*What happened,*" Professor Snape demanded, marching up to Hagrid, still in his black robes, his eyes glued on Harry.

"Hagrid," Seamus began, "I dunno! I was woken by Neville screamin' bloody murder and then I saw this huge, ugly beast in front of me so I screamed too and then Dean woke up--"

"Beast?" Snape sneered.

"Yes! Tall and black--"

"It was your *Slytherins,*" Harry snapped angrily.

"*My Slytherins--*"

"*Yes,*" Harry shouted. "Draco, Crabbe and Goyle snuck into our tent to scare Neville-- probably to get back at him for what happened today on the boat."

That sparked Professor McGonagall's interest. "And what were *you* doing outside this hour of the night, Mr. Potter?"

"I . . ." Harry blinked. "Couldn't sleep. I . . . have a headache." It was true, after all. His scar was positively *throbbing*. He looked around for Sirius, wanting to let him know that his scar was starting up again-- *something* was about to happen.

"*That* is a very serious accusation you've made," said Professor Snape, "especially without any proof--"

"*There's* your proof," Ron spoke up, pointing towards the Slytherin side of the camp. Draco, Crabbe and Goyle were approaching them dressed in their robes. "There they are! What, they just happen to be the only ones in the whole camp who slept through all this commotion? Even the other Slytherins are out here!"

"Mr. Malfoy," said Professor Warwick, "is it true what Mr. Potter has just claimed? This is all *your* doing?"

Draco folded his arms. "Me? Never, Professor."

In a flurry of movement, Hagrid had bent down and extracted something big and black from underneath Crabbe's robes.

"Oh really? What's this, then? I'm sure it ain't yer nightie!"

Hagrid dangled the ugly black costume in front of them, triumphantly. The Professors' faces all grew red with anger-- even Snape's. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a deep, low rumbling noise.

Everyone turned towards the direction of the noise-- it was coming from within the forest. Suddenly, bursting out of the brush, galloped a Unicorn-- beautiful and brilliant white. It walked slowly towards the camp, everyone gasping at its unexpected appearance. The unicorn stood perfectly still for a moment, its black eyes studying the scene, and then it bowed deeply. From out of the Professors, it was Aria Warwick who approached it, her head high and voice soft.

"Hello Morad."

"Hello, Aria. It has been much too long."

"Indeed it has. Why have you come here tonight?"

"To tell you that you must get these children away from here, Aria. This is a safe place no longer."

Harry was too stunned to ask questions--such as how this Unicorn was *speaking*.

"Why is that?"

"There is news. Terrible news . . . Azkaban has been liberated."

A shudder tore through the students.

"When?"

"Only just. Even now the Dark Lord is gathering his long banished supporters. . . we fear much bloodshed, Aria."

Professor Warwick remained perfectly poised.

"Thank you, Morad."

The gorgeous beast bowed again and galloped away, leaving the entire crowd speechless: mesmerized by Morad's brilliance and terrified by his message. Harry put his hand to his forehead-- he was extremely worried over the fact that his scar *still* burned. He found Sirius standing beside him.

Sirius looked down at Harry, then at his scar, then back at Harry questioningly. Harry nodded-- *Yes, Sirius. My scar is burning again.*

Sirius must have understood this because his expression darkened. "Hagrid," he said sternly, "You heard what Morad said."

"Aye," he said immediately, "Let's pack up the children, now!"

The students looked at each other and kicked their feet around before heading towards their tents.

"Best hurry," said Professor Warwick in a strangely distant voice. "I don't like the feeling in the air . . . it's much too . . ."

". . . quiet," finished Snape. He pointed his finger at the students. "Prefects, round up your houses. Hagrid? Loading the bus are you?"

"Aye, just finishing up."

"Excellent. Professors McGonagall and Gray, tend to the Gryffindors. Slytherin house, follow me--"

But Snape's words were still on the tip of his lips when the ground began to quake below their feet. And in then in the very next instant, the trees surrounding them seemed to sway, branches went snapping and flying in every which direction, and an enormous pack of fierce beasts the like of which Harry had never seen before came tearing down onto the campsite. They ran on all fours and at first Harry thought them to be werewolves until they got closer: they had murky brown fur, horribly mangled faces, and teeth that sharpened to lethal points--a whole *mouthful* of them. And the *noise*--oh, their high-pitched squeal was just as terrifying as their nightmarish faces!

Professor Warwick had already pulled out her wand. "Impossible--it *can't* be! Syads! GET THOSE KIDS INTO THE BUS NOW!"

She pointed her wand at the monsters and shouted a curse Harry couldn't recognize-Snape and Sirius had done the same thing.

"*Come ON,*" Hermione was ordering, her face wrenched in horror. She pulled Harry and Ron's sleeves, and Draco following them closely at a break-neck pace.

One of the beasts cut in between Hermione and Harry and she screamed. The monster lunged for Harry's leg, but Ron had pulled out his wand and shouted "*Stupefy!*" just as the horrific teeth made contact with Harry's leg.

Harry hadn't anytime to thank Ron, because four more of the animals had surrounded them, forcing them to make a run for it--in the opposite direction.

"*We-have-to-get-on-the-bus,*" Draco was shouting.

"GEE, YOU THINK?" Harry snapped.

They could hear Hermione screaming for them to come back, but there was no way they could fight their way through the pack of beasts. A mighty scream rang through Harry's ears and he turned his head to see a beast, from another direction, careening straight for Draco! Draco's face went white and he tried to run, but tripped over his feet and stumbled, still screaming the desperate scream of someone sure they are about to die.

Sirius saw this and threw his body against the creature, knocking it to the ground, wrestling it with his own bare hands.

"*RUN, MALFOY!*" Sirius shouted, "***Harry! GO!***"

Draco stumbled to his feet, shaken, and made a break for it. Mortified, Harry pointed his wand at the frothing beast wrestling with Sirius and shouted "*Stupefy!*" The beast froze, but not before Sirius let out an earth-shattering scream of pain-- the Syad's horrific mouthful of teeth had sunk into his leg!

"SIRIUS!" Harry shouted, running for him.

"HARRY, WATCH OUT," Ron pointed to a new slew of the monsters which were bearing down on them from the opposite direction.

He wanted to help his beloved Sirius, but instead found himself running for his own life-- he could feel the scalding hot breath of the beasts at his feet. Then suddenly, Harry was met face to face with one of the Syads who had appeared out of nowhere-- his ravenous jaws opened. Harry braced for the pain--and then a blue light shot past him.

Snape had appeared, his face contorted with anger. "*POTTER,*" he said, grabbing Harry's arm, "*All three of you! This way, NOW!*"

Harry had never run so quickly in his life.

The images were blurred as they ran after Snape--all he knew was that the bus was the other direction. They seemed to be running *into* the forest. *Away* from the rest of the students--but at least away from the Syads!

Darkness shrouded them, the ground getting softer, their feet crunching on brush and branches. Draco and Ron were wheezing, gasping for breath and Harry too felt he was about to collapse when Snape's pace finally slowed, then stopped, and he shouted, "*Ariah!*"

"Here!" She answered, apparating. "Hurry!"

She pressed her palm into the nook of a large rock and to Harry's shock, there was a deep rumbling noise and then the rock appeared to split in half!

"Inside!" She ordered, sliding into the opening. The rest followed.

And then it was dark.

Only heavy breathing was heard for a very long time.

Chapter Fifteen: The Auror

"Is everyone all right?"

It was Professor Warwick's voice Harry heard through the pitch-blackness. In the next instant she murmured '*Lumos Totalus*' and they were at once bathed in light. Harry found himself standing in a sort of cave dwelling, so small that Snape's head nearly grazed the ceiling. It looked as though at one time someone had lived there: a small cobwebbed cot was in the corner of the room, and on the other end laid a table and two chairs.

Harry's breathing was still a bit heavy, but he was calmed enough now to at least talk. "Where are we?"

"This," said Professor Warwick, "is my old hovel."

Ron raised his brow. "Your old hovel?"

"Weasley, Professor Warwick is an Auror."

Harry's mouth fell at Snape's words, and he stared at Professor Warwick in complete awe.

Ron was similarly surprised. "*You're an Auror?*"

"*Was an Auror Severus, was an Auror,*" she said with a small hint of sadness in her voice, "But that was a long time ago."

"It doesn't *matter*," Ron was gushing, stepping closer to her, "that is the without a doubt the most bloody *fantastic* thing I've ever heard! An *auror*. . ."

"If ever my work called for me to stay here in the Caledonian Forest," she said, talking over Ron, "this would be my home for the duration."

"Y-you were here often, then?" Harry asked.

She nodded, "You could say that, yes. But look at me-- I'm being a terrible hostess. Please, have a seat everyone." She waved her wand and four chairs apparated. They sat down, Harry's legs feeling like they were ready to fall off, and then in their hands appeared a goblet of cool, crisp water. Harry gulped his down in one breath and sighed heavily.

"What *were* those things," asked Draco finally.

"*Those*," said Ariaah, "were 'Syads.' They were the first of Voldemort's creatures to be banished after his demise, along with the Giants. Now that they have returned, what Morad said is confirmed. . ."

"The Liberation of Azkaban," Snape breathed. He looked tired--his black eyes staring straight ahead into nothingness and suddenly Harry wished he knew what was going through his mind.

"We're safe here for now," said Ariaah, "but we can't stay here forever. We have to get you three back to Hogwarts. Now that . . . now that the worst has happened, it's the only place you'll be safe."

"You were an Auror," Ron breathed, obviously still not over it.

Ariaah smiled. "Yes. I was. Let's see, we'll all need some place to sleep."

She waved her wand and five sleeping bags appeared, but sleep was the last thing that Harry felt like doing. He was still shaken from what had just happened. . . his mind fixed upon those horrible, frightening images. That look on Sirius' face-- that agonizing scream that had splintered the night air. Harry had no idea what had happened to him. No way to know if . . . he'd survived.

Ron seemed to have guessed this is what Harry was thinking, because he picked that exact moment to place a much needed supportive hand on his shoulder. *Thank Heaven Ron is here with me*, Harry thought. And, he had to admit, there was an odd feeling of empowerment to know that they had an Auror with them. It was the sort of protection he always felt with Sirius around . . .

"My goodness," Ariaah sighed. "I haven't been here for so many years-- it brings back memories, to be sure. I spent quite a lot of time here in this forest in particular. . ." there was a definite twinkle in her eye. "You remember, Severus?"

Snape cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably.

Ariah laughed, throwing her hair back. "I chased Severus throughout this entire forest for a *week*. I'd been given orders to track him down by Alastor Moody. Alastor *apparently*, er, *forgot* to tell me that Snape was no longer a Death Eater."

Snape growled. "Oh he thought that it was damn hilarious."

Ron and Harry tried desperately not to laugh, but when Draco let out a snigger, it was all over. They fell into stitches.

Ariah wiped a tear from her eye. "And--when I finally caught him, he had one hell of a time convincing me that I was mistaken!"

And then. . .

Snape.

Laughed.

Snape.

Smiled.

Not that twisted, sour, 'I'm-gonna-stab-you-in-your-back-once-you-turn-around' smile, but a real one. And his laugh was . . . soft! It was almost . . . *gentle!*

Ron and Harry threw a look at each other as if to say 'No Way.'

Snape became aware of the stunned look on their faces because he quickly calmed himself back down again and resumed his usual deadpan.

"So," said Ron, "then the two of you must know your way around this place all right."

"I should *hope* so," said Ariah. And then she stood up. "Right then. I want everyone to get as much sleep as possible. In the morning we set out on foot. The Caledonian used to be a Dark Forest, and I expect now that Azkaban has been liberated, they will return here. Many good creatures, like Morad, live here now. And I expect some will try to fight for it when Voldemort comes back. But I believe most will simply abandon it."

"But why will Voldemort and his supporters come *here*," pressed Harry.

"Because this happens to be the closest Forest to Azkaban."

Somehow, that didn't exactly give Harry much peace of mind.

He awoke when it was still dark, a terrible pain in his neck from his awkward sleeping position. Ariah was already awake, dressed and ready to go, as was Snape. They both looked as though they'd had very little sleep the night before. Ron and Draco were still sleeping soundly, curled up close to one another for warmth--oh, if only Harry had a camera . . .

Ariah and Snape were talking in hushed tones and then stopped abruptly when they saw Harry stand up.

"Please, don't mind me--carry on."

Of course they didn't.

Harry stared at Snape thoughtfully. "Why were you gone so long, Professor Snape?" He tried to sound as genuine as he could, but expected Snape to just cut him down as he always did.

Snape, however, seemed to be *different* with Ariah around.

"I happen to know all the old paces where Death Eaters get together to chat and discuss their plans. I know people in places with inside information. . . anyway, Dumbledore thought it was a good idea for me to. . . research." He paused. "I knew they were planning this, but I didn't realize it was going to be so soon. I thought we'd have time to prepare."

"What else are they planning, Professor?"

Snape stared at Harry for the first time *without* that usual touch of malevolence.

"You know Voldemort doesn't forget. He wants to get rid of everyone who stands in his way. . . he's the same as before, only more. . ."

"More what?" Ariah prodded.

"More . . . powerful. The speed in which he liberated Azkaban? Unheard of! Even for him!"

Harry looked alarmed.

"Don't be afraid, Harry," said Ariah, "we're going to all be fine."

*

The unlikely quintet emerged back into the Forest and Harry was relieved to see it looked much less ominous in the light of day. In fact--the ancient trees besieged with moss and enormous ferns made it look quite beautiful!

"We have to get back to Hogwarts as quickly as possible," Ariaiah was saying as they walked beneath the hazy sunshine that peeked through the canopy of leaves overtop them. "Times like these I wish we could just apparate on school grounds."

"We should have caught the Night Bus last night," said Harry.

"The *Night Bus*? Out *Here*? A bit beyond their territory!" She shook her head. "No, we're going to have to get you to Orod. . ."

"Orod," Snape repeated. "Are you certain that's wise?"

"Of course."

"With the *children*?"

"You aren't *scared* are you, Severus?" She was smiling.

"Of course not."

"W-what's an Orod," Draco piped up.'

"Orod is a *he*, Draco. He's a Gryphon."

"A *Gryphon*?!?"

"Yes."

"B-but," said Draco, I thought that Gryphons--"

"all lies," she dismissed. But he can sense fear. I suspect he'll take kindly to Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley--you are Gryffindors after all. But Mr. Malfoy, well . . . best just keep smiling."

Draco went white.

*

It truly felt as though they'd been walking all day and hadn't made any sort of progress. Everything around them looked the same, and if Harry wasn't so certain that Ariaiah and Snape knew where they were going, he would have said they'd been making circles all day. Harry, Ron and Draco had fallen behind in their pace, feet aching and patience waning.

"I think they're lost," said Draco angrily.

Ron was probably thinking the same thing, but he snapped at Malfoy, "You heard what they said, didn't you? They've spent a *week* here before-- they know where they're going."

"Yeah," said Harry, "and you'd better not start complaining, because it's your fault that we're even here to begin with."

"My fault? It was *my* fault that the faculty decided to let their students stay in a place they knew was covered with those things?"

"That isn't true! You heard what Morad said--Voldemort released them from banishment because Azkaban has been liberated!"

"I'm tellin' you, they should have known better than to send a class of students to a place like that. Need I remind you that *I* almost lost my *life*!"

Harry was visited with a flush of vivid images-- Sirius' face wrenched in pain as he wrestled with Draco's aggressor.

"Yes it *is* your fault," snapped Harry, "it was your idea to try and scare Neville with your stupid little prank and Ariaiah told me earlier today that Syads are blind to everything except sound and movement. She says we would have probably been fine if you hadn't turned the campsite into a riot!" Harry was getting emotional. "And now I've probably lost Sirius--" Harry bit his tongue, but it was too late. Draco may have been dumb, but he wasn't exactly stupid. His eyes grew at the mention of that name, but Harry didn't care-- it was the truth! Ron didn't seem to care either.

"He's okay, Harry. Sirius is gonna be fine. He'll be waiting for you when we get back home." Harry felt his throat tighten and he willed back the tears. Losing Sirius seemed unfathomable-- he'd just assumed that Sirius, so strong and protective, would just always be there.

"S-Sirius," Draco finally was able to choke out. "Y-you mean to say that Professor Gray is really Sirius *B-Black*?"

Ron scowled at Draco. "Yes, Malfoy. He *also* happens to be Harry's *Godfather* and I for one can't understand *why* he even bothered to save your life! He should have left you to the Syads! Better you than him!"

"Ron," said Harry sternly, "shut-up, mate."

Draco was speechless. Ron was visibly angry, but he respected Harry enough to bite his tongue. He frowned at Draco and brushed past him, walking ahead.

Silence.

Finally Draco was able to formulate his words. "But. . . h-how can Sirius Black be your *godfather* when he's the one who had your parents killed?"

"Your father knows the story," said Harry bitterly. "All the death-eaters do. Why not ask him?"

Draco stared at Harry with an expression that was unable to decipher-- was it anger? Was it shock? What *was* it?

From up ahead, Ariaiah turned abruptly, grinning. "Children! Come, see! Isn't it beautiful?"

The three trotted to join her and Snape who were standing at what turned out to be the edge of a cliff. The ravine below them was deep and one couldn't see where the ground began due to the infinite mass of trees that canopied it. But what you *could* see were fantastic shots of light: bright blues, purples, brilliant lavenders, pinks-- the entire *spectrum*-- glowing from underneath the branches and leaves.

It was the most astounding sign any of them had ever beheld.

"Where are we," Ron whispered.

Ariaiah's voice was ecstatic. "It's The Cove."

"The cove?" Draco repeated.

"The Forest Fairies," said Snape calmly. "They live there."

"A-are we going down there?" Harry asked.

"Of course. We have to-- it's the only way to get to the other side of the forest."

And of course, there was the inevitable question:

"How?"

"Oh, let's see. . . Severus, do you remember where-" Ariaiah was inspecting a nearby tree with utmost intensity. "I can't remember which one it is . . ."

Snape seemed to understand exactly what she was doing. "No, I do believe it's this one here," he said, pointing to a white birch tree next to him.

"Ah! You're right of course, Severus, as usual."

She pressed her palm against one of the knots in the trunk, the same way she had the previous night with the rock. Only the tree didn't split open. Before Harry's eyes, something was appearing along the edge of the cliff! It took a moment for his eyes to focus on what he was seeing: stone steps had appeared out of nowhere, the steps levitating in mid air, leading down to the ravine floor.

Harry didn't exactly like the look of it.

Apparently neither did Ron. "We're not walking down on those, are we?"

"Come on," said Ariaiah happily, putting her foot onto the first step.

"B-but," he protested as Snape ushered them along. "Is it just me, or does that look *completely* unsafe?"

"I was thinking it looked more like suicide," said Draco.

"For the first time in our lives, I think we're all in agreement," said Harry gravely.

To Harry's relief, the steps felt completely solid and sturdy-but the endless depths below them kept him in a panic nonetheless.

The further they descended into the ravine, the more the temperature rose and the air seemed to sweeten. Their skin was bathed in lights of all colors emanating for something that looked

like a cross between a bee hive and Muggle Chinese lanterns: they were large and round and hung in the air beneath and around the branches in the trees. They were all shades of any color imaginable and they were positively everywhere!

"It's a city," said Ariaah as they reached the last of the steps. "The forest fairies all live here in The Cove--it's an incredible society they've created, actually. Such organization you've never seen the like of."

Harry saw wisps of bright gold and silver streaming to and fro quite frequently.

"Are those---"

"Yes, those are the fairies. When they're flying at full speed, that's all that the human eye can see of them--the bright gold ones are from the wings of the males, the silver from the females." They reached the bottom step, and nearly immediately the steps disappeared once again.

"State your names and business, please."

Harry looked up to see a fairy hovering before Ariaah and Snape.

It was a male, probably between six and eight inches in length, his wings fluttering furiously behind him, glowing bright gold. Harry had never seen a fairy in person and the drawings of them he had seen really didn't do them justice. Their miniature form was entirely human: the male fairy's body perfectly proportioned--with subtle differences. His nose was long and nearly pointed, ears pointed, eyes considerably larger than any human's eyes could be. He was actually dressed in what appeared to be a uniform of sorts, giving Harry the impression he was a city official.

Ariaah nodded her head respectfully, as did Snape. "Ariaah Warwick, Severus Snape. Professors. These with us are our students. We are simply passing through on foot."

The official stared at her, unconvinced. "Then you are not here to see anyone?"

"No, Sir."

"You have not obtained a Visitors' Pass?"

"No, Sir."

"You are aware that a law was passed at the Fairie-Sorceric Summit last year forbidding entrance to all humans who do not possess a pass?"

"Yes, we are certainly aware of that. However we did not realize this trip would be necessary until last night."

"You understand I am simply following my orders Madame Ariaah, but I cannot admit you into The Cove until you obtain a pass."

"Is Fehr Gossamer in? I should like to have a word with her, please."

The official stiffened. "Gossamer? You have an acquaintance with Amalda Gossamer?"

"I knew her many years ago."

The official grimaced, and then bowed. "*Ananti*," he said and then sped away.

"Ananti?" Harry whispered after he'd left.

"Yes--fairietalk. It means 'one moment.'"

"Who is Fehr?" he asked.

"*Fehr* is a fairietalk title for a mayor. Amalda Gossamer was the Mayor last time I was here and she and I developed a bond."

"Most unusual," said Severus, "for most fairies are taught from infancy to not trust or befriend humans. They find us dangerous."

Ariaah made a low sigh. "And they are correct, unfortunately."

A silver streak shot at them and then, before them, hovered a very old looking faerie, her shining silver wings making her skin itself to appear silver. She held up a wrinkled hand to her face.

"But it *can't* be Ariaah Warwick!"

Ariaah bowed. "Fehr Gossamer! It's been much too long!"

"Indeed! As I am no longer the Fehr! Ah, but it is good to hear it once again!" She turned to the official. "These shall be my guests."

"Of course, Amalda," he said bowing.

The wide-eyed group followed Amalda as she led them down what they supposed was a main thoroughfare of sorts. The beehive-like constructions multiplied the further they walked.

"Hey," said Ron, nudging Harry's arm. "They're stores! Look, the fairies are shopping!"

He was right: many of the 'buildings' had store signs written in a language Harry had never seen, and fairies fluttered in and out carrying large netted bags slung over their shoulders.

There were clusters of fairies strolling along, appearing to be chatting happily, others zoomed by in an obvious rush—all of them taking a double-take at the human forms that were walking by.

Harry most definitely felt out of place.

Amalda stopped them at the entrance to her home—it was decidedly larger than the rest—and glowed a pale, periwinkle blue.

"You have been walking all day? You must be tired."

"You can say that again," Draco murmured.

"Won't you come in?"

Ariah and Snape seemed to find this invitation completely normal and agreed.

Harry, Ron and Draco stared at each other: how could they step inside a fairie's house?

Ariah turned to the children, smiling. "I take it none of you have ever done this before? It's quite painless, don't worry." She raised her wand and pointed it at them.

"Wait," said Ron, "What are you going to—"

"*Abeo!*" Harry's stomach plunged, almost like he'd jumped off a very high cliff. Everything around him blurred and he was sure that he *was* falling! And just when he thought he was going to be sick from the velocity of it all, it stopped. He was kneeling on the ground, breathing heavily, as was Ron and Draco.

"Ron!" Harry cried, "You okay? What *was* that?"

"I don't know," said Ron, getting to his feet. "But I think I'm gonna bloody be sick."

"Looks like Draco already is," said Ron, pointing to Draco, who was turned away, throwing-up.

"Ah, yes, well that can happen sometimes," said Ariah, smiling. "He'll be fine in a minute."

"Ready?" Asked Amalda—

But Amalda was the same height as Ariah! Her face was life-sized, as were her hands now reaching out for Ariah's. Snape turned to the boys and said with a stern face, "Come now, let's go."

"P-Professor Snape! How did Amalda get to be—"

"It's not her, Potter, it's us. Now, give me your hand and let's go."

Harry was utterly confused.

Until he looked up.

Amalda's home loomed some twenty feet above them, a grand, magnificent, enormous home.

In fact. . . the entire world seemed to stretch up for an eternity.

"Bloody hell," said Ron beside them. "We've. . . we've been. . ."

"Shrunk," Draco finished, weakly.

Chapter Sixteen: Orod

Snape seemed humored by this, but after their earlier reaction to his laugh, he wiped away his smile and grabbed hold of Harry's hand.

"*Wingardium Leviosa*," he said simply, waving his wand, and Harry, Ron and Draco's feet left the ground. They were weightless and rose up through the air, which now smelled a thousand times sweeter than it had even before. Ron and Draco had smiles on their faces and Harry was flushed with excitement as well as they approached Amalda's home.

They gazed upward at the huge front doors, the entire home made from substances Harry couldn't identify-the walls were as sturdy as stone, but looked almost transparent-bright periwinkle blue light filled the rooms and there was an indescribable airiness to it all.

"You've had a long trial, I can tell," said Amalda, setting them down in a lounging room.

"You must be thirsty."

A maidservant walked into the room and handed them each a silver goblet. Harry, Ron and Draco positively swooned at the provocatively-clad girl who, throwing them a wink, flurried out of the room without a word. The drink was as sweet as the air, and it seemed to fill Harry, almost as if he'd eaten a full course meal!

"When you reach the other side of the forest," Amalda was saying, "where is it you will go from there?"

"Ariah thinks our surest bet of getting home is to visit Orod."

Amalda nodded, setting her goblet down. "You know this is not a safe time to be in this forest."

"We know," said Snape. "And we assure you this is not a leisure holiday. We are stranded here. Every year, the students who attend the school where Ariah and myself teach are taken on a trip to places of Historical significance. So of course, this being the Caledonian Forest, the itinerary includes a stop to visit Merlin's Birthplace."

"Ahhh," Amalda nodded again, "Yes, I see."

"However none of us--*none of us*--were expecting what happened last night."

"Yes," said Amalda eagerly, "there is rumor in the forest that the Dark Lord has returned."

"The rumor is quite correct," said Ariah grimly. "And what is more, his supporters which were safely locked away in our Wizard Prison, were liberated last night by him."

"Yes, this was rumored also." Her face looked worried. "We are praying they will not come here. But if the Syads are already roaming the forest, then it appears they will come." She shook her head. "Fourteen years we have lived in peace, here in the forest. Fourteen years of calm and tranquility. We remember what life was like whilst the Dark Lord lived. . . always in fear. . . always in fear. Even we, a peaceful nation, feared our lives. . . and for fourteen years we were able to sleep soundly at night." She shook her head. "What of this boy, this Harry Potter? Can he not stop the Dark Lord? It is true that he stopped him once, is it not?"

The room fell quiet. Harry lowered his eyes immediately, his face burning, and he could feel Ariah staring at him.

Finally, she spoke. "Amalda. . . *this* is Harry Potter."

Amalda stared at Harry, her eyes wide. "Indeed?" she said softly, quietly. It was silent for an eternity in which Harry wanted so very much for the floor to swallow him up.

"Well then," she said, "we must make *sure* that you reach Orod safely."

Thankfully, that brought up the opportunity to change the subject.

"Orod *is* still in his same den, isn't he?" Ariah asked.

"Oh yes, most definitely. Not nearly as public as he was centuries ago. I suppose he is lonely now. You did know that Fae was slaughtered."

"Fae?" Ariah cried. "A *Gryphon*? How-" "The Dark Lord," said Ariah gravely. "Dear me--going on six years ago--"

Ariah looked devastated and Snape seemed stunned as well.

But why would Voldemort want to kill a Gryphon," Ron whispered. Amalda shook her head. "The same reason that he was known to kill unicorns-- their *blood*. Gryphons are amongst the strongest creatures in the known world. He'd kill to have that kind of strength. So he killed Fae." She looked almost teary. "Orod never recovered."

"Disgusting," said Ariaah, "absolutely disgusting."

Amalda looked over her shoulder and called out "Reedshimmer!"

A bulky manservant appeared almost instantaneously and bowed.

"Reedshimmer, will you please see to the preparation of two guest rooms? We will have guests staying here tonight."

"Oh no," Ariaah protested, "we really don't have time to waste."

"Who's wasting any time? It is near nightfall. You will never make it to Orod's tonight and I will not have the five of you trekking through the woods and risk running into the Syads and-- well, who knows what other creatures will be returning now. No, I must insist that you and your friends stay with us the night. From here we can send word to your families that you are safe here. . . of course, the fairie post system is much slower than your wizarding system, but at least they will be informed."

Ariaah and Snape exchanged looks. Snape shrugged. "You are most kind, Amalda."

She laughed softly. "Ah, if only the public opinion of me were so favorable!"

"Well. . . you *are* a politician," said Ariaah lightly.

"Yes, but at least I know that you don't hold that against me!" She was chuckling now and stood up. "I must be leaving now, my friends. I am expected for a meeting with the *Fehr*. We're having the most terrible time passing a new trade tariff," she shook her head.

"Amazing, isn't it? The more money we make the less we are willing to spend. . . it's a never-ending cycle. Although I am rather worried as to why he *insists* we discuss this at eight o' clock in the evening over dinner in his home. . ."

Ariaah raised her brow. And once again, there was the *faintest* hint of smile tugging at Snape's lips.

"Are you sure you won't be needing some. . . company?" He asked. "Just for good measure?"

"Ah, well I may be old but, as you humans say, I can still pack quite a punch!" She winked and then bowed her head. "Now please, make yourselves at home, here. If you desire anything at all, you need only to ask one of my servants. I shan't be returning until late."

She bowed again and bade everyone good evening before walking for the front door. The five were left together in silence.

Reedshimmer appeared again and gestured towards another room.

"We have a dinner prepared for you, if you are at all hungry."

Hungry? Harry was *ravenous*. They sat in Amalda's dining room which glowed white, the great table was most likely glass, but it was the thinnest, most delicate looking glass he'd ever seen and it hovered in the air. Five oversized, periwinkle blue cushions sat on the floor-- which turned out to be filled with an *unearthly* soft stuffing. Ron and Draco were smiling now, especially when the girl servant appeared again, setting plates in front of them. The food was thick and creamy--just *what* it was, Harry didn't know nor did he really *care* to know what exactly fairies ate-- all he cared about was that it was delicious.

He'd expected them to eat in silence, but the strangest, most unbelievable thing happened. (Yes, even more unbelievable than the discovery that Snape was capable of laughter.) All five of them *talked*.

No scathing looks from Snape, no vicious slurs from Malfoy or Ron . . . it was an *amicable* conversation.

"So have you done this often? Visited the Forest Fairies?" Ron had asked Ariaah innocently.

"The times I have in the past were when I was here in the forest. But I've never stayed longer than a couple of hours, so this is a new experience for me as well. What do you think of the Cove?"

"Oh, it's bloody *fantastic*," said Ron. "It really is a big city, isn't it?"

"Those were stores, weren't they?" Draco asked. "The ones that we passed on our way here-- we saw fairies going shopping."

"Yes, there are countless stores carrying anything you can think of. We were walking down the main road of the city, this house here is in what's known as the The Old Cove, which was the first part of The Cove to be founded."

"It's, what, one thousand years old, Aria?"

"I think it might be a bit more, Severus."

"You've been here before, Professor Snape?" asked Harry.

"Yes-- once." He paused and then added. "When I was running for my life. But that was before this new law they've passed, so I was able to just run right into the city. It's rather a good thing they've passed that law. They're fiercely proud of their culture, fairies are, and will quite literally do anything they can to protect it. It would be a grave mistake to be fooled by their size."

Aria nodded, taking a swig from her goblet. "I for one would never like to become involved in any sort of confrontation with them. They know some complicated magic, fairies. Quite literally can knock you off your feet."

"Are we going to send word to Dumbledore, then? You know, that we're all right?"

Snape wiped his mouth with a delicate napkin. "Yes, I think that would be a good idea." He turned around, "Er. . . Reedshimmer, is it?"

Reedshimmer poked his head in the room and Harry tried not to laugh when he saw the head of that beguiling girl servant try to duck out of sight. *So that's what they're up to while their master is away.* He quickly came to Snape's side-- red lipstick smothered over his lips.

This was most distracting and Snape did his best not to look at it. "Amalda was telling us that it might be possible to have word sent home."

"Oh yes, most correct. You have the message ready?"

"Yes--"

Reedshimmer held out his hand and a small gold box appeared in his palm. "Where will we be sending the message?"

"Er--" Snape raised his brow at the box. "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." He stopped.

Reedshimmer smiled. "Go on-- recite your message."

"Er. . . To Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. Professor Warwick, Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, Draco Malfoy and myself have found safe lodgings within the Caledonian Forest in The Cove. We are staying the evening here with an old friend of Professor Warwick and then tomorrow we will be heading directly for the den of Orod the Gryphon who will then escort us home. Please inform the families of the students that they are perfectly safe and will be returning to school tomorrow directly. Er. . . Yours Most Sincerely, Severus Snape."

Reedshimmer muttered something to the box and it made a small spark and disappeared.

"Where did it go?"

"To our post office of course. It will most likely not reach your destination until tomorrow afternoon, but we shall try our best. Will you be desiring anything else, Good Sir?"

Snape was making a direct point of not looking at the bright red lipstick. "Er-- no."

Reedshimmer bowed and exited. Ron was trying his hardest not to laugh

Aria's brow was raised. "Did you *see* that?"

"Yes--" Snape started.

"Incredible! I simply must find out *how* they do that! It could start quite the revolution in the Wizarding Post!"

They stared at her and Snape finally said what everyone else was thinking. "I was actually more interested as to whether it is the fashion for Fairie men to wear red smudged lipstick."

The boys laughed together-- Snape included -- and Harry sat realizing that perhaps being stranded wasn't quite as bad as he'd first thought.

The rose and left the table to get some sleep, Reedshimmer leading the way to the guest bedrooms.

Snape seemed extremely anxious, especially when Reedshimmer pointed the way to 'their' bedrooms.

"Right, then. Have nice rest, Ariaiah." He turned to Reedshimmer. "Might I please be directed to a sofa?"

"Oh, but sir, I have direct orders from Amalda--"

"Nonsense, Severus! I'll not have you sleeping on a sofa! Reedshimmer, we can add another bed, can we not?"

"Certainly."

"Good. Really, Severus, the very idea. . ." she walked off into the bedroom, visibly shocked that Snape would have ever suggested such a thing.

Ron, Draco and Harry's eyes were wide-- Professor *Warwick* and Professor *Snape* sleeping in the same *bedroom*? There couldn't possibly have been anything to give Harry a more disturbing mental image than that. Snape's face was rigid, betraying no emotion (as usual) and he simply walked in after. He made a specific point of leaving the door open ajar. The boys could hear Ariaiah's voice from inside saying, in deep annoyance, "Oh, for heavens sake, Severus, shut the door!"

The door slammed shut, and the three collapsed into laughter.

They walked into their guest room, three small beds made and ready for them.

Draco folded his arms, a twisted grin on his face-- that Harry and Ron had seen so often before.

"I don't know about you lot, but I can't sleep knowing that Professor Snape is alone in that room with *her*."

Ron's smile was ready to fly off his face. He jumped onto the bed. "Yeah-- too bad we can't *see* through those walls."

"Yeah," Draco agreed. "Or at least *hear*. But I can't think of a proper charm to do the trick."

Harry snapped his fingers. "I've got an idea!" He took out his wand and said "*glacio aparao*" and a glass appeared in his hand. "This," he said giving Draco a pointed look, "is a *muggle* trick. You put the edge of the glass to the wall to hear what's going on in the other room. But it's usually really muffled--"

"Well, let's give it a little help then!" Ron said, jumping off his bed and pulling out his wand. "*Aggrio!*"

The three smiled and knelt down onto the floor, putting the end of the glass to the wall-- the voices inside came through clear as day.

Harry had to cup his hand to his mouth to keep from bursting into laughter as they listened: "*Really*, Severus, did you have to make a specific point of placing the bed in the furthest corner? I don't carry the plague, you know."

"A-Ariaiah, you may not see a problem with this, but as a Hogwarts Professor of ten years, I find this type of behavior highly irregular, especially with students present. The *correct* thing to do would have been to have asked for separate bedrooms."

"Ohhh," she said-- there was a hint of amusement in her voice. "You're scared of what the kids think, are you?"

"Well . . ." awkward silence. "Yes."

"Oh, Sev--"

"Kids love to spread rumors, Ariaiah, especially *those* kids in there! Word spreads and the next thing you know, I am going to be fired for taking advantage of a Professor or something like that."

"Now *that* is just ridiculous," she said flatly. Draco sniggered and whispered, "No it isn't-- you know as well as I do that's exactly what would have happened!"

The other two laughed in agreement. They snapped to attention, however, when they heard something that sounded a lot like bed springs being jumped on top of and Ariaiah's voice again. "If *anyone* is going to do the taking advantage of around here, it's me. . ."

Harry *wished upon wish* that he hadn't heard those words correctly. But the look of horror in Ron and Draco's faces affirmed he had. Draco's nose was scrunched up as though having smelled something rancid, and Ron's face had drained of color. *No, no, no, oh please, this isn't happening, NO!*

But it was!

You could have heard a pin drop between the boys as they listened through the glass, waiting. . . and then it came. . .

"Oh my-- Ariaiah, what are you--"

"Shhh," she said, "don't say anything, Severus. You'll ruin the moment. . ."

They heard what sounded frightfully like a pleased giggle and a smooch on the lips--

Ron was the first to completely lose it.

"EEEEWWWWWW!!!!!!!" He cupped his hand over his mouth and went charging out of the room, shouting for Reedshimmer to direct him to a bathroom.

Draco was close at his feet, shouting "AAAAAHHHHHH!!!!!!!"

Harry jumped away from the cup, trying desperately to get the mental image out of his head.

He pointed his wand at the cup and ordered it to disappear just as Snape burst into their room.

"POTTER! WHAT'S WRONG?"

Harry, breathing heavily, stared at Snape: he was dressed in black night pajamas and looked briefly relieved to see him than actually concerned about his welfare.

"Erm. . . they. . . the-- the food. The food, er. . . it didn't sit too well."

"Oh," Snape was talking very loudly and very quickly, "well, perhaps we should send for some medicine? I'm not sure about what is best for an upset stomach, I know a number of potions we might use, although here in The Cove I'm not sure if we can find the correct ingredients, though perhaps I can think of some, er. . . Ariaiah, perhaps I'd best tend to the boys and see that they're okay, I mean it's probably nerves as well, you know, being away from school grounds in a foreign place where anything can happen-- er. . . yes, let me see to them, er, Reedshimmer? Reedshimmer, might I have a word?"

He walked off in a hurry, leaving Ariaiah behind. Her eyes were narrowed and looked quite cross. She was staring at Harry suspiciously.

Harry cleared his throat. "I-- I *told* them they shouldn't have eaten so much." He attempted a smile.

Ariaiah nodded. "Goodnight Potter," she said quietly and then went back into her room, slamming the door behind her.

Draco and Ron came back into the room ten minutes later, with Snape trailing behind them.

"No, really Professor Snape," Draco was saying, "We're fine. There's no need for you to wait up with us."

"R-right. Well, if you need anything, just come and fetch me. . ." He turned for the door and added, although Harry didn't think he intended for them to hear it, "*Please* come and fetch me. . ."

"Nox," said Harry. The lights went out and the three of them lay on their beds in silence.

"Do you know," said Ron, "that I actually feel *sorry* for old Snape."

"Did you see his face?" Draco asked. "He looked absolutely terrified--"

"Look you guys, I'd rather *not* think about it," Harry snapped, trying desperately to fill his mind with much *happier* things.

It was quiet for all of ten seconds before Harry gave in. "Who would have thought: Warwick *fancies* Snape."

"She more than *fancies* him," Ron said incredulously, "she obviously bloody *wants* the poor sod."

"Well," said Draco, "I mean, it could be worse. It could be. . . Madame *Pince* or something. At least *Ariah* is. . . well, come on, you have to admit she is pretty damn good looking."

"She's *gorgeous*," said Ron. "Remember that first day in class? I think all of us were ready to--"

"*All right*, Ron," Harry snapped. "We remember, okay?"

Ron laughed. "I can't believe it. Of all people: Professor *Snape* is girl-shy!"

"Hmmm," said Draco, "Maybe he's--"

"Oh no, he's not," said Harry, "definitely not."

"How would *you* know, Potter?" Draco challenged.

"*Because* I happen to know that *Snape's only* love was. . ."

"Yes? Who?"

"My. . . mum."

Silence.

"Your *mum*?" Draco breathed. "Snape was in love with Lily Potter?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "But you two are the *only* ones who know that and it's going to stay that way."

More silence.

"You know who *my* Dad used to fancy?" It was Draco speaking. . . Harry could hardly believe that Draco was offering anything like this.

"Who?"

"Your friend Sophie's Mum."

"*Imelda*?" Harry squeaked.

"Yeah," said Draco. "She was Imelda Arlington back then-- could've had the pick of any wizard in all of Britain, she could. Oh Dad had it *bad* for her. And when he chose that Banbury muggle instead--" Draco must have sensed that he shouldn't have said that because he added "--well, he tried liking her sister instead, but it was Imelda he was crazy over."

"Who would've thought," Harry breathed. He cleared his throat. "Are you and Pansy Parkinson together or what?"

"*Pansy*?" Draco scoffed, "Yeah, right. No *thank* you, Potter. Ever tried carrying on an intelligent conversation with that girl? Damn impossible. Sometimes she's bloody worse than Crabbe and Goyle!" He paused. "She *did* tell me that she heard from some Gryffindor that you've got it for that Sophie girl."

Harry burned. "*You're* the one who started that silly rumor, Malfoy."

"Yeah, but . . . c'mon Potter, you *do*, right? I mean, don't you write back and forth like every other day?"

"Sure as hell does," said Ron.

"*Ron!*" Harry cried in disbelief, "What are you talking about?"

"Well you *do* talk about her a lot, Harry."

"So what if I do? We're friends!" *Ridiculous. I don't like Sophie-- she's just my friend, that's all!* Harry folded his arms crossly. . . and then to his horror, in the back of his mind there was a voice. *You do think about her often though, don't you. . .*

"What about *you*," Harry shouted to Ron, trying to drown out the voice in his head. "You've been stubborn as hell all year--"

"We've already been through this, Harry--"

"*Hermione*, right? So you *do* fancy that Granger girl," said Draco triumphantly.

"NO!" Ron shouted-- he looked mortified. "And. . . and even if I did I wouldn't tell *you*, Malfoy!"

Draco was laughing. "Go on, threaten me if you like. It's too late though, the truth is out--"

"*Shut up Malfoy!* You don't know *what* you're on about!"

The door to their room creaked open. It was *Snape* again, his hair frazzled.

"Erm. . . having problems boys?"

"NO," said Ron quickly.

"A-are you sure? B-because if you need anything at all I can just--"

"We're *fine*," said Draco.

Harry strained in the darkness to see Snape-- he still looked frightened as a mouse and there was something near his lips that looked strangely red in the moonlight. He left most reluctantly to go back to the other room.

There was a nail-biting silence and Ron finally said what everyone was thinking. "Hey you lot. . . was it just me, or did anyone else see. . . "

All three shouted in unison. "*Red lipstick!*"

* *

In the morning, very little was spoken between the five. Harry, Ron and Draco watched Ariaah and Snape most intently. They went about their affairs very normally with the exception that neither seemed to be giving the other any type of eye contact. After breakfast they bade their farewells to Amalda and then ventured out into the gorgeous, wonderfully bright sun.

Amalda embraced Ariaah and told her to send word the moment they made it back home safely and she promised that of course she would. Ariaah pointed her wand and the five descended back down to the forest ground. She then said "*abeo aggorgio*." There was a burst of wind, the world around them blurred with color and. . . they were back to normal.

"Hey," said Ron, "Draco didn't even get sick this time." He was trying desperately to get a smile out of the scowling Professor Warwick-- even Snape, who looked like he would have been quite happy to crawl underneath a rock.

"Come. Let's go."

They climbed the steps up out of The Cove, Harry taking one last look at the incredible city, and finally found themselves standing in a field of very tall grass. Ariaah had already begun walking, Snape's robes billowing behind him as he followed. It wasn't exactly *easy* terrain to walk in, the mud getting thicker and thicker the further they trod.

Up ahead, Ariaah and Snape were slowing down as well. By this time, Harry was straining just to get one foot out of the murky ground to put it in front of the other.

Ron looked panicked. "Um. . . Professors? I don't think that this is good--"

"I think you're right, Mr. Weasley," said Ariaah from up front. She was stopped-- no, she was *stuck!* "Severus!" she shouted, "Are you--"

"Yes," he said quickly, "can't move an inch."

"No," she shouted, "are you *sinking?*"

Harry stared in horror and sure enough-- Professor Warwick was slowly but surely sinking. . . And so was he. . .

"*Ahhhh*," Draco was shouting, "It's. . . what is it?"

"I don't know," said Snape angrily. "But don't panic," he yelled at Draco.

Snape pulled out his wand and pointed it directly ahead of him. A heavy rope shot out of end of his wand and flew about thirty feet before attaching itself to a tree. He pulled on it to test its tension. "Ariaah-- come on, do the same!"

She did so.

"Come on, you three, hurry!"

Harry, Ron and Draco followed their orders.

"Now, on the count of three repeat after me: "Rejectus Infitalus". Ready? One, two, three!"

"REJECTUS INFITALUS!"

They all shouted at the same time, and their wands seemed to be pulling forwards towards the tree their ropes were attached to. With a great heave, they were pulled out of the muck and went flying towards the tree, holding onto their wands for dear life. They came to a crashing stop-- literally. All five of them rammed into the trunk of the tree.

They landed on the ground, which was thankfully solid and trustworthy, each of them now sporting some type of injury: Malfoys knee was bruised, Ron's nose was bloodied, Harry's

finger was jammed, Ariaiah's shoulder was bruised and there was black and dark blue forming underneath Snape's eye. Everyone stared at Snape, annoyed that he didn't find a less dangerous alternative.

He grimaced, "Well I didn't notice anyone *else* was coming up with any ideas!"

They all heaved themselves to their feet, and pressed forward. But if nothing else, at least the small mishap had broken the ice between Ariaiah and Snape and by midday they had finally taken up talking again-- though unbeknownst to them, every word was being scrutinized and analyzed by the three boys.

Harry was tired. He was aching. He wanted rest-- he wanted *food*. But there was no sign of stopping. If anything, Ariaiah and Snape were *picking up the pace*, if that was at all possible. The sun was actually beginning to set by the time Ariaiah finally made the announcement Harry had been waiting for all day.

"There!" she cried, pointing towards a rocky hill in the distance. "Orod's den! We have to hurry! We must reach it before nightfall or risk the Syad's return!"

The urgency in her voice was contagious and the exhausted company broke out into a run.

Malfoy, though, had had enough. He was falling seriously behind. Snape turned and frowned.

"Malfoy, come on!"

"Professor Snape, *please*--"

"You *must*, Draco." Snape took hold of his hand and pulled him along.

They reached the bottom of the rock-like hill, which was taller than Harry would have liked.

"No-way-in-hell-I'm-climbing-that," Ron panted.

"No worries," said Ariaiah, pointing to flat, smooth steps that were engraved into the side of the large crag. "Just keep running!"

The steps were endless, absolutely endless. Even the most physical game of Quidditch couldn't compare to what this felt like! It was quite literally, murderous! By the time they reached the top of the hill, the sun had just lay to rest the last of its rays. The surface was flat and smooth, save for the enormous entrance to what must have been the Gryphon's den. Draco collapsed on the spot and vomited again. Harry would have felt sorry for him, only he was trying desperately not to do the same thing. Ariaiah was kneeling, catching her breath, unable to move another step.

"S-Severus. . . g-go f-find him."

He nodded and peeked his head inside the entrance. "Hello?" He shouted, still winded.

"Master Orod? Are you in here?"

Harry heard a low rumble from within.

"Who is here?" The voice was deep and smooth.

Snape took another step forward and then dropped to one knee. "Master Orod, my friends and I are in need of your help."

The growl came again, "I have none to offer. Please go."

"Master Orod," said Ariaiah, approaching Snape's side. "We *need* your help. My name is Ariaiah Warwick. I have with me three innocent children. We have been stranded here in the forest for two days now and we need you to take us back home."

"And where is home?"

"Hogwarts School, Master Orod."

"Hogwarts. . ." Orod repeated breathlessly. "Come in."

Harry, Ron and Draco followed Ariaiah inside the den.

Harry had never seen such a singularly beautiful creature-- nor one quite as fear inspiring. He must have been ten feet in length and at least the same in height, if not more. His body was catlike, covered in a rich, soft golden fur that glinted like the sun overtop fields of rye.

Powerful wings protruded from his back, the tips of which gradiated from gold to black. His four legs were those of a lion, except for the feet, which were enormous and birdlike with lethal looking claws, which were dusty from the dirt floor of the den. And his head-- huge,

brilliant, infinite black eyes on the face of a lion-- or was it an eagle? He had a beak that was shining black with a tip as though it had been dipped in blood-- Harry felt his knees go weak. Orod was breathtaking.

"Hogwarts," Orod was repeating. "My friend Godric. . ." there was distance in his eyes and his voice, as though torn between the present and some vivid memory which was probably infinitely more appealing than whatever the present could possibly offer. "Godric was a good man."

"Godric Gryffindor," Ariaah nodded, "yes, I have read so many times."

"So few left," he continued. "So few. . . *good* men." And then his attention returned. "You know, of course, that he has returned. The forest is full of the news."

"Yes. The Dark Lord is back."

"You. . . these children. . . are not safe. No one is safe. . . not even myself. . ."

Their attention was rapt.

". . . a powerful man, this Dark Lord. My own power proved useless against his. . . I could not even save my friend."

Harry's heart ached. He understood entirely the pain he now saw in Orod's eyes. It was the same pain he'd been battling with all year. Before he could think better of it, the words were already out.

"I know the feeling."

Orod's eyes flickered over to where Harry stood. They scrutinized him and Harry never felt so small as he did at that moment.

"You?" There was a bitterness in his voice. "A boy? How can *you* know *anything*?"

"Because it was Voldemort who killed my parents when I was a baby, and just last year, a good friend of mine. I could do nothing to stop it."

"Last year? But he has only just returned."

"Yes. And I was there and *watched* him as he came back."

Orod said nothing for a long time. And then. . .

"Ah. So *you're* the boy they call Harry Potter."

To have a *Gryphon* know his name was almost too much to bear.

"You and your friends. . . you all three attend Hogwarts?"

"Yes." And then, hoping it was the right thing to do, added "and we're all Gryffindors." *Well, it's not *entirely* a lie. . .*

If it was possible for a Gryphon to smile, then Orod did just that.

"I see. . ." he yawned and stretched his claws. "And you would like for me to help you home?"

"We would"

He nodded. "Very well. You belong to the House of my friend. Were he alive, I am sure he would be most in favor of my helping you. And that is why I shall. Even in death, I am loyal to my Godric."

Harry and Ron smiled at each other, bursting with pride at that moment to be Gryffindors-- Draco was staring at the floor.

"*Thank* you, Master Orod," said Snape.

Orod rose to his full height. "Come. We've a long flight ahead of us."

They left the den and went back into the night air, the sky now a blanket of stars.

"A ride on a *Gryphon*," Ron was saying. "*Wicked!*" Indeed, this mishap of theirs was beginning to have some very nice upsides! Most people never even get to see a Gryphon in their lifetime, and they were about to take a ride atop one! Oh, and wait until they told Hermione about their evening with the Forest Fairies. And Sophie would be *so* very jealous to hear--

"Well, well, well. Look what we have here."

The entire company froze. Harry whipped around and saw, to his complete amazement, someone he knew. Just what she was doing there was uncertain, but plain as day, Imelda Banbury was standing before them.

"Imelda?" Harry cried in disbelief. He broke out into a smile and made a start for her, but Snape grabbed his shoulder.

"*That* is not Imelda Banbury."

Imelda laughed a bone-chilling squeal. "You catch on quickly, dear Severus."

"What are you doing here, Delphine?"

Delphine! Delphine Lestrange!

"But isn't it obvious, Aria?" She laughed. "It's called revenge, dear."

Aria and Snape were reaching for their wands, but Delphine was faster on the draw. There was a blinding light, a scream, and then nothing.

Chapter Seventeen: Voldemort's Lair

Harry hit the cold ground with violent force. Pain surged throughout his body, but he forced himself up nonetheless. Wherever he was, it was cold. He was standing inside an enormous cave, which reached into a dome. At first Harry thought he was the only one in the entire cave until he heard a voice he knew so very well . . .

"Harry!"

That's when the nightmare began.

He turned around and saw. . . *Sophie!* Sophie was standing not ten feet behind him, her hands bound in chains, and beside her stood . . . *Imelda*, bound in chains as well. In fact. . . Aiah, Snape, Ron and Draco all had their hands tied together, standing in a straight line.

The woman who looked so similar to Imelda walked in front of them like a Drill Sergeant, a satisfied smile spread across her face.

"Look at them Harry. Don't they look wonderful?"

Harry was staring at her aghast. Something came rushing back to mind-- Sirius' words just as though he'd spoken them yesterday: '*She never told you who her sister is? Her sister is Delphine Lestrange. . . it was such a disgrace to the Banburys. . .*' But not once had Imelda ever mentioned the fact that Delphine and her were twin sisters.

"I assume by your obvious state of confusion that Imelda, my dearest, has most likely told you that I am dead. Not *entirely* true, though as anyone will tell you, one is worse than dead whilst in Azkaban. And that is where I have been for the past *fourteen* years, Harry. . . suffering. . ."

"Y-you got out of Azkaban months ago. . . why have you waited until now. . ."

She looked thoughtful. "Good question, Harry. I've been. . . busy. Actually, you and I have met before Harry. Oh, yes. Over Christmas break, don't you remember? You came to my house for a Christmas party that I threw for you! Remember? All your friends came?"

"No--"

"Yes, that was me." She laughed. "Oh but it was just too easy. Of course, the first person I wanted to visit after my Lord liberated my husband and I was my dear, sweet sister Imelda." She stroked Imelda's cheek-- Imelda's eyes were furious and she leaned backwards, away from Delphine's touch. "She was easy to find. I met her just outside the ministry of magic. . . and, well, I overpowered her. And what luck: the timing couldn't have been better.

Apparently, Harry, the street where you live is quite inaccessible. How fortunate that Imelda had been securing a pass that very night to add her home to the Floo Network. I thought 'Delphine, you might be able to do some wonderful things with this.' So, I decided that I would take her place-- now that I had a way in *and* out. The pass was only supposed to have been valid for one day, but. . . it was quite easy to have. . . misplaced."

"You *took her place*?" Harry was in disbelief.

"Wonderful, isn't it? Of course Roger and Sophie were concerned-- I was much thinner than Imelda, I looked older-- in fact I believe that Sophie wrote to you about this sudden change, did she not? But, just as our parents always said, I am so like her. Mannerisms, you know, the little things. And what a treat for me: my first night as Imelda Banbury, I had the honor of meeting the one and only Harry Potter."

She was standing in front of Harry now. "I must say, you aren't at all as unfortunate looking as the rest of my death eaters say you are." She brushed his hair from his eyes and Harry cringed.

"So then why didn't you just take me to Voldemort right then? At the party? Why wait all this time?"

"I admit, it was most tempting. But it wasn't time. Azkaban still needed to be liberated-- Voldemort needed myself and my husband to help in that. And I discovered how wonderful it was that my niece turned out to be every bit as sentimental as her mother. You do know that she keeps every letter you've written to her, don't you Harry? She has a special folder for

them. If I didn't know any better, I would say she was rather fond of you." She stroked Sophie's hair and Imelda shouted at the top of her lungs.

"YOU'LL NOT TOUCH HER!"

Delphine's eyes were piercing as she stared down her sister. "Don't-- interrupt-- me."

Imelda's mouth was thin and angry, but she said nothing.

Delphine turned back to Harry. "Your letters proved quite useful, Harry. Why, I even learned that Snape had finally returned to Hogwarts. And not only that, but you, Aria Warwick *and* Severus Snape would all be on a trip together! Why, I could not have planned it better myself! So I waited. Voldemort, oh he was most pleased with this turn of events, and we planned this-- this meeting tonight." She sighed. "I must admit, Sophie, I'm going to miss number three Privet Drive. After years of suffering, it was good to have such a comfortable home to rest in. . . such a kind family. . ." her smile broadened, "such a nice husband--"

"KEEP him OUT of this!" Sophie shouted.

Delphine's eyes stared right through her. "Don't worry about your pitiful muggle of a father."

She twisted out a smile. "And by the way dearest niece-- you'll always be a muggle to me.

Yes, you were fortunate enough to have been given your pathetic little powers by Harry--"

"WHAT?!?" Harry shouted, not believing his ears. "What do you mean?!?"

Delphine paused and raised a brow. "You truly mean that you don't *know*?" Her laugh filled the air. "Why Harry! Oh, I suppose Sophie was too *embarrassed* to tell you. . ." she sniggered. "Good thing I made a point of reading her letters and her diary, otherwise I wouldn't have known either."

"Sophie, *what* is she talking about?"

Sophie looked petrified. "Harry. . . you remember that day before term started? When you were showing me how to hold a wand? And you recited that incantation?"

"Yes?" He said, still not understanding.

"Well-- I . . . didn't *realize* what that incantation meant. I thought you did--"

"No! I was just repeating what you said."

"Let me refresh your memory," said Delphine. She repeated the spell that Harry heard only once before: "*Revericus Totalus*."

Professor Snape gasped. "The Trans Charm. . ." Delphine nodded. "Correct, Professor. It was cast very feebly, thank goodness, but it was enough to transfer a bit of Harry's magical ability to Sophie."

"But *how*," Snape insisted, "If Harry cast a spell like *that*, he would have surely been--"

"There's a Hiberitus charm at my home," Imelda explained. "I moved next-door to Harry on an assignment to monitor black magic in the area of Surrey. All of us in the Special Investigations department have Hiberitus charms on our houses, for many reasons."

"Yet again, *another* convenience I was most appreciative of, especially since I had to hide my dear sister there for such a long time." She took a breath. "So *that* is why I waited to take you, young Harry. And because, well, you have to admit this is *infinitely* more exciting. Besides, I wanted an audience for my first killing in fourteen years."

"YOU MONSTER" Sophie screamed.

"Tut, tut. Now, is that any way to talk to your Aunt?"

"I don't have an Aunt! She's dead!"

"Oh, but I wasn't dead-- I was *worse than dead*." She bent down and spoke right into Sophie's face. "There are horrors in Azkaban that you can't even *imagine*, little girl. And I suffered there for fourteen years thanks to your *mother*. . ." she paused.

Sophie's eyes were welling with tears, and Delphine was now standing overtop her, staring her down.

"You think that I am going to kill you, don't you. . . But I won't. . ." her voice was now hushed-- barely audible. "No, don't worry Sophie, I'm not going to take your life. . . just your mothers'."

In flurry of movement, Delphine had pointed her wand at Imelda and yelled "*Avada Kerdava*"-- green light shot from the wand and hit Imelda in the chest. Imelda's scream filled the hall, bouncing off the cold walls and then-- it stopped. Almost as abruptly as it had begun and that was the horrifying part-- the sudden silence. Imelda slumped to the ground and lay still, lifeless, her eyes staring upward at nothing-- just as Cedric's had.

Imelda was dead.

Sophie screamed. She ran and collapsed at her mothers' side, grabbing her hand.

"MUM! Mummy, please, wake up! PLEASE wake up! Mum, don't leave me! Please, come back, Mum I love you! Please, you can't leave me when I love you so much! MUM! NO!"

Sophie screamed hysterically, choking on her tears. She threw her body over her mothers, pulled her head close to her bosom and rocked gently back and forth. The only thing that was heard for several minutes were Sophie's wails and screams.

Harry couldn't watch. He closed his eyes, feeling faint. . . the screams pounded in his ears, eating away at his sanity. He felt tears forming in his own eyes. . . Imelda. . . she was the closest thing to a mother he had ever known. . . and . . . know he knew what his own mother must have looked like when *she* died. . .

Delphine's eyes were closed as well, and she was smiling. "Ahhhh. . . such a *beautiful* sound, is it not? That is what I went to sleep hearing every night of my life for the past fourteen years, Harry. . . such gorgeous lullaby. . . isn't it?"

She was stark raving mad--a lunatic. But all Harry could concentrate on was Sophie--her face soiled with tears. And then. . . all he could *feel* was anger.

"murderer" he said in a low, trembling voice.

"Oh, is *that* what I am? My husband will be most disappointed to discover it. . ."

Harry reached for his wand, but Delphine simply said "Expeliarmus" casually, and he was disarmed.

"I haven't time for games like this," she said, suddenly serious. "My Lord is coming-- ahhh, yes, he's coming. Severus? You feel it too?"

Snape was staring dead into her eyes, betraying no emotion except for complete disgust.

Harry, who was seething from rage, managed to say the words, "Let them free." He pointed towards his friends. "You've done what you came to do. You're going to give me to Voldemort-- now let them go."

"You're not *serious*--"

"I am. They've done nothing to you--"

"True, but that's not the point. You see-- Voldemort is the one who is going to kill you, correct? Now, since these are all people who apparently care for you, My Lord would find it *most* amusing if they were around to watch. I could not deprive him of that pleasure!"

Harry felt as though he could hardly contain his anger.

Delphine smiled. "You'd like to kill me right now, wouldn't you?"

His eyes detected a movement behind her-- Sophie had risen from her mothers' side and walked, quietly, to Snape's side. She pointed her wand at his chains and-- Snape was now free. He pulled out his wand from his robes and walked calmly up behind Delphine.

Harry hadn't answered her question.

"Well, here is my wand Harry." She handed him the wand. "If you want me dead so much, then please-- be my guest."

Harry held the wand, still staring into her eyes. He could see Snape now right behind her, his wand extended.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't." Harry said dryly.

Their eyes met. And then she laughed-- that high pitched laugh that echoed off the walls.

"Go on, then, please. Kill me if you like, though you really should let me kill you now and get it over with. He's coming for you and only *I* can spare you unimaginable agony. . . ." Delphine started to laugh again. "Exactly as I suspected. You haven't the nerve to kill me--"

"No," said Snape calmly from behind her. "But I have."

Delphine spun around to face Snape who pointed his wand at her chest, muttered something under his breath, and in the next instant a red light shot from his wand and Delphine was knocked back five feet and landed on the floor where she lay motionless.

Snape was breathing heavily, and then his eyes met Harry's.

Harry let out a smile. "Professor Snape. . . I can't believe you did that. . ."

"Nor can I," said Snape in disbelief, then returned Harry's smile.

"And nor can I."

The entire company turned around.

"*Father!*" Draco shouted. "What are you doing here?!"

Lucius Malfoy had entered the cave, and was standing overtop Delphine's dead body. He was dressed in the garb of the death eater-- his black hood pulled back. "Oh dear, Severus. As though you weren't in *enough* trouble with Our Lord as it is, you went and killed his favorite servant. He isn't going to like that *at all*." He pointed his wand and shouted 'Expeliarmus' and both Snape and Harry were blown backward. In the next instant, shackled and chains appeared not only on Snape, but this time on Harry as well. Their bodies rose off the ground about three feet, so their feet dangled haplessly below them, except for Draco.

Lucius snapped his fingers and Draco was unchained. "Draco," said Lucius, finally acknowledging his son's presence, "it's most unfortunate that you are here to see this. But then perhaps it is all for the best. To see the power of our world in all its glory. Look-- here come my brothers, Draco-- *our* brothers. And our Lord with them."

Draco stood dazed for a moment, unsure of what to do. Ron and Harry in particular was studying him with keen interest. If it had been two days ago, they would have naturally assumed he would proudly take his stand alongside his father. But now-- now they both waited to see what he would do. . .

From where Harry stood, he saw only fear in Draco's eyes-- and why shouldn't he have been frightened? What was coming into the cave at that moment would be frightening to anyone. From a narrow passageway at the far end of the cave came a steady stream of black-cloaked men, all carrying torches. A man, tall and slender leading them. . . a man who, even from a great distance, had visible beady red eyes. . .

Lord Voldemort.

Voldemort approached Harry, smiling. There was color to his cheeks this time. He looked more human than he had the day of his re-birth, although having said that, there was really nothing human about his form whatsoever. He looked more like a snake than anything else, that flat nose and those fire red eyes. . . he was the most *inhuman* form one could possibly imagine.

And the voice. . . is it possible it could have grown more unnerving?

The Death Eaters-- and there must have been a hundred of them-- formed four organized rows behind them, the torches levitating beside them as they stood with their arms crossed.

"Which of you killed my Delphine? Come now, speak up. Or you shall all die now.

Cooperate, and you add minutes to your lives. But they are only minutes."

Professor Snape spoke bravely. "You know it was I, Voldemort."

"Ah, Severus, my old friend. It has really been much too long." Voldemort's eyes surveyed the prisoners before him. "And Ariah-- but don't you look as lovely as ever. I see that I have already missed Imelda, what a shame, I would have loved to have chat with her. . . and these two children I am not familiar with. I assume they are good friends of yours, Harry? I daresay, your best?"

He bent down and Harry felt ill-- Voldemort *smelled of death*.

"I do believe you have met most of my friends. Of course, you already know Lucius-- you met Delphine-- that tall man next to Lucius was Delphine's husband. Marcus. Marcus? Say hello to the boy who helped kill your wife."

Harry recoiled and took a step backward.

Voldemort laughed. "And. . . oh yes, Peter Pettigrew, you know of course. And. . . oh, there are too many, really, to mention."

He turned to face the crowd of Death Eaters. "My Children!" He shouted, his voice carrying over the room. "Tonight is a night that we have all waited for many years!" His voice was shrill and it made Harry want to run away screaming. "Tonight, for the first night, we are all gathered together-- a family united once more! A family that will remain united always!"

The Death Eaters let out a shout of agreement.

"You have suffered years in my behalf. And I will not forget you for it! I will remember it always! And tonight, we, all of us, forge a new beginning together! Tonight we grab fate by its' hand and turn its tables. TONIGHT WE RETURN!"

There was more shouting.

"And here with us, we have three of those who have been foremost in trying to see to our end-- to our demise! Three of which failed, most miserably, and were brought here to us tonight by the woman who was faithful to your lord as no other servant has ever been-- who at the moment lies slain by the hand of one of these three."

There were murmurs and shouts of disbelief.

"And tonight. . . WE WILL SEE THAT JUSTICE IS DELIVERED!"

The Death Eaters were ecstatic.

"Of course-- one of these has the power to end this all right now." Voldemort turned to Harry.

"I'll tell you what, Harry. Let us play a little game. I will give you the opportunity to save one life-- one life in exchange for yours. Or *all* of your friends go free *and* you keep your life."

"What must I do?"

"It is simple: you just join myself."

Harry stared at him. "You've asked me this before, Voldemort. My answer hasn't changed."

"Ahh. I suspected your answer would be thus. Harry Potter-- so noble and so just."

Harry felt a chill sweep over him as Voldemort smiled and extended his bony, tentacle-like fingers. Harry's body floated to the floor, landing directly at Voldemort's feet. Those horrifying, monster-like fingers grazed Harry's cheek, Voldemort's thin smile spread across his face.

"Let me show you what I think of your nobility and your justice, Harry Potter." He put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Come-- tell me. Which of these do you care for the most? Please, point me to him-- that I may kill him for you."

"*NO*," Harry shouted and tried to move away, but Voldemort held his grasp and placed his hand on Harry's. "Point me to him, Harry-- which one is he. . ." Voldemort closed his eyes and then another smile. "So *he* is your best friend. . ." he opened his eyes and stared pointedly on Ron.

"*LEAVE HIM ALONE!*" Harry shouted. But it was too late. Voldemort wasted no time. He pointed his wand at Ron and yelled "*CRUCIO*".

Still bound in chains, Ron was forced to the floor and writhed in pain, screaming. The sound of Ron's screaming was enough on it's own to kill Harry.

"STOP IT, I SAY!"

"VOLDEMORT, HE'S ONLY A BOY!" Snape was staring at horror at Ron's writhing, twitching body.

"Only a boy. . ." He repeated. . . "Yes, he is at that. What was I thinking, Severus? I'm glad you've helped me see my error. I meant, of course, young Miss Banbury."

"**STOP!**" Harry was in tears as he watched Sophie fall to the ground, just as Ron had. She was screaming and crying, pleading for help.

It was a nightmare! It couldn't be real! It was happening again-- his friends were in danger of dying, and once again he could do nothing to stop it!

"Please! Voldemort! *Why are you doing this! WHY?*"

"Why?" He released Sophie from the curse. "You ask me *why*? My dead servant on the floor-- that's why. The hundred men in this room who have suffered for fourteen years-- that's why. Because of my horrific, painful past existence-- that's why. All of these things have one thing in common: *You*, Harry. You know as well as I that none of your friends would be here, on the verge of death, if it weren't for you. That's why I'm doing this, Harry. Because of *you*." Harry was paralyzed with fear. History was repeating itself once again.

I can't do anything! I can't do anything to save anyone--

Oh yes there is.

But what? He was arguing with the thoughts storming his brain. *I don't have a wand. . .*

Follow what you're feeling . . . What he was feeling was anger-- a consuming anger. A strange sensation that he hadn't felt since the night Dudley had punched him in his stomach. His hands were clenched in fists and there was murder in his eyes. A strange tingle traveled throughout his body, like an electrical current, and without even thinking, he outstretched his left arm, his fingers spread open. He didn't even realize what he was doing until the words were already out there, ringing in his ears:

"Expeliarmus!"

Voldemort's eyes widened. His left hand holding his wand was shaking. . . Harry could see the whites of his knuckles clutching it with all his might.

Harry took another breath and shouted at the very top of his lungs, so loud that he was sure it would kill him. . .

"EXPELIARMUS!"

It was as though an invisible force had thrown Voldemort backwards onto the floor. His wand slipped from his hand and flew into Harry's grasp. Harry's heart was racing and he was not thinking about anything else except getting his friends out of where they were at any costs. He pointed his wand towards where his friends stood still bound in chains and shouted: "LIBRIATUS!"

They fell to the floor, and in the blink of their eye, their wands were out and pointed at Voldemort.

Harry held Voldemort's wand threateningly pointed at his neck. Voldemort stared at Harry, barely able to believe it.

"If any one of your Death Eaters so much as *points* their wand at myself or my friends, I will kill you now. Without any hesitation."

The Death Eaters were ready to kill, but Voldemort shouted, "Death Eaters, hold your fire."

He was smiling-- *Oh why must he keep smiling. . .*

"Impressive Harry. My, my, you *are* full of surprises." He chuckled. "Which is an amazing coincidence, because so am I. In fact, I think it's time to introduce you to some old friends of yours. . . I can hear them even now, can't you?"

Harry was growing cold. A horrible, consuming, unbearable cold swept him. He was drowning in it. . . and he knew what it was. . .

He could hear Voldemort confirming his fears, "Yes. Dementors, Harry. And I think they have a friendly kiss they've been saving for you. . ."

Harry could see black masses filling the room-- more dementors than Harry had ever seen.

You know what you must do.

Harry straightened, the voice giving him a strengthening confidence. There was that strange surge of strength coursing through him once more and he pointed his wand towards the dementors.

It had been nearly two years since he had last performed the spell, but never before had he been so confident that he was capable of it. He closed his eyes and into his head came the happiest thought he could conjure: his friends safely at home. All of them. Nothing else in the world mattered, only that.

"EXPECTO PATRONUS!"

White blasted from the end of his wand, and Voldemort stumbled backwards. A magnificent stag gleaming brilliant white appeared and galloped towards the Dementors. Harry was regaining his senses again, warmth coming back to his body as his Patronus forged ahead. From behind him he heard Arianne and Snape both shout "EXPECTO PATRONUS" and a bright yellow and a bright blue light burst forward: an enormous ghostly eagle Patronus and a glowing vicious-looking bear Patronus joined Harry's, all three converging upon the Dementors who were sweeping their way out of the cave. The three Patronus' combined caused the room to suddenly burst into an explosion of blinding light-- it was barely visible to see even two feet!

"Arianne!" Snape called out into the confusion, "Get the kids out of here! Get them to Orod! Now!"

Harry faintly saw Arianne's figure grab what he supposed to be Ron and Sophie.

"Draco," Ron was shouting, "Come on, hurry!"

But Draco hadn't answered. And when Harry saw Arianne pulling only two children to the passageway, he knew that they had left Draco behind.

From somewhere in the light, Voldemort was shouting. "KILL THEM! ALL OF THEM!"

The Death Eaters were enraged and green light started being shot blindly. Even though the Death Eaters could not see their targets, they shot furiously, hoping to hit them.

Snape was positively *seething* with rage. "Deflector charm, Harry!"

Harry obeyed, blocking a number of blind hexes that were flying at him.

"We have to leave *now*!" Snape grabbed hold of Harry's hand-- and then he saw Draco.

"DRACO! LET'S GO!" Snape hollered.

But Lucius appeared behind him. Draco looked at his father who was staring at him through angry eyes. And then, to Harry's complete amazement, Draco threw a confused look at his father and then made a run for Snape's outstretched hand.

"DRACO!" Lucius shouted. "YOU'LL NOT LEAVE!" He pointed his wand and Draco came hurtling back to his father's side. Lucius' wand shot a hex at Snape, which he deflected.

Harry's eyes were fixed on Draco-- there, for the first time, Harry saw genuine sorrow in the eyes of someone whom he had at one time believed incapable of it.

But Snape was now pulling Harry along, making a break for the passageway at full speed-- and Harry knew why.

From the smoky haze behind them, they could hear Voldemort shouting madly, "LUCIUS! HAND ME YOUR WAND!"

Harry and Snape reached the passage entrance and began the task of running up its narrow, spiral stairwell to the outside world above. Voldemort's voice was closer now. 'Avada Kerdava' he said and a green light filled the stairwell-- he was at the passage entrance.

"Keep running," Snape bellowed. Their life literally was depending on it! They heard him again, 'Avada Kerdava' and green light filled the stairwell once again-- only this time they could *hear* the rush of green light from the wand.

He was right behind them.

They were outside now, a field of tall grass glowing under the moonlight. They ran-- and then up in the sky, Harry saw something. Was it Orod? No, the winged creature was much smaller. . . and it was rapidly descending towards them . . . and it was red. . .

"Fawkes?" Harry shouted, momentarily stunned by its sudden appearance.

Voldemort was outside and, ringing through the air, came his death curse once again.

"DOWN!" Snape yelled, throwing his body onto Harry's and the two hit the cold ground just as a green light rushed past them. Harry heard a screech pierce the sky-- it sounded as though *Voldemort had hit Fawkes!*

Snape and Harry were holding onto one another for dear life-- heaving, gasping for breath as quietly as they could.

"Are we--"

"Stay-perfectly-still," Snape whispered.

They could hear him. He was laughing now, his feet crunching along the grass. Harry peeked his eyes open just enough to see what was going on above him. Voldemort approached them and was glaring down triumphantly.

"All three," he said, blood in his voice. "Harry, Severus *and* Dumbledore."

Dumbledore, thought Harry, *What is he talking about* -- and then his answer came. Behind Voldemort, Harry saw a second Phoenix descend silently. In an instant it morphed and there, standing with his wand pointed at Voldemort's back, was Albus Dumbledore.

**

Chapter Eighteen: Flight of the Phoenix

"My Dear Voldemort. It has been much too long."

Harry could see Voldemort's face flicker-- it even looked as though he had, ever so slightly, flinched.

Harry had never seen Dumbledore as incensed as he looked at that moment: his eyes focused and menacing, the usual soft, gentility about him completely gone. No-- Dumbledore looked every bit as dangerous as Voldemort.

Snape and Harry, from their fetal positions on the ground, watched and listened intently.

Voldemort turned around to face Dumbledore ever so slowly.

"Albus."

"You didn't think I'd leave myself as such an easy target, did you? I thought you were smarter than that." His eyes drifted down to Fawkes' limp body.

"Thank you, Fawkes. That will do."

And upon that, Fawkes immediately screeched a reply and rose from the ground, flapping his wings happily next to Dumbledore.

"Very useful," said Dumbledore, "to have a pet who just happens to be immortal." He smiled.

"It looks as though I missed quite an impressive show tonight. Sorry I was late." He looked down. "Seems you've been having another chat with Harry tonight. Harry, Severus, it's quite all right-- you may get up."

Snape and Harry exchanged a look of momentary hesitance and then obeyed wordlessly.

"Fawkes will take you home."

Voldemort glared at Harry and Snape.

"Voldemort, times have changed since you've been gone. People have been given a taste of what peace of mind feels like and they *like* it. They *love* it. And they will do *anything* to protect it. I warn you now, Voldemort. If you intend to carry out your plan, be aware that the fight will not be an easy one. as dedicated as you are to your own selfish cause, we are just as dedicated, if not moreso, to *our* cause."

"You are still the foolish old man you've always been, Albus."

"And you are still the disillusioned little boy that you have always been, Voldemort. I should have thought that by now you would have realized your entire creed can not prevail--"

"We shall see about that, Albus."

"Indeed, we shall." He paused, "Fawkes-- please take Harry and Snape back. I shall be right behind you."

Harry and Snape each grabbed a tight hold of Fawkes' tail feathers.

"We will meet again, Albus," Harry heard Voldemort say as Fawkes rose gently off the ground.

"I am counting on it," was Dumbledore's answer-- they were now too high off the ground to hear anymore-- Voldemort and Dumbledore were nothing more than two specks in a field of grass-- and then they were nothing at all. Fawkes was happily soaring through the soft clouds into the middle of the night-- the air was cold, but Fawkes' body was warm and comforting.

The second Phoenix appeared at that moment, next to Fawkes, flapping his wing proudly.

Even in Phoenix form, Dumbledore still held that twinkle in his eye. His head turned to face Harry and Snape-- they held their gaze-- and then he returned, focused, on the horizon.

Harry turned to face Snape: his eyes were closed and he suddenly seemed older. His face was tired, lines visible around his mouth and eyes, his hair mangled and robes soiled--souvenirs of the past two days. Harry knew that he must have looked just as disheveled as Snape--indeed, his own hands were covered in dirt.

"P-Professor Snape," Harry said quietly, his voice rather hoarse from all the yelling and screaming of the past few hours. Snape's tired eyes opened and looked at Harry, waiting.

Harry was still uneasy when talking to Snape alone and stumbled over his words, "A-are you okay?"

Snape kept his stare on Harry and then finally answered, "Yes. . ." he paused. "Although. . . I doubt I'll be able to walk for at least a week."

Harry smiled-as did Severus! Professor *Snape* had *smiled* at Harry!

"Yeah," he agreed, "I think that all five of us are going to be with Madame Pomfrey for a couple days!"

Snape let out a low, *soft* chuckle.

And then Harry frowned. "Professor Snape . . . Draco-"

"Draco's father is a very controlling man. Draco doesn't have the freedom that you think he has, living with someone like Lucius."

"He tried to come with us-"

"Yes," Snape said slowly. "Yes, he did. I was surprised . . . even *glad* to see it. But-"

"Draco doesn't have a choice, does he. Because of who he father is."

Snape took a breath. "We *all* have a choice. It's just that for others that choice is much more difficult to make."

After that, it was only the wind that made any noise between them. The gentle flapping of Fawkes' wings and the unbearable softness of the air below him reminded Harry just how tired he was, and soon he was drifting into sleep.

*

Harry woke with a start from a very restless sleep. He was sweating, his heart pounding and for a moment he almost thought that everything had been one horrendous nightmare. Then his eyes focused on Professor Snape about five feet away from him, curled up tightly in a blanket, sleeping soundly.

He rubbed his eyes and found that he was sitting on a grassy hilltop, the moon was incredibly bright and the world below it glowed a bluish-black. The wind was frigid and Harry pulled his own blanket closer around him-where were they?

"You're supposed to be sleeping, Harry."

It was Dumbledore who was standing overtop him, putting to ease his growing sense of panic. "Where are we?"

Dumbledore laughed softly. "Well, I'm not as young as I used to be. Fawkes could have lasted the entire journey, but not myself-I needed a moment to rest. We aren't far from Hogwarts now- we will be there by daybreak." Dumbledore nodded towards Snape, "And Severus said he wouldn't mind a nap." His eyes came back to Harry. "How are you feeling?"

"Exhausted. . ." he said plainly. "absolutely exhausted."

"Little wonder with everything that you've been through these past few days. I received word that you were in the Cove, heading to see Orod and I knew that I had to reach you as soon as possible. Word was that with the freeing of Azkaban, they were headed for the Caledonian Forest directly--you were not safe there. Fawkes and I reached Orod's den too late and he told us what had happened. I sent Fawkes ahead as a decoy-"

"Because Voldemort knew your animagus is a Phoenix?"

"Correct. He'd most definitely love to get rid of myself more than all of you combined, I should think. I wish we would have arrived sooner-we cut things a bit *too* close for my blood."

"And. . . now what?"

"You mean Voldemort?" Dumbledore couldn't shake the sadness that had appeared in his eyes. "I must be honest and say. . . I don't know, Harry."

"I . . . I heard what you were saying to him about being ready to fight for our cause. It sounded like you were talking about war. . ."

"And so I was. A war is a conflict, isn't it? One side trying to conquer the other? That is precisely what Voldemort is waging--a war against everything decent and kind and *good*. I . . ."

don't know what Voldemort is thinking right now. But I do know that whatever he devises, his efforts will fail. He will not win this war, Harry."

Harry tried to be confident, but the memory of Voldemort -- his red eyes his shrill voice, seeing his friends suffer, watching his friends die-- it was all too much. For the moment, the situation seemed completely hopeless.

"How can you be so sure," Harry asked quietly.

Dumbledore appeared momentarily surprised that Harry should even find it necessary to ask such a question. "Harry- the simple fact is that evil can not prevail over good. It may *seem* that way, oh yes, it may most definitely appear that way. But never, and I mean *never*, has evil ever *completely* triumphed over good." He smiled and lowered his voice to whisper, "It's in the stars, you know."

Harry and Dumbledore both laughed-- Snape stirred, mumbling in his sleep, pulling the blanket overtop his head.

"What did you think of Orod?" Dumbledore asked.

"Oh, he was beautiful!"

"Yes, stunning creatures, Gryphons. *Tremendous* strength."

"So I've heard."

"Noble and *loyal*. Loyal right down to death, and many times even after."

Harry nodded, remembering Orod's words about Godric Gryffindor. Dumbledore seemed to be on a similar vein. "Godric Gryffindor was just such a man--fearless and brave, but most importantly, he was loyal. Loyal to his friends right down to death. . ." he paused. "Much like you, Harry."

Harry cast his eyes downward, not wanting to hear himself compared to Godric Gryffindor in any way, shape or form. The very idea of drawing similarities to such a great man was, in Harry's mind, completely ridiculous.

"And really," Dumbledore was saying, "like your father before you. . ."

Harry looked up at Dumbledore--his eyes were staring directly into Harry's.

". . . and his father before him. . . and his father before him. . ."

Harry's heart skipped a beat. Exactly what was Dumbledore getting at? He sat, perfectly still, unable to move. There was an inkling gnawing away in the back of his mind, but. . . no . . .

"Professor, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying, Harry, that it's time for the truth."

"The truth?"

"About who you are."

Harry's stomach churned and he felt like he was going to be sick, suddenly mortified of what he was about to hear.

Dumbledore sighed. "I just didn't realize it would have to be so soon. Your father didn't know until he was already a man--until he was *ready*."

Harry was starting to sweat.

Dumbledore took a seat upon the soft ground, his stare wise gaze fixed most keenly upon Harry. "You know, of course, the history of our school. Salazar Slytherin and Godric Gryffindor being such fantastic rivals. . . and of course a few years ago you found out just who Slytherin's heir was."

"How could I forget?" said Harry, the memory of the chamber of secrets sending a chill through him.

"Well, did it not occur to you that Godric Gryffindor would likewise have an heir?"

Harry sat perfectly still.

"Someone descending directly from his bloodline? I knew such a man--years ago."

Please, make him stop staring at me like that . . .

"A man who went by the name George Potter. He had a son, James. But George died before he ever got to see his son James marry- he did not know that he would one day have a grandson named Harry."

Harry couldn't *breathe* let alone say anything. *This is some sort of joke. A very terrible joke--Dumbledore should know better than to joke around with things like this.*

"Yes. . . *you*, Harry. It's *you*."

Harry was feeling lightheaded-like he was going to faint on the spot.

"That's why Voldemort wanted only to kill your father and yourself--you are Godric's *heir*. James never knew of his lineage until his father told him upon his deathbed. It was difficult for James to accept and he was in his twenties! But Harry, this is important for you to know *now*. So you know that this battle with Voldemort doesn't go back just a couple of decades, but for centuries. Back to the founding of Hogwarts itself."

"I know you can't grasp this all right now, but--Sirius and I both agreed it was best for you to know. Your father never had to deal with this as you have."

Finally, his voice found him again. "But . . . I didn't ask to. . . I didn't *want* --"

"You didn't ask for this, yes, but nonetheless it is *in* you, Harry. In your blood, which is something no one can change. It's who you *are*. Just as Slytherin's blood is *in* Voldemort. Only . . ."

Dumbledore's face darkened, "Voldemort hopes to be the last heir--"

"Meaning he's still trying to find a way to become immortal?"

"Indeed. More than ever. He knows who you are, Harry. You are the last of an *entire* *creed*. The last of Helga Hufflepuff's descendants died centuries ago and Rowena Ravenclaw's heir, well, of course you remember my dear friend Nicolas Flammel? He was the last of her *bloodline*."

"So he was using the Philosopher's Stone to stay alive so that he could keep her line going . . ."

"Amazing the way everything fits, eh Harry? So of the original Hogwarts Four, there are only two descendants left: Voldemort and yourself." He leaned closer, "but I will let you in on a little secret: Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw's heirs wouldn't have stood a chance against Voldemort. But *you* do."

The words couldn't be true. Of course Dumbledore would never lie to him, but. . . oh how he wished this really *was* just a lie. He didn't want to be Gryffindor's heir anymore than he wanted to be 'famous Harry Potter.'"

"Professor, I don't want to sound horrible, but. . ." against his will, his eyes were tearing up. "I don't *want* to be this. I want nothing more than to be able to live life like Ron or Hermione -- free and not having to constantly worry about how much longer I have until he tries to attack again."

The tears fell and out came everything, "And my *friends* Dumbledore, they're in danger for even knowing me! First Cedric's death and then this year with Imelda, I almost got Ron and Sophie killed--Ariah and Snape--"

"HARRY," said Dumbledore firmly.

Harry sniffled and wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

"You *saved* your friends. They did not nearly die because of you, the nearly died because of Lord Voldemort's deplorable, obsessive grudge. If the grudge weren't with you, it would be someone else. *You* are the reason that Ron is at this moment arriving at Hogwarts and will sleep in his bed safely another night. And do not forget that." He spoke with utmost urgency.

"You can *not* doubt yourself. It is then that Voldemort can easily overcome you. Remember that your power is in your friends-you are not alone. That is the truth of it."

Harry nodded and Dumbledore brushed his hair with his fingertips. "We will see you through this. Myself, Sirius-" he smiled, "I even understand that you have had time to bond with our dear Professor Snape."

Harry coughed. "I wouldn't call it bonding. . . but. . . well, did you know that Professor Snape has a sense of *humor*?!?"

Dumbledore laughed. "Yes, he does keep it rather well hidden!"

Harry was laughing now, remembering that hilarious night spent in The Cove. "Yes, well I have to admit, we did make a great team tonight. It was more him than me, of course."

"He told me the opposite."

"Oh?"

He nodded wisely. "He accredits it all to you. Said he was merely helping." Dumbledore could see the shock on Harry's face. "You see Harry, people are not *always* what they may seem."

"Yes. So I've begun to notice." And then he remembered!

"Oh!" He cried, reaching into his robe and pulling out the long, dark wand that so resembled his own. "I . . . I don't know how to tell you this, but. . . I have Voldemort's wand."

Dumbledore removed his spectacles and stared in disbelief. "Are you . . . *certain*?"

"Yes! I . . ." he paused, "Er. . . I disarmed him, got his wand and, well, he never had a chance to get it back--"

"Then he must have yours?"

"Well, I left it behind somewhere."

Dumbledore laughed. He threw his head back and let out a roar of laughter--Snape stirred irritably in the background. "Oh," he said, wiping a tear from his eye, "Oh Harry--that is the best news that I've had for a long time."

"But Dumbledore! I can't . . . *use* it! It's, well, it's *bad*!"

"Nonsense! There is nothing wrong with the wand! It's only a wand after all. It's the *holder* of the wand who determines its worth."

Harry lowered his eyes, the wand suddenly feeling heavy in his hands. "It's the wand that killed my parents. . . and gave me my scar."

"It's safe with you, Harry. Never again will it work evil now that you have it."

There was still something else bothering him. "Did . . . did Snape tell you how I disarmed. . ."

"Yes. Severus was most anxious to tell me. And Sirius had told me earlier about your possibly being a Free-Hander." His voice was soft and understanding. "Voldemort inherited his gift of parselmouth from Slytherin and you have inherited the ability of being a Free-Hander from Gryffindor. You realize that doing something of that magnitude-- disarming someone at voice command only-- takes a great deal of *strength*. Most fall faint after merely attempting it, let alone attempting it *successfully*. And I understand you next produced a Patronus, did you not?"

Harry nodded.

"Well, I should think that perhaps now Voldemort will think twice about picking a fight with you." Dumbledore winked. "Now I think it's best if we get on our way once more. Minerva will be in a frightful panic until we return--as will Sirius and Hagrid. Sirius was especially angry that I would not let him accompany me--hasn't had one wink of sleep since you've been away."

Everything inside of Harry lit up. "Sirius! Then he's *alive*!"

Dumbledore nodded wisely. "Yes, quite. Thanks to Hagrid, the rest of the students made it back to Hogwarts safely and after spending the night under Madame Pomfrey's supervision, his leg is quite healthy."

Harry smiled upon hearing that-- it had been the perfect remedy for everything that was ailing him. He was going home now! Sirius would be there waiting for him. He took hold of Fawkes' tail feathers once again, Professor Snape following suit, still in a sleepy stupor, and they took flight once more into the horizon, the sun rising ever so slowly in the distance.

*

Harry woke up in his dorm room, daylight shining through the window.

"All right, Harry?"

It was Ron, sitting on the edge of Harry's bed.

"*Ron*," Harry cried and sat straight up, throwing his arms around his friend. Harry was weak, and his body ached, but he'd never been more thrilled to see anyone in his life. "Thank goodness- you all right then?"

"Yeah," he said smiling. "Sore as hell, though. Not exactly the most *comfortable* ride, Gryphons."

Harry couldn't help his silly grin--Ron was *alive*. It was enough to make him want to cry!

Ron was staring at Harry with a similar smile. "But apparently a lot faster than Phoenix's. What took you lot so long?"

"Oh, we took a breather," he said dismissively, "but you're okay, that's what's important! And Sophie? Where is she?"

"Oh, Minerva put her up for the night in a guest room and Hermione stayed up with her."

"How is she doing?"

"Sophie? Oh hell, Harry, she looked horrible when I saw her. I mean. . . last night was a nightmare."

"That's putting in lightly."

"Is this . . . what it's like for you."

Harry raised his brow.

"You know what I mean. I haven't slept a wink all night--all I could think of was *him*. Harry, those *eyes*. And all I could hear was . . . the *screaming*. And then I remembered that you've been through this before. Is . . . is this what it's like for you every day? Trying to live with it all?"

Harry nodded slowly. "Yes. You never really forget it."

And then Ron got out what he *really* wanted to know. "How. . . did you do that? With Voldemort? Disarming him without a wand?"

Harry looked down. "I. . . don't know. I didn't ever realize what I was doing until it was already done."

"Yeah, but *how*? You didn't have a wand!"

Harry couldn't look at Ron. Everything that Dumbledore had told him during the night was still fresh in his mind-- being the heir of Godric Gryffindor. . .

But Ron wasn't to know anything of this. Harry could barely admit it to himself let alone anyone else.

He shook his head. "Ron, I honestly don't know how. Believe me, I wish I did. I suppose it was just . . . the energy of the moment."

"Like adrenaline?"

"Yeah-that's right."

Ron seemed to accept this, although Harry could tell he was still turning over ideas in his head. "Er. . . I was supposed to come in here to let you know that Sirius wants to see you. He was here at your bedside all this morning, but you didn't wake up."

Harry jumped to his feet. "Where is he?"

"His classroom, of course."

Harry threw on some trousers and a shirt. "He was here this morning?"

"Yeah. So was Hermione-- she wanted so much to talk to you, but didn't have the heart to wake you up."

"How is Hermione," he asked, running a comb through his hair.

"She seemed to be . . ."Ron paused and then grinned deviously. "she seemed to be *very* happy to see me."

Harry grinned and punched Ron on his shoulder. "You sly dog. I'll catch you in a bit-- gotta talk to Sirius!" And with that, he bolted down the corridor, out of the common room, down

the staircases and made a beeline for Sirius' office. He burst in through the door, huffing, and spotted Sirius sitting on the side of his desk.

"*Sirius!*" Harry cried and ran to his side, throwing his entire weight on top of him. Sirius' arms held Harry tightly and protectively--

"Harry," he said warmly, "thank *heavens* you're all right! Let me look at you!"

Sirius studied his Godson. "Oh, you look a fright--"

"I'm *fine* Sirius, but *you!* Your leg--"

"Still a bit stiff, but Madame Pomfrey really is a miracle worker."

"I was worried sick! I didn't know if you'd--"

"I was perfectly fine, thanks to Hagrid here."

Harry looked up and found Hagrid smiling down at him. In Harry's excitement, he hadn't even noticed Hagrid who'd been standing there plain as day (which is really saying something since Hagrid wasn't exactly easy to miss!)

"Hagrid!" Harry shouted and landed him with a similar bear hug.

Hagrid chuckled. "There, there, Harry."

And then it hit him-- *Hagrid* still thought Sirius Black was a *serial killer!* He hated Sirius Black!

Harry broke away from Hagrid, looking at Sirius apprehensively. "Er. . . Hagrid, d-do you know about who Professor Gray is--"

"Oh, aye, o' course! Dumbledore told me when term started! Told me the whole story, he did. Have to tell ya, I was dead *relieved* to hear it. 'Specially because it means you have real family, Harry."

Harry sighed in relief, and then turned back to Sirius. "I really thought I'd lost you, Sirius."

"*You?* Harry, *I* was the one who was worried sick! I thought I'd lost *you!*"

"Well, I promise that I'll never leave you, if you promise the same."

"It's a bargain," said Sirius and they hugged again.

"Well!" said Hagrid, "I have ter get goin'-- gotta finish up preparin' all yer finals, Harry!" He winked and then left the two alone.

Sirius' smile was soft, and his gaze was fixed on Harry. "Dumbledore-- he told me everything. And I am sorry to hear about Imelda. She was a wonderful lady."

Harry's throat tightened at the very mention of that name.

"And, I also hear that he. . . told you. About . . . well, about you know what."

Harry nodded.

"I just want you to know that I'm here, if you ever need to talk. It's not an easy thing to deal with. . ." he paused. "I was the first person that James told once he found out about who he was and I remained the only person-- save for Lily, of course."

"I will, Sirius." And then he paused, "Does. . . this mean that you're staying on as the Defense professor?"

Sirius bowed. "At your service. Finally putting to rest that silly superstition about the position, eh?"

"Oh everyone is gonna be thrilled! You're the best we've had since. . . Lupin!" He lowered his voice, "actually, you're *better* than Lupin, but don't tell him I said that!"

Sirius laughed and there was a knock on the door. Professor McGonagall entered.

"Oh!" said Harry, smiling upon sight of her, "Hello, Professor!"

"Good Afternoon, Harry," she said brightly. "It is indeed good to have you back with us!"

"Thank you, Professor."

"I'm here to tell you that Professor Dumbledore wishes to see you in his office, Mr. Potter. I hope you'll pardon the intrusion, Professor Gray?"

"Oh course," he said.

Harry waved good-bye to Sirius and followed McGonagall outside and down the hall towards the great Gargoyle entrance to Dumbledore's office. She announced the password ("Dillweed Pepper"), the Gargoyle moved aside, and Harry walked up the escalator-like staircase alone.

He entered Dumbledore's charmingly untidy office and found him to be already waiting-- as was Sophie.

"Sophie!" Harry cried, his heart breaking upon seeing her face-- tired, drawn and eyes devoid of their usual magnetic spark.

"Hi Harry," she said, standing up, somewhat unsteadily.

It was the most unbelievable sensation: everything around him seemed to disappear into unimportance upon sight of her. And his pulse-- it was beating just as rapidly as it had last night when he was face to face with Voldemort! Not knowing or caring what was appropriate for such a moment, he came to her side and threw his arms around her.

Sophie's body fell comfortably into his embrace-- as though it had always belonged there. He buried his face into her soft hair and whispered quietly, "I'm sorry, Sophie. I'm *so* sorry. . ." He could feel her tighten her grip upon him and her voice trembled as she spoke. "I'm just s-so glad you're here-- you have no idea--"

"No, I *do*," he said, pulling away to get a look at her face: her eyes were red and it looked like she must have been aching from fatigue. "I understand Sophie, and-- I'm here for you."

His own eyes were welling with tears and he cleared his throat, turning his attention to Dumbledore who had probably anticipated such a meeting and had been waiting patiently.

"Good afternoon, Sir."

"Hello, Harry. Feeling better today?"

"Oh yes-- thanks."

"Harry, I've called you here to ask you if you would perhaps accompany myself and Miss Banbury tomorrow morning. I am coming with Miss Banbury to inform her father of the situation and I understand that he is quite fond of you and you are of him?"

Harry nodded. "Yes-- yes and of course I'll go."

"Excellent. Then please meet us here at half past nine tomorrow morning. I have already sent an owl ahead to Mr. Banbury and he is expecting us there." He turned to Sophie. "That is all, Miss Banbury. Professor McGonagall is waiting downstairs to take you back to your room-- I believe Miss Granger will be up for a visit soon."

Sophie nodded and managed a smile-- albeit weakly-- and then turned to leave.

"Harry," said Dumbledore once she'd gone, "Have you read the news today?"

He handed Harry a copy of the morning's Daily Prophet. The headline read:

MINISTRY TO PREVENT POSSIBLE DISASTER.

In a bold move, the Ministry of Magic stormed a cave in the Caledonian Forest, which was housing a meeting of Dark Lord supporters. The meeting suggests that the dark movement is once again on the rise. Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic, is quoted as saying "the re-appearance of the Dark Lord himself is not only possible, but probable." He was quick to add, "however, the deplorable attempted deeds of the death eaters were thwarted thanks to the ministry, and we are currently launching a massive campaign to squelch all dark activity. There was one casualty to the Ministry: Imelda Banbury who served the ministry Special Investigations' department for over twelve years."

"Unbelievable," Harry breathed. "How can they *print* this rubbish?"

"It's called saving face." Dumbledore sighed. "At least Fudge knows that now the truth is undeniable. He has even asked to meet with me."

"I bet he's scared out of his wits."

"He's brought it upon himself. Everything that happened this weekend could have most likely been avoided had the ministry been on *top* of things. Now they'll be running to catch up."

Dumbledore shook his head and then said, "Tomorrow. Half past nine, Harry."

"Yes, of course. Thank you sir."

**

Chapter Nineteen: Willow Vale

The next morning, Harry was awake at the crack of dawn, as was Ron who'd been unable to sleep as well. They were the first in the great hall for breakfast, and Harry excused himself early to go up to meet with Dumbledore and Sophie. Dumbledore informed him that they would be traveling via Floo Powder, as it was the fastest method and not to mention, the *only* way of getting into Privet Drive.

Harry cringed: he *hated* Floo Powder with a passion. Dumbledore explained how to travel with the powder to a very apprehensive looking Sophie. He stepped her into the fireplace and she recited "Three Privet Drive" as loudly as she could and with a great burst of green smoke, she vanished. Dumbledore followed which left Harry. He was soon once again whizzing past an endless lane of fireplace grates.

He came tumbling out of the fireplace at three Privet Drive and he hopped to his feet, coughing, shaking the soot from off his clothes. Dumbledore and Sophie were already in the Banbury's living room, and he was ever so relieved that he hadn't ended up in Knockturn Alley again!

"SOPHIE!"

Roger had fallen to his knees and Sophie plunged herself into her fathers' embrace, sobbing into his shirt. Roger was stroking Sophie's hair, telling her over and over again how much he loved her. Harry watched, absolutely crushed at the sight of Roger on his knees.

"Oh my darling girl! I've been worried sick--"

"I'm here, Dad. I'm here."

Roger finally stood up and acknowledged the other two guests in his home. "Harry," he said, grabbing his hand. "It's good to see you, my boy."

"And you as well, Sir."

"Mr. Banbury?" said Professor Dumbledore softly.

"Yes-- hello." He extended his hand.

"My name is Albus Dumbledore-- headmaster at Hogwarts."

"Oh, yes, I've heard much about you. Won't you please sit down?"

They did so-- Sophie's hand firmly clasped to her fathers. Dumbledore removed his spectacles and gave Roger his utmost attention. His voice was silk as he spoke, and Roger sat tall, as if he already knew what was coming.

"Mr. Banbury, we have identified the person who abducted your wife and daughter two days ago."

Roger put his hand to his heart. "Thank God. Who was he?"

"It was actually your wife's sister-- Delphine Lestrangle."

"Delphine," Roger whispered. "But-- how? I thought she was locked away in your wizard prison."

"Indeed, she was until this past Christmas. I am to assume that you are familiar with whom the Dark Lord is?"

Roger nodded. "He-- he hasn't returned . . ."

"I'm afraid so. And your sister-in-law and her husband were freed from prison at his hand. It was then that Delphine came to visit Imelda-- only what she did next was unthinkable. She hid Imelda-- kept her a captive here, in her own home-- and assumed her place."

"You mean that all this time Imelda has really been --"

"Delphine. Yes."

Roger ran his hands through his hair. "How could I have not known!"

"You mustn't blame yourself, Mr. Banbury. You were at the mercy of some very powerful dark magic. No man would have been any wiser in your shoes--not even a wizard."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "She had devised a horrific plan, Delphine did. She'd wanted

to deliver your wife, Harry here and two professors from my school into the hands of the Dark Lord."

"Harry is the reason that I'm here right now, Dad," said Sophie. "He saved all our lives."

Mr. Banbury smiled at Harry and then took a shaky breath. "All your lives?"

The room fell terribly quiet. Dumbledore's words were soft and gentle. "I am sorry, Mr.

Banbury. I wish I could have arrived sooner, but Delphine had already taken your wife."

Harry's gaze was stuck on the floor, unable to look at Mr. Banbury. The sound was horrible enough-- he could hear Mr. Banbury's muffled whimpers, the desperate attempt to keep inside what must, inevitably, come out. And when he finally did find the courage to look at him, he found Roger and Sophie embracing each other, rocking back and forth gently, tears streaming down their faces. Much like the silent tears that were finding their way down Harry's own face.

It was a painful afternoon. Roger received an Urgent Owl from Imelda's parents to let him know they would be coming by that very afternoon. Harry was sure it would be to discuss funeral arrangements. After Roger phoned his own mother and father with the news, and Mr. and Mrs. Banbury senior arrived towards the late afternoon directly from Bexhill, absolutely distraught with the news. Imelda's parents-- Rosalinda and Ambrose Arlington-- burst through the fireplace just after four o' clock, and the family sat together in the living room.

The conversation was quiet and somber and peppered with occasional outbursts from Roger's mother and Rosalinda Arlington. Sophie looked emotionally drained and Harry decided perhaps it might be a good idea to step out for some fresh air. They disappeared into the backyard, Sophie still trembling somewhat.

"*Harry?*" Harry spun around to find Dudley Dursley peering over the fence. Harry had completely forgotten about Dudley. It had seemed like years since he'd seen him and there was a split second that Harry even forgot Dudley wasn't exactly the same person he'd grown up with.

"Dudley--"

"What are you *doing* here? You're supposed to be at school!" He looked at Harry, then at Sophie, then at Harry again. "What-- something's happened, hasn't it. Sophie. . . what's wrong?"

"Come 'round the fence," said Harry.

Dudley did so, marching up to them, concern written all over his *incredibly* thinner face.

"It's Mrs. Banbury," said Harry. "She's. . . she's died."

Dudley's mouth fell. He blinked stupidly for a moment and then, hesitantly, reached out for Sophie. Sophie hugged him and Dudley closed his eyes.

"No, Sophie, it can't be. . ." he opened his eyes again and looked to Harry for help. "How? What's happened?"

Harry hadn't wanted to, but he went ahead and unfurled the tragic story about Imelda and her evil twin sister. Dudley was still in a state of complete shock. "And. . . she just kidnapped you and your mother?"

Sophie nodded and, to Harry's surprise, gave them the story. "We'd all known something was wrong. Actually, Dudley, it was *your* insistence that something wasn't right with her and that she probably needed help that really got me worried. I came home early from school on Tuesday and. . . I just had a bad feeling. I caught her in my room-- reading my letters and I knew it wasn't my Mum. Right then and there. She laughed-- a laugh I'd never heard before. She said 'you want your mother? I'll show you to her. I think you two should spend as much time together as possible-- this being the last day of your lives.' And then the next thing I knew, I was tied up in that cave-- and then you were there Harry. . ." her tears were coming back.

Dudley's fists were clenched. "Thank God that Professor of yours killed that Delphine--" he was so enraged he could hardly speak. "Evil," he said, "pure evil. . ." He put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "And thank

God you were there, Harry. You saved her life--"

"Nonsense. . ."

"Oh quit being noble," Sophie snapped weakly. "You were brilliant. You blew everyone's minds away-- Dudley, he did some things that not even most grown wizards can't do.

Professor Dumbledore, that's the headmaster at our school, he told me so and *he's* one of the greatest Wizards of our age."

Harry thought he saw admiration in Dudley's eyes, but he didn't want to think about it any more. "That's not important," he said dismissively, "what's important is that we're still here, Sophie."

"And no one is more thankful than me," said Dudley earnestly. "Dunno what I'd do without you two."

Harry blinked at his grinning cousin.

"It's been hell with you away, Harry. Mum and Dad and I can hardly stand the sight of each other these days. And then you sent me that postcard from Mystic Pier--"

"Oh yes, I got one of those too," said Sophie with a grin.

"-Bloody fantastic! The pictures bloody *move*! Oh, I was *so* jealous of you. I tried looking it up on the Internet but I couldn't find any information on it--"

"No, of course you wouldn't find anything about it in something like the Internet."

"-- I was gonna suggest to Mum and Dad that we go *there* for summer holiday."

"They'd love that, I'm sure."

"Sophie," said Dudley, serious once again, "You're going to need help around the house--"

"Oh, Grandmum and Granddad are going to be staying for the next few days to help Dad and I about the house. They'll be here until after the funeral."

"Well-- what about your garden, eh? Harry and I will help with all that, won't we?"

Harry nodded. "Yes-- of course."

"*You'll* be going back to Hogwarts tonight with Dumbledore. Remember? You have to take the OWLs on Monday."

Harry cringed. He had *completely* forgotten about his OWLs exams. With everything that had happened, they had most definitely slipped his mind. He tried to cover over the fact that this absolutely *mortified* him and said, hopefully, "Oh, I'm sure he'll excuse me a few extra days. I . . . I don't want to leave just yet, Sophie. I want to make sure that everything is okay."

Sophie beamed. "You're much too good to me." And then with a smile at Dudley, she added, "The both of you."

Dumbledore conceded to allow Harry to stay for Imelda's funeral, and arranged that since himself, Cornelius Fudge and a few others from the Ministry would be attending as well, Harry could just continue home to Hogwarts with him after the funeral. By the end of the evening the arrangements had been made: Imelda's body was to be brought back and to be buried at the Wizarding cemetery in Essex called Willow Vale on Saturday.

Before he left, Dumbledore took Harry aside, quietly.

"Listen Harry: I think it best to tell you ahead of time, to prepare you for what you will probably see on Saturday: The Willow Vale Cemetery-- that is where your parents are."

Harry's heart stopped. "My parents. . ."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. That is where they rest."

Harry was speechless.

He squeezed Harry's shoulder supportively and then, disappeared in the fireplace after the Arlington's.

Petunia Dursley spent a better part of that evening in distress. When Harry showed up on the front porch with Dudley's arm around his shoulders, she nearly burst from anger. And then when Dudley informed her of Imelda Banbury's death, she nearly keeled over from shock.

"Her sister *killed* her?" Petunia put her hand to her chest, trying to regulate her breathing.

"Unheard of! How *tragic*! Oh, young Sophie must be devastated!

She and Vernon drilled Dudley for details on when and where the funeral would be.

"Roger says that it will be held on Saturday at the Willow Vale Cemetery in Essex at three o'clock."

"Why in Essex?"

"Well, according to Imelda's parents, that's where most of their family, the Arlington's, are buried."

Vernon snorted, "Willow Vale Cemetery? I've not heard of that before."

Dudley looked to Harry for help. Harry raised his brow as if to say 'You tell them, I'm not crazy!'

Dudley cleared his throat. "Well Dad, you haven't heard of that cemetery for a very good reason. See. . . it's a . . . *special* sort of place. Only, er, *certain* people know of its existence."

Harry nodded. "Yeah-- most people walk right by without realizing its a cemetery."

Petunia shot him an icy glare. "And how would *you* know, you presumptuous little ingrate!"

Harry stiffened. "Because *my* parents are buried there."

Petunia and Vernon went white.

"What are you saying," said Uncle Vernon slowly.

"He's *saying* that Imelda Banbury-- the woman you loved so much, Mum-- wasn't as normal as you thought." Dudley couldn't help the smile plastered on his face. "She was a witch," he said brightly.

Petunia's face darkened. "How *dare* you *lie* that way to your very own mother! Harry's influence on you has been--"

"He's telling the truth," said Harry quickly-- interrupting his Aunt for the first time in his life.

"And not just any witch, but one of the most well-respected ones in our world."

"Sophie's one as well," Dudley added happily, visibly loving his parents reactions. "How does that strike your fancy, eh mummy dear? It turns out that your *role model* is nothing more than a *witch*. And so is the girl that you've been after me to start dating, Dad!"

Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia were absolutely silent.

"Ahhh, well Harry? What do you say you and I go up for a bit of telly, eh?" The two stood up from the table. "Of course, you're still invited to the funeral. Roger and his family aren't wizards, so you won't be uncomfortable."

Dudley put his arm around his cousin once more and the two walked upstairs towards Dudley's room.

The sky was a menacing gray on Saturday morning, the sun briefly able to peek through long enough to give the two cousins their wake up call. Harry and Dudley who'd spent the night in sleeping bags on the floor of Dudley's room, hadn't expected Vernon and Petunia to want to go to the funeral, so they dressed and walked downstairs to go across the street for a ride with Roger and the Banburys. Petunia was sitting at the kitchen table in curlers and Vernon was immersed in the morning *Daily Mail* -- they didn't so much as *look* at the boys as they left.

They rode in Rogers' car-- the hour journey to Essex being spent in almost complete silence. Sophie sat in the back seat between Harry and Dudley, each one holding onto her hand. Roger pulled his car into a forgotten alley way and they parked, everyone filing out and, climbing a set of decaying stone steps, pushed open an unhinged gate surrounded by ancient brush. Once they stepped inside, they found themselves standing amidst a sprawling lawn, countless enormous willows sheltering them from the outside muggle world.

At the far end, atop the hill was a small white structure with "Willow Vale Mortuary" plastered on its walls. In between that building and where they stood at the entrance gate,

were endless seas of headstones. The older sites were obvious because they mostly had bulky, stone monuments marking them-- much the way muggles did. And then there was a sight Harry hadn't been prepared for-- none of them had. The newer gravesites were most apparent since a light-silver spirit of the dead themselves hovered overhead, perfectly still, eyes closed. It was one of the creepiest things Harry had ever seen, and Dudley, Sophie and Roger looked similarly apprehensive.

"Ah, it's quite all right," came Dumbledore's familiar voice from behind them. "I take it none of you have seen a wizarding gravesite before."

"They're all. . . ghosts?" Dudley squeaked.

Dumbledore shook his head. "No--they will not open their eyes let alone talk to you. A few centuries ago it became the custom to, at the burial of a wizard, perform a very powerful spell that allows a perfect representation of the person to stand guard of the gravesite."

"So--then they're like headstones?"

"Basically. Come," said Dumbledore, "this way."

They walked past rows and rows of the translucent people, all eyes closed and lifeless, perfectly preserved as they had been in their primes. A large crowd of people had assembled beneath one particularly large tree. There were a handful of people that had to be muggles: Roger's parents the Banburys of course, and a sprinkling of others who were probably relatives as well or very close friends. The rest were wizards and there were a few faces that were familiar to him: Cornelius Fudge was there, as was Arthur Weasley, and what Harry presumed to be more members from the ministry.

Dudley was sticking close to Harry's side and Harry squeezed his cousin's shoulder supportively. "I'm sure they all look odd to you, Dudley, but they're all wonderful people-- you know Ron Weasley? There's his Dad right there--"

"You don't have to hold my hand, Harry. I'm fine-- n-not n-nervous in the slightest."

A tall man, drowning in robes of sackcloth black appeared before them and the crowd fell hushed. He pulled back his hood to reveal a pale, gaunt face. He was quiet and then finally spoke--his voice just as soft as satin itself. "Imelda Arlington-Banbury, mother, wife, friend and leader. Unjustly taken from all of us this Wednesday past at the hands of her own sister. A sister controlled by the dark forces that our dear Imelda spent her life crusading against . . ."

Roger's arm was around Sophie protectively and there were a few outbreaks of sobbing from the Banbury's--Mrs. Arlington looked positively ill. Harry himself felt weak as he listened to the man's weighty words, feeling as though he were actually talking about his *own* mother.

". . . but death conquers naught but the flesh. To those of us who loved her, Imelda Arlington-Banbury will always be with us. For love is a thing infinitely stronger than death."

The man raised his arms high above his head, looked up into the sky and shouted out an incantation that Harry had never heard before. He was awestruck as a shaft of white light shot up from the ground just in front of where the man stood. Harry had to squint from the intensity of the light, as did the rest of the company, and then it gradually changed from white, to blue then to silver. When it all finally stopped, a translucent Imelda Banbury rose before them. She looked so young and beautiful--her eyes closed as though she were simply taking a peaceful sleep.

He heard a gasp and turned to see Dudley's eyes wide in wonderment--it was precisely the way Harry felt.

They made their way back down the rows of countless sites, Dudley was whispering to as they walked. "That was the most beautiful thing that I've ever heard-- what that man was saying, I mean. Beautiful. . ."

"Yeah. . . it *was* calming, wasn't it?"

"Not a bit like our muggle funerals--Mum would've been disappointed that there weren't people throwing themselves onto a casket or beating themselves in grief--"

Harry stopped in his tracks. From the corner of his eye, he'd spotted something that had sent a chill through his spine. He whipped around and ran, nearly tripping over his feet, and reached them. Two motionless spirits that differed from the rest in that they held each other's hands. The man, handsome with unruly black hair. The mother, an absolute beauty. They were his parents.

James and Lily Potter lingered in front of Harry. Not caring that it was pointless, he reached forward with his fingers and, of course, they drifted right through their forms. If only they could speak . . . if only . . . if only they were *real* . . .

"Harry?" It was Dudley rushing up behind him, "Harry, what are you doing-- oh."

Harry felt Dudley approach his side but couldn't tear his gaze away to look at him.

"This is them-- your mum and dad?"

Harry nodded.

"I . . . never knew what they looked like, my Aunt and Uncle. This is them . . ." he was quiet for a moment and then, "beautiful. Your mum and dad-- they were beautiful."

Harry subconsciously fiddled with his mother's small gold band he kept on his pinky finger-- noticing that the spirit before him was wearing one as well.

Harry didn't know how long he'd been standing there, but finally, Dudley tugged at his shirtsleeve. "C'mon, mate. Let's go, eh?"

Harry snapped out of his trances and, reluctantly, followed Dudley's steps. Back at the gate, the Banburys and the Arlington's were waiting--along with Dumbledore.

"Ready, Harry?" he asked.

Harry nodded and turned to his cousin.

"When you comin' home," asked Dudley.

"The 15th."

"I'll be there waiting." Harry hugged his cousin and this time, he really meant it.

"Sophie," Harry started but she cut him off with a flashing smile.

"I'll be waiting too, Harry."

She hugged him again and then Harry turned to follow Dumbledore and Cornelius Fudge.

They arrived back at Hogwarts late Sunday morning when half the school had adjourned to their final Hogsmead excursion of the year. That meant that he had the entire Gryffindor common room to himself and Ron who had decided to stay behind and await his return.

They were on their way back from lunch, Harry in the middle of telling Ron more about the funeral service, when he spotted a figure walking down the corridor a good twenty feet ahead of them. But that slicked back blond hair and assertive gait could only have been one person.

"Oy! Malfoy!" Harry jogged ahead and Draco slowed his pace, turning around to face Harry as he approached. Draco wasn't smiling--but then again he wasn't scowling either.

"All right there, Draco? Haven't seen you since--"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Harry nodded. "Right. Good. It's just that after everything that happened, I wanted to make sure--"

"Potter, stop. Just-don't, all right?" Draco was staring at Harry--no anger in his voice or menace in his stare. His voice was quieter than it usually was and he spoke very candidly.

"I know that you've come to try and give me a heart to heat, right? You spend two days with me and you think that you know me and now you're on a crusade to save me, right? You *don't* know me, Potter. *Or* my family. It's . . . best that we forget the past week. Nothing has changed: I'm still a Malfoy and you're still a Potter and that's the end of it."

Harry tensed up. "You're wrong. You showed us who you really were that night--you made the right decision."

"Oh? *Betraying* my father is the *right* decision? I don't think so! No, I don't have a choice in this--"

"Of course you do! *You* make the decision on who you want to be! Now, if you *want* to be what your father is, then that's one thing. But if there's any doubt, *any doubt at all*, that maybe your destiny is *different* than his, then you'd better bloody well make that decision."

"You don't understand what my father is capable. Right now, he's probably making arrangements to have Snape sacked-"

"What? *Why?*"

"Because I bloody almost chose Snape over my father that night, that's why! And Snape is actually lucky that's all my father is doing-you don't *know* him, Potter. He doesn't care when it comes to things like revenge. *Trust* me, you want as little to do with me as possible."

Draco, who's voice had been more pleading than threatening, turned to walk away. Harry didn't follow, but called out after him.

"Malfoy!"

Draco slowed and turned, waiting silently for Harry to continue.

Harry took a breath. "You can't pretend to be someone you're not."

"This *is* who I am!"

Harry walked up to Draco, not two inches away from his face, and stared him down. "I wouldn't be so sure about that," he said quietly, and then turned to Ron. "Come on, Ron, let's get back to the common room."

They left Draco standing alone, unable to speak.

Chapter Twenty: New Leaves Turning

"Did you hear that!" said Harry as they walked, "can't believe it! I mean, you saw his face that night, right? He was *scared!*"

"I would've been scared too, seein' my father that way! But Harry--he *does* live with Lucius. I mean, he's only fifteen, he can't exactly say 'Oy! Dad! I've had enough of your death eater rubbish, I'm off!'"

Harry smiled. "Of course not. . . but Snape told me something the other night that I'll never forget. He said that all of us have a choice--it's just that for some of us, it's a much harder one to make."

Snape!

Harry turned to Ron. "Er--look mate, I'll see you back up in the dorms, all right? I . . . have to go and do something!"

Harry bolted down the corridor, away from Ron's shouts that he was off his rocker.

Harry flung the door open to find Snape at his desk with two large boxes that he was in the middle of placing books into. He looked up, startled, as the door *slammed* against the wall.

"Potter--"

Harry wasn't about to let him speak. He pounded his fist down onto the desk, glaring at the boxes. "What do you think you're doing? You're *not* leaving, are you. You *can't* leave Hogwarts! I just talked to Malfoy in the hall and I know what Lucius is gonna try and do, but it won't work! He's a *Death Eater!* We could have him bloody kicked off the school board--"

"Watch your language, Mr. Potter--"

"Oh, come off it, Professor! This is madness, this running away! You *can't* leave!"

"Professor Dumbledore will see to a suitable replacement."

"You aren't seriously going to let someone like Lucius Malfoy run you out of your home, are you? You can't!"

Snape said nothing, and then handed Harry a copy of the Sunday Daily Prophet. "Read just below the story about Imelda's funeral."

Harry stared at the thick black print:

IGOR KARKAROFF, FAMED BULGARIAN PROFESSOR, FOUND DEAD:

Igor Karkaroff, one of the most esteemed professors at Durmstrang's School of Wizardry in Bulgaria, was found dead Saturday morning just outside his home near Plovdiv. Cause of death is unknown at this time, but preliminary speculations are pointing to the possibility of foul play. Given the recent increase in dark activity across the continent, the Bulgarian Ministry is looking into the possibility that Karkaroff's death may somehow be affiliated with such actions. However, no official statement has been made at this time regarding this. Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge sent his condolences to the Karkaroff family and the Durmstrang school, quoted as saying he hopes whoever is behind the crime will be apprehended and dealt with most severely.

Harry set the paper down silently. He looked up at Snape, whose arms were folded.

"That is why I'm leaving, Mr. Potter. It has *nothing* to do with Malfoy threatening to have me dismissed and *everything* to do with the fact that. . . I am next."

Harry remembered Voldemort's words last year: '*We have six missing death eaters. . . one too cowardly to return. . . he will pay. One who I believe has left me forever. . . he will be killed, of course . . .*'

Harry at once understood why Snape was wanting to leave-- Snape and Karkaroff had been Death Eaters together and were the two death eaters that Voldemort had sworn vengeance upon. Now that he'd slain Karkaroff, it only seemed reasonable that Snape would be next.

"But Professor, Hogwarts is the safest place you could be! You're here with *Dumbledore*! You saw they way he was with Voldemort: there's no way he's going to let anything happen to you!"

"My being here poses a threat to *all* the students here. Voldemort is out to kill me, Harry. I can't stay and endanger the lives of the children--"

"He's after me as well, Snape! I am forever wondering 'when is he going to come again,' but I'm not hiding out at Privet Drive, I'm *here*! At Hogwarts! Not only because it's home, but because it's safe! If you leave Hogwarts, *Dumbledore* can only help you so much. You're much better off here, Professor."

Snape raised his brow. "Why the sudden interest in my well-being?"

"Because I don't want *this* to happen to *you*!" Harry shouted, shoving the newspaper back at Snape. "Not when you can help it! You have to stay, it's your safest option."

Snape was oddly quiet. "I must say. . . of all the students, you were the *last* I suspected would be so opposed to my departure." He leaned closed, "I have given you *no* reason to act this way, Potter. Why are you telling me all this?"

It was true: Snape *hadn't* given Harry a reason for this fervent lobbying of his staying on at Hogwarts. But the memory of what had happened earlier in the week was still too strong.

"I'm not asking you for anything. Forgive me for saying so, but you've been a right *bastard* from day one. But I have spent too much time watching people around me die-- Mum, Dad, Cedric, Imelda-- I do not want *another* person added to that list, understand? After that night . . ."

Harry couldn't believe he was actually *saying* those words! He closed his eyes, fists clenched in emotion. "I mean, dammit, Professor Snape, you and I made an *amazing* team that night!" *Oh hell, Harry, you might as well just spit it out instead of beating about the bush.*

"Things would feel so much more *secure* with you on the campus. And with you, Sirius *and* *Dumbledore* together on one campus? Well, I should think that rather *decreases* the odds of anything happening to the students, not increase the odds!"

Harry was breathing heavily, knowing that he'd made a damn fine case. Snape held Harry's gaze-- his expression vague. It felt like hours before anything was said.

"Have a seat, Harry."

Harry blinked, but obeyed immediately. Snape walked out from behind his desk, looking very unsure of how to formulate his words.

"You have been . . . a very easy person for me to dislike. I've spent these past five years doing nothing but finding fault with you. Something. . . anything to justify my tearing you down. And you understand that your knack for landing in trouble only fueled that fire. And admittedly, I am still most displeased with your uncanny ability to get away with much more than *any* Hogwarts student ever has-- including your father."

He took a breath, "Slytherins take great pleasure in deriding Gryffindors for their nobility-- most of us think of it as sheer stupidity. The idea of putting one's self last-- of fighting for what is right no matter the consequences--those are traits Slytherins laugh at. A Slytherin would have buckled under pressure-- would have signed anything or paid anything to have their life spared. But you proved there is nothing stupid or laughable about the pride and nobility of a Gryffindor-- It was those very things that saved our lives the other night."

"I suppose this is all a very long way of telling you that . . . after what you did, I now have a respect for you, Potter. I don't give my respect to many people at all. As you've most likely gathered, I'm not exactly what once would call a 'people-person' and it takes a great deal for someone to win my respect. And, this you have done."

Snape's words were almost unbelievable! Harry felt compelled to reply. "Well. . . I'm sure you're very much aware that for the past five years I've absolutely *hated* you."

"Yes, I rather got that impression."

"But . . . you were willing to give your life that night. . ." he paused. "In that way, you and I aren't so very different after all."

And that's when Harry saw it-- that tug at the corner of his mouth.

Snape cleared his throat. "Off with you then, Mr. Potter. I believe you have your OWLS to study for. . . and I suppose I'd best start reviewing some possible lesson plans for next year-- it seems that I'm a bit behind."

Harry nodded, understanding Snape's words loud and clear. Despite his valiant attempts to suppress it, an enormous grin had broken out over Harry's face. "Good afternoon then, Professor Snape."

"Good afternoon."

Harry turned to leave.

"Oh and Mr. Potter-- you'd best inform Professor McGonagall that ten points to Gryffindor are in order."

Harry's knees almost gave out from under him.

Points to Gryffindor from Snape?

Now, Harry had been witness to many an incredible sight in the past week that he'd been able to handle. Being attacked by Syads? Fine. Nearly getting pulverized by Lord Voldemort? No problem! Discovering he's the Heir to Godric Gryffindor? Kids' stuff! But *ten points to Gryffindor* from *Professor Snape*? No-- that was most definitely the greatest shock yet!

"Now get out of here, Potter, before I change my mind!"

Harry nodded quickly and stumbled backwards, bolting out of the dungeon, mystified.

**

The OWLS were every bit as murderous as Harry had anticipated. As expected, he had his primary difficulties in potions, though really, he knew he'd done not nearly as well in any of the subjects as he'd originally hoped. (He had his fingers crossed for perhaps a certificate in the Defense Against the Dark Arts at least!)

As was expected, Hermione seemed quite chuffed with all of the subjects and she confidently expected a certificate in every one of them. (that girl was *determined* to be selected as a Prefect for the next year) And Ron? Well, he just seemed to be rather quiet about the whole thing. Something told Harry that he and Ron were in the same boat!

Ron and Harry were under strict orders to be *selective* in what they told the students about what had happened on the trip. They delivered the much practiced, abbreviated speech of: 'Delphine Lestrage escaped from Azkaban and tried to hand all of us over to Voldemort, but her plan didn't work.' Although, admittedly, Harry did rather like Snape's reply to every student who inquired about it: 'with your exam scores it would suit you better to worry about much more *important* things than that.' In other words: 'none of your damn business.'

The final day of school was upon Harry before he knew it and he was once again packing up his things, getting ready to re-join the muggle world. Although this time, the idea of going back to Privet Drive was . . . tolerable! There were two things waiting for him there: Dudley-- the reformed, the new, the *likeable* Dudley Dursley. And, of course, Sophie.

The prospect of seeing her again made Harry feel, eager to get back to Privet Drive-- something that would have seemed laughable one year earlier.

Hagrid and Sirius were in charge of dispersing the students onto the train on departure day, and Harry was once again trudging along with the rest of the students, making their way towards the awaiting Hogwarts Express.

"Can you believe," George was saying, "that it's over. I mean. . . we're never going to see Hogwarts again after this. . ."

Fred was nodding, "It just doesn't seem possible that seven years can fly by so very quickly! I can't believe that this is the last time we're ever gonna be riding this train," Fred was saying as they waited to climb aboard. "I mean, I feel so . . . old."

"Yeah," Harry snorted, "Seventeen years old. You're *ancient*, Fred. But, well, you've got the joke shop to think about now! Weasleys Wizards Wheezes!"

"Yeah, of course we're all keyed up about that-but still, this has been our home for the past seven years!"

"Did we tell you, Harry, that we found out who torched the shop?"

Harry's eyes widened. "NO! Who was it?"

"Well, lo and behold, it wasn't Malfoy after all. Matter of fact, it wasn't even a person who did it at all."

"It wasn't?"

"No! Dedalus Diggle was in town on holiday that weekend, visiting some friends, and he wanted to amuse them with one of his fireworks displays--"

"Uh oh," Harry breathed, "no way--"

"Oh yes. You remember how hot it was that weekend, right? Well, we all know how powerful his fireworks are--all it took was a gust of wind in the wrong direction and *poof*. Bye-Bye-Wheezes."

"Unbelievable. Not the most encouraging start, that's for sure."

"That's exactly what Ron said-- he seems to think the fire was an omen or something, but we don't care! We've put too much of ourselves into it to just give up. Besides, we're investing in some AntiFumuer spray pronto."

Harry looked over his shoulder anxiously, "Speaking of Ron, where is he? Haven't seen him or Hermione since breakfast!"

George let out a low, devilish laugh. "Ahhhh. Well, there's your answer."

"Harry! Oy! Wait up!"

Harry turned to see Ron and Hermione running towards him. . . hand in hand.

Harry grinned like a Cheshire cat. "So . . . what's all this hand holding business about?"

Ron and Hermione both blushed.

"Yeah, well, I guess I just had a lot of sense knocked into me over the past few weeks."

"I think all of us did," Harry said.

Seamus Finnegan walked by at just that moment and did a triple take at Ron and Hermione.

He broke out into a tremendous grin and shouted, "*IT'S ABOUT BLOODY TIME!*" He grabbed Dean by his shirt collar. "Oy! Thomas! That'll be ten knuts! Cough 'em up, mate!"

Ron raised his brow. "Ten knuts?"

"Oh aye," said Seamus happily, snatching the money from Dean's reluctant hands. "We had a bet going that you two would get together before years' end-- you too Longbottom! Ten knuts, thank you! Angelina, where do you think you're going? You owe me as well--"

"Whoa," said Ron, "how many people were betting against us?"

Seamus was still smiling, counting up his money, "Oh, just about everyone except me. Now lets' see, ten, twenty, thirty, forty-- who am I missing. Oh yeah-- how could I forget, Fred and George! You two, c'mon, let's not be stingy now."

Hermione feigned disgust. "Fred! George! You actually put down money against your own brother?"

Fred shrugged, giving Seamus his dues, "Well, the odds were in our favor!"

George nodded. "Yeah-- the guy couldn't form coherent sentences with you around, much less ask you out!"

Hermione was blushing furiously and she laughed nervously, clinging to Ron's arm. Ron's ears were pink as well and Harry had to grab his sides, he was laughing so hard.

They climbed aboard, the entire Weasley clan plus Hermione and Harry squeezing into one compartment. There was laughter spilling out from the compartment the entire journey home, and by the time they reached King's Cross Station, Harry was sure he was going to loose his voice from all the raucous laughter!

They filed out onto the platform, all the Hogwarts students scattering about like ants, trying to locate their parents. The Weasleys all ran back through the barrier together and once again found themselves amongst the muggle world.

Hermione was smiling at him. "You gonna be okay, Harry?"

"Yeah," he said, "Yeah, I'll be fine, Herm."

"Well--you're always welcome to come and visit, you know that."

"Yeah-and you know that Mum would love to have you anytime."

Harry nodded. "I might just stop by."

He paused and then gave Hermione and Ron the biggest hug he could muster. And they returned it--all three standing in each other's embrace for eternity. . .

"Bye!" He waved at Ron as the Weasley's disappeared through the crowds of travelers. Now, where was Uncle Vernon-

"Hello Harry."

Harry spun around. "*Sophie*," he exclaimed.

She stood with her hands behind her back, dressed in a lavender sun dress--the color as lovely on her as it had been on her mother.

"Dad and I are taking you home," she said.

Harry couldn't imagine a face he wanted to see more than hers.

He walked to where she stood and stared at her. "You all right?"

She nodded. Yeah. . . it's just . . . hard, you know?"

"Yes. I do."

She stood for a moment in uncertainty, and then reached for him. Harry embraced her readily, pulling her close to him, stroking her soft hair.

"I'm so glad you're here," she whispered into his hear. He could hear the struggle within her voice to remain composed.

Harry closed his eyes. "Me too."

If only she knew how deeply he meant that.

She pulled away and smiled. "Well! Let's get you home, then."

Roger appeared right then, squeezing through the crowds, his face looking drawn and thin, but still its usual kind self.

"Hello Mr. Banbury," Harry said immediately, foregoing the usual handshake that would have followed and landed him with a hearty bear hug.

Roger patted his back warmly. "Hello there, Harry. Here, let me help you with that."

Roger helped Harry with his cart to their waiting red Renault and loaded it, Harry climbing into the backseat and they made their way out into the London traffic, towards the motorway.

Harry did his best to keep the subject light and as far away from the horrible recent events as humanly possible. He talked about Ron and Hermoine mostly-- Sophie particularly interested and was "shocked" that Hermione hadn't sent her an owl to personally tell her about it!

They were back on Privet Drive in an impressively short period of time and Roger and Sophie both insisted Harry have some tea with them before going to his house. He of course obliged and was even further delighted to find Dudley was to join them. Dudley met Harry with a firm hug and genuine "All right".

"All right, Dudley, thanks. And you?"

He shook his head. "Don't ask-- let's just say that I'm glad Sophie invited me over because I was just about to wring dad's neck."

Harry laughed, knowing just how easy it was to feel that way, and they took a seat in the living room.

"How did those exams go, Harry?" Roger asked, pouring everyone a cup of tea.

Harry groaned. "Next subject, please."

"That bad, eh?"

"Worse, I'm sure," he said glumly.

Sophie was smiling strangely. "Well . . . I got my exam scores back two days ago."
 "And?" asked Harry eagerly.
 "Full marks."
 "Sophie! That's fantastic," said Harry.
 "Yeah," Dudley added, "congratulations!"
 "Yes," said Roger, "isn't that wonderful? Let me go fetch the parchments--" He happily went upstairs.
 "Have you written to Hermione letting her know?" asked Harry, "She'll be thrilled."
 Sophie nodded, "yeah, just sent and owl yesterday. Infact, I guess it was such a good thing that Professor Dumbledore and I had a chat last week."
 "Oh? Really?"
 "Yes-- he actually asked me if I should like to join the students at Hogwarts next term."
 Harry's heart skipped a beat and he beamed at her. "Sophie! That's fantastic! It'll be so much fun!"
 She nodded. "Yes, I know . . . but I said no. Call me a muggle, Harry, but I can't leave my father. Not now."
 Harry smiled. "Sophie? I would have been disappointed If you'd decided anything else. He needs you."
 "I know."
 Roger came back downstairs at that moment, happily waving the parchments. Harry smiled, flipping through her results. "*Very* impressive. So then, if you're not going to attend campus, what about your studies?"
 "Still correspondence. I'll have a Hogwarts tutor stop by once a week. But Dumbledore *did* insist that I at least attend some of the Quidditch matches. . ." she smiled strangely again, "it seems as though I'll be supporting Ravenclaw."
 Harry's mouth fell. "You were *sorted*?"
 "Yes!" she cried happily, "A Ravenclaw--just like Mum."
 "Ravenclaw," Harry repeated, "little wonder with marks like these!"
 "That's not your house, is it Harry?" asked Dudley.
 Harry smiled, "No, I'm . . ." he paused, "I'm a Gryffindor."
 Those harmless words hung in the air around him-- he truly *was* a Gryffindor. More than they knew.
 It wasn't until Sophie was walking Harry and Dudley across the lawn to number four Privet Drive that she dropped the bomb upon them.
 "I . . . I have to tell you both the truth."
 They stopped and stared at her expectantly.
 "Dad and I . . . we're moving."
 It was the worst thing anyone could have possibly said.
 "You're *moving*," Harry repeated in disbelief.
 Dudley was similarly devastated. "Sophie! *No!* But you've only just moved in--"
 Sophie didn't look any happier about the situation. She stared at the ground glumly, kicking a rock around with her shoe. "I know, but . . . we're moving back to London. Dad. . . he can't take it in that house. You understand."
 "Of course," said Harry, but inside he was dying. The thought of Sophie moving away was absolutely unfathomable! He would have literally given *anything* to have her stay there-- with him.
 "W-when are you leaving," he asked quietly.
 Sophie looked up at Harry, her eyes watering slightly. "Monday."
 "*Monday?!?*" Both Dudley and Harry shouted at the same time.
 "*Wot?!?*"

Sophie nodded. "Believe me-- I don't want to leave you two, but I haven't any choice in the matter. I'm going wherever my father says, that's the end of it. Like I said, there's no way that I can leave him." She took a shaky breath. "I'm all he has left."

The Dursley's remained quiet indifferent to Dudley's announcement that the Banburys were moving away as they lugged Harry's trunk inside the front door. Petunia did make a comment, however, that it was a relief and she hoped the next neighbors would at least be respectable citizens.

"Mr. Banbury is a *police* officer, Mum! How much more respectable can you get!"

And," Petunia continued, "they'd best not have any out-of-control teenagers like that Sophie! What a blemish to the neighborhood she was--"

"You were fine with the Banburys until you found out the Imelda and Sophie were witches," Dudley spat. There was rage in his eyes and Harry knew that Petunia was going to sorely regret having said anything negative against Sophie. "They were the nicest, kindest, most *sincere* people that any of us had ever met! You adored her, Mum!"

"I was probably bewitched--"

"*Oh for crying out loud!* You just *can't* admit that you were wrong about wizards, can you! You're never wrong, are you! Well, you know what? That's *your* problem, not mine! Because Harry and Sophie and Imelda-- they're all the most *wonderful* people that anyone could ever hope to know. You want respectable? Well, Dad and Mummy dear, it might interest you to know that Imelda spent her entire life dedicated to fighting against a force more evil and darker than anything you could possibly imagine! And as for your 'worthless nephew', well, he's the reason that countless more innocent people haven't died from that force! He's a regular bloody *hero* and you treat him like gum on your shoe! And I am just bloody damn lucky that I found it out before it was too late! So it's *your* loss!"

With his teeth gritted, he turned to Harry and grabbed his shirtsleeve, "Come on, and let's get your trunk upstairs."

And then he stopped and whipped around suddenly, as though he'd forgotten something. "And if anyone is a blemish to the neighborhood, it's *you!*"

They lugged the trunk upstairs, Harry in awe of his cousin. There was such passion in his voice-- and a certain *pain* in his eyes. So much so that Harry felt . . . *sorry* for him. Dudley sat on Harry's bed as he went about putting away his clothes.

"They just make me so *mad*, y'know? They're both so bloody thick-- I just wish I could smack sense into 'em."

"Well," said Harry lightly, "it *did* take a pretty girl for you to come around."

Dudley laughed. "A pretty girl can be a bloody powerful thing. . ." he sighed. "I'm gonna miss her, Harry. I really am."

"We'll go and visit," Harry was saying, trying to convince his own self more than Dudley.

"It'll be fun-- we'll get to go into London! And I'm sure she'll come back and visit too--"

"Mum and Dad will chase her out of the house." He paused again. "I really am glad that she came along."

"Yeah!" Harry snorted, "We all know how glad you are--"

"No, it's not just that I bloody lost my head over her, its . . . hell, Harry, I've had fun with you. Much more fun than those gits I hang out with at school."

Harry smiled, genuinely glad to hear that. "You know, if I could, I'd take you back to Hogwarts next term." He laughed. "Bet your Mum and Dad would *love* that!"

"Oh wouldn't that just blow 'em up!" Dudley was laughing too. "Too bad I can't. . . it sounds like a fantastic place."

"You realize that if you heard yourself saying this last year, you would have thought you'd lost your mind."

"I know, I know . . . but there *is* a such thing as turning over a new leaf."

"Don't I know it. Seen a lot of that this year. And . . . I'm glad too, Dudley. Your being here makes things . . . unimaginably better."

Harry and Dudley were up at the crack of dawn on Monday morning and, after a quick bowl of cereal from the pantry, they trekked across the lawn to number three where Roger and Sophie were already wide awake, going about putting things into boxes. It took them the entire morning of non-stop work before they got everything packaged up and ready to haul into the moving van that waited in their driveway.

"*It's-times-like-these-I-wish-you-could-use-magic-outside-school,*"

Dudley panted as he and Harry heaved a large box onto the van.

"I'll second that," said Mr. Banbury, stretching his back. "And these bloody movers of ours have been on tea break for an hour now! Where have they gone to-- we're the ones doing all the work!"

"I think they're in the back garden," said Harry.

Mr. Banbury put his hand to his forehead. "The back garden! That's what I've forgotten! Er-- Dudley, can you help me, son?"

Dudley nodded and disappeared with Roger through the house.

Sophie and Harry stood alone.

"So. . . then this is goodbye," said Harry quietly.

Sophie's eyes were downcast. "It's not goodbye. . . we just won't be seeing each other every day like we used to."

"Well . . . I *will* be expecting you to visit campus next term," said Harry. "Even though since you're a *Ravenclaw* you won't be cheering for me when you come to see the Quidditch games!"

Sophie shook her head. "Are you joking? I'll be your number one fan."

Harry's laughter subsided. . . Sophie was staring into his eyes. And suddenly, Harry knew what he wanted to do more than anything else in the world. He placed his hand to her cheek--her skin every bit as soft as he knew it would be. And was it his imagination, or did she blush when he touched her?

His face drew closer to hers and Sophie closed her eyes as Harry let his lips softly meet hers. This was different than kissing Hermione.

Harry had been dreaming of this, he'd been *wanting* this and the magic that coursed through his veins was more powerful than any other magic he'd ever experienced. Her body felt comfortable and good in his embrace, as though it was had always *meant* to be so.

He let her go, but only out of necessity to breathe for he would that he could have kept her there so close forever.

"Wow," he breathed quietly. "Don't ever let anyone tell you that you're not a magician, Sophie."

She beamed and met his mouth once more, pulling him close against her--Harry could feel her heart racing against his chest.

"I'm going to miss you," she whispered. "Every single day."

"You'll keep writing, won't you?"

"You bet your life." She pulled away finally, although Harry still felt warm from her embrace.

Dudley came out of the front door at that moment, Roger behind him, the both of them struggling with a very large cardboard box.

Sophie laughed, "See Dad? I told you all that exercise equipment was only going to sit around and collect dust!"

Roger laughed, "you're absolutely right-- that's why I'm getting rid of it. Dudley said that he'll make good use of it!"

"I'm glad someone will," she said happily as Roger and Dudley heaved the box towards the Dursley's backyard.

Roger sighed and approached the kids-- the movers had reappeared and were pulling the doors closed on the van. "Well . . . this is it. We're going to be getting on our way now." He extended his hand to Harry and squeezed it tightly.

"I want to thank you, Harry, for everything you've done for my family. I am never going to forget it." He then did the same to Dudley, "and as I understand it you'll be celebrating your sixteenth birthday in another two weeks, right? We'd be delighted to have you down for a bit of a party, if you're interested!"

"Brilliant! Thanks, Mr. Banbury."

Sophie smiled at Dudley and threw her arms around him. "I'm gonna miss you, Dudley. Thanks for everything--"

"No," he said seriously, "thank *you*. Because if it hadn't been for you . . . I'd still be . . . that person I once was."

She smiled sweetly. "Oh Dudley, no, don't say that. You've *always* been this person on the inside-- it just took you awhile to find it out."

"And you're the *reason* I did, Sophie. That's the truth."

They stared at each other and finally, Sophie nodded and then gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for that."

Her enormous eyes drifted upon Harry once more. "And you," she said quietly.

"Don't say anything," said Harry softly, "it's not goodbye, remember?"

She smiled. "That's right."

"All ready, Mr. Banbury!" A gruff looking mover was motioning for Roger to hurry it up.

"Right," said Roger, "come on Sophie-- we'd best get going."

Roger and Sophie walked to their maroon Renault, Harry and Dudley right at their feet. They got into the car and Roger started up the engine. Sophie rolled down the window and Harry bent down, face to face with her. Sophie's eyes teared up and she threw her arms around Harry once more. She whispered in a tremulous voice so hushed that even Harry wasn't sure he heard her rightly.

"I think I've fallen for you, Harry Potter."

They were the last words she spoke to him as Roger was pulling the car out of the driveway. Harry watched as the car pulled away, a vision of loveliness, her small hand waving from the window.

And all too soon, the car was soon no longer visible.

"What are you so happy about," said Dudley, noticing Harry's smile. "I'm tryin' my best not to break down like a baby right now."

Harry had never felt so entirely happy in his entire existence. Sophie Banbury had told him she thought she was falling in love with him. . . and . . . it finally hit him!

Harry felt the same way about her.

"It's nothing, Dudley. Come on, let's go inside."

"It's just not going to be the same without her," he moaned as they walked inside, past Vernon and Petunia who glared at them from behind newspapers.

"They've gone, I hope," Vernon sneered.

"Yes," said Dudley, "they've gone."

"Thank heavens. At least we'll never hear from *them* again."

"I wouldn't be so sure if I were you," Dudley snapped back. They climbed the stairs, away from the sneers and jibes of Vernon and Petunia.

"Yeah," Harry finally said to his cousin, his smile returning. "You're right. Something tells me that this was only the beginning."

THE END