

Harry Potter and the Legacy of the Light

By

Gramarye

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Chapter One - Purely Coincidental

What we call the beginning is often the end.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from

-- T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding", *Four Quartets*

Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was noisy as usual with shouted goodbyes and the rattle-bang of loaded trolleys. But the three students who disembarked from a compartment near the front of the train were unusually quiet.

Harry Potter didn't feel like talking. Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, his closest friends and confidants, respected his feelings and let him be silent. They didn't like his silence, but they knew better than to try and be overly cheerful. It would only remind them that there was very little to be cheerful about.

He Who Must Not Be Named, or You-Know-Who, or Lord Voldemort if you were brave or foolish enough to say his name aloud, had returned to terrorize the wizarding world. Harry Potter, known to all wizards and witches as the only person ever known to survive a meeting--or to be completely accurate, *two* meetings--with Voldemort, had seen Cedric Diggory, an innocent young man, die before his eyes. The Triwizard Tournament fiasco had proved only one thing: Voldemort was alive and ready to wreak havoc on wizards and Muggles alike.

All three of them knew that Harry was at the top of Voldemort's hit list, and that at the moment he was living on borrowed time.

The three of them pulled their luggage off the train, and stood on the platform, staring at one another uncomfortably. There wasn't anything to say, really. Each knew what the others would be doing over the summer holidays: Hermione would be working at her parents' office if she wasn't too busy studying for the O.W.L.s, Ron would be spending as much time on a broom as possible to practise Quidditch moves, and Harry would be staring at his bedroom ceiling, crossing off the days until school started again.

The Hogwarts Express whistle shrilled once, warning any remaining passengers to clear the compartments.

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but before he could draw a breath, a heavy hand slapped him on the back with such force that he spluttered, starting to choke.

"Come on, Ronniekins," George Weasley said, pounding his younger brother's back in an attempt to stop the coughing fit, and only succeeding in making it worse. "Mum'll go spare if we're late. Oi, Fred!"

"Yeah?" came a yell from three cars down.

"I've got Ron--where's Ginny?"

Before Fred could answer, there was a loud pop, and a large puff of thick purple smoke erupted from an open carriage door at the rear of the train. As nearby students fled from the clouds of choking smoke, a horrified squeal shot through the air, and a girl's voice screamed: "My robes! They're ruined! FRED!"

Hermione flew to Ginny's rescue.

George threw back his head and laughed. "I take it our Tye-Dye Time Bomb is a success, O brother of mine?" he said as Fred sauntered up to the group.

Fred's grin was so wide it nearly split his face in two. "All field tests support the resulting data," he chuckled. Seeing the confused looks on Ron and Harry's faces, he elaborated. "We had to get *some* use out of George's research for his Muggle Studies term paper, since it barely got a passing mark."

"What was it about?" Harry asked, half-dreading the answer.

"'When Muggle Fashions Attack!--Hideous Muggle Costumes Throughout the Ages'," George proclaimed proudly.

The twins' chuckles turned into snickers when Ginny, her face almost as splotchy as her now violently multi-coloured robes, stalked past them without a backward glance. Hermione rejoined their group, and glared at Fred and George.

"Dry up, Gin, it'll wash out in a week or two," George called after her. She pretended to not have heard him, and vanished through the barrier into the main terminus of King's Cross Station. Without further incident, the rest of them followed suit, gathering up their belongings and struggling through the barrier.

Mrs. Weasley was waiting for them on the other side. Her arms were folded across her chest and there was a dangerous glint in her eye. Ginny stood next to her, smirking at her older brothers.

"Hi, Mum," Fred said, a little too brightly.

Mrs. Weasley glowered at him, and pointed to Ginny's trunk. "You'll be carrying this until we get home, Fred," she ordered. "Plus your own. And George will take Ron's trunk and his own as well."

"Aww, Muuum," the twins started to moan, but the expression on Mrs. Weasley's face quickly shut them up.

"Go. Now."

Fred and George ducked their heads and scuttled away, dragging the four trunks.

"Be careful, Fred! Don't hurt yourself!" Ginny chirruped, smiling nastily.

Her brother responded with a gesture that made their mother shout "FRED WEASLEY!" and storm after him, Ginny in tow.

Ron rolled his eyes, more than used to his family's antics. "Bye, Hermione," he said. "See you later, Harry. Don't forget to owl!"

Six red heads vanished into the bustling crowd. Harry shoved his trunk underneath a nearby pillar and sat down on it, setting Hedwig's cage on the ground between his feet. Hermione sat down next to him, tugging at her unruly hair.

"Whew!" she breathed. "What a horrible thing to do, even for Fred and George! Ginny looked like she was going to cry when I got there; she thought her robes were completely ruined."

"Ah," Harry said, gazing off into space.

Hermione gave him a strange look. "I just hope it *will* wash out, like George said it would."

"Yeah."

"Are you waiting for your aunt and uncle?"

"Yeah."

Hermione stared at the ground. "Do...do you mind if I wait with you? My parents said that they might be a little late picking me up."

Harry shrugged. "Sure, if you want."

They sat together in silence, watching the people who passed by. The furtive strains of a busker, nervously looking round for police as he scraped on an out-of-tune violin, drifted across the crowd.

Hermione fidgeted, tapping her foot on the ground in time with the unmusical music. Harry gnawed on his lower lip.

A half-hour passed, then an hour.

"They're not coming, are they." Hermione's voice was flat.

"I guess not." Harry's response was equally flat.

"Are you angry?"

"No. They probably forgot, that's all."

"Oh. Well, do you want to--"

"Hermione?" shouted a woman's voice, rising above the monotonous rumble of the crowd.

"Ah, there's my parents," Hermione said, leaping up. She waved happily at a neatly-dressed man and woman, who waved back. Harry waved, too, but not until Hermione had jabbed him in the ribs with a sharp elbow.

She pulled her trunk over to where they stood, and hugged and kissed both of them in turn. She turned back to wave goodbye to Harry, but paused and let her hand fall as she looked at him, sitting alone beneath the pillar. Slowly, she walked back to where he sat.

"Harry...would you like a lift?"

"That's very kind of you, but I don't mind waiting." His voice was cool with polite formality, as though the offer of a lift had come from a complete stranger.

"If they aren't coming--"

He waved his hand airily, without looking at her. "I'm surprised it hasn't happened sooner. Go on, your parents are waiting."

Hermione shifted her weight from foot to foot. "We could call for a taxi, or--"

"Thanks all the same, Hermione. I'll be fine."

"But--"

"Trust me." He looked at her, and the corners of his mouth twitched faintly in the ghost of a smile. "I'll be fine."

Hermione nodded feebly, echoing Harry's faint smile. Suddenly, her eyes widened in alarm. "Oh!" she exclaimed, pressing a hand to her face. "Stay right there...I won't be a moment."

Harry watched her run over to her parents and begin to speak to them. The conversation was animated, agitated, and judging by the startled expressions on her parents' faces, entirely one-sided. Hermione's father bent down and helped her open her trunk. She rummaged through it for a moment, then held up a small rectangular object and hurried back through the crowd to Harry.

"I nearly forgot--I wanted to lend you this." She thrust the object into Harry's hands. It was a book.

He read the title aloud. "'All Creatures Great and Small', by James Herriot."

Hermione's face was flushed, her eyes alight with the bubbly joy that only books and discussions of books seemed to create within her. "I thought you might like it...it'll give you something to read if you get bored with homework. But don't get it dirty or anything--it's one of my favourites."

Harry had to suppress a half-laugh at Hermione's deliberate use of 'if' instead of 'when', even though he knew she wasn't trying to be funny. "Hermione Granger doesn't even trust me to take care of a book? Fine, then, have it your way. But I won't finish it in three hours like you do, so don't start nagging me with endless letters when I don't return it by tomorrow."

"Well!" Hermione huffed indignantly, the light gone from her face. "Try to be pleasant, and look where it gets you! See if I ever lend you anything of mine again!" She spun around on her heel, preparing to storm off in disgust.

"Hey, Hermione?"

She paused in mid-turn, and looked back.

Harry was grinning widely, one of the first true, genuine smiles she had seen from him in a long time.

"Thanks," he said simply.

She smiled back, rather shyly. "Not at all, Harry. Have a nice summer." With that, she darted back through the throng to meet her parents, and together they headed for the nearest exit.

He waved after them, and kept the grin on his face until the three of them were out of sight.

Once he was certain they had gone, the cheerful smile faded.

"Nice..." he repeated bitterly, flopping down on the trunk again.
"Not bloody likely."

He knew that he should start figuring out some way to get home, but he also knew that his options were limited. He had no Muggle money, so a taxi or the Underground were both out of the question. He could call for the Knight Bus, but that would mean using magic, and the last thing he wanted to do at the moment was to think about anything magical. But just in case, he checked his pockets--and realized that with only five Sickles and twenty-odd Knuts on his person, even a ride on the Knight Bus wasn't possible.

Unless the Dursleys came soon, he was stuck.

With nothing better to do, he studied the well-worn front cover of the book that Hermione had given to him. He turned it over in his hands, looking at its rubbed corners and the spine that was beginning to crack in places, telltale signs of Hermione's favourite sections.

Sliding off the trunk, he knelt down next to it, and was about to open it up to put the book away when he felt a lump underneath the front cover. He opened it carefully, wondering if Hermione had forgotten to remove a bookmark.

Carefully tucked inside the tattered dust jacket flap was a thick wad of folded pound notes.

He felt his face grow very hot. Half of him wanted to be stubborn and refuse to spend the money, but the other half was too tired to be bothered with the prickling of his wounded pride. All he wanted was to leave the train station behind and go somewhere to forget about everything for a while--even if it meant going back to Privet Drive and the Dursleys.

"Thanks, Hermione," he murmured to his absent friend as he slipped the notes into his pocket.

"Mr. Potter?"

A deep voice from behind and somewhere over his head startled Harry. He jumped, slipped forward, and managed to smack his head on the edge of the trunk all at the same time. Tottering unsteadily to his feet, he wheeled around, rubbing his aching head. But before he could open his mouth to give the person who had startled him a piece of his mind, he saw who it was, and the angry words stopped in his throat.

"P...Professor Stanton?" he gasped.

Harry had met Professor Will Stanton fairly early in the previous school year--though it felt like an age had passed since then. He was a Professor of Anthropology at Cambridge University, a famous Muggle institution, but he had visited Hogwarts Academy to present a guest lecture concerning Defence Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies. With his round, placid face and slightly rumpled dark blue suit, he looked scholarly, comforting, entirely normal. Yet in spite of his appearance, Harry knew that the man standing in front of him was anything but normal.

"Oh, dear...I didn't mean to startle you," Professor Stanton said apologetically, setting down the briefcase he was carrying. "Are you all right?"

"It's nothing, sir. I'll be fine." How many times had he said that, or some variation on it, today? And to how many people? A twinge of pain in his forehead brought him back to reality. "How are you, sir. What are you doing in London?"

"I'm quite well, thank you. I have to meet with an old colleague who lives just outside of London. And I assume you're off from school for the summer."

"Yes." Harry knew he was being horribly rude, but his head still throbbed angrily, and he had to get out of the station before rush hour made finding transportation all but impossible. "I was just about to leave...could you tell me where the taxi rank is?"

Professor Stanton's brow creased in thought. "I'm afraid I don't know," he said. "I usually come through Liverpool Station when I'm in town, so I'm just as lost as you are. But as luck would have it, I need to find a taxi myself. Would you mind wandering with me?"

Harry hesitated, but his need for the presence of a reassuring adult figure won out over his desire to be alone. "All right."

Navigating with the heavily-laden trolley by himself was difficult work, and he was relieved to discover that the taxi rank wasn't far away. He pushed his precious cargo to the nearest waiting black cab. The driver, a brown-faced old man with white hair poking out of his ears, hefted the trunk into the boot with surprising ease, and Professor Stanton helped him put Hedwig's cage in the back.

"Now, where to, young man?" the driver asked Harry as he settled down in the back seat.

"Little Whinging, Surrey. Number Four Privet Drive." he replied.

"Really?" Professor Stanton looked up, pausing in his final adjustments to the owl cage to make it fit snugly behind the passenger's seat. "How convenient. I'm headed to Little Whinging

as well. I'll split the cost of a taxi with you, Mr. Potter, if you don't mind the company."

The driver turned to Harry. "Is that all right with you, young man?" he asked, casting an uncertain glance at Professor Stanton.

For what felt like the billionth time that day, Harry sighed quietly and said, "It's fine."

Chapter Two - Arrivals and Departures

I am just a poor boy
Though my story's seldom told
I have squandered my resistance
For a pocketful of mumbles
Such are promises
All lies and jests
Still a man hears what he wants to hear
And disregards the rest....

-- "The Boxer", Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel

Harry had his doubts about sharing a taxi with an adult who could barely be called an acquaintance. Yet as it turned out, Professor Stanton's idea of 'company' suited Harry perfectly. Not five minutes after leaving King's Cross Station, the older man had opened his worn briefcase and pulled out several folders filled with paper, page after page covered with scribbles and notes in a fine but messy hand.

"Chapters for a book I'm writing," he had explained, shuffling through the papers in his lap. "They need a lot of editing. I have an unfortunate tendency to get carried away with ideas and lose sight of the big picture...or more often, proper grammar."

Harry had smiled politely, and buried his nose in Hermione's book.

It was a relief to read a regular book, a novel, one that didn't focus on spells or potions or even the finer points of Quidditch. He dove into the story head first, losing himself in the tales of the young veterinarian's hectic first year of practice in the Yorkshire Dales. Dealing with normal farm animals sounded almost as painful as some of the nastier parts of his Care of Magical Creatures class--only without the off chance that you'd find your eyebrows burned to a crisp by a Blast-Ended Skrewt.

The soft, regular scratch of Professor Stanton's pen was soothing. He read quickly, easily, not noticing that his head was nodding, or that the book gradually felt heavier and heavier in his hands....

The thick volume slid from his fingers and landed on the floor of the taxi with a soft thump. He was fast asleep.

* * *

The elderly driver adjusted his rear-view mirror. His shrewd eyes softened at the sight of Harry's dozing form, and his grim features

relaxed into an indulgent smile. "Heh...th' young lad's tired out, I see."

"Yes," Professor Stanton said quietly, removing his glasses and folding them. His movements were very painstaking and deliberate, and when he had finished he sat quite still, so as not to disturb Harry. "He's had a hard year, it seems."

"Well, at least he's got a nice long holiday to look forward to. Have himself a rest."

"So one would hope." Professor Stanton turned his thoughtful gaze on the sleeping boy, and a hint of sadness crept into his voice. "So one would hope...."

"Something wrong, sir?" The driver looked puzzled, but his voice was wary, almost suspicious.

"No, nothing," Professor Stanton said crisply. He turned back to his notes, but after a moment he set his pen down and said to the driver, "Oh, by the way...."

"Yes, sir?"

Professor Stanton gestured to Harry, who was curled into a tight ball in one corner of the taxi. "I don't think he has enough money on him to cover the cost of this trip, but I don't want him to worry about it. I will make up the difference on his fare. Please let me know if he still owes money when we arrive."

"Of course," the driver replied with a nod. Any suspicions he may have had about the gentleman's conduct vanished; as a doting grandfather and a devout churchman, he had a high regard for those who showed kindness to strangers, especially children. "Right generous of you, sir."

Professor Stanton shook his head. "Not generous. Just...concerned."

* * *

Harry awoke with a start at the sound of a car door slamming. It took him a few moments to remember where he was. He ran a hand through his mussed hair, pushing it away from his face.

"Mr. Potter, I think we've arrived," Professor Stanton said, shaking him gently.

"Oh...oh, right." The nap hadn't made him feel any better, or even more rested. His head still ached, and his mouth was dry. The only blessing was that his nap had been free of dreams. Any sleep that wasn't interrupted with visions of dead bodies and flashing green lights had been infrequent of late.

Even with that good fortune, it still took a lot of effort to climb out of the back seat of the taxi.

The driver had set his trunk on the front walk of Number Four, Privet Drive. "There you are, lad. Need any help?"

"No, thanks. I think I've got everything." Harry dug in his pocket and pulled out the wad of money. He was about to hand it over, but something made him pause. He stared at the money for a moment as a wave of cold horror washed through his body...he suddenly realized that he hadn't bothered to count them. Not only that, he had no idea how much the fare was, or how much to tip, or anything else.

The driver took the notes, casually ruffled through them, and tucked them in his pocket. "Just right, young man. Seventy-five pounds exactly--and thank you for the custom. Want your receipt?"

Harry gaped dumbly, then blinked. "Ah...no, no, thank you."

"Right." The driver winked, and touched his cap in farewell. "Take care, now."

"Thank you," Harry said. He wasn't entirely sure what had occurred, but since the driver had let him keep his luggage, he assumed that he'd had enough money for the fare and everything was fine.

The taxi spluttered as the engine started, then revved loudly as it drove off. Harry looked back, but it had turned down the side street and was roaring out of sight.

He dragged his trunk up the walk, letting it fall with a loud bang on the top step. All he wanted was to get inside and go hide in his room for a while, though he knew he'd most likely end up raking the lawn or weeding the garden before dinner. With a resigned sigh, he turned the doorknob.

Locked.

He grunted irritably. Exactly what he needed--for all of them to be out somewhere.

To be certain, he lifted the knocker and rapped once, twice, three times on the front door.

The door opened a crack, and a wide eye peered out. After a moment, the door opened a little wider to reveal a small, pudgy boy with a grubby face, sucking on a lolly. He stared at Harry, his piggy eyes glittering.

"Oo are you?" the boy said around the mouthful of candy, rubbing his runny nose on the sleeve of his faded shirt.

Harry gaped. He checked the house number; the lacquered house number was a number four, and it was in the same position it had been when he left. He was certainly on Privet Drive. It was the same house--but it couldn't be.

"I...I...I live here," he stammered. "Who are you?"

The boy squinted at Harry, then leaned back and called out to an unseen person indoors.

"MUUUUUUM!"

Harry jumped at the sheer volume of the boy's yell. It beat any of Dudley's temper tantrums by a long shot.

He heard the slap-slap of slippers on the tiled floor, and stepped back in shock as a middle-aged woman shuffled to the door. She wore a dirty apron over an old print frock. Strands of greying hair straggled from the kerchief that covered her head. A half-smoked cigarette dangled from her lips, and to Harry's disgust she puffed out a miasma of stale smoke, the stench of which permeated the once-painfully clean house.

"Get yer tea, Billy." The woman shooed the boy away from the door, and turned to Harry. "Well?" she barked.

"I...I live here," Harry repeated thickly.

"Live 'ere?" She coughed heavily, and took a long drag on her stub of a cigarette. "Wot 're you talkin' about?"

Harry tried a different tactic. "What happened to the Dursleys?"

"Dursleys?" Her face screwed up in momentary concentration as she tried to process the information.

"The family that live...er, lived here before. The Dursleys. Vernon and Petunia Dursley." He couldn't believe he was standing on his own front step having this impossible conversation. Growing desperation sharpened his voice. "What happened to them? Where are they?"

The woman shrugged, frowning his change of tone. "Well, 'ow should I know? They're gone, aren't they? Didn't anyone tell you?"

"What--?"

The frown grew deeper, angrier. "They **MOVED**, boy!" she shouted, sending a fine cloud of cigarette ash spraying all over him. "Moved! Gone! Now go 'ome and quit botherin' us!"

She shut the door firmly.

Harry didn't move. Maybe, if he stood there long enough, and waited very patiently, Aunt Petunia would come, open the door, and yell at him to get inside and not track dirt all over her freshly cleaned floors. Uncle Vernon would order him to mow the lawn if he wanted to have anything to eat tonight. And Dudley would try to hit him with the knobbly Smeltings stick he was so proud of. He would stand on the step and wait until one of them opened the door.

He heard a rattle. The flap on the letter box was pushed outward, then fell shut with a snap.

"Mummy, that boy's still 'ere! Make 'im go away!" It was a different voice, a little girl's this time, whiny and petulant.

The woman's voice returned, more irritated than before. "Get in th' kitchen and finish yer mash, Daisy. Take the baby."

The door opened once again, and the bedraggled woman stared at him, her mouth firmly set in disdain. "'Ere, what're you doin'? I *told* you, they're gone. They don't live 'ere. What are you waitin' for?"

Harry met her accusing gaze with a tranquility born of extreme fatigue. "I used to live here. Where did the Dursleys...where did the people who lived here before move to?"

The woman began to shut the door, but stopped short. She stared at Harry as if seeing him for the first time. Her widening eyes took in his pinched face, then flicked upward to the scar on his forehead, then down to the trunk and cage at his feet.

The cigarette fell from her lips and landed on the doormat, leaving a scorch mark.

"You...you're that *boy*." Her voice was shaking, filled with dread and fascinated horror. "They told us about you. About the *freak*."

Something seemed to snap inside of her, and she backed away, staring fearfully at Harry as though he were about to murder her and then come after her children. "If you don't get out of 'ere in five seconds I'll call th' police, I will. Go on, get out!"

"Wait--" Harry pleaded, desperately reaching out with one hand to stop her from closing the door.

She leaped away from his outstretched hand. "GET OUT!" she screamed, her cry rising to a painfully shrill pitch.

The door slammed in his face. The deadbolt lock snicked shut with an ominous click.

He heard the sound of a telephone rattling in its cradle and a baby's loud wailing, followed by a child's fretful screams.

He let his hand fall to his side and hang there.

"Mr. Potter."

The voice behind him was quiet, gentle. A sharp contrast to the noises he heard coming from inside the house.

"Harry."

At the sound of his first name, Harry looked up bleakly. Professor Stanton was there. He knelt down, eye to eye with Harry.

"Come with me, Harry," he said. He spoke very slowly and deliberately, as if to a small child. "There's a friend waiting for you, not far from here. I'll take you there."

Harry couldn't summon enough energy to form words, or even to open his mouth. He nodded mutely.

Professor Stanton hefted the trunk onto one shoulder and handed Harry the owl cage. With his free hand, he guided Harry down the walk and away from the house.

Harry stumbled along, cage banging against his shins, not seeing anything. His legs acted of their own free will, propelling him forward like an automaton. He didn't know where he was going, only that he was being led to meet someone.

A friend.

Going to meet a friend.

He couldn't tell how much time passed. It felt like a few moments, but it could have been an hour for all he knew. As long as the hand was behind him, helping him forward, he would just keep walking. But he was tired...so very tired....

"Almost there, Harry."

Good. They were almost there. Wherever 'there' was. It wouldn't be much longer now. He let his eyes drift out of focus, because it took too much effort to look straight ahead.

The hand on his shoulder tightened, holding him back, and his legs stopped moving. When he could focus once again, he saw that he was standing before the front door of a different house, not as nice as the one that had just slammed in his face. The paint on the door was chipped and beginning to peel off in thin strips.

The door opened. His nostrils were assailed by a very strong and unpleasant odour, one that he knew he should remember.

"Harry!"

The voice was thready, cracking from what sounded like lack of use. The face hovering above him was blurry, but familiar. He squinted at it, vainly trying to recall where he had last seen it...and heard that voice...and smelled that particularly pungent aroma of *cat*....

The last thing he heard before his senses deserted him was a deep murmuring, and the thready voice saying in a low snarl, quite different from its original tone:

"Those blasted Muggles--good riddance to them."

Chapter Three - A Bit of Breakfast

Old age is not so bad when you consider the alternatives.

-- Maurice Chevalier

Harry opened his eyes, and his heart sank.

He was in Mrs. Figg's spare bedroom, in the same room where he had spent so many hours of his younger years. Whenever the Dursleys had wanted to go somewhere without him--which occurred with increasing frequency as Harry grew older--they would pack him off to spend a day or a weekend or a fortnight with Mrs. Figg. Harry knew the spare bed well: a not very soft mattress, lumpy pillows, and stray cat hairs on the blankets made it uninviting even to the sleepest child.

Despite the uncomfortable bed, he had apparently had a decent night's sleep. He felt refreshed, or at least less tired than he had been. Either would have been a marked improvement.

He idly wondered why Mrs. Figg hadn't come in to wake him. The sun was fairly high in the sky, and the battered clock on the small night table read 11.28 AM. The Dursleys would probably be back soon, and then--

He sat bolt upright, a thin sweat breaking out on his forehead. The Dursleys wouldn't be back. They were gone. They had moved away, and he didn't know where they were.

He had imagined this scenario many, many times in his most pleasant daydreams, but to be confronted with the stark reality was another matter entirely. The Dursleys, horrid as they were, were also a familiar part of his life. Without them....

A pair of soft, fluffy slippers sat on the rug next to his bed. He stuffed his feet into them and padded out of the bedroom, heading for the bathroom across the hall.

In the bathroom, he splashed cool water on his face and rinsed out his mouth, which tasted furry and nasty for want of proper brushing. There was no comb or hairbrush in sight, so he ran his hand under the cold water tap and finger-combed his unruly hair into submission. His toilet completed, he left the bathroom and headed downstairs.

He crept down the carpeted stairs, carefully avoiding the third one from the bottom, which always creaked when stepped on.

"Mrs. Figg?" he said hesitantly, peering around the doorframe into the kitchen.

Mrs. Figg was standing at the kitchen counter, wrestling with an old electric kettle that stood in a puddle of water. The puddle seemed to be growing larger by the minute, flooding the countertop and beginning to drip onto the floor. She was mumbling to herself, and Harry caught a few words that he had last heard during one of Ron's particularly colourful outbursts after a confrontation with Draco Malfoy.

"Ouch!" She jerked her hand away from the kettle as a fine spray of scalding water erupted from bottom of the spout. "Blasted Muggle contraptions," she said vehemently, almost spitting out the words. "Can't even make bloody hot water, let alone a decent cup of tea." She wrenched the plug from its wall socket and violently flung the unfortunate appliance into the sink.

This could not be the batty old woman who had looked after him since he could remember, who had passed the time by showing him yellowing snapshots of her countless cats. It looked like her, and sounded like her, but the Mrs. Figg he knew would never use such language, or get so upset over a malfunctioning electric kettle. She was wearing a simple housedress with a painfully flowery print and a mismatched scarf over her almost white hair. Baggy tights that had seen better days and ratty carpet slippers completed her outfit, which was exactly the same as every other outfit he had ever seen her wear...yet as he looked more closely at it, he thought that it looked somehow wrong. Mrs. Figg looked like an old woman--or rather, someone's concept of how an old woman *should* look. It was too accurate, too 'correct', like a costume worn to a fancy dress party.

In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he came to realise that Mrs. Figg looked too much like a typical old age pensioner to actually *be* one.

"Mrs. Figg?" he repeated, moving from behind the doorframe and standing just outside the kitchen.

His elderly neighbor whirled around. She glared at him with unfocused eyes, as if she wasn't really seeing him. "Would you believe it? Prefect and Head Girl at Hogwarts, countless hours of training, nearly forty years in the field, undercover operations, counterintelligence activities, Ministry commendations for this, that, and the other, and look at what it's come to!" She pointed to the discarded kettle lying forlornly in the sink. "Wrestling with leaky teapots like...like a blasted *Muggle!*"

She stood there after finishing her tirade, silently fuming. Slowly, her angry scowl faded and her anger dissipated. She let out a long, exhausted sigh.

"Eh, I'm sorry, Harry," she said sincerely, smoothing her dress with her hands. "It's just that I haven't seen another wizard or witch for so long...it builds up, you see. Your friend got the full brunt of it, I fear, once we got you to bed."

Though he was still a little dazed from processing the entirely new information, her last words clicked in Harry's mind. "My friend...my friend...Professor Stanton? Is he still here?"

Mrs. Figg shook her head. "No, no. He had to be going, but he stayed long enough to be sure that you were sleeping naturally. Will Stanton always was a good man, once you got to know him...if he wasn't being too cryptic, that is. We had a little chat, once you were in bed. He wanted me to give you this--"

She held up a plain white envelope, and with a flick of her wrist, she tossed it to land neatly on the kitchen table. Harry moved to pick it up, but the elderly woman darted between him and the table with a speed and dexterity that startled him.

"Ah!" she said imperiously, holding up a bony finger. "Not until you've had some breakfast. It looks like tea's off...." She glared at the electric kettle. "How about a bit of egg and toast?"

Harry's stomach, whose last encounter with food had been a pumpkin pasty on the Hogwarts Express the day before, gurgled and rumbled loudly at the welcome suggestion. Harry flushed a deep embarrassed red, but Mrs. Figg merely smiled.

"I'll take that as a yes." She busied herself pulling out crockery and pots and pans and ingredients. Harry, used to cooking for himself, started to help, but Mrs. Figg shooed him to the table and told him to sit. "You're not to do any cooking while you're here...you're supposed to be on holiday, remember? And since you're not living with those blasted Muggles anymore, you don't need to worry about the washing up, either. Just sit and relax for once."

Harry sat, feeling very useless but not wanting to disobey Mrs. Figg. He fiddled with a corner of the frayed tablecloth. "So you're really a witch?" he asked, and regretted the obvious question as soon as it left his mouth.

"Though it might not seem like it at the moment, I am," she replied casually, tossing eggshells into the dustbin. "And if you'll wait until this toast is done, I'll tell you more."

Once the meal was ready, she slid a plate heaped with her concept of "a bit of egg and toast", which turned out to be several fried eggs, rashers of crisp bacon, and large slices of thickly-buttered toast in front of Harry. He ate hungrily, devouring the breakfast as if he expected it to vanish before he could finish it all...which to some

extent, he did. It tasted better than most food had for a while, but he chalked that up to hunger and lack of proper sleep, as well as the fact that it had been cooked expressly for him.

"Yes, Harry, I'm a witch," Mrs. Figg said conversationally as he chewed and swallowed. "And a damned good one, if I do say so myself. Since those Muggle relatives of your mother's have decided to do a bunk on you, I'm going to be your guardian from now on. I obtained papers long ago, in case something like this should happen. You'll spend your summers here--unless you have some place you'd rather go."

"Where did they go? The Dursleys, I mean," said Harry through a mouthful of bacon and toast.

"Who knows?" Mrs. Figg shrugged, an expressive gesture that involved her entire body. She rested one hand on the kitchen table. "Probably ran off somewhere, hoping no one would know or care that they'd be leaving you behind. Trying to get away from magic, from 'freaks' like us. Stupid of them, when you stop to think on it--they're far safer living with you than they would be otherwise."

Seeing Harry's confused stare, she pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger, trying to sort out her thoughts. "I've been living here for as long as you can remember, Harry. But I haven't lived here as long as you might think. I moved in to this house the night you first arrived at Privet Drive, nearly fifteen years ago. Can't use magic here, though. Can't even get owl post--it might look suspect seeing owls flying around in the day. But in any case, I've been living in this house ever since your parents were taken, poor dears."

Harry said nothing, but the hand that held his knife trembled slightly in the act of transferring marmalade from the pot on the table to his piece of toast. A chunk of orange goo landed on the tablecloth.

Mrs. Figg grabbed a cloth and scooped it up before it could leave a stain, continuing her story as she did so. "You see, Albus Dumbledore was concerned that even though you were living with Muggles, someone might try to find you and harm you before you were old enough to learn about who you really were. Your parents, may they rest in peace, made many enemies in their day...and there are more than a few people I could name who would have preferred that the famous son of James and Lily Potter be eliminated before he could pose a threat to them, in the future."

Harry's fork stopped in mid-air. A piece of egg slipped off it and fell back on his plate. He suddenly didn't feel like eating anymore.

"So that's why I moved in here," Mrs. Figg finished. "To watch over you, in a way. You've no idea how hard it was to see you so often and

not be able to say anything about who you really were. Especially when you needed it more than anything else."

"But why couldn't I have lived with you instead?" Harry asked, dropping his fork with a clatter. The tight ball of tension that had sat in his stomach for the last few weeks had returned, and he felt the beginnings of nausea swirl in his gut. "Why did I have to spend those miserable years with my aunt and uncle?"

Mrs. Figg's eyes narrowed. "You don't understand. You *had* to stay there, for your own safety."

Harry angrily shoved his chair away from the table. "All I understand is that I spent the first ten years of my life wishing that I had never been born! You can't imagine what it was like--"

Quick as a flash, her hand shot out and struck him full in the face, nearly knocking both him and his chair to the floor. His glasses flew off and landed on the table, miraculously unharmed. His cheek burned with the impact as the blood rushed to his face, though the rest of his body felt icy cold.

They stayed in that position for a long moment, Harry clinging to his chair and Mrs. Figg standing over him, a frozen tableau.

When she finally spoke, her voice was very soft, but as hard as stone.

"In those ten years, Harry Potter, there were no fewer than seventeen violent attacks on various towns in Britain, resulting in the deaths of fourteen people. The Muggle papers described them all as 'unrelated incidents of violent crime', but there are definite similarities between each one." There was no sympathy or sorrow in her eyes, just a cold acceptance of unpleasant facts. "Muggle news doesn't normally get printed in the Daily Prophet, but these events were. Shall I show you the clippings, Harry? Would you like to read them?"

Suddenly, Harry's plate, scattered with the remains of his half-eaten breakfast, was the most fascinating object he had ever seen.

"It isn't coincidence. They were looking for you." An emotionless statement.

"Why didn't they ever find me? I mean, if they spent so long looking, and tried so many times...." Harry trailed off weakly as he came to the awful realisation that he had just wedged his foot even farther into his mouth.

"I'm ever so glad to hear you place so much faith in my ability," Mrs. Figg snorted derisively. "This entire area is heavily enchanted with protection spells. If another witch or wizard besides myself--and you, of course--were to come within a five mile radius of this house, I'd

know it. It acts as an early warning of sorts. Your Weasley friends nearly gave me a heart attack when they popped in without warning. But that's how Arthur Weasley always was--less foresight than a lovesick squirrel."

She looked back at the sink, filled with the grease-covered skillet and plates. "If you're done with that, give me the plate," she said pointedly.

Harry hastily shoveled a few more bites into his mouth, then handed the nearly-empty plate to Mrs. Figg. She took it without a word, and turned her back on him.

Feeling rather at a loss, and in desperate need of something to do with his hands, he fumbled for his glasses and slit open the sealed envelope that lay next to his plate. He pulled out a letter on thick creamy paper, written in Professor Stanton's flowing hand.

Dear Mr. Potter [it read],

By now, I assume you've learned what your living arrangements will be for the summer. Rather unorthodox, I admit, but it may actually be more beneficial than you realise. Arabella Figg knows what she's doing. I doubt you could be in more capable hands.

My reason for writing is to give you a few words of advice to help you during this summer. Please forgive the hasty introduction, but I have little time and much to write.

First, spend as much time as you can indoors. Avoid going outside if you can help it. This is more for your guardian's peace of mind than your safety, but for heaven's sakes don't tell her I said that.

Second, let your friends know where you are, but do so discreetly. Send a letter by regular post to Miss Granger, telling her that you are not living with the Dursleys any longer and that all communications must go to your new address--by Muggle post only. Stress the need to keep any contact to a minimum, at least for the time being. Enclose a copy for Mr. Weasley so she can owl it to him. Don't worry about messages from your godfather or anyone else. If your Headmaster Dumbledore wants them to know where you are, they'll know soon enough.

Third, do your homework. Now, before you roll your eyes at me for sounding like a sour old schoolmaster, hear me out. This coming year will be one of the most academically, physically, and emotionally challenging years that you will ever face, and there is a grave danger that you could fall behind in your studies if should you happen to be...shall we say, 'overtaken by events'. This cannot happen. If you want help, by all means go to Arabella Figg--she'll be overjoyed to work with magical studies again, and you couldn't find a more knowledgeable instructor outside of Hogwarts.

Last, take your time and enjoy the holiday. Rest up and get your strength back--you may have need of it sooner than you think.

Until we next meet, I remain,

Will Stanton

Harry folded the letter, and returned it to the envelope.

He looked over at the sink, where Mrs. Figg was still doing the washing up. She seemed to be putting more effort into the scrubbing than was necessary, and the plates rattled loudly under her hands. The running water drummed in a faint staccato rhythm on the metal of the sink.

"Mrs. Figg?" he said, slipping the letter into his pocket.

"What is it, Harry?" she replied shortly.

Harry put on his best confused face, and let a hint of wheedling enter his voice. "Umm...well, I have a *huge* essay for Transfiguration that I need to write, but I don't know where to get started. I want to get it done as soon as possible, because I have *so* much else to write for my other classes. Could you...if you're not too busy...maybe, could you help me with it, later?"

She stopped dead in act of wiping down the countertop. The sippy dishrag dropped from her hand, landing with a wet plop on the worn surface. When she turned around, she was positively beaming, the brightness of her smile making her wrinkled face look years younger.

"Why didn't you say so, you little brat? Come on, get your parchment, get your quills and your textbooks! I'll be there in a minute, once I finish drying. Oh, what I wouldn't *give* to be allowed to use a bloody Lavatio spell on this mess!"

As Harry ran up the stairs to collect his school supplies, he came to the firm conclusion that despite Voldemort's sudden return to power

and the imminent danger that threatened the wizarding world, having a Dursley-free summer holiday was, at least for now, well worth the inconvenience.

Chapter Four - Postman's Knock

What joy is better than the news of friends?

-- Robert Browning

Harry awoke on the morning of his fifteenth birthday to the sound of the postman rattling the metal flap of the letterbox.

He sprang out of bed in one fluid movement, pulling on his new dressing gown as he flew down the stairs to scoop up the tidy pile of letters that had been deposited on the front hall floor.

As he knelt on the cool tiles of the hall, he deftly sorted through the day's post. Two parcel notices for oversized items; he would have to go down to the post office later in the day to pick them up. He tossed aside a coloured advertisement and a couple of bills. Two envelopes immediately caught his eye: a very thick one from Hermione and a thinner one without a return address.

He carried the post into the kitchen and set it on the table, then filled the kettle--a new non-electric one that Mrs. Figg had caved in and purchased the week before--and set it to boil. He sat down on a kitchen chair, tucking his legs under him. Whistling softly under his breath, he slit the thick envelope open and pulled out a folded sheet of paper and another, smaller envelope, addressed to him in Ron's hasty scrawl. Setting aside the envelope, he unfolded Hermione's letter and began to read.

Dear Harry [it said],

Happy birthday! I hope you get this letter on time--you know what the Muggle post is like. I've enclosed Ron's letter as well. He couldn't remember how many stamps to use, and I told him that using too many would only make the envelope look suspicious, so he decided to just owl both it and your birthday present to me and let me pass them on to you.

How's life without the Dursleys? Is Mrs. Figg spoiling you rotten? I'm sorry I haven't written very often, but since you told me that secrecy was of the utmost importance, I figured that it would be better to restrict my correspondence. But I couldn't forget your birthday present; you'll just

have to go and pick it up, that's all. What a bother it is to not be able to use owls!

Things are fine at home, but I can't wait to get back to school. I'm so tired of swapping labels on boxes of files and typing up National Health forms for cavity fillings. At least I have enough saved up to buy that boxed set of "Neo-Pythagorean Approaches to Arithmancy" I've had my eye on all summer.

Will you be spending the last few weeks at the Burrow again this year? Will you be coming to Diagon Alley to get school supplies? Let me know, and I'll tell Ron. I don't think they get Muggle post at the Burrow, but you could always try sending him a letter yourself. I'm sure that Ron's dad would love to get a letter delivered by a real live Muggle postman.

*Well, I should be going, so I hope to see you soon!
Happy birthday!*

*Love from
Hermione*

"Neo-Pythagorean Approaches to Arithmancy"? Is she off her rocker?" mumbled Harry, returning her letter to its envelope.

A hand ruffled his hair, making him leap away in surprise.

"Well, I thought I was going to be the first one up, but you beat me to it," Mrs. Figg said. She had entered the kitchen so silently that he hadn't even noticed. "Happy birthday, brat. What would you like for breakfast? We've got waffle mix, or I can make scrambled eggs...."

"Waffles, please, if that's okay," Harry said. "With lots of syrup. And sausages."

"I think I can manage that." She rummaged through the cupboards and pulled out measuring cups and an old blackened waffle iron. "And how about your birthday dinner?"

"Whatever you're making 's fine with me," said Harry.

"Don't you want anything in particular?"

He opened the envelope containing Ron's letter. "No, not really."

"Oh, Harry, you just don't get it, do you?" Mrs. Figg said with a laugh. "It's your *birthday*. Come on, choose whatever you want for

dinner, and I'll do my best to whip it up. Or we could even go out to a restaurant, if you like. You're the birthday boy--it's your decision."

As Mrs. Figg's words sank in, Harry suddenly felt a stinging sensation in his eyes and nose, and blinked rapidly to try and get rid of it. For years, the Dursleys had barely acknowledged his birthday. He had watched silently, longingly as Dudley had received expensive presents which would be forgotten in a month's time, elaborate birthday cakes that would be reduced to a mess of crumbs and icing, and above all, lavish praise from his doting parents. Now, having the chance to pick a menu filled with his favourite foods, or being given the prospect of visiting any restaurant and ordering whatever he wanted....it was almost too much for him to bear.

"I don't know," he whispered helplessly.

Mrs. Figg looked at him with compassion, her eyes bright with tears and understanding. "Tell you what," she said huskily. "You sit down and read your letters, and I'll finish with breakfast. Then we'll go and pick up your packages, and you can take your time and think about what you'd like to do for a birthday treat. Just let me know when you're ready."

"All right," said Harry, intensely relieved that he wouldn't be forced to make an on-the-spot decision.

He read through Ron's letter, his mouth watering as the rich aroma of frying sausages filled the small kitchen.

Hey Harry!

Happy birthday, to start. It feels so weird to not use an owl to send the post. Hermione says she does it all the time, but Muggles just don't know what they're missing, not having owls.

Mum says to tell you that you're more than welcome to spend the last few weeks with us if you want to, though since you aren't living with the Dursleys anymore, I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't want to come. To tell the truth, it's not exactly all fun and games round here at the moment. Dad and Percy got in a huge fight last night at dinner about Fudge and the Ministry and You-Know-Who. Percy was being an ass, as usual. So now they're not speaking to each other, and Mum won't speak to Percy because Percy said that Dumbledore was, and I quote, "past it". As usual, Fred and George aren't being much help--they ruined one of Mum's best cooking pots the other day, working on some new project of theirs called

"Weasley's Jumping Jelly-Babies", and now she's furious at them, too. So all told, things are pretty crazy here. But I'd like to see you, and I know that Ginny does, too.

I probably should keep this letter short, since I don't know how well Errol will hold up if it's any heavier. Mum told me to use him to send this to Hermione. She still doesn't trust Pig to deliver the post properly. Let me know through Hermione what your plans are, all right?

*Cheers,
Ron*

As he finished reading Ron's letter, Mrs. Figg set a plate before him. "Eat up, eat up. There's more where this came from."

The third envelope was momentarily set aside to take care of more immediate needs. He speared a sausage link on the tines of his fork and used it to mop up the sticky syrup. Eating dripping waffles and reading the post at the same time is no small feat, but Harry did so as only a growing fifteen year-old boy can. Only when the first batch of waffles had disappeared under his knife and fork did he pick up the last letter.

Dear Harry,

With any luck, this letter will arrive in time to wish you a happy birthday on the actual day. It's been a long, long while since I sent a letter the Muggle way, so I can only hope that it doesn't end up lost or returned or whatnot. It's a pity that you can't receive owls, but since Arabella Figg's done just fine without them for so long, I suppose I can grit my teeth and bear a little inconvenience.

I hope your summer's been more enjoyable than some previous ones. I almost couldn't believe it when Dumbledore informed me that you'd be living with Arabella. It's a comfort to hear that you're in such capable hands. Arabella Figg was, and is, one of the best Aurors we've got, and if anyone can keep you safe until school starts again, she can.

I don't know how much you've heard, but things aren't going too well in the wizarding world. What with the in-fighting amongst the Ministry members, flying rumours, and tension all round,

everyone's tempers have been on edge. That idiot Fudge still refuses to accept that the Dark Lord has returned, and as long as his opinion is the official opinion of the Ministry of Magic, we're all at a standstill. I'm only hearing this as secondhand information, of course, but I still don't like the sound of it. It looks like we'll just have to wait and see how all this plays out.

I truly wish that I could come and see you, but until Wormtail is caught and turned in to the authorities, it's not safe for me to be out. I can't even tell you where I am, but I thought I should let you know that I'm all right, and so is Remus. Speaking of Remus, he wants to write a few lines, so I'll turn the pen over to him for a moment.

[Here, the handwriting changed from a cursive scrawl to a tidy block printing]

Happy birthday, Harry. Fifteen already, eh? Old folks like your godfather and myself don't bother to count birthdays any more--it just makes us feel more ancient than we already are.

I hope that you're enjoying yourself before school starts, and that Arabella isn't running you ragged with drills and making you rewrite your essays ten times before she's satisfied. She's just getting back into form, so she needs someone to practise on...but I'll stop there before I say too much and spoil everything.

Sirius is starting to look rather edgy, so I think I'd better say goodbye for now. Take care of yourself, Harry. I'm thinking of you, and we both wish we could be there to help you have a proper celebration. Of course, there's always next year.

**Yours,
Remus Lupin**

[The handwriting changed back to Sirius' script]

Anyway, as I was saying, I wanted to let you know that your birthday present is going to be a little late this year. I don't trust the post enough to handle your present, so it'll have to

wait until you get to school. Once you see what it is, though, I know you won't mind the wait.

Happy birthday, Harry, and many more to come.

*All my love,
Sirius*

"Good news from your godfather, Harry?" Mrs. Figg asked brightly, sliding another waffle onto his plate.

Harry nearly choked on a chunk of sausage, and had to gulp down water to shift the spicy lump of meat from his throat. Eyes streaming, he coughed and blinked at his elderly guardian, who had a mysterious, knowing little grin on her lips.

"Don't worry...I'm nothing if not discreet," she said. "Dumbledore sent me a letter a while ago, explaining everything. And I do mean *everything*." She shook her head, still smiling at Harry. "You're a piece of work, brat, you know that? Just like your father. And your godfather, come to think of it."

Harry didn't know whether he should be offended or filled with pride. He decided on a combination of the two. "Thanks, I think."

"Any time." She chuckled. "Now eat. You want to go to the post office, don't you?"

Once the breakfast dishes were dry, they went to the post office to pick up Harry's presents, as Mrs. Figg had promised. The two parcel slips turned out to be from Ron and Hermione respectively. Hermione had sent two books: a slim but large volume titled "Secrets of the Seekers--New Quidditch Strategies and Tips", and another James Herriot book, "All Things Bright and Beautiful", the sequel to the one she had lent him. Ron's gift was a squashy parcel of fresh gooseberry tarts, which he had labelled as a combination present from his mother and Ginny, and a new Chudley Cannons promotional poster, the seven players resplendent in their best orange robes and the team's cannonball logo emblazoned across the background.

The remainder of the day passed like a wonderful dream. He loafed around the house, reading his new books and napping when he felt like it. After a quick lunch, Mrs. Figg banned him from the kitchen so she could bake his birthday cake, and he spent much of the afternoon sitting in the front hall, relishing the rich scent of chocolate that wafted through the open door.

For dinner, he suggested going to a restaurant, mostly because he'd never really been to one with anyone but the Dursleys before. He had no idea where to go, but by chance, the colourful advertisement that had come with the morning post had been for a recently-opened Indian

restaurant not far from the house. Mrs. Figg, upon learning that he'd never eaten Indian food, declared that he'd love it--and that was that.

It was Harry's first time in an ethnic restaurant; Vernon Dursley refused to touch that "nasty cat food", as he called it, and Dudley would have rather died of starvation than go to a restaurant that didn't feature hamburgers and chips as the highlight of the menu. He stared at the menu for a long time, not because he was being overly selective but because he was trying to find a dish that he could pronounce.

Mrs. Figg, however, was rattling off her selections like a culinary expert. "I'll have samosas to start, then the tandoori chicken tikka with a side of keema naan. Oh, and I'd like the chicken to be 'Indian hot', please."

"And to drink, madam?" their waitress asked, copying the order down.

"Oh, just some mango juice, please." She handed her menu to the waitress. "Harry, what would you like?"

Harry wordlessly pointed to one of the dishes that had the word "mild" in its description, choosing discretion over valour.

The waitress nodded. "Bewali chicken...very good, sir. And to drink?"

"Just the water, please," Harry said faintly.

The waitress nodded again, took his menu, and left them.

Harry decided that now would be a good time to broach the subject of visit to the Burrow, before their food came and made conversation difficult. He had no idea how she would respond, but he was terrified that she would forbid it outright in the name of his safety or her peace of mind or some other unarguable cause. The best he could do would be to start slowly, choose his words very carefully, and above all, act casually.

"Thank you so much for taking me to dinner, Mrs. Figg," he said, flashing his most winning smile.

"Not at all, Harry. Are you enjoying your birthday?"

"It's been lovely." He took a quick sip of water. "It was great to hear from Ron and Hermione again. It feels like ages since I've seen them."

"Well, you'll be back in school soon enough," said Mrs. Figg lightly, noncommittally.

"Yeah." Harry frowned at that, but decided to press on. "You know, Ron told me something funny in his letter. You know what he said?"

"Hmmm?" She was busy studying a series of framed black-and-white photographs of the Taj Mahal that hung on one of the restaurant's walls.

"He...he said that his mum was wondering if I'd be coming to Diagon Alley to get school supplies before classes start." Not a complete lie, just a minor stretching of the truth.

Mrs. Figg smiled lazily, not really hearing him. "Really? Oh, I'm sure we'll figure out something."

Harry's eye twitched. This wasn't quite how it was supposed to go.

"Oh, of course. But I thought...I mean, the last few summers, I spent a couple of days with Ron's family, just to make it easier to get to Diagon Alley. Much less bother for everyone, you know." He laughed, trying to sound genial.

Mrs. Figg leaned back in her chair. The lazy smile was gone, replaced with a grim frown and a sour stare. "And so you were wanting to do the same this year? Spend the last few weeks with the Weasleys?"

"Um...well...well, yes," he blurted out, then added, "that is, if it's all right with you, of course."

"We'll see."

Harry bit his lip, but said nothing. He knew that tone of voice all too well. When adults said, "We'll see", it usually meant "Chances are, you're not going to get your way".

But at that point, their food arrived, and Harry's plots and plans to visit the Burrow took second place to his sudden discovery that a food described as 'mild' in an Indian restaurant is not exactly 'mild' to someone who had never eaten so much as instant curry before.

* * *

It took some cajoling on Harry's part to allow Mrs. Figg to let him stay with the Weasleys for the last weeks of the summer. Actually, it took several days of constant and repeated asking, filled with pregnant reminders that "it would look suspicious if I *didn't* go" and "Mr. Weasley can keep me up to date on developments within the Ministry".

Mrs. Figg grudgingly agreed, but not without extreme and explicitly stated misgivings on her part. Harry dashed off a happy note to Hermione, telling her to send it to Ron as quickly as she could.

The remainder of his time with Mrs. Figg passed in much the same way it had before his birthday. When he wasn't working on homework, he was reading his new books, or eating one of his elderly guardian's enormous meals, or sleeping. He'd never had so little to do during the summer, primarily because Mrs. Figg wouldn't let him help out around the house. Whether it was an attempt to make up for the years of hard labour with his aunt and uncle, or merely her pride getting the better of her, he couldn't tell...and didn't care.

But even though she refused to let him do physical labour, she kept him incredibly busy with schoolwork. Every one of his essays had to pass her critical eye, which could pick out the smallest flaw or tiniest inaccuracy. He soon learned to dread any sudden intake of breath she made while reading his papers, because it was a sure sign that he would have to recopy it yet again. She was a stern taskmaster in everything academic, picking apart his essays and grilling him on everything from proper use of fungi to minutiae concerning the unbearably dull Accords of the International Conference on the Undead in 1078.

Ron's letter, via Hermione, came the morning after one of their marathon homework sessions that found Harry nodding sleepily in his cornflakes.

Harry,

Short note, sorry. Mum says to take train from London. Will pick you up in Exeter, taxi to Burrow. Let us know your train plans. Talk to you soon.

Ron

P.S.: Ginny says hi.

P.P.S.: Hermione says she's tired of being delivery service--wants you to write her more. Just like a girl to say that.

Mrs. Figg snorted as Harry finished reading Ron's message out loud. "Exeter, eh? I'll have to make your train reservations--you'd be best off going out of Paddington. I don't trust King's Cross, not unless you're catching the Hogwarts Express. It's a seedy place...though I dare say that it's better than it used to be. Less chance of you being mugged or worse, nowadays."

Harry ignored her remarks. He picked up his empty bowl and set it in the sink. "Will you let me know when you do? Make the reservations, I mean."

"Yes, yes," she said, grumbling. She checked her watch. "I'm going shopping, do you want anything?"

"No, thanks. But I think we're out of cornflakes."

As he picked up the discarded cereal box, he felt the food in his stomach turn to lead. The summer had been wonderful, but it was nearly over, and he would have to go back to Hogwarts in less than three weeks. Every year, he had loathed the summer holiday and eagerly looked forward to going back to school, but this year his feelings had completely reversed.

"Bread...hoover bags...do you need more shampoo?"

"No, I've got enough."

A tiny part of his mind, small enough to be brushed aside but large enough to make itself heard on a regular basis, spoke up.

Cedric Diggory wouldn't have minded going back to school...but he didn't even get a chance to finish it....

"Are you all right, Harry? You don't look well."

"I'm fine."

He was back to where he had started.

Chapter Five - Getting There Is Half the Battle

"Revenge is not hard to fathom for a man who believes in nothing."

--Pierce Brosnan as James Bond, in "The World Is Not Enough"

"The 9.33 Great Western Railways train to Penzance, calling at Reading, Taunton, Exeter St Davids, Dawlish, Teignmouth, Newton Abbot, Torquay, Paignton, Totnes, Plymouth, Liskeard, Bodmin Parkway, Par, St Austell, Truro, Redruth, and St Erth will depart from Platform 7. Will all ticketed passengers please board at Platform 7."

The daily commuters who had packed London's Paddington Station with pedestrian traffic had already scattered, departing for their scheduled connections with the Underground, taxis, or buses. There were plenty of travellers scattered around, sipping coffee from flimsy paper cups or reading the daily papers, but for the most part the mad rush of the early morning had cleared. The August Bank Holiday wasn't for another week, and though there were crowds, passengers didn't have to fight the awful crush that would have accompanied the busy travel day.

Harry would have been more pleased at this good fortune, but it took all of his concentration to keep control of his belongings and at the same time respond to a barrage of last-minute questions from Mrs. Figg.

"Are you sure you've got everything you need?" She peered at his luggage, making a final survey to see if anything crucial was missing. "Your books? Your homework? Hedwig's food? You haven't left anything behind?"

"I've got everything, don't worry. It's all in my trunk." Harry handed said trunk to a porter, who carried it away to the luggage van with ridiculous ease.

Mrs. Figg was not to be daunted. She thumped her cane--which she didn't really need, but which she said lent an air of 'authenticity' to her Muggle identity--on the chipped concrete of the platform. "Do you need money, anything for supplies?"

Harry wondered if this was what Neville went through each and every day. "Mrs. Figg...."

"There's a chemist's in the station--do you need toothpaste?"

"Mrs. Figg...."

"You're sure you packed that essay we went over last night, the one on the 1772 Anglo-French Warlock Convention?"

"Mrs. Figg...."

"And you **did** remember to bring an extra change of under--"

"MRS. FIGG!" Harry cut her off, his face scarlet.

"I know, I know." The older woman sagged, the wind gone from her sails. "I just worry, that's all."

"I'll be fine, I promise." Harry tried to sound bright and reassuring. Apparently, he was successful, because Mrs. Figg immediately began scolding him once more.

"You get off at Exeter St Davids--remember that. The Weasleys will be there to fetch you. Your friend Ron knows what time you're coming in, right? You told him 11.45?"

"Yes."

"And don't you **dare** fall asleep on the train, do you hear? The last thing I need to hear is that you missed your stop and ended up with all the Muggle trippers in Penzance."

"I won't even close my eyes," said Harry, very seriously.

She twisted her face into a mock scowl. "Oh, now you're just having me on. Goodbye, brat," she said briskly, thrusting a lunch bag into his hands and pecking him on the cheek.

Harry gazed at her, smiling crookedly, then wrapped his arms around her and gave her a warm hug. She stiffened at first, but he soon felt her return the embrace, her wrinkled cheek pressing against his own.

"Goodbye, Mrs. Figg. And thank you," he murmured.

She gave him a final firm squeeze and a pat on the back. "Take care of yourself, Harry. I'll be seeing you."

Then she was off, walking with a pronounced and completely affected feebleness so contrary to her actual self that Harry, watching her, groaned out loud. Whenever Muggles were around, her playacting seemed to flourish until he half expected her to brandish her cane and rail on at perfect strangers about how children these days never listened to their elders or ate their vegetables.

He hopped onto the train and found an empty pair of seats near the front of the car. Settling in, he took out the book that Hermione had given him for his birthday and began to read. He was almost finished, just a few chapters away from the end. Hermione had said in one of her letters that there were two more sequels, and he hoped she would bring them to school so he could continue the story.

He was so engrossed in the Yorkshire vet's travels, he barely noticed his own begin as the train pulled out of the station. By the time he had closed the book with a satisfied sigh they were well on their way to the West Country. He watched the scenery flash by outside the fingerprint-smear window, and was just about to reach for the lunch bag Mrs. Figg had given to him when he heard a low, quiet cough, like a person clearing his throat uncertainly.

"Is this seat taken?"

Harry looked up, and barely managed to catch Hermione's book before it slipped from his hand and hit the floor.

Professor Stanton stood in the corridor, smiling in a disinterested, friendly way, as if he was addressing a complete stranger. In one hand he held his briefcase, and in the other was a copy of the Financial Times. Despite the warmth of the August day, he wore a wool blazer and tie. A navy blue overcoat was slung over one arm.

"N-no. Please." Harry quickly moved the lunch bag off the empty seat, setting it on his lap.

"Thank you so much." Professor Stanton nodded politely, placed his briefcase on the floor at his feet, and slid into the vacant seat. "The train's nearly full...I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to find a place."

He unfolded the newspaper and began to read. Harry, not knowing what he was supposed to do--or even if he was supposed to do anything--sat uncomfortably still, staring straight ahead.

A pleasure to see you again, Mr. Potter.

Professor Stanton's voice spoke directly into his mind, making Harry twitch. He started to turn his head, but the older man loudly rattled his newspaper, the noise as strident as a warning.

No, don't turn your head, he said silently. *Keep looking forward. We're going to have to play a little cloak-and-dagger game shortly, and I'd rather not give up our current advantage.*

Which is?

They know that you're on the train. They also think you're alone. But they can't use magic in front of all these people without giving themselves away, so they'll have to wait until you get up and move about the train before they can act.

Harry gulped, and unconsciously shrank away. *What's going on? Who are "they"?*

...do you have to ask, Mr. Potter?

Harry's heart skipped a beat, and he unconsciously shivered as an icy wave of fear washed down his spine. The voice was pleasant enough, but the meaning behind the statement was not.

Professor Stanton continued, entirely unhurried. *Now, I want you to stand up and make your way toward the back of the car, very casually. Act as though you were heading for the washroom, but open the door and go in between the cars. Once you've shut the door behind you, the train will start to slow. We're almost halfway between Reading and Taunton, and there's a slight delay on the line ahead, so the train will have to stop for a few minutes. When the train stops completely, and not before, open the door to your left. It will be unlocked. Do you have all that?*

Harry struggled to recall the directions he had been given. *Head for the washroom, but go out the back. Wait until the train stops, then open the door on the left.*

Correct. Once it's open, get out as fast as you can, and start running--but run toward the rear of the train. There's a railway crossing about three hundred metres away. You'll see a small dark red car pulled over on the verge. Its doors are unlocked.

Harry repeated the instructions in a monotone. *Small dark red car on the verge. Three hundred metres.*

You have to make it to that car, Harry.

I...I'll try, he said, the shreds of confidence in his voice no reflection of how he actually felt.

Professor Stanton turned a page of the newspaper, a picture of calm. *Count to one hundred, then go. And don't waste time looking around, trying to figure out who and where they are. All you need to know is that there are at least two of them, that they are in this car, and that they want you alive. Cold comfort, at that. Now start counting.*

Harry obeyed, counting silently to himself. By the time he had reached forty, his palms were thoroughly soaked with sweat. The fear in the pit of his stomach had tripled by the time he had counted past seventy. When he reached one hundred, he steeled his nerve, stood, and mumbled an apology to Professor Stanton as he left his seat and headed for the back of the car.

He stuffed a hand into his pocket, fumbling for his wand. He traced the familiar roughness of the wood, feeling the little spark of power that crackled in his hand wherever his fingers made contact. Though he knew he couldn't use it to protect himself, just having it at hand was immensely reassuring.

He rocked and swayed down the corridor, leaning forward against the motion of the car. For a horrible second, he thought that he might actually need to make use of the washroom, but the watery feeling in his bowels went away once he had opened the door between the cars.

He hadn't seen anything unusual, but his senses were singing at a fevered pitch. Two of the people he had just walked past so calmly, who looked like any of the other completely genuine railway travellers in the car, were on the train for the sole purpose of capturing him. Voldemort never liked to leave unfinished business for too long, and now--

The train lurched, and began to slow. He heard a garbled announcement over the public address system in the car, an unintelligible drone deeply regretting the slight delay.

Harry braced himself on the top step, facing the door that had been on his left.

The train continued to slow, brakes squealing and scraping.

He reached for the handle, but before he could touch it, there was a rattling sound from the door leading back into the compartment.

Harry froze.

The door rattled again, sounding as if someone were trying to slide it open but couldn't. Through the scratched, foggy window, Harry could just make out the shadow of a face,

though he couldn't see more than that. He heard voices, and the door rattled a third time, louder and more urgently.

The train stopped with a final, convulsive jolt, snapping Harry out of his petrified state. Blindly, he threw himself bodily at the door in front of him. It burst open, and he fell forward, landing hard on his shoulder and rolling, rolling, gravel and dirt filling his nostrils and scraping his exposed hands and face. He heard one of the lenses of his glasses break, but fortunately the glass stayed in its frame.

He slid to a halt and picked himself up, looking around wildly with his one seeing eye for the car. He spotted the flashing lights of a railway crossing, and his heart leapt at the sight of a reddish dot close to it. He began to run.

The gravel was slippery and he found it hard to keep his footing, but he ran as fast as he could, cursing when he stumbled and hoping to hell that no one was behind him. His shoulder throbbed with every breath. The blood pounded loudly in his ears, drowning out the crunch of his feet on the gravel. Cramp tied his sides in burning knots. A part of his mind that wasn't focused solely on survival was berating him for allowing himself to get so out of condition over the summer. He felt unbearably slow, expecting that at any moment he would hear a hoarse shout of "Stupefy!" from somewhere behind him and find himself falling, falling....

The car was fifty metres away. With a last, desperate burst of speed, he flung himself at it, yanked open the passenger door, and dove inside. He jammed his finger on the "Door Lock" button, and nearly sobbed in relief to hear the click of the locks sliding into place.

Crouching in the footwell of the passenger's side, he pulled out his wand, his breath coming harsh and fast. The Improper Use of Magic Office could go to blazes as far as he was concerned--there was nothing that would stop him from fighting back if they came after him now.

He waited for what felt like forever, but was really less than five minutes according to the clock in the car. He heard a shrill whistle, followed by the puffing sounds of the train starting up again and gathering speed. Even when he heard the clang-clang of the crossing gates going up, he stayed low, wanting to unfold and stretch his aching legs but terrified that *they* were out there, waiting for him to drop his guard.

He felt the vibrations through the ground before he heard the actual footsteps approaching. He double-checked the locks and shrank back into the footwell, mentally running through a list of potential hexes and counter curses. But before he could move, he heard a silvery metallic jingle.

The sound of keys rattling.

The door lock on the driver's side clicked, and the driver's side door opened. Professor Stanton got in, closed the door, and regarded Harry, who was firmly wedged in between the fascia panel and the passenger's seat, with satisfaction and a trace of amusement.

"Nicely done, Mr. Potter." He set his briefcase and overcoat in the tiny back seat, inserted the keys into the ignition, and reached for his seatbelt. "I think we might be able to make it to the Exeter St Davids station in time for you to meet up with your party. You might not arrive at

exactly 11.45, but you shouldn't be so late as to cause undue worry. You can pick up your luggage there."

Harry's tightly-wound nerves uncoiled like a watch spring that had suddenly lost its tension. His breath came out in a loud whoosh, ending in a choking cough. He flopped into the passenger's seat, and after several failed attempts managed to put his seatbelt on.

"Won't...won't they come after us?" he asked weakly.

"Highly unlikely, but there is always the possibility. They've lost the element of surprise, though, so I doubt they'd try again so soon." Professor Stanton started the car and released the hand brake. The engine purred contently as they drove off.

Harry removed his cracked glasses and rested his forehead against the cool glass of the window, not caring that his sweaty face was smudging the clean window pane. After his uneventful summer, it was a nasty shock to return to a world where 'constant vigilance' would be the only thing keeping him alive.

"If the traffic is with us, we might even be able to make up time." He gazed at Harry for a moment, then turned his eyes back to the road. "Will you be all right?"

"Yes," Harry said miserably.

"Just relax, Mr. Potter," Professor Stanton said conversationally as he merged with the motorway traffic. "Enjoy yourself. It's a nice day for a drive."

Chapter Six - Courtesy Call

It is good to die before one has done anything deserving death.

-- Anaxandrides

The traffic on the main Devonshire roads was not very heavy, so the little red car reached the Exeter train station at 11.50, moments after Harry's train had arrived. Professor Stanton steered the vehicle into a vacant space outside the station entrance, put the hand brake on and let it idle.

Harry, eager to find the Weasleys before they started to worry, reached for the door handle, but was forced to stop short. Professor Stanton had grabbed his arm.

"Not yet," he said, his voice dark with meaning.

"But--"

"Wait." He released Harry, and leaned back in the driver's seat. "I suggest you let the train leave the station, just to be safe. In the meantime, you might want to do something about that."

He pointed to Harry's glasses, resting in their owner's lap. One of the lenses was completely smashed, but the glass itself had remained in the thick frame. A fine spiderweb of cracks spread out in crooked rays from the centre of the lens.

Harry turned them over in his hands, tracing the cracks with a finger. "I'll get Mrs. Weasley to take care of it," he said flatly.

"As you will." Professor Stanton picked up the folded newspaper he had carried on the train and flipped through the pages. He found whatever article he had been searching for and continued reading.

Harry studied his broken glasses. Everything around him was foggy, just undefined shapes and blobs of light and dark. With a long sigh, he put them on again and stared defiantly out at the world through the one good lens.

"This is how it's going to be all year, isn't it," he said, bitterness colouring his voice. "Running and hiding. Waiting for them...for HIM...to come after me."

Professor Stanton set the paper aside. His round face was not unkind, but there was a distinct seriousness in the set of his jaw that made him appear more severe than he might have been.

"I don't know, Mr. Potter. I could tell you, if I knew more, but sadly I don't. And before you accuse me of 'being cryptic' or withholding information," he added, seeing Harry's frown deepen into a belligerent scowl, "let me remind you that no matter what Sibyll Trelawney may

have taught you, the future is not some mystical place revealed only to those with the 'Inner Eye'. It operates on logic, the same as most anything else in this world. Even something as complex as magic is series of events and their consequences, little more."

The train whistle blew a long, breathy note, and Harry heard the train itself start up, pulling out of the station.

"Events and consequences, Harry. Remember that." He tapped the side of his nose with a finger, as if he was sharing an important secret.

Harry nodded mutely. He had an odd feeling that something had just *happened*, but he couldn't tell what it was. He sat still for a long moment, trying to figure out exactly what had occurred, but no good explanation came to mind. He looked to the driver's seat, seeking answers from the only source, but Professor Stanton had returned to his paper, an indication that their conversation was at an end.

Mumbling his thanks, he slipped out of the car and ran to the station entrance. His broken glasses seriously skewed his depth perception, so it took him longer than he wanted to find his trunk and other luggage and drag everything off the main platform.

"Harry!"

Before he could straighten up or even smooth down his hair, the Weasley family descended upon him in a deluge of emotion--Mrs. Weasley looking worried, Fred and George grinning broadly, Ron waving what appeared to be a railway timetable, and Ginny nearly falling over herself in an effort to keep up with the rest of them.

Mrs. Weasley reached him first. "Harry! Heavens above, what happened to you?" she cried, grabbing him by the shoulders.

Harry suddenly realised what a bizarre sight he was. Not only were his glasses shattered, but he was covered in dirt and dust from head to foot, his hair was sticking out in every direction, and his bare hands and arms were bleeding from numerous tiny cuts. The little adventure had left its mark, and not even the best lie he could come up with would be adequate, let alone believable.

"Sorry, Mrs. Weasley. I had a hard time...finding my trunk," he said nervously. His glasses slipped down his nose, and he shoved them back into position.

The avoidance of her actual question did not go unnoticed. "Let's get you back home before anything *else* happens to you," she said. "Ron, tell your brothers to take Harry's things."

Ron sighed gustily and turned to the twins. "Mum says to tell you to take Harry's things."

Fred and George glowered simultaneously, looking like a set of angry book ends. George bowed mockingly and said, "Ron, please tell our *dearest mother* that we'd be only too *glad* to be of service."

Ron tugged on his mother's sleeve. "Mum, George says--"

"I *heard* what he said," Mrs. Weasley cut him off tersely. "Let's go."

Harry meekly allowed himself to be led out of the station.

As he walked along, he soon saw that the news in Ron's letter hadn't been an exaggeration. He'd never seen Mrs. Weasley so angry at the twins before, not even in the aftermath of their most glorious pranks. The twins marched along, no laughter on their faces now. Poor Ginny looked wan, almost sickly. And Ron was babbling, trying unsuccessfully to keep up a one-sided conversation.

A head of red hair bobbed next to his shoulder, its cheerful colour distracting him from the dark turn his thoughts had taken. He looked down.

"Did you have a nice summer, Harry?" Ginny asked, gazing up at him with an attempt at a pleasant smile.

Without warning, and to Harry's complete shock, Ron leaned over and punched his little sister in the arm. "Harry's tired. He doesn't need you bothering him," he said angrily.

"MUM! Ron PUNCHED me!" Ginny squeaked in outrage as she smacked her brother.

"Be quiet, both of you." Molly Weasley's reprimand was half-hearted, without her usual spirit.

Harry closed his eyes, the beginnings of a headache surging in his temples. A small part of him almost regretted coming in the first place...not because he didn't want to see them, but because he didn't want to see them like this.

They reached the taxi stand without further incident. As he climbed into one of the taxis that waited for them, Harry paused and furtively scanned the area, searching for any sign of the red car. It was gone.

* * *

Dinner that night was a silent and awkward affair, broken only by overly polite requests to pass dishes or exaggerated offers of second and third helpings. Mr. Weasley and Percy had returned from their work at the Ministry to have a meal with the family--though Harry could tell that neither of them wanted to be in the same room with the other, let alone sit down and eat together.

A complex yet unacknowledged system of communication had sprung up, since Ginny wouldn't speak to Ron, Mrs. Weasley wouldn't speak to Fred and George, and no one would speak to Percy. Harry, his broken glasses newly repaired by a quick wave of Mrs. Weasley's wand, kept his eyes on his plate and his mind on the food. He knew that however tense things were at the moment, they would be even more so if the wrong topic of conversation was mentioned.

"Harry, Ron tells us that you didn't have to spend the summer with your Muggle relatives this year," Mrs. Weasley finally said, breaking the edgy silence.

He quickly swallowed a bite of pumpkin casserole. "Yes. One of the neighbours took me in."

"Arabella Figg, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Best to stick to one-word answers, if possible.

"That was nice of her." Mrs. Weasley's normally genial smile was tight, strained.

"Yes."

Mr. Weasley decided to join his wife and guest in their discussion, though his replies bordered on the monosyllabic as well. "Glad to hear that Arabella's back. Wonderful lady. Knows her stuff."

Harry heard a low mumble from Percy's direction. He couldn't hear what the older boy had said, but it didn't sound complimentary. Whatever it was, he prayed that no one else had heard it, either.

However, he had no such luck.

"What was that?" snapped Mrs. Weasley, turning her fork accusingly on her son.

"I wasn't talking to you," Percy answered sharply, with more feeling than the statement deserved. He may have been stating a fact, but his mother reeled back as if he had slapped her across the face.

"Percival Weasley, how **dare** you speak to your mother like that!" Arthur Weasley's thin face was white with rage, but two splotches of crimson burned bright on his cheeks.

Percy, his anger already simmering, immediately went on the defensive. "All I was trying to say was--"

"Oh, shut up, you stupid berk!" Ron said viciously, throwing down his knife and fork.

"Ron! Language!" Mrs. Weasley was quick to scold.

Harry slid down in his chair as an argument began in earnest, fervently wishing that he could disappear. He didn't like to see the Weasleys fighting. They were the closest thing he had to a real family, and though he knew that real families didn't always get along, listening to the raised voices and harsh words made him feel sick to his stomach.

He winced as he heard Ron call his older brother a name that would have gotten him a detention and twenty points docked from Gryffindor if he had used it while at school, but shouted at the dinner table merely got him grounded by his father. Fred and George had the good grace, or perhaps the common sense, to keep out of the argument, yet Harry could tell by their identically grim scowls that they were just waiting for the right moment to join in and add their voices to the din.

His eye caught Ginny's across the table, and he mouthed a silent plea, a cry for help. 'Get me out of here...please....'

Ginny, flushed with embarrassment, returned his gaze helplessly. Then, suddenly, a light flickered in her eyes as an idea came to her. She lifted her head to look directly at Harry, and her quiet words cut through the shouting like a beam of light.

"Say, Harry, would you like to go for a walk after dinner?"

The argument stopped. Everyone turned to stare at the two of them.

As if her offer was completely unexpected, Harry blinked and put on his best surprised expression. "Sure, where to?"

"Oh, nowhere in particular," she said airily, but her troubled eyes told a different story. "Dad, may I be excused?"

Her father grunted, and returned to his meal. Taking the sound to be a yes, Ginny hurriedly folded her napkin, picked up her empty plate, and slipped away from the table.

Ron's mouth was hanging open as he looked from his sister's retreating form to his flustered best friend and back again. His mouth snapped shut, eyes narrowing in an unfriendly way that strangely reminded Harry of Professor Snape.

He struggled to finish his food at a leisurely pace. It wouldn't be a good idea to offend Mrs. Weasley, or to make Ron overly suspicious. He used a piece of bread to scoop up the crumbs on his plate, and wiped his mouth neatly with the napkin.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Weasley," he said brightly, a disarming grin firmly plastered on his face. "It was delicious."

"Not at all, Harry. Glad to see that *someone* appreciates all the hard work I put into my cooking." She glared daggers at Fred and George, who were suddenly very intent on devouring the last two slices of the casserole. Harry, seeing an opportunity, made his excuses and left the table. He deposited his plate, glass, and cutlery in the kitchen sink as he passed.

Ginny was waiting for him in the hall. He put his shoes on, and they grabbed jackets in case the evening grew colder. Without a word, they left the silent house. Harry had never understood how anyone could refer to silence as 'deafening', even poetically, but the miserable quiet at the dinner table tonight had certainly been enough to drown out any pleasant thoughts he might have had...not that he had many to start with.

They walked for a while, not saying anything, just enjoying the peace of the early evening. They avoided the small village of Ottery St Catchpole altogether, keeping to the open fields and wooded paths. The summer evening was pleasantly cool, with a hint of crispness in the air that foretold the coming of autumn. A few birds chattered angrily at them, annoyed that men were disturbing their territory. Ginny's sharp eyes spied a cluster of twitchy rabbits in one of the fields, and they gave the little group a wide berth to avoid startling them.

As they walked, Ginny pointed out several houses that belonged to some of the other wizarding families in the area, like the Lovegoods and the Fawcetts. Most looked like normal Muggle houses, but one or two were as ramshackle and funny-looking as the Burrow. All of them were quite out of the way, at a fair distance from the neat rows of Muggle homes. Harry was so caught up in her guided tour of the area that he didn't notice where they were going....

Until he realised that they had wandered into a small, wooded cemetery.

He shot a look at Ginny. He thought that her face was a shade paler than usual, but she seemed determined to continue walking as if there was nothing unusual about their current location.

He read a few of the names on the markers, none of which rang any bells in his mind. After a time, though, he noticed that the dates between birth and death had become longer, far too long for a regular Muggle lifespan. Some of the names looked familiar, too--names he had seen on cups and trophies at school, names he had heard mentioned in passing conversations.

Ginny came to a sudden halt, breaking his train of thought. She stood very still, looking at something a little ways away. Harry followed her gaze, and felt his heart give a painful wrench at a sight he had expected but never wanted to see.

The marble was fresh and newly hewn, without the crumbling, weathered face so easily created by time and the elements.

Cedric Diggory Triwizard Tournament Champion Beloved son, beloved friend

The dates of birth and death were inscribed beneath.

Dimly, he heard Ginny talking, the tone of her voice bordering on hysterical.

"I'm so sorry, Harry. I don't know how we ended up here...come on, let's get back, Mum'll have the pudding waiting for us--"

Harry cut her off. His voice was thick. "You knew exactly where we were going the entire time. You led me here deliberately."

She cringed, as if she had been struck. "I'm sorry," she repeated in a broken whisper, staring fixedly at the ground.

He sighed. The brief flare of anger he had felt was gone, replaced by remorse for his harshness.

"No, don't be," he said. "I'm not mad at you."

A thin fringe of grass had sprung up over the grave, as if it were trying to disguise the fact that the earth had been turned over only a few months ago. Somewhere in the near distance, a thrush trilled and then was silent.

Harry, in an odd gesture of respect, avoided treading on the grave itself as he approached. He knelt down beside the headstone.

"Hello, Cedric," he said softly, resting a hand on the chiseled stone. "It's good to see you again."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ginny hovering uncertainly a few feet away. He held out a hand, beckoning her forward. "Come on, Ginny. Come and say hello."

She stumbled forward to join him and knelt as well, her knees shaking. "H...hello, Cedric."

"I'm glad to see that you're here," Harry said brightly, pretending that Cedric was sitting there in front of him, listening to him talk. It made it easier, somehow. "I saw your mum and dad before I left school, and they said they'd take good care of you. I see they did. That's wonderful."

He paused. The cold marble made no reply.

"Just thought I'd stop by, you know, see how you were doing." He barely managed to keep his voice from cracking.

He wouldn't cry. He wouldn't. Ginny was there, right next to him, she'd see him crying...big brave Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, crying over Cedric Diggory, the Boy Who Didn't.

A hand touched his shoulder, and he started, almost leaping to his feet. Keeping his eyes downcast to prevent his tears from falling, he looked back to see Ginny patting his shoulder awkwardly, tears shining on her face as well.

The simple gesture of human contact was reassuring, but at the same time he felt very uncomfortable. Ginny's feelings for him were no secret, and to make matters worse, he had a wild idea that Ron had followed them and was somewhere out there, lurking in the bushes, just waiting for Harry Potter to take advantage of his baby sister. It was hard to maintain his composure.

Fortunately, Ginny seemed to decide that Harry didn't really need her comfort, and let her hand slip from his shoulder and fall to her side.

"I went to his funeral, you know." She ran a hand over the short grass that blanketed the grave. She didn't lift her head or look up. "Mum didn't want me to go, but Dad put his foot down. Said that I had to see for myself, had to pay my respects. Said that Cedric deserved it, if nothing else."

Harry felt a sharp pang of guilt. Cedric *did* deserve it. He should have been there, too. "I wish I could have come," he said wistfully, sitting back on his heels.

"No!" she burst out, her head snapping up. "Don't say that...please. You don't know what wizarding funerals are like. It's...it isn't something...."

"Ginny? What's wrong?" Her violent reaction truly alarmed him--she looked haunted, almost terrified by the memory. He'd never been to a funeral before, even a Muggle one, but it couldn't be as horrible as that...could it?

Before he could do or say anything, she stood, brushing the dirt off her knees. "Never mind," she said quickly. "I shouldn't have brought you here. Let's go home."

Harry scrambled to his feet as well. "Ginny...please...it's all right. I'm glad we came. I think....I think I had to see it for myself, let it sink in. All summer, I've had this at the back of my mind, and...."

"It wasn't your fault."

"I know that." The corner of his mouth quirked in a rueful smile. "I have so much to blame on Voldemort, one more thing won't make much difference, right?"

Ginny shivered at the mention of the name, but let it pass. "I suppose you're right. Now, we really should go back, 'cause it's almost dark, and Mum will start to worry. Not to mention Ron--I'm sure he thinks I brought you out here to seduce you, or something."

Harry grinned at her wicked humour. "You're right. Y'know, for a fourteen-year-old girl, you're not too bad."

Ginny blinked in surprise, then smiled impishly. "Well, I'd have to say that for a fifteen-year-old boy, you're not so bad yourself."

They walked back to the Burrow. This time, there was no awkwardness in their silence.

For Harry, visiting the wizarding cemetery had done something to him, changed something inside him. It wasn't a sense of release or relief, it wasn't closure, it wasn't even acceptance. All he had done was to see Cedric Diggory's final resting place, and to try and apologise for...well, for everything. Even though he had failed to put his feelings into appropriate words, it was a start.

Maybe the next time he came, he'd finally work up the courage to finish what he had begun.

Chapter Seven - Affairs of Little Import

It is not only for what we do that we are held responsible, but also for what we do not do.

-- Moliere

After the fiasco at dinner, an uneasy truce among all parties concerned reigned in the Weasley household. Perhaps the general realisation that they'd had a flaming row in front of their guest had something to do with it. Perhaps it was Fred and George's belated promise to buy a new cooking pot for their mother at the first available opportunity. Perhaps the fact that Mr. Weasley and Percy had arranged never to be home at the same time also helped. For whatever reason, things had improved, if only slightly.

Harry's biggest problem had been explaining to Ron exactly what had happened on his after-dinner walk with Ginny. Or rather, what **hadn't** happened. In explicit detail.

Apart from that, a week passed in relative comfort. Harry sent a short letter to Mrs. Figg using Muggle post to let her know that he was all right. He mentioned meeting Professor Stanton in passing, though he neglected to say in what circumstances they had met. Mrs. Figg had spent fourteen years of her life worrying about him--she didn't need to worry about something that was over and done with, not to mention beyond her control.

He also owed a longer message to Hermione, confirming their plans to meet when they visited London to buy school supplies. Harry's letter from Hogwarts, complete with the list of the new year's required textbooks, had arrived at the Burrow with the letters for the members of the Weasley family still in school. He had stopped questioning long ago how the letters managed to find him--no matter where he was.

Ron was still grounded, so the two of them spent most of their time in his room, talking about everything and nothing. Ron expressed his hopes of being able to join the Gryffindor Quidditch team, even as a reserve player. Harry talked about his battle with Indian food. They both agreed that the O.W.L.S. were terrifying, that Snape's class was probably still going to be a pain, and that Neville would melt no less than four cauldrons before the Christmas holidays.

Harry was certain that Ron had forgotten the whole Ginny incident, but the night before they were slated to leave for Diagon Alley his best friend brought up the subject yet again, just before they fell asleep.

Harry had to explain himself, yet again. "I told you, we went for a walk and talked for a while. Nothing else. That was it," he said wearily, twisting the blankets in his hands.

Ron's haughty sniff declared that he didn't believe Harry for a minute. "Why would she just up and ask you to do something like that?"

Harry had had enough, and sarcasm came easily to his tongue. "Maybe because she was really embarrassed to see two-thirds of her family at each other's throats, right in front of the famous Harry Potter?"

Ron sat straight up in bed. Even in the darkened room, Harry could tell that his friend was shaking, and his face had gone white as a sheet. He had a sinking feeling that he'd gone too far this time. Ron's reaction confirmed his suspicion.

"I don't care who the hell you think you are, if you so much as lay a *finger* on my sister...."

Before things could come to blows, Harry propped himself up on his elbows. "You'll what, Ron? Challenge me to a wizard's duel? Or maybe pistols at dawn?" he quipped, dredging up a memory from a television programme he had watched at Mrs. Figg's over the summer.

The sudden outburst of dry humour punctured Ron's anger like a burst balloon, and he found himself floundering for words. "I...I...just watch yourself, okay?"

Harry pressed his advantage, seeing an chance to set things straight for good. "Come on. Ginny's a nice kid, but dating her? It'd be like dating my own sister. If I had one, that is."

"You don't know what you mean to her," Ron said, shaking his head slowly. "You joke about it, but I don't think she's joking."

"I know," Harry said with a grunt, sitting up as well and shoving a stray piece of hair out of his face. "And that's exactly why I don't want to do anything that would...you know...mean too much. Just in case."

"Oh, so she's not good enough for you, is that it?" Confronted with an unpleasant reality that was more than he wanted to handle, Ron fell back on his tried-and-true argument. "Just because we're not rich or famous or--"

"They tried to get me, Ron. On the train, coming here. And they almost succeeded."

Harry's cold statement cut short Ron's descent into self-pity. "Who? What?"

"Voldemort. You know, the evil wizard? The one who wants me dead?"

"Don't say the name...." Ron hissed, though there was more plea than command in his voice.

Harry slammed his fist into the wall. "NO!"

A large chunk of plaster fell from the ceiling and hit the floor with a thump.

Rubbing his bruised knuckles, he continued, more quietly. "I'm not going to tiptoe around this anymore. If you mention him in front of me, you'll damn well use his proper name. Voldemort. Vol-de-mort." He stared his best friend directly in the eyes. "Say it."

"Stop it...." Ron squirmed under the full force of Harry's anger and tried to look away, but the other boy wouldn't let him. He moaned softly, frozen with wretched horror.

"Say it."

"V...Vol...*Voldemort*..." Ron finally choked out, his face contorting horribly with each syllable. He flopped back onto the bed, all his strength gone. "There, are you happy?"

"No," said Harry, feeling equally exhausted. "But it'll do, for now."

"How'd you escape, anyhow?" Ron asked once he had regained a little of his energy.

"Professor Stanton. He was on the train, too."

"Professor Stanton?" Ron's voice rose to a squeak. "You mean *he* saved you?"

Harry rubbed his forehead. "Something like that. I can't really explain it. Everything just *happened*, and the next thing I knew I in his car outside the train station. But I'm sure that if it wasn't for him, they'd have gotten me."

"He creeps me out," Ron said suddenly, vehemently.

Harry blinked. "Professor Stanton? Why?"

Ron thought for a long moment, so long that Harry thought he had fallen asleep. When he answered at last, his voice was hushed, bordering on reverent.

"Harry, the man knew Merlin. MERLIN. I've read enough Muggle books to know what they...and what *you*...think about him. King Arthur and all that stuff. He's just an old man in a pointy hat to you."

"Give me a little more credit than that," Harry said witheringly, rolling his eyes. "I collect Chocolate Frog cards, too, y'know."

Ron pounded the pillow in frustration. "I'm not explaining this right at all." He stared up at the ceiling, studying the Chudley Cannons poster over their heads. "Okay, think of Dumbledore. Think about how powerful he is. Got that?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

"Right. Now multiply that power, oh, say, a thousand times. Maybe even more. That's Merlin."

"I never thought of it like that," Harry said slowly.

"You see what I mean. That's what you're getting into."

"But even so--"

"You still don't get it." Ron shifted his weight, rolling over on his side to look at Harry. "He's...he's...wizards and witches don't take his name lightly. If you swear something on Merlin's name, something really important, you don't dare go back on it. You don't dare to. And if Professor Stanton is anything like him...." He fell silent.

Harry turned the words over in his mind. He had read the King Arthur stories many times as a boy at the Dursleys; any child would fall into fantasies to escape the life he had led. He had

seen the animated film of "The Sword in the Stone" when Dudley received the video cassette for his sixth birthday. He currently had no less than seven Chocolate Frog cards with the great wizard's portrait on them. Ron's description of Merlin didn't fit in with any of the interpretations he knew--but from what he had seen of Professor Stanton, he was certain that Ron's was more accurate than any of the others.

Not that it was any more comforting. In fact, it was considerably less so. The mental image of an absent-minded old man with a long white beard, who not surprisingly looked a lot like Dumbledore, had given way to...well, he wasn't sure what, but it wasn't pleasant to think about.

"What time are we leaving tomorrow?" he asked.

Ron coughed. The bedsprings creaked with the sudden movement. "Around eight, Mum said. She wants to beat the crowds."

"I suppose we should go to sleep, then."

"Yeah."

Harry rolled over on his side, facing the opposite wall. "Well, good night, then."

Ron did likewise. "Night."

He closed his eyes, willing himself to fall asleep. There was much to do tomorrow, and he needed all the sleep he could get. But as he lay in bed, a wicked little idea popped into his mind. Just evil enough to be deliciously mean, but not so cruel that he would regret it later. Ron deserved it, anyway, for being so uptight.

A sly grin spread across his face, and as he turned to his friend he was thankful that the darkness hid his evil glee. "D'you know, Ginny has a really cute dimple on her...."

With a horrified roar, Ron threw a pillow at him, and any further remarks he might have made were lost in a sea of smothered giggles as a truly magnificent pillow fight ensued.

* * *

Morning came all too soon. Harry stumbled about in the early morning light, pulling on various articles of clothing and bumping into an equally sleepy Ron.

During his months with Mrs. Figg, he hadn't been troubled by nightmares or even regular dreams. Every night was a blissful oblivion, every morning he woke up and felt to some degree refreshed. But ever since he had arrived at the Burrow, he had started to dream again.

Not that the dreams were bad ones. Most of them made little sense, and none featured screaming or pain or flashing green lights. Some could even be called pleasant. Even so, he wished that he could just close his eyes at night and know nothing until the next morning. He didn't want the pleasant dreams if they eventually led to unpleasant ones.

He was very careful with the Floo Powder, and luckily was able to arrive in the same location as the rest of the Weasleys. Pounding the soot from his clothes, he stepped out into the bustling world that was Diagon Alley.

Mrs. Weasley took charge. "Now, first we'll head for Gringotts, and then get your things for the year." She hurried off through the packed crowds, leaving her children and Harry to follow her as closely as they could.

The imposing bastion of wizarding finance known as Gringotts Bank always sent a thrill of delighted terror running up Harry's spine. The ugly but well-dressed goblin clerks and tellers, the clink of money and scratch of quills--the atmosphere of the place was nothing short of intoxicating. Harry and Mrs. Weasley produced their keys, and a goblin directed them down the long tracks to the rows of vaults.

Harry was careful to count how much of each coin he scooped into his money pouch. In previous years, he had grabbed handfuls of money haphazardly, but with the sour memory of taking taxi fare from the Grangers still fresh in his mind, he was determined to be more careful with his spending habits this year.

The Weasley vault was next, and Harry was relieved to see a little more money inside it than he had seen in previous years. Mrs. Weasley wasn't forced to go digging in the darkest corners in search of a few scattered Knuts. He was glad that the Weasleys didn't have to scrape together their last precious coins to buy school supplies this year.

Relief surged through him when they finally left the darkness of the vaults and could once again step out into the bright sunshine.

"Now then," Mrs. Weasley said, shaking some Sickles and a couple Galleons into her hand, "Ginny and I need to stop by the robe shop. Would the four of you please get all your textbooks? Ron, I think you know what Ginny needs."

"Sure, Mum," Ron said. He was eager to get back in her good graces again...and hopefully salvage the rest of his summer.

Flourish and Blotts was packed with Hogwarts students, and the clerks scurried about trying to find enough copies of the standard textbooks to satisfy the high demand. Ron, Harry, and the twins joined the mad scramble, and somehow were able to get all of their necessary books, pay the frazzled manager, and get out without being crushed.

Once on the street outside, they surveyed the damage. Harry felt very bruised and battered, but his books were intact.

Ron, however, was not so lucky. "Damn it all!" he swore, holding up his copy of "Intermediate Charms". "The cover's nearly off!" And indeed it was--there was a large rip down the spine, as though he had tried to wrest it out of someone else's hands and only just succeeded.

"We can use Spell-o-tape on it at home," Fred huffed, straightening his twisted robes. "Just don't let Mum see it."

Ron blanched at the thought of his mother's reaction. "No fear," he said.

"Well, we're off to Gambol and Japes," said George. Diagon Alley's premiere wizarding joke shop was always a high priority for the twins. "Either of you want to come?"

"Don't you think you should buy the cooking pot *before* you go off spending money there?" Ron said, wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

Fred snickered, and reached out and cuffed Ron over the head. "Nice words coming from someone who's grounded until the end of summer. I'm surprised Mum even let you come with us today. Take good care of our precious Ickle Ronniekins, Harry--don't let him get into any trouble!" Laughing, the twins strolled off, down the street.

Ron snarled and spun around to go after them, but he in mid-turn he crashed into a person who had unexpectedly appeared behind them. They both fell to the ground, landing on the uneven cobblestones.

"Watch where you're going!" Ron yelled, rubbing his aching bottom.

"Why don't you watch where *you're* going, Ron Weasley!"

Harry, who had been helping Ron to his feet, glanced up to see none other than Hermione Granger helping the other unfortunate victim to stand. The victim in question was a sore-looking Neville Longbottom.

"Hey, you two. When did you get here?" he said happily. Ron nodded a curt hello, still massaging his behind.

"About a half-hour ago," replied Hermione as she dusted Neville off. She had a cloth shoulder bag filled with books slung over one shoulder, and her Hogwarts school uniform was immaculate. She looked every inch the model student and prefect--which, of course, she was.

"I'm here with Gran. She's in Madam Malkin's...and if I'm lucky, she'll stay in there for a while." Neville's clothing was in slight disarray, but he looked none the worse for wear. Harry noticed that he had lost some weight over the summer, and had grown a bit as well. He was only just shorter than Ron, who had always been the tallest of the four of them.

"New cauldron?" Harry pointed to the gleaming copper kettle sitting at Neville's feet. It was filled to the brim with textbooks and various potion ingredients.

"Yeah. This one's supposed to have some spell on it that makes it spill-proof, or something like that."

"I bet things are going to be different this year in Potions," Ron said jokingly, running his hand around the cauldron's rim.

Neville looked him straight in the eyes. "Oh, you've no idea," he said softly.

A curious note in his friend's voice made Harry pause. There was a rather strange look in Neville's eyes, and an even stranger smile on his face. Harry stared, trying to figure out what it was. The word 'confident' popped into his mind--Neville looked confident. To be honest, he looked more than confident. He looked completely at ease with himself, and everything else, for that matter.

It was frightening.

"NEVILLE!"

The crotchety voice of an elderly woman boomed over the chatter of the crowd, causing more than a few people to stop and stare.

The odd light faded from his face, and before their eyes the strange new Neville became the nervous, timid boy they had always known.

He gulped, and glanced anxiously around. "Gotta go," he said. "Bye, you guys!"

With that, he grabbed his cauldron and ran off, disappearing through the door of Madam Malkin's shop.

"What in blazes was that?" Ron looked as though he had just heard a house-elf demand workers' compensation and extensive pension plans.

"I *think* that was Neville Longbottom," Harry replied.

"Nah, couldn't be. He didn't trip over his own feet even once."

"Oh, stop being mean," Hermione said with a sigh, interrupting their discussion. "Let's get going--it's quarter past now, and I have to meet Mum and Dad at the Leaky Cauldron by five."

They wandered through the alley, admiring the window displays and chatting about the upcoming school year. Ron and Harry stopped to press their noses against the shop front of Quality Quidditch Supplies, forcing Hermione to drag them away from the store window by the backs of their shirts.

Something had been bothering Harry ever since they had left Flourish and Blotts, and his uneasiness only grew as the day progressed. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but as they passed by Gambol and Japes, it suddenly hit him.

"Say, do you know who we haven't seen?" he said.

"Hmm?" Hermione was only half paying attention. She was flipping through one of her new books, and consequently bumping into people as she walked.

"Malfoy."

Ron snorted. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

Harry, who was starting to lose circulation in his fingers, shifted the stack of books in his arms. "Come off it, Ron."

Ron stopped walking and gave Harry an incredulous stare. "Let me get this straight...you're worrying about Draco Malfoy? Did I hit you too hard with the pillow last night or something?"

"Ron, please." Hermione lowered her book, glaring at him.

Ron remained undaunted. "I can't believe this!" he spluttered. "This is *the* Draco Malfoy we're talking about here, right? The same one who all but admitted that he was a...a 'you-know-what' in training?"

"They're called Death-Eaters," Harry said automatically.

"I *know* that," snapped Ron.

"Then use the proper *name*," Harry snapped back.

"Stop it, both of you!"

Hermione's sharp command froze them in their tracks.

They looked over at her. She had thrown her heavy shoulder bag to the ground, and her eyes flashed fire and steel.

"Yes, you heard me," she said. "I'm here to have a nice, enjoyable day with my best friends, not to sit here and watch two little boys have a brawl in the street. Now shake hands and make up."

Harry's anger wilted under Hermione's wrath. He shifted the books to his left arm and grudgingly stuck out his hand. After a moment, Ron slowly extended his own, and they shook hands, immediately yanking away from the other's grip when the painful ritual was complete.

"Thank you," Hermione said, still sounding disgusted with them. "And now, I'm going to Fortescue's for ices. Whether I'm going to have company, or whether I'm going to get a chance to start the reading for the school year, is entirely up to you."

She stormed off, leaving them standing by themselves in the middle of the street.

Harry, watching her rapidly walk away, decided that he'd had enough of arguments for one summer.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to snap at you," he said sincerely.

"Yeah," Ron muttered. "Same here. Just a stupid fight, 's all."

"You up for a sundae?"

The mention of food brought a smile to Ron's gloomy face. "Only if you're paying," he said slyly.

Harry laughed. "I suppose it's the least I deserve." Since his burden of books prevented him from simply reaching over and clapping a hand on Ron's shoulder, he settled for kicking his friend lightly in the shin. "Come on, or Hermione'll get her nose in the books she's bought and we'll never get it out."

They ran down the street, not stopping until they had reached the door of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour. The little bell above the door gave a silvery tingle as they entered. The queue was short, though the shop itself was crammed full, and they soon reached the counter.

"Butterscotch sundae, please. No nuts, extra whipped cream."

"I'll have a banana split with marshmallow topping."

The witch behind the counter dished out their orders and handed them the chilled dessert cups brimming with ice cream. Harry made a face as he paid the bill, more for Ron's benefit than in reaction to the cost of their treat.

Hermione was sitting alone at a table in the corner, sipping a large root-beer float and thumbing through her copy of "The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5" by Miranda Goshawk. She looked up as Harry and Ron approached, and gave them a cool, superior smile.

"Well, now that you're acting like human beings again, maybe we can have a civilised conversation," she said smoothly. "How was your summer, Harry?"

"Not too bad," he muttered, diving into the sticky butterscotch.

"Except for that little part about nearly getting killed on the train to Exeter," Ron added casually through a mouthful of banana.

"Ron!" Harry hissed, elbowing him in the ribs.

Hermione leapt out of her chair, almost upsetting the table. "WHAT?" she shouted, eyes bugging out of her head.

Harry grabbed her arm and yanked her back into her chair. "Shh! Keep it down!"

The customers in the shop had stopped their conversations and were staring with great interest at their table. Harry ducked his head, not wanting his scar to be seen, and Hermione and Ron quickly busied themselves eating their desserts. Only when the general hum of conversation had started up again did they continue with their own.

By this time, Hermione had calmed down, though her hands were shaking. "Why didn't you tell me about this?" she growled. "What happened?"

Harry explained the incident on the train, giving her a little more detail than he had told to Ron. Her eyebrows went up when he mentioned Professor Stanton's name, but she kept silent, waiting to hear the rest of the story.

"So you didn't actually see anyone," she said when he had finished. "How could you be sure? Maybe...maybe it was just someone trying to get through to the next car."

"And what if it wasn't?" Harry said irritably, scraping the last of the butterscotch from the bottom of his glass.

Hermione grimaced. "I'm just looking at other possibilities. You don't have to be so defensive about it."

"I think I have a little right to be defensive, Hermione."

"All I'm saying is--"

"What're you gabbing about?"

Three heads snapped around to see Ginny sauntering toward them, sipping delicately on a large fizzy lemon squash. Her hips swayed a little as she walked, something that did not escape Harry's notice--but a low grumble from Ron's direction made him quickly avert his eyes.

"Nothing," said Hermione, at the same time that Ron and Harry answered, "Quidditch."

Ginny snorted. "At least you're all in agreement." She turned to her older brother. "Ron, Mum wanted me to tell you that we're leaving in fifteen minutes, so you'd better have everything you need."

"Yeah, yeah," he said, using his spoon to mash the last bit of banana into a sticky paste. He noticed the lemon squash his sister was drinking, and his eyes widened. "Hey, where'd you get the money for that?"

"Fred and George." Ginny took another long sip.

Ron stared at the drink in her hands as if it was poisoned. "You...you took money...from *them*?! And it didn't turn your hands black or...or *explode* or something?"

"Nope." She noisily slurped the last of her drink and set the empty glass on their table. "Later, Hermione," she said nonchalantly, and walked out without so much as a glance at Harry or her brother.

Ron's forehead hit the table with a loud thunk. "What is with everyone today?" he moaned.

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Harry.

"She's your sister, Ron." Hermione handed Ginny's glass to a waitress who was circulating with a tray.

"Tell me something I don't know." Ron stood up, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. "Look, Harry, I'll meet you outside in a minute, okay? I've got to have a slash."

Hermione choked on her float. "Ron!" she managed to gurgle, but he had already vanished into the lavatory. "I swear, that boy...."

Harry toyed with his spoon, rattling it against the rim of the sundae glass. He'd been dreading this moment all summer, but now was as good a time as any, before he lost his nerve. "Um, Hermione...about...about the money...."

She shook her head, knowing exactly what he was going to say. "Don't worry about it."

"I'll pay you back, of course," he said quickly.

"You don't have to. I'm just glad things turned out all right."

He felt a lump swell in his throat, and had to swallow a few times before he could reply. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." She finished the last bit of her float, and grinned. "Now, you should go before Mrs. Weasley sends out a search party. She'd have every reason to, given your record recently."

Harry returned her grin, and he picked up his books and left the ice cream shop. Once he was out in the street, though, his cheerfulness faded. School would start in less than a week, and with it would come a whole host of problems that he had been able to avoid for a few blissful months.

For the first time since he had started at Hogwarts, he almost didn't want to return. And his first real step back inside the wizarding world hadn't been the reassurance he badly needed.

Chapter Eight - King's Cross Station

You can discover what your enemy fears most by observing the means he uses to frighten you.

-- Eric Hoffer

Mrs. Weasley, determined that absolutely nothing would go wrong with her brood's scheduled departure from King's Cross, had arranged for herself, the twins, Ron, Ginny, and Harry to spend their last night at the Leaky Cauldron. The room arrangements worked out as could be expected, and Harry found himself sharing a room with Ron.

It took him a long time to fall asleep, and as the minutes ticked by he found himself getting more and more agitated. He berated himself for being so stupid--fretting about not being able to sleep would only make it less likely that he actually **would** fall asleep.

Sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep. He said the word over and over in his head until it dissolved into a random noise and completely stopped making sense.

After several hours of staring at the water-stained ceiling, he tried a different tactic, one that had often worked at school when he couldn't sleep on the nights before Quidditch matches. Willing himself to be still, he focused on Ron's deep, rhythmic breathing. In and out, very slowly. He allowed himself to fall into the rhythm, and gradually his tense muscles relaxed. Just a few minutes more, and he would be able to drift off--

"...that is all you have to tell me?"

Voldemort.

The high, cold voice was faint, but unmistakable.

It wasn't speaking directly into his mind, but he felt as though he were listening to a radio programme that happened to be playing in another room. Straining to hear it only made it grow far away, fading into nothing. But if lay very still and let the words come to him, he could hear everything quite clearly.

"My lord, I swear...there was something...or someone...with him!"

It was a woman, a young woman from the sound. What might have been an otherwise pretty voice was muddled with pain, cracking and indistinct.

"And whatever it was, my lord, it stopped us from following him." A man's nasal tone this time, on the ragged edge of hysteria. "What's more, it wouldn't let us leave the car at all, not even at the next station. We had to stay on until the end of the line."

"So Potter slipped past you not an hour after he boarded, and the three of you were forced to travel all the way to...Penzance?" Voldemort said the place name as though the word tasted foul in his mouth.

"Yes, my lord." A second man's voice, deeper and less nasal than the first man's. Though his comrades had sounded panicked, the second man was completely calm, almost resigned to the punishment that he knew would follow.

"I see." Voldemort's sibilant response was thickly laced with irony. "I sincerely doubt that even the word 'incompetence' properly describes this obvious failure."

The woman tried a last desperate plea. "Master...please believe...."

"Silence!" came the sharp command.

Harry heard her whimper. One of the men cleared his throat nervously.

After a long, thoughtful pause, the Dark Lord continued. "I grow weary of these roundabout methods. I think...I think it is time for a change of plans. I do believe that we must stop focusing on the *ends* and concentrate for a while on the *means*. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, Master. Of course, Master," the three said eagerly.

Voldemort sniffed. Then he said, almost offhandedly:

"Crucio."

Three separate screams shrilled in Harry's head, doubling and redoubling as their pain grew until their anguished cries cut off abruptly as Harry sat upright in bed, sweating and breathing hard. His scar throbbed angrily.

Ron was still asleep, fortunately. The vision, or dream, or whatever it was, hadn't awakened him. He hadn't heard it.

Carefully, Harry crept out of bed and flopped onto the floor, wearily resting his head against the cool sheets and down-filled mattress. The sounds of early morning traffic on Charing Cross Road drifted through the room's thin walls.

He knew he hadn't been dreaming. And even if he had been dreaming, it was been the most vivid dream he had had in a long time. He didn't need to see Voldemort's face or know what the three Death Eaters looked like to understand exactly what they had planned to do. Hearing his near capture being discussed in such casual terms was intensely disturbing. He didn't want to think about what would have happened if Professor Stanton hadn't been on the train.

He tucked his pyjama-clad legs underneath him and propped his chin up on his hands, turning Voldemort's words over in his mind. This was not something he could just set aside and deal with later. Every time he had tried to brush off or dismiss his feelings and dreams, no matter how unimportant they might have seemed to him, someone ended up getting hurt.

What was worse, this one was far more ominous than any he had heard before. There was simply no ignoring such a deliberate threat, especially one that involved a potential "change of plans".

For all his desire to act immediately, it was too late to do much about it. A letter to Dumbledore would arrive only a little while before he did. A letter to Sirius at Lupin's wouldn't be very useful, except maybe as an early warning. The best option would be to go to Dumbledore as soon as he arrived at school, right after he got off the train. He would have to miss the Sorting Ceremony entirely, but it wasn't as if he hadn't missed previous ones--for far less important reasons. In any case, Dumbledore would certainly appreciate the warning. He could alert the necessary people--perhaps even that "old crowd" he had mentioned last year.

Yes. That was it. He would see Dumbledore first thing and let him know about the threat.

As soon as he got to Hogwarts--not twelve hours away.

Comforted by the thought, he climbed back into bed, rolled onto his side, and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * *

King's Cross Station was its usual busy place, packed with witches and wizards in Muggle dress seeing their children off to school. Mrs. Weasley accompanied them into the station and helped them load all their luggage onto a small fleet of trolleys, then quickly kissed them all goodbye and left. She had planned to meet Mr. Weasley at the Ministry of Magic so they could have a nice, quiet lunch together, and she didn't want to be late.

As soon as she was gone, Fred and George pulled out a large brown paper bag and disappeared into the crowd, dragging their luggage with them. Harry had heard them whispering and snickering in the taxi on the way to the station, and he knew they were up to something. The safest plan would be to stay as far away from them as possible.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Colin Creevey and his younger brother Dennis walking toward him. He knelt down and quickly pretended to be tightening the cord on his trunk. The two of them jumped up and down, trying to get his attention, but when he didn't acknowledge their presence they soon gave up and went away. Harry felt a little guilty, but he didn't want to deal with Colin at the moment. Hero worship was the last thing he needed.

Together with Ron and Ginny, he pushed his trolley out of the thickest part of the crowd. They waved hello to a few fellow Hogwarts students, and Ginny paused to direct a group of lost-looking first years toward the barrier that led to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

"Hermione said she was going to meet us here, right?" Ron asked once Ginny had returned.

Harry pulled her most recent letter out of his pocket. "Entrance to Platform Eight," he read, jabbing at the paper with his finger. "That's what it says. And that's where we are."

"Maybe she got held up by traffic." Ginny was on her tiptoes, trying to look over other people's heads.

"Maybe," Harry said absently. A funny, gurgling feeling had begun to grow in the pit of his stomach. He chalked it up to nervousness, as well as the huge but indifferently cooked breakfast they had eaten at the Leaky Cauldron.

Ginny tapped her brother on the shoulder. "Ron, I'm going to get a copy of a Muggle newspaper for Dad. Before we left, he told me to buy one here and send it to him as soon as we got to school." She stuck her hand into her pocket and pulled out a pound coin.

Ron snorted. "Why didn't he just ask Mum to get it?"

Ginny gave him a look that would have done Hermione proud. "Could you see Mum spending money on a Muggle paper? Or better yet, could you see Dad *asking* her to?"

"All right, all right," her brother said. "Hurry up, though--we don't have much time."

As Ginny was swallowed up by the crowd, Harry looked up at the clock on the station wall. Ron was right...it was quarter to eleven. Only fifteen minutes before the Hogwarts Express would depart--where was Hermione?

He turned to Ron, about to ask if there was any sign of her, when a flash of blinding pain shot through his scar with such violence that he staggered and nearly fell.

"Ron! Get down!" he shouted, and without waiting for his startled friend to react dove forward in a flying tackle that sent them tumbling behind a row of empty trolleys.

Ron's surprised yell was drowned out by a tremendous explosion that rocked the station, deafening echoes bouncing off the high metal girders.

They rolled to a sudden stop against the wall. Harry grunted as Ron's elbow landed firmly on his solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him. He stumbled, gasping, to his knees, keeping his head down to take advantage of the cover of the trolleys. He didn't dare lift his head any higher, so the cages of metal in front of him severely restricted his vision. But the little he could see was not pleasant.

A small group of black-robed and masked figures, not more than five people, stood in the centre of the crowded terminus, firing spells and hexes in every direction. Muggles and wizards alike were shouting, screaming, running around in panic. Even those who couldn't see the actual cause of the terror fled for their lives, abandoning luggage and knocking down others in their mad dash to save themselves.

The sight sent a wave of déjà vu rippling through Harry's mind. It was last year's Quidditch World Cup all over again...only worse. There was no playing this time, no sense that the whole thing was just a cruel joke. There was only malice, a horrible desire to hurt and cause fear. And it wasn't directed solely at Muggles this time, though Harry knew that if any Muggles were injured during this raid, Voldemort would be only too pleased.

Something clutched at his sleeve. He whipped around, hands poised to deliver a blow, but the sight of Ron's frightened face stopped him short.

"Are you all right?" asked Harry, trying to detach himself from Ron's frantic grip.

Ron wouldn't let go of Harry's shirt. "What's going--"

A body crashed into the wall not five feet away from them, knocking over the trolleys that shielded them and cutting off the rest of Ron's question.

Harry felt a sharp pain in his left ankle as the edge of one of the trolleys landed on top of him. From somewhere behind him, he heard a loud, vicious curse and the scraping of metal on metal as Ron tried to crawl out from beneath the pile of trolleys. Ignoring the pain, he shoved the metal cart aside, and was about to reach out and pull the wounded person behind their make-shift barricade when he froze, arm outstretched.

There was no mistaking that bush of brown hair.

Hermione lay on the ground in a heap, one arm twisted underneath her body. Her face had a bad, bloodless look to it, and her wand dangled from the limp fingers of her other hand. She wasn't moving.

Before Harry could think to move, Ron saw her. All the colour drained from his face, leaving it a sick mottled grey.

"Hermione? HERMIONE!" he shouted, and stood up, leaving himself completely exposed.

"Ron, get a hold of yourself!" Harry grabbed him by the wrist, yanking him back down and away from Hermione. He pointed to her chest, which was rising and falling in a slow but even rhythm. "Look, look, she's breathing all right...probably just knocked out. Where's Ginny?"

Ron was still trying to break free, to get to Hermione before someone else did. "What?" he said, distracted.

"GINNY!" Harry screamed, shaking him so hard his teeth chattered. "Your sister! Where is she?"

"Don't...don't know." Ron's eyes were glazed over. His face was vacant.

It took all of Harry's self-control to keep from throttling his friend. "Stay here," he said loudly, giving Ron another shake for good measure. "I'll find her. Just keep trying to wake Hermione."

Ron didn't need to be reminded. The moment Harry let go of his arms, he scuttled over to the fallen girl and dragged her behind the trolley barricade.

While Ron tried to rouse their friend, Harry got down on his hands and knees and crept out from behind the trolleys. His ankle still hurt, and he didn't trust his ability to walk on it. The pain itself was bearable.

He couldn't see the robed attackers, but he was in more immediate danger of being stepped on or trampled than hexed. He kept to the wall, staying well away from the running and screaming crowds.

He saw a bit of bright red hair poking out from behind the deserted newspaper kiosk and crawled toward it, praying that he wouldn't find Ginny unconscious...or worse.

The relief he felt when he finally reached her made him dizzy. Ginny was curled into a tight ball, hands over her ears and face buried in her knees. She had apparently just purchased the newspaper when the attack took place, because it was next to her on the ground, unopened, along with her change. She was rocking back and forth, very slowly.

Harry realised that touching her would be a bad idea--in her state, she was liable to claw his eyes out if she thought he was an attacker.

"Ginny!" he said loudly, staying a safe distance away. "Ginny!"

Somehow, his voice penetrated her defences. She lifted her head just enough to peep over her knees, eyes wide with terror.

"Harry..." she whispered, as a dying person in a desert might say 'Water....'

He crept over to her and wrapped his arms around her. "Shh..." he said, stroking her hair. "It's all right."

"Where's Ron?" she wailed.

"Ron's fine. Hermione got knocked out, but she'll be all right," he added quickly as he saw tears start to roll down her face. "Where are Fred and George?"

She gulped. "I think they went through the barrier...Harry, what--"

"Death Eaters." He was surprised at how grim he sounded.

Ginny began to shake convulsively.

"I want Mummy," she said softly.

That scared him. He'd never heard Ginny call her mother anything but "Mum". The helpless plea of the normally self-possessed girl filled him with horror, followed closely by anger.

Suddenly, he heard a series of loud, explosive pops close by. With the greatest caution, he poked his head out from behind the kiosk.

The robed figures were gone, but the Dark Mark floated in the air, a glimmering skull with a serpent tongue looming ominously over the crowd. Muggles were pointing and staring at it, while the witches and wizards in the crowd could only look away in disgust and sadness.

He grabbed Ginny's hand, and together they ran, skirting the wall to arrive back at the pile of trolleys. Harry grimaced every time he had to put weight on his injured ankle. They collapsed behind the safety of the carts.

Ron was still there, Hermione's head resting on his knees as he gently patted her cheek. Ginny quickly joined him in his efforts to wake her.

Harry looked up at the clock on the wall. Not even five minutes had passed since he had last checked it. It felt like a lifetime.

Before he could move to check on Hermione, a long, drawn-out cry split the air, chilling him to the bone. It was a heart stopping howl that silenced all the other cries of terror and alarm.

He looked at Ron, then Ginny, seeing identical expressions of incomprehension and fear on their faces. Very slowly, the three of them lifted their heads and peered over the top of the barricade.

Ginny screamed and buried her face in Ron's shoulder.

Ron made an unintelligible, choked noise, pulling his sister close.

Harry could only stare.

Colin Creevey was kneeling on the grimy concrete of the platform, sobbing as though he could bring down the high vaulted ceiling of King's Cross Station upon all of them to crush his grief.

Cradled in his arms, crumpled like a child's broken doll, was his younger brother.

Chapter Nine - Last Train Home

All warfare is based on deception.

-- Sun-Tzu, "The Art of War"

Within minutes of the attack, a swarm of officials from the Ministry of Magic had arrived at King's Cross Station. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement, the Department of Accidental Magic Reversal...even the Department of Magical Transportation sent workers to the scene. They all wore Muggle business clothing, and could have passed for a large group of office workers were it not for the fact that they had all appeared out of nowhere. Apparition in the presence of Muggles was unthinkable--but then again, so was an incident of this calibre.

Immediately upon arrival, the officials separated to take care of the most important matter--namely, erasing all knowledge of the attack from Muggle memory. While that business was being taken care of, two mediwitches and a mediwizard fanned out among the crowd, examining the people for injuries. Still others pulled out quills and parchment and began to pen detailed reports on the entire incident.

Once all of the Muggle bystanders had been sent blissfully on their way, and a special crack squad of Obliviators delegated to round up any who might have slipped past, the Ministry workers escorted the shaken children onto the Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. Quickly and efficiently, they loaded them onto the Hogwarts Express and sent them on their way. The train left only ten minutes behind schedule, and the students were assured that they were not to worry. Everything would be taken care of.

Even with the reassurance, it was a much different ride to school. Instead of the usual excited chatter, there were only whispered, terse conversations and the occasional sounds of scattered weeping.

The quick-thinking Ministry officials had segregated the students by their houses, placing them in separate cars. The unsorted first years rode in three special cars well toward the back. Gryffindors and Slytherins were at opposite ends of the train, in case the tense situation caused the well-known house rivalry to spill over. Students were forbidden to travel between the cars, and even the sweet, friendly witch who pushed the snack trolley had an unfriendly-looking wizard with her, escorting her as she went around offering free Chocolate Frogs to the shaken students.

Hermione was lying down across a row of seats in the makeshift infirmary that had been set up in first car. She had regained consciousness as she was being loaded onto the train, but the mediwizard who had been hastily recruited to attend the injured on the way to school feared that she had suffered a concussion. Harry, Ron, and Ginny had been recruited to keep her awake and talking, and to alert him if she showed signs of drifting off.

The Weasley siblings sat side by side, not talking, simply taking comfort in the fact that the other was there. Harry sat opposite them, dying to scratch an itch that had developed under the thick bandage on his ankle. The mediwizard had said that it was just strained, not sprained

or broken, but he had wrapped it up so tightly that Harry couldn't even slip a finger underneath the bandage. The itching was driving him mad.

Two second-year Ravenclaws, a young-looking boy and a girl, had also been hurt in the incident and were under the mediwizard's care. For the moment, they were sleeping soundly. Colin Creevey was under heavy sedation at the far end of the car, closest to the front, but no one went up there unless they absolutely had to. Even the mediwizard avoided looking in that direction, and if there was no avoiding it he hurriedly averted his eyes.

"And you're sure you're all right?" Ginny asked for the fifth time, holding Hermione's hand tightly.

"Just bruised, that's all." Hermione sat up a little and gingerly rubbed the back of her head. "That's what I get for trying to be heroic."

"Good thing your hair's so frizzy," said Ron. "It probably saved your life, you know. Cushioned the blow." He tried to make it a joke, but there was a husky note in his voice that took all the humour out of his statement. He looked away, staring fixedly out of the window.

Hermione didn't bother to yell at him. She leaned back, closing her eyes.

"Don't go to sleep!" Ginny shouted, grabbing her by the arm.

Hermione opened her eyes and gave the younger girl a withering look. "I wasn't going to sleep, silly. I have to blink sometime."

Ginny's face twisted pitifully. "I was just worried. The mediwizard said you could go into a comma if you fell asleep."

"That's 'coma', Ginny," Hermione corrected, more gently. "And I think I'll be okay."

"If you say so." Ginny didn't sound convinced.

The elderly mediwizard walked over to them, swaying slightly with the motion of the car. The cloying, heady smell of chocolate filled the air, wafting toward them as he approached. He had dispensed so much chocolate to the injured students that he smelled as though he'd been bathing in it.

"How's the headache, young lady?" he asked.

"It could be worse," said Hermione, wrinkling her nose at the almost overpowering aroma of chocolate.

"That's the spirit, missy," he said, his wrinkled old face creasing into hundreds of tiny smile lines. "Now you just let me know if you don't feel well. We wouldn't want you to go and have a funny turn on us, now would we?"

"We certainly wouldn't," Ron replied, very seriously.

Ginny had to fake a coughing fit to keep from bursting out laughing, and ended up giving herself the hiccoughs instead. Harry ducked his head to hide his own smile.

When the mediwizard had left them, Hermione released her tightly-held breath. "Phew...I like chocolate as much as the next person, but really! And what's this about 'funny turns? Do I look that much of an invalid?"

"You did have us worried for a moment there, you know," Harry said. "You hit the wall awfully hard."

Hermione coughed drily. "And this coming from the boy who's probably spent more time as Madam Pomfrey's special guest than the rest of us combined."

Harry opened his mouth to make an unflattering remark about a botched dosage of Polyjuice Potion, but before he could say anything, there was a fusilade of knocking on the door that connected the car to the rest of the train.

The sudden noise woke the Ravenclaws. The little girl, who had two long blonde plaits and an elbow in a sling, began to bawl. Ginny hurried over to comfort her. Harry and Ron drew closer to Hermione, who tried to sit up but was pushed back down by Ron.

The mediwizard straightened his robes, and strode toward the rear of the car with a confidence he almost certainly didn't possess. He stopped five feet away from the door and began to shout, trying to make his voice carry over the noise of the train:

"Excuse me! You can't come back here!"

The knocking started again.

The mediwizard blanched, but stood his ground. He tried a different turn of phrase. "This car is off limits to anyone but authorised person--"

He hadn't finished his sentence before the door flew open, hitting the facing wall with a crash.

The mediwizard leapt back, holding out his wand in a hand that wouldn't stop shaking. Ginny tried to shush the frightened Ravenclaw girl, only to have the little boy started howling as well.

Harry motioned for Ron and Hermione to keep down, and looked over the top of the seat. He could see two figures, one tall and one short, standing in the doorway. They wore black and scarlet robes of a cut that Harry had never seen before.

The shorter one, a compact woman with dusty grey hair, stepped forward. She held out a roll of parchment stamped with an official-looking seal.

"We **are** authorised personnel, Mr. Evanston," she said in a gravelly voice. "The Ministry of Magic wants a full and complete report, and that means interviewing everyone on board. Everyone."

It was Mrs. Figg.

Harry's first thought was that she looked quite different in wizarding dress. He'd never seen her in anything but faded headscarves, old housedresses, and laddered tights, and he couldn't get used to the sight of her in formal robes.

His second thought was to wonder why he hadn't been more surprised to see her.

Mr. Evanston the mediwizard warily took the proffered document and read it through several times. He looked up when he had finished, and handed it back to her. She passed it to her partner, who rolled it up and deftly slipped it into his robes.

The initial fear had left Mr. Evanston's face, and had been replaced with sulkiness. "I was only doing my job," he said sourly.

The second person, a tall blond man with very unruly eyebrows, spoke for the first time. "Your job is tending to the wounded, and you've done admirably so far," he said placatingly. "Now please, stand aside and let us do ours."

The mediwizard gave them a glare that was as near to unfriendly as he dared to go. Without another word, he turned around and headed back to take care of the young Ravenclaws. They were still howling, but two large pieces of chocolate soon quieted their sobs.

Ginny's brief childcare experience had left her rather frazzled, and she looked only too glad to rejoin Harry, Hermione, and her brother.

Mrs. Figg and the blond man strode down the corridor. Harry stood up, overjoyed to speak with Mrs. Figg again, but his good mood faded when he saw that her face was a complete blank. She didn't act as though she knew who he was, let alone that he had spent the entire summer living with her.

They stopped once they had reached the row of seats where Hermione lay. "Good afternoon," Mrs. Figg said briskly. "My name is Arabella Figg, and this is Edward Linchley."

She indicated her partner, who nodded briefly to them and stepped forward.

"We would like to ask you a few questions about the incident," he said, pulling out a quill and a fresh piece of parchment. "But before we begin--"

"May I see your identification, please?" said Hermione, holding out her hand.

"What?" Linchley blinked, looking very startled.

"Your identification," Hermione repeated slowly, spelling it out for him. "It's only proper. Constant vigilance, and all that."

Mrs. Figg smiled wryly, and prodded Linchley with a bony finger. "Go on, man. She's got you there. Trust a Muggle-born to know proper police procedure."

Linchley grudgingly handed the identification parchment to Hermione, who unrolled it and held it up for Harry, Ron, and Ginny to see.

Harry peered at it. The writing on the scroll, though tiny, ornate, and densely packed, was easy enough to decipher.

Hereby let it be known, [it said,] that the bearer(s) of this

document have the full authorisation of the Ministry of Magic and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to act within reason and due process of law.

Arabella Figg, Auror

Edward Linchley, Auror

[signed]

Cornelius Fudge

Minister of Magic

Attached to the bottom of the document were two photographs, headshots of Mrs. Figg and Linchley that gazed placidly at the viewer. The pictures didn't move as much as those in normal wizarding photographs, but Harry assumed that was because they were deliberately sitting very still in order to appear more 'official'.

Hermione let go of the bottom of the parchment. It rolled up with a snap. She handed it back to Linchley, who took it from her and put it away again. He picked up the parchment and quill, and fixed them all with a very severe frown.

"Your names," he barked. "First and last. And your ages."

"Harry Potter, fifteen."

"Ronald Weasley, fifteen."

"Hermione Granger..." She trailed off, hesitating for a moment, then continued. "Fourteen. But I'll be fifteen in a fortnight," she added hastily, as if to remind them all that her age was of no consequence.

"Ginny Weasley, fourteen."

"Ginny?" Linchley repeated, disbelievingly.

"Yes, 'Ginny'." She sounded offended, very put out. "That is my name, you know."

"Fine, then." Linchley finished copying her name down and looked up, twiddling the quill in his hand. "Now, I would like to know your exact locations at the time of the incident."

The four of them exchanged glances.

Ron was the first to speak up. "Harry and I were standing outside the entrance to Platform Eight. Ginny was--"

"I can speak for myself, *dear* brother," Ginny interrupted, glaring at him. She addressed Mrs. Figg. "At the time, I was at a newspaper kiosk, buying a copy of 'The Independent'."

Linchley looked up sharply. "That's a Muggle paper, isn't it?"

Ginny returned his accusing stare. Her dislike of him, if it had not been apparent before, was now blatantly obvious. "Yes, it is. My father--Arthur Weasley, who works for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Department--wanted one. He asked me to get it for him." Her smile was syrupy sweet and not very nice. "Would you like to see it?"

Linchley had to good grace to appear embarrassed. "Ah...that won't be necessary, Miss Weasley." He turned to Hermione. "And you?"

"I was just entering the main terminus. My parents had dropped me off outside, and I had a hard time trying to load my trunk onto one of the trolleys. It was quarter to twelve. I was afraid that I would be late."

"...would...be...late." He wrote the last word, crossing the 't' with a flourish. "All right. Now that we have established your whereabouts, I'd like you to describe what you saw. You first, Mr. Potter." He pointed to Harry.

"I...I didn't see anything," Harry said, stammering a little. "I just felt this pain in my head, and I knew that something was wrong. So I grabbed Ron and dove behind a row of trolleys."

"Why the violent reaction?"

Harry laughed softly, a laugh with absolutely no mirth in it. "When something goes wrong around me, it usually goes very wrong, very fast. Story of my life, really. I just didn't want to take the chance."

"Is this true, Mr. Weasley?" Linchley asked, turning to Ron.

Ron shrugged. "I guess. I don't know. I just remember Harry shouting something and knocking me down, and then the next thing I knew Hermione was there and she wasn't moving and...and...."

He stopped short, unable to continue. Hermione reached over and patted his hand gently.

Rather than wait for Ron to regain his composure, Harry decided to change the subject. "After that, I looked over top of the trolleys and saw them," he said.

"Whom did you see?"

"The group of Death Eaters."

"How do you know they were Death Eaters?"

Harry pushed the hair away from his forehead in a gesture that was designed to 'accidentally' reveal his scar. "They're not something you forget very easily," he said.

Linchley shifted uncomfortably at this, but Mrs. Figg didn't seem to notice. "And what were they doing?" she asked.

"Casting spells, it looked like. I don't think they were going after anyone in--"

Mrs. Figg cut him off sternly. "We're not interested in what you *think*, Mr. Potter. We're interested in what you *saw*."

Harry's temper flared. He was sore, itchy, and sick and tired of dancing around the issue. He was also more than a little furious at Mrs. Figg for treating him like a complete stranger.

"You want to know what I saw?" he said coldly. "I *saw* a group of people dressed in black throwing hexes left and right, in broad daylight, in the middle of a crowded train station filled with Muggles. I saw Hermione crash into the wall right next to me, looking like she was dead. I saw...I saw Colin...."

His eyes flickered toward the front of the train, toward the curtained off area where Colin lay. The burst of anger left him, and he couldn't finish his statement.

Hermione reached over and took his hand, too, squeezing it. The pressure of her slim fingers was a sweet gesture, but it didn't make him feel any less choked up.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," Linchley said, realising that it would be better not to press the subject. "Miss Weasley?"

Ginny's eyes grew vacant as she tried to remember. "I had just bought the paper and was waiting for my change when I heard the explosion. I didn't look to see what it was--I dove for the ground. I don't really remember anything else until Harry said my name."

"You didn't try to find out what was going on?"

Now it was Ginny's turn to look uncomfortable. "I...I didn't think about it. I just wanted to get away."

"Completely understandable," Linchley said with a sympathetic nod. "Miss Granger?"

"Well, I heard the explosion, too, but I didn't see what was going on at first. I ran over toward Platform Eight. I was hoping that Ron and Harry would be there. I must have been hit with a spell or something, because the next thing I knew I was flying through the air and then everything went black."

"According to the report made at the scene, you had your wand out. May I ask why?"

"I wanted to be prepared, that's all."

Linchley raised a bushy eyebrow. "So you pulled your wand out in the middle of a crowded train station? With Muggles all around you?"

"Some people didn't seem to care about things like that," Hermione said flatly.

"Yes...well, thank you, Miss Granger." He rolled up the parchment and put his quill away.

Mrs. Figg cleared her throat. "That will be all for now. I must ask all of you to stay here for the time being. We will return if we have any further questions for you."

Harry knew that he couldn't sit there and watch her walk away.

"Mrs. Figg?" he said quickly, catching hold of the edge of her sleeve.

She hesitated, but quickly nodded to him. "I'll be there in a few minutes, Linchley," she said over her shoulder. "See what you can get from them." She jerked her head toward the two Ravenclaws.

Linchley grimaced, as though she'd asked him to wrestle a Common Welsh Green, but he bowed slightly to his superior and walked over to the little boy and girl.

Mrs. Figg turned back to Harry. "What is it?" she asked, keeping her voice low. "I can't talk long."

"Mrs. Figg, I knew that this would happen."

Her eyes went wide. "How did you know?" she hissed.

Harry took a very deep breath, and proceeded to describe his vision, including as much detail as he could remember. He knew that Mrs. Figg would probably want to flay him alive for not informing her of the close call he had had on the train to Exeter, so he played down that aspect of the story. He focused more on the 'change of plans' side--the actual threat from Voldemort.

A tiny muscle had started to twitch in Mrs. Figg's jaw. Her normally twinkling eyes smouldered with an intense light. He couldn't tell whether it was directed at him or at Voldemort...but he hoped to blazes it was intended for Voldemort.

"No names?" she asked, the strain of speaking in quiet tones showing through.

Harry thought very carefully, racking his memory. He wanted to be certain. "No," he said finally. "But it was definitely two men and a woman. And I didn't recognise their voices...it wasn't Wormtail or Lucius Malfoy or anyone like that."

"And you said this was just last night? You didn't tell anyone else about this?"

He could feel Ron's eyes boring into his back, and deliberately avoided looking at his best friend. "By the time it was over, I couldn't do much of anything about it. I was going to go tell Dumbledore when I got to school, but now...."

"Was anyone else hurt?" Ginny asked Mrs. Figg, interrupting him.

"Any Muggles?" Hermione added, very worried.

A little of the anger left Mrs. Figg's face. "We have five confirmed casualties. Two were Muggles. The others...the other three were Hogwarts students." She looked tired, more like an old woman and less like an Auror with the authority of the Ministry of Magic behind her. "I shouldn't even be telling you this much...you'll find out more at the Sorting Ceremony."

"But I won't--" Harry began, then snapped his mouth shut.

"Won't what?" The steel came back into her eyes.

"Never mind. It's nothing." He gave her a smile that he hoped would be chipper enough to calm her fears. "Thank you, Mrs. Figg."

She returned his smile thinly. Her eyes were still hard. "Chin up, Harry. I'll be seeing you soon."

Before he could figure out whether that was a threat or a promise, she had left.

Ron propped his chin on his hands, watching her head over toward Linchley, who was having a good deal of trouble interrogating the teary-eyed and sticky-faced Ravenclaws.

"Wow...THAT was Mrs. Figg?" he said. "I know that the Dursleys were pretty bad, but having to live with *her* for a summer..." He shook his head in wonder. "You always do get the worst breaks, Harry."

Harry wasn't listening. He was too busy calculating exactly how much time he had before the Sorting Ceremony--he had to put his trunk and other belongings away, slip past all the teachers who would be keeping an especially strict watch on them all, get through the corridors without being seen by Mr. Filch or Mrs. Norris, and somehow find his way to Dumbledore's office.

He'd have under a half-hour...if that much.

A finger poked him sharply in the ribs, snapping him out of his string of troubled thoughts.

"Harry, are you listening? What's wrong?" asked Hermione, poking him again.

"I'm not going to the Sorting Ceremony," he said slowly. "I'm going to see Dumbledore as soon as we get to school."

"But won't he be at the Sorting Ceremony, too?" Ginny said, her brow furrowing in concern.

"Not if I can corner him before it starts. This is too important to wait--I waited too long, and look what happened. I...I don't want anything else to go wrong."

"I'll come with you," Ron said firmly.

Hermione sat up carefully. "Me, too."

"Well, I'm certainly not going to be left behind!" piped Ginny.

"No. It'd be too conspicuous." He held up a hand to stop them before they could protest.

"What I need you to do is to make up some excuse in case anyone asks where I am. And," he said, as an idea struck him, "I need someone to take my things--I can get to Dumbledore faster if I don't have to worry about my luggage."

Hermione scowled. "So while you go off traipsing through the school, being all heroic and noble and secretive, we're stuck behind as your alibi and your porters?"

Harry opened his mouth, then quickly shut it.

Hermione laughed at his funny expression. "All right, all right. I suppose I could always fake an attack." She composed her face into a tragic contortion of exaggerated suffering. "Oh...oh, my...Professor McGonagall, I think I'm having another funny turn. Could Harry please escort me to the infirmary? I don't mean to be such a terrible bother, but..." She placed a hand against her forehead and moaned softly, fluttering her eyelashes.

Harry grinned broadly, and Ginny giggled at Hermione's playacting. Even Ron looked a little less dour, some his normal cheerfulness returning.

The Hogwarts Express sped northward, carrying its precious cargo to their home from home.

Chapter Ten - Through A Glass...Not So Darkly

"Now, if you'll only attend, Kitty, and not talk so much, I'll tell you all my ideas about Looking-glass House. First, there's the room you can see through the glass--that's just the same as our drawing room, only the things go the other way. I can see all of it when I get upon a chair--all but the bit behind the fireplace....Oh, Kitty! how nice it would be if we could only get through into Looking-glass House! I'm sure it's got, oh! such beautiful things in it!"

-- Lewis Carroll, "Through the Looking-Glass"

Whatever fears Harry may have had about the implementation of the plan disappeared the moment they entered Hogwarts. Hermione played her part so well that he found himself actually concerned about her health.

They all had agreed that the plan would begin the moment the train arrived at Hogsmeade Station. Hermione, not surprisingly, took the initiative. Looking as feeble and injured as possible, she staggered off the scarlet train, past the huddled groups of startled first-years, and into one of the waiting horseless carriages. The carriage ride was silent, broken only by Hermione's occasional practice moans and a raspy, nervous cough or two from Ron.

Once the carriage had stopped in front of the school, Harry and Ron helped her climb out. Ginny followed close behind. Hermione walked slowly, as if every step was an agony. Just outside the Hogwarts front entrance, she stumbled forward, clutching her head and crying out. Her face was a mask of pain.

Professor McGonagall rushed to her side, but Hermione waved away her offers of assistance, stressing that she "didn't want to be a bother". Only after a long, drawn-out argument did she weakly accept Harry's arm and his 'request' to help her to the hospital wing. She moaned so pathetically that it made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

Ron and Ginny's respective performances were equally admirable. Ginny superbly slipped into the role of the very distressed girl friend, fluttering around and twittering and being generally ineffectual. For his part, Ron cracked endless stupid jokes in an attempt to "raise her spirits". The two of them played off each other to perfection. Harry suspected they'd had a lot of practice.

Once he had half-escorted, half-carried Hermione safely up the marble staircase to the first floor, well out of sight of the rest of the students, they ducked behind a tall pillar. She let go of his arm.

"I should actually go see Madam Pomfrey, in case she checks up on me later," she whispered. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Of course," he said, turning to go. "Now get going before someone tries to come after us."

They went their separate ways down the deserted corridors. Harry kept a sharp eye out for Filch and Mrs. Norris, taking very deliberate steps to stop his shoes from making noise on the polished stone floors. He wished he had thought to bring the Marauder's Map, but it was hidden in the lining of his trunk.

He hurried along, stomach tingling as he felt the precious minutes slip by, but the corridors looked unfamiliar and alien to him. He had walked them a thousand times before, going to and from classes and cram sessions and detentions, and yet he knew with growing dread that he was getting hopelessly lost.

Walking past the same faded tapestry and rusty suit of armour for the tenth time, he was near tears. If he didn't get to Dumbledore before the Sorting Ceremony, he certainly wouldn't have a chance afterward. The teachers would tighten security even more this year in the wake of the attack, and he wouldn't have this freedom, this opportunity for a long time--if ever.

With those pressing, urgent thoughts on his mind, he turned the next corner and ran smack into a door.

"Ow!"

He stumbled backward, rubbing his head. His cry echoed shrilly in the corridor.

Cursing his clumsiness, he glared at the offending entryway. It was a plain door, made of solid wood with a pitted and worn metal handle. Some of the doors in Hogwarts were merely walls that liked to *pretend* to be doors, but this one looked and felt real enough. He turned the handle, though he had the foresight to keep the door firmly shut.

It was most definitely unlocked.

It was no different than any of the other doors in the school, but a brief glance round proved he was near the library--and if he remembered rightly, there had never been a door in this place before.

If he was near the library, he'd never get to Dumbledore's office in time. Hermione would be at the hospital wing, but he couldn't go there without Madam Pomfrey asking unpleasant questions. And he couldn't simply wander into the Sorting Feast without causing a stir. The situation couldn't have been worse.

There was nothing to lose.

He straightened his robes, opened the door, and went inside.

The room he entered was fairly small, maybe half the size of the Gryffindor boys' dormitory. Bookshelves lined the walls, and the musty smell of old book permeated the air. An ornately carved rectangular table made of a rich dark wood took up most of the immediate floor space. Several chairs of the same design as the table stood along the right wall. A welcoming fire burned brightly in the grate at the far end of the room.

Harry took all of this in with a single glance, but what he saw on the other side of the room made his breath catch in his throat.

In the centre of the left wall was a large mirror. The reflective surface sparkled in a dark wooden frame. The wood of the frame was similar to the material of the table, and it also had an intricately carved pattern on it, though he couldn't make it out very well in the indistinct firelight. But where the carvings decorating the table looked like the handiwork of a long-dead Muggle artisan, the pattern on the mirror frame was like nothing he had ever seen before. It was a strange, repeated pattern, a series of lines and circles and curves that covered every available area of the polished wood.

Harry wanted to examine it more closely, but he kept his distance. Memories of the Mirror of Erised were far too fresh in his mind. Instead, he did the safest thing he could think of and sat down in one of the chairs along the right wall. He waited.

And waited.

And waited.

He had been sitting in the room for well over an hour when he found himself starting to feel very drowsy. The crackling fire made the room pleasantly warm. The rich scent of old books reminded him of the Hogwarts library, scene of many a lovely late-Saturday-afternoon nap. He was tired from all the stress and excitement, and nothing seemed more logical or inviting than pulling the chair right up to the table, pillowing his head on his arms, and--

The door handle rattled once.

Harry had heard a lock slide into place when he shut the door, though he hadn't seen a key. The lock clicked and snicked with an accusing sound as it was released.

Harry leapt to his feet, quickly running his hands through his hair to tame it. The door opened soundlessly on its well-oiled hinges.

He had hoped it would be Dumbledore, but instead it was Professor McGonagall. She didn't look very pleased.

She gave Harry a dismissive nod and half-turned around, looking over her shoulder.

"Wait here for now," she said to someone behind her. "The Headmaster will be with you shortly."

She stepped back, and Hermione and Ron filed into the room, with dragging feet and heads hanging down as if they'd been scolded.

Before Harry could say a word, the door swung shut and the lock slid back into place.

"What are you two doing here?" he asked.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "Well, nice to see you, too," she said snippily.

"You know what I mean," he said, flopping back down into his chair with a sigh. "I thought you were supposed to be in the infirmary."

"I *am* supposed to be there," Hermione declared, folding her arms across her chest. "I think I went a bit too far with faking sick--I really *did* pass out, just outside the door to the hospital wing. The next thing I knew McGonagall was practically dragging me out of bed. I've never seen Madam Pomfrey so angry."

"Well, she grabbed *me* the minute the Sorting Ceremony was over and marched us down here," Ron said. He looked around, studying the old furniture and books with a wary eye. "What is this place?"

"I don't know," Harry replied. "I've never seen it before."

Hermione still looked very ill, and more than a little put out. "Well, there's no sense in wasting our time and energy worrying about it. Dumbledore will be here soon--he'll explain it." She walked over to the wall and ran a hand over the rows of books, seeking comfort in the familiar feeling of leather and gilt paint.

"Say, Ron, what happened at the ceremony?" Harry asked in an attempt change the subject.

Ron shrugged. "Nothing much. The Sorting Hat was pretty quiet for once. But Dumbledore did tell us...he told us the names of the students who died."

"Who were they?" Harry asked. His chest felt tight.

"One was a girl who hadn't even been Sorted yet--her name was Ellen Rhys-Jones." He frowned. "From the way Dumbledore talked about her, it sounded like she was Muggle-born. He didn't come right out and say it, but that's what it sounded like to me. She didn't even make it to the platform."

"How awful," Hermione murmured, not looking away from the books.

"The other was a Slytherin prefect," Ron continued. "Sixth-year, I think. Her name was Eleanor...Eleanor De Vere, or something like that. I don't even know what she looked like." He shuddered. "But the strange thing was, Dumbledore said that there was no evidence that either of them had been cursed. Their deaths weren't caused by magic at all."

Harry couldn't believe his ears. He'd seen the group of Death Eaters casting spells, hexes, curses...everything but the infamous green light itself. "Then how did it happen?"

"The same way Dennis Creevey snuffed it. Crushed to death. By all the people who were trying to get away," Ron stuffed his hands deep into his pockets and pulled out a grubby handkerchief. He blew his nose noisily.

Hermione spun around. Her jaw was tightly clenched. "And you know what that means, don't you?" she said to Harry. "Even if they catch who did it, they can't be tried for murder. Five people dead and the most they could be charged with are a few counts of voluntary--no, make that *involuntary* manslaughter. In Muggle courts, that is. I haven't read enough to know what the wizarding judicial system is really like."

Though he knew he shouldn't find the situation funny, Harry had to fight back a grin. She sounded eerily like the Muggle crime novelists who wrote endless amounts of cheap

paperback thrillers. His Aunt Petunia had owned boxes upon boxes of those books, though she had to hide them from his uncle and only read them on the sly.

"Hermione, what exactly were you reading over the summer?" he asked slowly, raising an eyebrow.

"Harry, I'm serious about this!" she shouted, pounding the table with a fist.

It was Harry's turn to be angry. "You think I'm not?" He stood up and turned to Ron, who had wandered over to the far wall and was warming his hands before the glowing grate. "Ron, what about wizarding courts? What could they get if they were brought to trial?"

Ron squinted into the fire, looking like he was trying to remember something he'd seen or read. "They'd only get sent to Azkaban if it could be proved that they were aware of the consequences of their actions. But I don't know what kind of sentence they'd get, even if they lost."

"Super," Hermione said bitterly, through gritted teeth. "Absolutely super. They kill five people and get off with a warning, or a fine, or a...or...or...." She stomped over to the left wall, and glared at the neat rows of books. "I could just SCREAM!"

She slammed her hand against the wall, thinking to take out her anger on an inanimate object. Seeing the looks on her friends' faces, she took a deep breath, and the rage faded from her eyes. But as she calmed down and started to turn around, her hand brushed the frame of the large mirror.

A flare of intense blue light blinded them for a horrible, eye-searing moment.

Harry blinked furiously, trying to clear the ghostly afterimage from his vision. When he could focus again, he saw to his amazement that though the bright flare had gone, the intricate pattern carved into the mirror's wooden frame was glowing with a faint bluish-white light.

"I really don't need this right now..." Ron moaned, shrinking back against the far wall.

"Hermione, what did you do?" Harry said sharply, backing away as well.

"I didn't do anything!" she wailed, wringing her hands as though she'd been stung by a wasp. "I didn't even touch it, I swear!"

Huddled against the walls, they stared fearfully at the mirror. The pattern continued to glow, but the mirror's reflective surface had turned dark and smoky, and as they watched a swirling grey mist seemed to appear behind the glass. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the mist began to clear--but what they saw was certainly nothing that they would have expected.

On the other side of the mirror was another room.

It looked like a moderately sized office or a private study, untidy in an oddly academic way. Even though their view was limited to what could be directly seen through the mirror, the ever-changing shadows on the walls indicated that the room was heated by an actual fire, not just an electric one stuffed into a pre-existing grate. Bookshelves stuffed with rows of leather-bound volumes lined the walls. Even more books in battered cardboard boxes covered most of

the available floor space. Two very comfortable-looking chairs sat in front of a large desk, illuminated by the soft glow of a globe lamp.

Sitting behind the desk, reading a book, was Professor Stanton.

He looked up from his reading and stared directly at them. His face softened, some of the seriousness fading from his expression.

"Ah, there you are," he said. His voice was as clear and audible as if they were all in the same room. "I was wondering when you'd arrive. I had expected you a little sooner, but no matter. The most important thing is that you are all here, and safe."

"Hello, Professor Stanton," Harry said, considerably relieved to find some familiarity in the strangeness.

"Hello, sir," Hermione said, nodding politely.

"Are you feeling better, Miss Granger?" Professor Stanton asked.

Hermione quickly covered her surprise. "Yes, thank you, sir."

"Glad to hear it." He smiled at Ron. "A pleasure to see you again, Mr. Weasley."

Ron made a short strangled noise, which he quickly turned into a cough. "Hello," he said finally.

Before the silence that followed could become awkward, the door of the room opened once again. A very tired-looking Dumbledore entered, wearily brushing at his robes with slightly trembling hands. His wrinkled face brightened at the sight of the children, who were standing as far away from the magical mirror as they could.

"I see you've beaten me to it," he said with a small wry smile. He swept forward and bowed to the mirror and its occupant on the other side. "Would you care to explain the situation, Dr. Stanton?"

"I think you'd be better suited for that task, Headmaster," Professor Stanton replied, returning the courteous bow. "If you aren't pressed for time, of course."

Dumbledore sighed, puffing out his already fluffy beard. "Better to take the time now to get things sorted out. Plus, it gives me a little break from answering letters from concerned parents."

He turned to the students, who had been listening to the conversation with growing confusion. "Today's catastrophe has convinced both Dr. Stanton and myself that the time has come for action. We have spent the summer collecting data from various sources in order to assemble a programme of study, one that can combine your experiences with the knowledge of the one being who has seen the work of the Dark at its greatest and most terrible."

"So you're certain that the Dark is involved, sir?" Hermione asked, looking from Dumbledore to Professor Stanton as though she did not quite know whom to address.

"Certain, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore repeated. "No. But I would prefer that you were prepared for that possibility. The true power of the Dark is an evil that our particular magic cannot handle alone."

Professor Stanton inclined his head. "And though I am familiar with many of the powers you call upon, there needs to be a way to combine our separate methods. I believe that is our best, if not our only, option."

"Dr. Stanton has graciously agreed to work with the three of you in this matter."

"Three...for now," Professor Stanton said, tapping his finger on his cheek.

"That's true," Dumbledore conceded. He headed back to the door and rested his gnarled hand on the polished handle. He can devote more time than I can at the moment, but I do intend to keep up with your progress. Indeed, I am looking forward to it." Dumbledore looked very sorry. Harry could tell that he wanted to do more to help, much more. "But now, I'm afraid I must leave you to your work and return to my own. Please, invite Dr. Stanton in. I would stay longer, but I have a feeling that I might even have a Howler or two waiting in the office from some of the more...highly-strung parents."

Harry and Ron both flinched. They remembered only too well the Howler they'd received in second year, over the little matter of a stolen flying Ford Anglia. By the time they had cleared the horrid memory from their minds, Dumbledore had gone.

Hermione edged over to the mirror, keeping her hands well away from it. "Professor...."

"Please, call me Will. We may be in an academic setting at the moment, but your dealings with me will be far from academic."

"Will." The name sounded strange on Harry's tongue. He'd never called a grown-up by his first name before; it felt very weird. He shook his head to clear the unnecessary thoughts from his mind, and pointed to the mirror. "How does this thing work, anyway?"

Ron looked over at Will (for that was how they all thought of him, from then on), and raised an eyebrow. "I have a feeling that you're not going to tell us," he said.

Will quirked his own eyebrow in an exact mimicry of Ron. "You're quite right, Mr Weasley."

"Let's think about this," said Hermione, rubbing her chin in thought. "Touching the mirror frame...turned it on, in a way. So it's only logical that we'd have to do something else with the mirror. I was angry when...so that might have something to do with it. And we know that Dumbledore said that we have to invite Profess...*Will* in. But short of getting really mad and saying 'Please, come in' at the same time, I don't think...."

"And I think you're overthinking, Miss Granger," Will said lightly.

"Since when is that something new?" Ron muttered to Harry, who did his best not to laugh.

"Ron!" Hermione's face had gone an unflattering shade of beet red. "If I can continue without being *interrupted*, I was going to say that the mirror must be a passage. We do something on our side, and it will open the door."

"But doesn't that mean we could go through the other way?" Harry asked.

"I'm afraid not," Will said before Hermione could ponder that question. "This device is only....'programmed', for lack of a better word, to work one way."

"Why is that?"

"I see it as a minor security precaution. It allow you and your Headmaster to control and regulate its use--since it will not work unless one of you activates it--and it comforts me with the knowledge that I won't have some rather unsavoury characters bursting in and spoiling my evening. Not that the integrity of the various Hogwarts' enchantments isn't sound, mind you, but this device operates on a far different type of magic...which I will further explain once you figure out how to activate it in the first place."

"Fantastic," said Ron, unable to keep the sourness from his voice.

"Ron..." Harry said warningly. Hermione made a low, ominous noise that sounded far too much like a growl.

"Enough." Will's voice was very soft, but it had a steely ring that silenced their squabbling before it could start. "Just relax. Close your eyes."

They obeyed.

Will continued speaking in the same soft voice. "Think very carefully about this--don't think of anything else right now. Tell me, just how would you go about solving this problem...tell me...tell me...."

They were rocked and soothed by the quiet words. There was a painful, interminable moment of Not-Knowing, one of the horrible ones that always seems to come at the worst times, during an important test or when called on in class. The answer was there, but it didn't want to appear.

But the Knowing, when it finally came, was like the first golden ray of sunlight through the clouds on a dreary, overcast day.

Harry was the first to open his eyes.

With a smooth, deliberate stride, he stepped forward and rested a hand on the mirror frame.

"Enter, Watchman of the Light," he said.

Hermione, almost as if on cue, followed suit, stepping forward and touching the frame on the opposite side.

"Grant to us your inner sight," she declared firmly.

Ron took a little longer, but after a moment he too reached out and took hold of the frame, directly underneath Harry's hand.

"Enter, for the time draws near," he said forcefully.

With his words, the intricate pattern of symbols carved into the frame changed colours, glowing a brilliant white.

Professor Stanton easily stepped forward and through the space where the glass had been as if there was nothing there.

As he crossed the glowing threshold, the exceedingly normal blazer and trousers he wore changed shape, transforming into flowing robes similar to their own. But where their school robes were plain and black, his were a rich deep blue, the colour of a midnight sky.

The sudden change of clothing had changed his appearance, and in their eyes, his entire personality. He no longer looked like a university professor, or even like a man in his late thirties. The being who stood before them, looking down upon them, was ageless, authoritative, surrounded by the aura of an ancient power that left the three of them speechless with awe.

"Well done, all of you." There was a fleeting hint of warmth, the slightest touch of praise, before his face and voice became remote and expressionless again.

"There is much to do. Let us begin."

Chapter Eleven - Same Song, Fifth Verse

Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.

-- Robert Frost

The moment Will entered the room, Harry finally understood the true gravity of the situation.

Until that point, he hadn't really accepted it. When he had arrived at King's Cross Station that morning, he'd fully expected to slip back into the predictable routine of the school year--once Dumbledore had been informed about Voldemort, that is. But now, not twelve hours later, he was in a strange little room he'd never seen before, standing in the presence of an immortal who had just charged him and his closest friends with a horrible, wonderful mission.

At the moment, he wanted nothing more than a long hot bath and the time to come to terms with the events of the day. Unfortunately, neither was possible. All he could do was to take things as they came, and hope for the best.

Will took hold of one of the high-backed chairs that stood against the wall and pulled it over to the long table. Harry, Ron, and Hermione hurriedly took their seats on the other side, facing him.

"Since you are going to be working with me, I feel that it is only fair that I tell you a little bit about myself," Will said. "I hardly need remind you I am trusting your discretion on this matter. You would not like to know the kind of repercussions that could result from the slightest carelessness. Do I make myself clear?"

The increased formality in his speech pattern--a subtle change which created a heightened sense of and urgency--made his words all the more nerve-wracking. They nodded slowly, afraid to do anything else.

Will seemed to relax a little, leaning back in his chair. "Then I might as well begin at the beginning, go on until I come to the end, then stop, as the good Mr. Carroll recommends."

He closed his eyes. "As you know, my name is Will Stanton. I was born in 1960, in a small village in Buckinghamshire, in the Thames Valley. Thinking back, it seems to me that my early years were almost a combination of your collective experiences."

He nodded to each of them in turn. "Like you, Mr. Weasley, I was the youngest son in my family. The seventh son of a seventh son, in fact. Like Miss Granger, my background is about as non-magical as one could find. And like Mr. Potter here, I discovered on my eleventh birthday that I was part of something greater and more terrifying that I could have ever dreamed. The Old Ones." They could hear the capital letters in his voice.

"The day I turned eleven, I assumed my destiny as an Old One and my duty as the Sign-Seeker, charged with finding six Signs that would be a formidable weapon in the Light's struggle to drive back the Dark. For at the time, the Dark was Rising over Britain, using the power it possessed in the darkest days of the year to launch a concentrated attack upon the Light and the world of men.

"The Light won that encounter, through the power of the Signs and the Circle of Old Ones. But the Dark was not entirely defeated, and over the course of the next few months, I found myself facing the Dark and its servants on several occasions. For that kind of evil changes its shape quite easily, and can take on many forms...human and non-human.

"The last battle was a hard one." His face hardened as the memory returned to him, and he opened his eyes. Harry shivered at Will's cold, distant gaze, and sense of immense age that surrounded him. "There was much loss, and much sorrow. Finally, though, the Dark was driven out of the world, and those of the Light returned to their final resting place outside Time. I alone was left, the Sign-Seeker-turned- Watchman, to ensure that the Dark could never find a way to return and threaten the world. But somehow, they did."

The look of fierce concentration left his face, giving way to the neutral, pleasant expression they knew well. At the same time, the lilting, epic quality left his voice, leaving it as casual as before.

"Of course, all of this happened in less than two years," he said. "By the time I was thirteen, I was a regular schoolboy again, and was lucky enough to remain so almost all the way through my school days. Yet circumstances have a way of changing...."

He paused for a moment, lost in some private memory, then continued. "Circumstances led me to pursue a teaching career. Circumstances led you three to Hogwarts. And circumstances also brought your world and mine together, and that is where we stand today. Now...do you have any questions?"

Hermione's hand shot into the air. Ron groaned out loud--then gasped and clapped a hand over his mouth when he realised what he had done.

"Miss Granger?"

She lowered her hand. "I couldn't help noticing that when Professor Dumbledore was here, you corrected him on one of his statements. What did you mean when you said 'three...for now'?"

"Exactly what I said." Will waved a hand, indicating the room as a whole. "You may notice that there are seven chairs in this room. That is not a coincidence. You three are the only ones here for now, but there will be three more by the end, if all goes well."

"Why six?" Hermione pressed.

Will was ready with an answer. "In the time of the last great Rising of the Dark, there were Six who did battle on the side of the Light. It was through their efforts that the Dark was defeated, in accordance with an old prophecy:

'When the Dark comes rising, six shall turn it back

Three from the circle, three from the track.'

That is only a part of the prophecy, but intuition tells me that it will define this battle, much as it did over two decades ago."

"Are we the 'three from the circle', then?" said Ron, asking a question for the first time that night.

"Perhaps. There are many interpretations. The circle could be almost anything, if you were to think about it long enough." Will stood up. "But it's high time you three were in bed--I've kept you up far too late as it is. You'll be tired in the morning."

Harry blinked, startled at the abrupt change of topic. He scrambled to his feet, and out of the corner of his eye saw Ron and Hermione do the same. "When do we start the actual training?" he asked.

"Once you learn what your schedules are like, let me know. I am on academic leave this term, and can afford to be flexible. If you come back here tomorrow night, we can discuss this further and agree upon a time that works for you."

"It might be hard to get back here without being seen," Hermione said musingly, frowning.

Will smiled cryptically. "I think you'll find that it will be easier than you imagine. But do be careful, and above all, be discrete."

"Of course," Hermione said. Ron and Harry nodded agreement.

"Good." Will nodded, and turned from them to face the mirror. He lifted his arm, the five fingers of his hand spread wide and pointing at the glass. He said a single word in a language none of them understood. The carved pattern on the mirror glowed a bright white in response, and the thin mist covered the glass, fading to reveal the interior of his office exactly as he had left it.

"Sleep well," he said, and stepped through the mirror.

As the last bit of his robes vanished from their sight in a swirl of deepest blue, the light faded. The mirror resumed its ordinary reflective quality.

"Wow," Hermione said softly, letting out a deep breath.

Ron flopped back into his chair. He looked very relieved that Will was no longer in the room. "Sleep? Who can sleep?" he complained. "He tells us all that and then expects us to sleep tonight?"

"Well, I for one am ready to drop," said Hermione. "I've had quite enough of being flung into walls for one day, thank you very much."

"I'd like to go to bed, too, but how do we get back into to the dorm? We don't even know the password," Harry said.

Ron smiled knowingly. "*I* know what it is--I overheard someone mention it at dinner. Tonight's password is--"

--'flibbertigibbet'," Hermione finished for him.

Ron jumped. "What? How do you know?" he said, his eyes wide.

"Because McGonagall sends all the prefects a letter before school starts with their House's first password of the year," Hermione replied.

"I know *that*," Ron said irritably. "Percy got one every--" He stopped short, and gaped.

"Hermione!" Harry exclaimed. "You mean you're a--"

Hermione had a lazy smile on her face. "You expected anything less?" She reached into her pocket and pulled out a shining silver badge. Deftly, she pinned it to the outside of her robes.

"Why the bloody hell didn't you TELL us?" Ron yelled.

Hermione gave him a look. "I was *going* to surprise you when I met you at the train station, but with one thing and another...well...I never had a chance to mention it before now." She was beaming with embarrassed pride.

"Congratulations," Harry said, giving her a hug.

Ron, however, couldn't get over it. "I must've sent you about fifty letters this summer asking if you'd found out anything!" he spluttered. "And every single time you said you didn't know, you lying--"

Hermione snorted derisively and pushed Harry away. "Ron, you sent me a grand total of eight letters the entire summer, and out of those eight only two of them even *contained* the word 'prefect'." She winked at Harry. "Would you like to see them, Harry? Most of them are about you, anyway." She affected a shrill, squeaky voice. "Oh, Hermione, have you heard from Harry? Hi, Hermione, did Harry send you that letter yet? Say, Hermione, could you write Harry a letter for me? I'd do it myself, but I've forgotten how to hold a pen--"

Ron bellowed, and made as if to throttle her. Hermione danced away, making grotesque faces at him as she continued to tease him in the same squeaky voice.

Harry sighed, but he was smiling. He had a feeling that they wouldn't be going to bed any time soon. It didn't matter, though--all he really needed was a quick nap, since he'd spent so much of the summer resting that staying up late this one time wouldn't hurt.

* * *

But Will was quite right. He *was* tired in the morning. And Ron and Hermione weren't much more alert.

It took a great effort to drag their sore bodies down the flights of stairs to the Great Hall. As they shovelled food into their mouths with the mechanical pace of people eating in their sleep,

McGonagall came around their table, passing out their schedules. Along with the rest of the fifth-year Gryffindors, they moaned aloud when they saw what awaited them after breakfast.

"Smashing. The bloody first class of the bloody first day and it *would* have to be Potions with sodding Slytherin." Ron stuffed a forkful of egg into his mouth and chewed moodily.

Harry winced, waiting for the yelling to start, but Hermione was too busy falling asleep in her oatmeal to take notice of Ron's language.

"Slytherin. It's always with Slytherin," Neville said gloomily. He stood up to put his plate away, but his foot caught under the table and he tripped, his elbow jolting Hermione's arm.

Hermione's head snapped up, jerked awake just inches before her head would have landed in the cold oatmeal. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed, and then resumed toying with the sadly withered remains of her grilled tomato.

"You'd think they'd know better by now," Harry remarked, taking a swig of his pumpkin juice.

"'They'?" Hermione repeated mockingly. "Who's this 'they', Harry? Is there some vast conspiracy that deliberately assigns us Potions with Slytherin? Oh, do tell, do tell." Sarcasm dripped from her voice like water from a soppy rag.

"Well, it looks like *someone* woke up on the wrong side of the bed," Ron teased in a nasty singsong.

"Oh, ha ha," she snapped. "That is *so* funny, Ron. Positively hysterical." She stabbed the sad-looking tomato with her fork and menacingly held it up in front of Ron's nose. Ron reached for his fork, but seemed to think better of it and grabbed the crumb-covered butter knife instead, raising it in self-defence.

The last thing Harry wanted was to watch his friends kill each other with cutlery. "Come on," he said, "let's get below stairs before Snape decides to start off the school year by knocking fifty points for our being late--ten minutes before class actually *starts*."

They made their way down to the dungeons, hurrying to get to class before a certain blond Slytherin did. However, their string of rotten luck seemed determined to continue, and they reached the door to Snape's classroom just as Draco Malfoy arrived, with Pansy Parkinson draped over his arm and the ubiquitous Crabbe and Goyle following in his footsteps.

Malfoy lost no time. "Look who decided to show up today...Potty and Weasel and the Mudblood. Good to see you're sticking close to them, Granger--wouldn't want see you end up like that whining Creevey brat."

Pansy sniggered, a simpering smile on her face. Ron went white, then scarlet. But before he could do anything, Hermione had swept forward, her wand out and pointed directly at Malfoy's forehead, right between his eyes.

Her voice shook with anger, though the hand that held the wand was perfectly steady. "I don't care what you say about me, but don't you DARE say another word about Colin Creevey or his family. You can call me whatever you like, but I don't even want to hear you mention his

name in my presence again. Maybe taking ten points from Slytherin will teach you some respect for the dead."

Malfoy's sharp gaze flicked down to the badge pinned to her robes. His pointed face twisted in a sneer. "Pulling rank already, Granger? If that's the best you can do, you're even more pathetic than I thought."

A thin smile spread across Hermione's face. It was not a nice smile. "Not half as pathetic as you, Malfoy. Not even close."

Harry's blood prickled at the ice in her voice. He noticed that Ron had moved forward to stand beside Hermione, and he stepped forward as well, flanking her.

Very slowly, Hermione lowered her wand. "It's time for class," she said, addressing Harry and Ron but not taking her eyes from Malfoy. "Let's go in."

Without another word, they entered the classroom. Harry and Ron grabbed a work table in the middle of the room, while Hermione sat down next to Neville in their customary table closer to the front.

Ron was fuming as he unpacked his books. "That foul little--"

Harry removed his glasses, and massaged the bridge of his nose. His eyes burned. "Ron. Not now."

Ron huffed, but was silent.

Just as Harry sat down, the door burst open and Snape strode in, looking characteristically caustic. Harry idly wondered if the Potions Master spent hours practising his sneers in front of a mirror to find just the right one for their class--the one he had on at the moment was certainly a beauty.

Snape began to lecture them, much as he had done in the first class of their first year with him.

"As even the most oblivious among you may have realised by now, you've a series of exams at the end of this year. The O.W.L.s have a charming way of asking you the questions you don't know on topics you've never studied, so it is pointless to 'teach to the test' as some of your other professors may do."

His tone made it quite clear that these 'other professors' included a certain Gryffindor Head of House. The Slytherins snickered as the Gryffindors stared straight ahead, trying not to rise to the bait.

Snape ignored all of them. "Instead, you will learn the potions that *I* see fit to teach you. If you are not a complete and total idiot, you will use your acquired knowledge to help you pass this impending exam. Given your overall performance in past years, I have more than half a mind--"

"I certainly wouldn't have guessed it," Ron whispered to Harry, who bit his lip and kept his face forward.

Fortunately, Snape was so wrapped up in his diatribe that he didn't seem to have heard them. "--to give it up as a lost cause. But for the sake of those who might benefit from *proper instruction*," he said, bestowing an almost paternal nod of approval on Draco, who smiled fatuously back, "I will endeavour to pound some knowledge into your soggy little minds. Do I make myself clear, Mr. Longbottom?"

Harry, like the rest of the class, quickly glanced over at Neville and Hermione's table. The Gryffindors waited tensely, knowing what was certain to come next. They hoped with desperate optimism that Neville wouldn't start off the school year by breaking down completely in front of their most hated professor. The Slytherins were waiting to see him do just that.

Neville, for his part, had turned a strange shade of greyish-white. The tips of his ears were bright red. His round face was under tight control, but to Harry it seemed like a struggle was going on deep inside--there was fighting in every line of his face.

Suddenly, something seemed to snap. The fighting stopped, and Neville looked up and said, quite easily, "Perfectly clear, Professor Snape."

Snape's unpleasant smile faded slightly, but he rapidly recovered. His intense eyes smouldered, seeing an unexpected challenge coming from his normally passive target.

"Oh?" A true master of his craft, he made the one word sound so patronising that Harry had to grit his teeth. "Indeed, Mr. Longbottom? Am I to understand that you won't be making a fortune for the cauldron industry this year? I'm certain that will come as quite a shock to them, and to the rest of us--won't it?"

He looked to his captive audience, but only a few half-hearted laughs came from the Slytherins. The Gryffindors sat in stony-faced silence. Just because Neville seemed to have suddenly developed a death wish didn't mean that they wanted to watch it come to fruition.

But to their astonishment, Neville acted as though Snape had just made some bland comment about the day's weather. He smiled faintly, and returned the Potions Master's glare with a level stare. His reply was immediate and decisive, his face eerily calm:

"I will do my best not to disappoint you, Professor Snape."

That wiped the smile off Snape's face.

The room was deathly quiet. No one dared to breathe, not even Malfoy. He seemed as transfixed as the others by this unexpected contest of wills, where neither side was about to back down.

Parvati Pavil let out a high, hysterical giggle and slipped out of her chair, falling to the floor in a dead faint. No one moved to help her.

After what seemed like an eternity of waiting, Snape finally broke the silence.

"Well, see that you don't," he muttered darkly, and immediately launched into the day's lesson.

As a body, the students snapped out of their collective trance and picked up their quills. Lavender Brown leaned over and lightly slapped Parvati's face until she woke up, then helped her back into her seat.

Harry took notes with the rest of the class and silently began to concoct the bubbling Purgative Draught that had been assigned. Not surprisingly, his mind wasn't on the lesson. He doubted if anyone else was truly concentrating, either.

It was very rare that someone managed to get the better of Professor Snape, and that little victory was always brief, met with instant reprisal. But Neville...timid, forgetful little Neville whose fear of Snape had achieved a near-legendary status in the school, had just done the near impossible and gained the upper hand.

It couldn't have happened. It **shouldn't** have happened.

But it had, somehow.

For the twentieth time in as many minutes, he peeked over at Hermione and Neville's table. They had been working busily ever since Snape had assigned the day's classwork, but now they were both sitting still, hands in their laps. Snape was standing in front of their cauldron with a very odd expression on his face. Held aloft in one hand was a small phial filled with a thick yellow liquid, and he was turning it slowly, scrutinizing it from all angles. It looked like he was desperately trying to find something, anything wrong with it. When he couldn't, he practically threw the little bottle into Hermione's hands and stormed away to check on Pansy Parkinson, whose potion was dangerously close to boiling over.

Harry didn't have time to ponder this development. His own potion was threatening to coagulate before he and Ron had a chance to add the other half of the ingredients. They spent the rest of the class sweating over it, barely managing to finish in time.

Near the end of class, Snape came around to check their work. He made fewer snide remarks than usual, but Harry still had to sit through one or two choice taunts about his mental abilities, celebrity status, and overall academic prowess...or relative lack thereof.

Their homework was written on the blackboard. It seemed that Snape had taken out his anger on them in the form of an essay, with a three-foot minimum length, on the various medicinal and non-medicinal properties of Purgative Potions.

"And I do mean three feet long," he said threateningly. "Not two and a half feet, not two foot eleven inches, and I won't even **read** anything that goes on for more than five feet." He gave Hermione a very pointed glare.

Harry didn't care. He was in such a fantastic mood that he could have written ten essays in record time.

The moment Snape dismissed them, Ron and Harry bolted from their chairs and darted over to Neville. They each grabbed one of his arms and lifted him bodily out of his chair. He didn't even have time to yell out before they had hauled him out of the dungeon and down the hall with lightning speed.

Once they were far enough down the corridor, well out of earshot of Snape and the exiting Slytherins, Ron let out a whoop of delight.

"Bloody brilliant!" he shouted, smothering Neville in a full body hug that nearly sent them both tumbling to the floor.

"Did you see Snape's face?" Harry said gleefully as he threw an arm around Neville's shoulders.

Hermione joined them just in time to catch Harry's words. "Of course he did, you silly ass," she retorted. "He was right there."

"Oh, shut it, Hermione," Ron said cheerfully.

Shoes clattered on the damp stone floor as Seamus and Dean ran up to them. They were grinning from ear to ear.

"I don't know what the hell got into you, man, but I for one hope it stays there," Dean said.

"Yeah," Seamus agreed. "Keep it up. We could use a lot more classes like *that* one."

Neville's cheeks were still rosy and flushed, but he shook his head grimly. "It was a stupid thing to do. He's going to be even harder on me from now on."

"Who CARES?" Ron shouted, clapping him on the back. "Just let the greasy old bat do his worst--you'll be ready for it." His eyes lit up as an idea came to him. "Say, how 'bout we go to the kitchens and get the house-elves to whip up a feast?"

Hermione's jaw dropped. She looked horrified, though Harry couldn't tell whether it was due to potential house-elf exploitation or the suggestion to skip their next lesson.

His question was immediately answered. "Ron, we have class!"

Ron scowled. "Class? CLASS?! How can you think about classes at a time like this! We should get the day off! We should be celebrating!" His eyes shone even brighter as another idea popped into his head. "Tell you what--I hereby proclaim September 2nd to be 'Neville Longbottom Day!'"

"'Neville Longbottom Day!'" Harry, Seamus, and Dean cheered, raising their fists in the air.

"No."

The boys froze. They lowered their arms and turned to stare at Neville. Hermione, her indignation momentarily forgotten, stared as well.

"No," Neville repeated firmly. "We have Herbology next. We're going to class."

There was no arguing. Whether it was out of respect for his besting of Snape, or whether they were truly cowed by the finality in his voice, they couldn't tell. All they knew was that he was right--they had class, and they would be going to it.

"All right," Ron said. The other boys quickly nodded.

Hermione looked profoundly relieved. "At least someone here has a bit of sense." She adjusted the stack of books in her arms. She turned, about to leave, but stopped abruptly. "Oh, Neville?"

He paused. "Yeah?"

She smiled, a genuine Hermione smile.

"That was marvellous," she said softly.

Neville flushed again, colouring prettily.

"Thanks," he said, suddenly shy. "But to tell the truth, I thought for sure that I was going to be sick--all over his shoes!"

They all laughed. Together, the Gryffindors left the dank dungeons behind, heading up the stairs to reach the greenhouses and the bright, warm September morning.

Chapter Twelve - Independent Study

A teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary.

-- Thomas Carruthers

The tale of Neville's victory over Snape spread like wildfire. By the end of the day, all of the students and most of the teachers had heard of it, one way or another. Gryffindor students gave him thumbs-up and V-for-victory signs in the halls, and students from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were constantly coming up to Neville and congratulating him. The Slytherins, however, gave him a wide berth and wary stares, as if he'd sprouted a second head.

If the teachers knew what had happened, they generally didn't show it. Hagrid was the exception. During their Care of Magical Creatures class right after lunch, he had heartily pumped Neville's arm and presented the flustered boy with a large bag of his infamous toffees as a reward for "finally puttin' one o'er on old Snape--always knew yeh had it in yeh".

Like any juicy rumour, the story had grown bigger and wilder with each successive telling, though the four of them didn't realise just how out of control things had become until a crowd of first and second-year Hufflepuffs timidly approached Neville outside the Gryffindor common room after dinner...and asked him for his autograph.

"What?" he said, staring in complete bewilderment at the quill and autograph book a little freckled boy held out to him.

"Hugh said you punched Snape in the nose in class today!" the boy crowed happily, waving the book in the air.

"Hey! That's not what I said!" a slightly taller boy, presumably Hugh, replied indignantly. "I said he punched him in the *stomach*, not the nose. At least that's what I heard."

"I didn't punch *anyone*!" Neville wailed, panicking. "Who's going around saying that I punched Snape?"

Hugh frowned as he tried to remember the complex details. "Well, Owen Caudwell told me, and Laura Madley told *him*, and Owen said that Laura said that she heard a bunch of seventh-year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws talking about it at dinner," he replied, ticking the names off on his fingers. "So it has to be true."

"Seventh-year Gryffindors?" Ron repeated slowly.

"Yeah," Hugh said, nodding.

Ron clapped a hand to his forehead. "Fred and George."

"I might have guessed," Harry said to Neville. "If *they're* the ones spreading these rumours, I wouldn't be surprised if pretty soon people started saying you knocked him down, whipped out your wand, put him in a full Body-Bind and then kicked him in the--"

"Harry!" Hermione exclaimed, aghast.

"Really? Did you really do *that*?" a little girl piped up, gazing at Neville with wide, worshipping blue eyes.

"This is ridiculous." Neville turned to the Hufflepuffs. "Look, you've got this all wrong."

"But they said--" Hugh protested.

"Just forget what you've heard, okay?" he pleaded. "Nothing happened. *Nothing*."

"Does that mean you won't sign my book?" the first little boy asked, lower lip quivering.

"Don't all of you have homework you should be doing?" Hermione said, folding her arms across her chest and giving the little group her best prefect's glare.

Grumbling, the Hufflepuffs trooped away dejectedly, still debating the extent of Neville's exploits.

Neville staggered over to the wall next to the Fat Lady's portrait and sank to the floor, head in his hands.

"I'm dead," he moaned. "So dead."

"You're being ridiculous," Hermione declared. "This whole thing will blow over in a day or two--you'll just have to wait it out."

"Snape's going to kill me in my sleep."

"He'll do no such thing!" she countered.

Neville was beyond listening. "No, even worse--he'll turn me into a newt and pass out chunks of me as ingredients in his Advanced Potions class."

"Neville...."

"I bet it would hurt--"

"*Neville*--"

"You know, I don't even *like* newts--"

"Will you STOP that?" she shouted, throwing her hands in the air.

"Um, Hermione," Harry said, checking his watch, "I'm not trying to interrupt, but think we have some studying we should be doing."

"What?" Ron whipped around. "Studying? On the first day of class?"

"We have to *study*, Ron," Harry said meaningfully. "You know--last night we said that we had plans to 'study'? At the *library*?"

"The li...oh." Understanding dawned on his face, followed by the stiff grimace of resignation. "Oh, yeah. 'Study'."

Hermione took hold of Neville's shoulder and lifted him to his feet. "Look, just go inside and lie down for a while," she said as she dusted him off. "Ron will have a nice long talk with his brothers later on tonight--won't you, Ron?"

"Sure." Ron didn't sound very enthusiastic.

"You see? Now go on and have a nice rest." She patted Neville's arm. "Bread roll," she said to the Fat Lady. The portrait swung open, and she unceremoniously shoed Neville inside.

As the portrait swung closed, they heard the sound of whoops and catcalls and cheering explode from the common room, followed by the beginning of a rousing chorus of "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow". Fred and George's voices boomed loudly, discordantly, nearly drowning out everyone else.

Without intending to, Neville had made a grand entrance.

"Honestly," Hermione said in disgust as they hurried down the corridor, heading for the little room off the library.

* * *

Harry had remembered to slip the Marauder's Map into his robes before dinner, prepared to use it as an extra precaution. At the moment, they could explain their presence in the corridors much as they had to Neville--they were heading for the library to do a little studying and get started on the new term's homework.

It was the leaving that would be tricky, but Harry had confidence in the map. It had served Fred and George well for a long time, but more importantly, it was partly his father's handiwork. He had a piece of his father with him, and he knew that James Potter's spirit would never let his son down.

The door was exactly where it had been the night before--and as before, it was unlocked. They looked up and down the hall to make sure that no one could be lurking in the shadows, spying on them. Harry had also brought along the Pocket Sneakoscope Ron had given him to check for anyone they might have missed, but the little glass top didn't indicate the presence of any untrustworthy persons.

Satisfied that they were alone, they opened the door and slipped inside.

Harry and Ron dropped their books and cloaks on the table as Hermione lit a fire in the cold, ash-choked grate. Harry checked the lock on the door, and Ron arranged the chairs around the table, three on one side and one on the other.

Their tasks complete, the three friends walked over to the mirror. Harry placed a hand on the frame, and they watched with thinly veiled awe as the mirror lost its reflective quality and revealed Will's untidy office.

All they could see of its occupant was his back, bent over a crackling fire that was just outside their field of vision. He straightened up as the last traces of mist vanished, and they heard a metallic clang as he replaced the fire-iron in its holder.

"Good evening," he said. "Classes went well, I trust?"

"Yes, sir," they replied--Hermione eagerly, Harry uncertainly, and Ron half-heartedly.

Will moved away from the fireplace and picked up his briefcase, which was lying on the floor next to his desk. "Well, since you seem eager to get started, by all means go right ahead."

They took up their positions: Harry and Ron on the right side of the mirror, Hermione on the left.

"Enter, Watchman of the Light."

"Grant to us your inner sight."

"Enter, for the time draws near."

Dazzling light shone from the mirror frame, blinding them briefly. Will stepped through the frame and into the room. His modern leather briefcase looked very out of place against his formal dark robes.

"You might want to close your eyes when you activate the mirror," he said as they blinked rapidly to clear the annoying spots from their vision. "Just a word of advice. Now, what about those schedules?"

Harry pulled out his timetable. He had shoved it into his pocket before Potions that morning and had all but forgotten it was in there. "Let's see. Today was Potions,"--he made a face-- "Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, and Divination."

Will held out his hand, and Harry passed him the crumpled piece of paper, hurriedly smoothing it out. "Since we're in the same house, our schedules are all the same," he added parenthetically.

"Not quite." Hermione took out her own neatly folded schedule. "I had Arithmancy last today, not Divination. I can't believe the two of you are still taking that batty old fraud's excuse for a class."

"Now, now, you mustn't say such things about a professor," Ron chided jokingly.

"Even if they *are* true," Harry noted.

"May I see your timetable, Miss Granger?" Will asked before Hermione could elaborate on her opinion of Sibyl Trelawney's teaching style--or lack thereof. She gave it to him, and he sat down. He opened his briefcase and rummaged through it, pulling out his glasses case, a

fountain pen, and a small notebook. He put on his glasses and studied the two sheets of paper, jotting down their class names and times in his notebook. "This doesn't list the names of your teachers...is that common?"

"Well, everyone pretty much knows who teaches what," Harry said with a shrug. "And whoever made the timetables probably figured them out before they knew who the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor would be--Dumbledore must've had a hard time getting someone who'd take that job willingly."

"I don't doubt it," Will said. For a second, Harry could have sworn that the older man was smirking, but when he looked again the strange half-smile was gone. "What about tomorrow?"

"We're all in the same classes, I think" said Ron. "Defence Against the Dark Arts is first, then Charms, Transfiguration, and History of Magic."

"I see you start Astronomy next week," Will remarked, returning their schedules. "That rules out one night a week--Tuesdays, in this case. And I'm not so heartless that I'd make you do work on Friday evenings. So that leaves five other nights, and you'd need Sundays for homework and other projects. Would Mondays and Thursdays be too much for you?"

"I might have Quidditch practice," Harry said. "Once it starts up again, that is."

"When will that be?"

"I don't know. In a couple of weeks, I guess."

"Why don't we just say Monday and Thursday for now," Will said. "We would meet after dinner, obviously. You could explain things away as a 'study group' that meets at seven o'clock, unless that's too early."

Hermione scribbled on her timetable. "The library closes at eight, but I think we could work it out. I'll ask Professor McGonagall tomorrow if she'll let us use an empty classroom for 'studying'--that should be enough in case anyone asks, later on."

"That sounds excellent." He stood up. "So I will see the three of you on Monday at seven?"

"Ye--wait!" Hermione exclaimed. "Aren't we doing anything else?"

Will peered at her over his glasses. "Did you have something in mind?"

"Not really, but I thought that...." She trailed off, seeing Ron and Harry's challenging stares. "Monday at seven, then," she agreed with a sigh.

* * *

"Good morning, class."

Harry's heart skipped one beat, then two. Then it started up again at twice the speed.

"I recall meeting many of you on the Hogwarts Express, but I hope that I may get to know you better under less...painful circumstances."

This wasn't happening.

"My name is Arabella Figg, and I will be your new Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor."

This simply wasn't happening.

He was having a very weird dream, probably brought on by the jam tarts he'd sneaked from the kitchen last night after leaving their meeting with Will. He'd thought that they'd tasted a little off, but not off enough to cause something like this. Maybe if he sat very still and waited it out, it would turn into a nice dream about his Firebolt or something. His stranger dreams often did just that.

"Oi! What's with you?" Ron murmured, poking him in the ribs.

The sharp jab and its accompanying pain crushed his hopes that he was in the middle of a jam tart-created dream.

"Why didn't you tell me SHE was teaching us?" he whispered back, pointing at Mrs. Figg as surreptitiously as he could.

"Tell you?" Ron's eyes went wide, then narrowed. "I thought you knew!"

"She never told me!"

"You mean you lived with her all summer and she never said a thing?"

"Shh!" Hermione hissed angrily.

Harry wrenched his attention back to the elderly woman at the front of the room. She had exchanged the oddly-cut black and scarlet robes she had worn on the train for a simple work robe, but she still looked every inch an Auror.

"It's really rather interesting to look over the work your class has done. Four professors in four years would be a challenge even for the best student, but you all have done well...considering what you've had to work with.

"According to the records left by former instructors, you've studied various Dark creatures and tactics used by practitioners of the Dark Arts. My job, this year, will be to teach you some of the skills that I have found useful in my career as an Auror. We will cover offensive and defensive strategies used by both sides, and go into the historical and theoretical side of the Dark Arts in much greater depth.

"And so, I think that this year you'll find this class to be...how shall I put it...a *new experience*. Open your textbooks to page 318, and we'll begin."

Harry slumped forward in his seat. First Mrs. Figg the Batty Old Age Pensioner, then Mrs. Figg the Auror, and now Mrs. Figg the Defence Against the Dark Arts Instructor. The absolute last thing he needed at the moment was one more *new experience*.

* * *

The reason for his dismay was mainly due to the fact that learning from Will was a new experience, too. That was the only way Harry could describe it to himself, or to anyone else if they were to ask--as a "new experience".

The first couple of sessions had been more like a history class than anything else. However, the history he chose to teach them was nothing like they had ever heard before. Will the Professor, as a prelude to a more in-depth history of the Dark, took great pains to explain the origins and development of the various Arthurian legends...and then explain why nearly all of them were bunk.

Harry soon discovered that many of the ideas and beliefs he had held had been swiftly and unforgivingly destroyed. The fairy-tale quality he had treasured was gone--it was hard to preserve the fantasy when reality stared you in the face and actually spoke to you. And for some reason, he found that he was emotionally torn by this. As well-known names and places came up in discussion, he remembered reading the stories for the very first time...and remembered the bad memories that accompanied the stories. Hour after hour of reading library books in the dank cupboard under the stairs, squinting to see by the faint light that slipped under the door, hoping that he would be able to finish the next chapter before one of the Dursleys shouted his name and made him do some mindless work....

He had used the stories as an escape from unhappiness, and though it was part of the past, all it took was a word or a turn of phrase to shove the unhappiness right to the forefront of his mind.

He tried wrench his thoughts away from his own problems by watching with growing interest how Ron and Hermione acted during the sessions with Will.

To Hermione, it was like another class--and naturally, she loved it. As soon as she sat down, out came the ink and paper and quills, and the notetaking began with a passion. And her research didn't stop when they left the room, either. Harry had spied her doing outside reading in the library and in the common room; she had devoured T. H. White's "The Once and Future King" and was currently picking her way through an antique, unabridged copy of Malory's "Le Mort d'Arthur". During the sessions, she asked pertinent, incisive questions which Will easily answered. Even when they emerged from the little room off the library, mentally exhausted, she would pull out her notes and review them as they headed back to the dormitory.

Ron was another matter entirely. He would set out to take notes as well, but gradually his writing would slow and then stop altogether. The quill would slip from his fingers, and he would spend the rest of the time listening intently, spellbound by the entire discussion. His questions were few and far between, marked with frequent pauses while he chose the right word. But he never forgot anything, and the analytical side of his mind came out in later whispered discussions, outside of Will's rather intimidating presence.

Once their initial introduction to Will's world was complete, the Old One announced that it was time to move into the second phase of training: his own. As they were packing up to leave late one evening, he asked them to bring their wands next time, and as many spellbooks as they could carry.

"Coordinating efforts, of course," he had said in answer to their questions. "I want to see exactly what you are capable of doing."

So they did as he asked. Feeling like the worst kind of show-offs, the three of them took turns performing spells and charms, curses and counter-curses on each other. They covered everything they could think of, beginning with Wingardium Leviosa and the basic first-year textbook exercises, then progressing to advanced spells they had learned only days before.

While they charmed and cursed each other, Will sat and took page after page of notes. He asked questions about every aspect of magic. For the next few sessions, they reviewed the steps of the learning process that went into mastering the spells, from proper wand technique to the etymology of the spells themselves. After a lengthy discussion about broomstick composition inevitably devolved into Quidditch babble on Ron and Harry's part, the two of them sneaked out to the Quidditch pitch late one night, retrieved Harry's precious Firebolt, and smuggled it into the room so Will could examine it.

In the beginning, Ron was so nervous around Will that some of his spells went a little haywire. As the first to demonstrate the uses of Summoning and Banishing Charms, he tried to summon one of the books on the top shelf and accidentally brought the entire row of heavy volumes down on their heads.

Ron looked as if he would have loved to be able to Banish himself, but Will quietly picked the books off his lap, wrote something down, and said, "That's quite a powerful charm, Mr. Weasley. Useful, too. Could it be used to help locate lost objects?"

Ron shot Hermione an anguished glance, but she gave him a minimal shake of her head and an encouraging smile. 'He asked you, not me....' was her silent statement.

"Not really," Ron finally croaked out after an uncomfortable moment of silence. "You...I think you need to know where the object is in the first place--it won't work, otherwise."

"Pity," Will said, noting down Ron's answer. "I would have had you come to my office and try to find my favourite pen...I lost the damned thing two weeks ago and nearly tore the room apart looking for it. On second thought, maybe you should come anyway and Banish a few more pens for me...chances are, the one I want would turn up if I needed it badly enough." He frowned thoughtfully. "Well, either that, or I'd have to buy more pens."

Ron stared at Will. Will stared back.

Suddenly, the two of them burst out laughing.

After a moment of shocked silence, Hermione began to giggle, and Harry started laughing as well. The awkward tension in the air dissolved as if it had never been there, and once they had collected themselves, they continued with the demonstrations.

The incident with the books was only one reason for their growing respect for Will--a respect based on partnership and trust, not fear. He was very patient with them, even when they couldn't answer all of his questions. In response, they did their best to anticipate his queries and prepare accordingly.

In addition, reviewing spells in his presence was excellent practice for the O.W.L.s--or so Hermione claimed. Harry and Ron agreed, but in Harry's private opinion she was simply trying to justify the hours she didn't spend shut up in the library.

He had other things to think about, though. Fred and George had told him that the Gryffindor team would be meeting during lunch to set up a date for tryouts. They needed a new Keeper and a couple of reserve players in case of the odd accident.

As soon as class had ended, he ran to the Great Hall to meet up with them, Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell, and Alicia Spinnet. They got their food quickly and sat down, well away from the rest of their house.

"Any good prospects?" asked Angelina, starting off the discussion.

"I've been watching a few of the younger girls," Katie said. "No one in particular, though. There's this one sixth year girl who--"

"It would probably be better if we picked someone fifth year or below," Fred commented, interrupting her. "It would make it easier on Harry next year, with all the rest of us gone."

"Why don't we just see who signs up, first?" Harry said hurriedly, stopping that train of thought before it could start. He didn't want to think about them graduating--it was too alien a subject to bring up in the second week of school. "I know we're recruiting, but we're not *actively* recruiting."

Fred nodded. "Good point. But we all know who'll be the first to sign up--my dearest darling baby brother. That's all he talked about, all summer. I love Quidditch as much as the next guy, but d'you have any idea how BORING he can get when he goes on like that?"

"Tell me about it," Harry said, grinning. "So there's one. Who else would probably try out?"

Alicia spoke up. "I did hear Colin say last year that he was thinking of trying out, but...."

She fell silent, staring at her plate. None of the others said a word.

The subject of Colin Creevey was an awkward one. Colin had only been allowed to return to classes a few days ago, after spending four days under sedation, another three in a near catatonic but undrugged state, and two more at home with his parents to attend his brother's memorial service. He had moved from the hospital wing back to the dormitory just two nights before.

The other Gryffindors, and McGonagall to some extent, were fiercely protective of him, ready to challenge anyone who so much as looked at him the wrong way. Hermione's confrontation with Draco was the only one of its kind as of yet, and Colin's housemates were determined to ensure that it stayed that way.

Not that Colin himself knew much of what was going on. He seemed to be wandering through classes in a daze, completing and turning his homework like an automaton. He went from class to meals to bed, and not even the other fourth-years could draw him into a conversation of more than one syllable at a time. Harry had tried talking to him at dinner, but Colin had given him a blank look that stared through him, rather than at him, and returned to moving his food around on his plate.

He pushed that memory aside. "So would next Wednesday be all right with you guys for the first tryout date?"

"Sounds good," said George. "I'll post the sheet in the common room before dinner."

"Did you want to do anything else beforehand?" Katie asked. "Make an announcement, or something?"

"Nah," said Fred. "They'll find out soon enough--it's only the first tryout, after all. Nothing crucial...we just want to see what we've got to work with."

"You make it sound so mercenary," Angelina said.

"Would you like to see how mercenary I can be, lovely lady?"

Harry quietly picked up his plate and edged away. He might have played Quidditch with them for several years, but they were still seventh-year students, and he was two years younger. In his eyes, at least, there was a definite line that he didn't feel comfortable crossing.

He headed over to where Ron and Hermione were sitting.

"Oh, Harry, there you are," Hermione said, looking up from her book. "There's someone here who wants to meet you."

"Meet me?"

A head of chin-length mousy brown hair poked around Hermione's shoulder, followed by a pair of wide blue eyes.

"Harry, this is Natalie McDonald. She's a bit shy," she added in a loud stage whisper. Natalie giggled nervously.

"Nice to meet you." He vaguely remembered her being Sorted into their house last year, and her name sounded familiar, but other than that he had no idea who she was.

"Hi, Harry," she whispered, a flush spreading across her face and down her neck.

"I'm helping Natalie with History of Magic this term," Hermione said. She turned back to the little girl, and pointed to the textbook that lay open on the table. "Now, the best way to remember these names and dates is to put them in a song or a rhyme. Take the Goblin Treaty of 1693, for example. You know how the war started up again in 1694? Well, try something like--'In sixteen hundred and ninety-three, the goblins signed their peace treaty. In sixteen hundred and ninety-four, they started up a brand new war.'"

"In sixteen hundred'...wow, that's great!" Natalie crowed, her eyes lighting up. "How do you do that, Hermione?"

"It's nothing," Hermione demurred, a little flustered. "I've always studied that way." She quickly gathered up her books. "I'll see you two in class--I need to go talk to McGonagall about reserving our 'study room'."

They watched her leave. The moment she was out of earshot, Natalie latched herself on to Harry's arm and gazed up at him with starry eyes.

"Isn't Hermione wonderful?" she gushed. "She's so smart, and pretty, and...and...."

"She's smart, all right," Harry said, relieved that she was fawning over Hermione and not him. "If anyone can help you pass a class, she can."

"I have to go start thinking up rhymes," Natalie said. "Hermione said she'd help me later on tonight. I have Transfiguration homework, too, but I want to get as much done as possible before then. Bye, Harry! Bye, Ron!"

And she was gone, stringy brown hair flying round her face as she ran out of the Hall.

"What was that?" Harry said, still a bit dazed.

"It looks like Hermione's got her own personal Colin Creevey," Ron said in a low voice.

"Good luck to her. I hope she knows what she's getting into."

"Knows what she's getting into?" Ron repeated with a snort. "She'll turn that girl into a younger version of herself, if I know our Hermione. You just watch."

"No, thanks," Harry said, shaking his head. "I have enough trouble with the original as it is."

But as they headed off to Transfiguration, Harry knew that Ron's joking statement was probably closer to the truth than his friend thought. He'd seen that same starry-eyed gaze before.

If Hermione wasn't careful, she really would have a Colin Creevey of her very own.

Chapter Thirteen - Matters of Trust

Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.

-- Aesop

Another long session with Will was over. The Old One had told them that tonight would be the second to last day of their demonstrations; by next week, they would start the actual process of 'coordinating efforts'--whatever that meant.

Once he had left them and returned to his Cambridge office, Harry gave the Marauder's Map to Ron and Hermione and told them to leave ahead of him. When they questioned his decision, he showed them the hem of his Invisibility Cloak, hidden underneath his robes, and said that he wanted to get a quick snack from the kitchens before bed.

In reality, he had no such plans. He simply wanted to take his time walking back to the Gryffindor dormitory. He hadn't had much time to himself recently, and he missed the peace that wandered the halls with him when he chose to walk around at night.

The quiet, uneventful stroll was very relaxing. He didn't come across anyone on the way back, and after whispering 'Foxglove' to the dozing Fat Lady, he entered the deserted, darkened common room.

At the foot of the stairs, he checked the Quidditch sign up sheet that George had posted. As he had expected, Ron's name was scrawled in a bold, messy script at the very top. He ran a finger down the list, noting some of the names. Apart from Ron and a single sixth-year student, all the rest who had signed up were fourth year or below.

It would be difficult finding a Keeper who was as skilled and dedicated as Oliver Wood had been. He'd never realised just how much he had taken Oliver's talent for granted; as Seeker, his first priority was always the Snitch, and he had little time to pay attention to the actual game. But even though he could end the game by finding the little golden ball, it wouldn't mean victory if Gryffindor's Keeper couldn't keep the other team from scoring.

He continued scanning down the sheet, doing a primary assessment of those who'd added their names to the list. Paul Weatherby, third-year: he was small and fast, very energetic, but there was a good chance that he'd lack the stamina to last for a long game. Rachel Parks, second year: a hardy girl, but with poor eyesight. He knew only too well the problems that glasses posed on the Quidditch pitch. Colin Creevey--

He froze.

At first, he assumed that someone had decided to add the name to the list as a rather cruel and thoughtless joke. Rage prickled in his blood.

But on closer inspection, it did look like Colin's handwriting. He had a funny, squashed way of writing the double 'e' in his last name that would be hard to duplicate believably.

So Colin had signed up after all. Harry didn't know whether to be happy or heartbroken.

With a gusty sigh, he headed upstairs.

The other four boys were in bed already, and he could hear Ron's heavy breathing through the closed curtains of his friend's four-poster. He changed quietly and slipped between the cool sheets. Running a hand under his pillow, he felt the crinkle of old parchment between his fingers. The Marauder's Map was safe.

He stretched out and soon drifted off, thoughts of Quidditch and Colin twisting and twining in his mind as sleep overtook him.

And he dreamed.

The dream crept up on him so slowly that he didn't realise what was happening. It was warm and dark, almost too warm. There was a soft hissing sound coming from somewhere in the background, like the noise of air escaping from a leaky radiator. The warmth was stifling. It was a little difficult to breathe properly. But gradually, he became aware of a slight pressure on his throat that was adding to his breathing difficulties.

He reached up to brush whatever it was away, and nearly screamed when his hand came in contact with a hand that was definitely not his own.

His eyes flew open, and he stared into the watery, squinting eyes of the man who had once been known as Peter Pettigrew.

Wormtail had him by the throat, dazzlingly silver fingers wrapped around his neck, squeezing, choking the breath out of him. The hissing sound he had heard was really Wormtail's voice, which was speaking to him, repeating the same thing over and over again in a thick whisper:

"Harry...Harry...you look just like your father...just like him...."

Harry lashed out, yanking at the heavy cloak Wormtail was wrapped in as a desperate effort to free himself.

Wormtail kept squeezing his throat, speaking to him in a gurgling hiss that was half-accusation and half-pleading.

"You look like him, Harry...just like James...like your father...like him...like him...."

Harry kept pulling and pulling on the cloak as his strength began to fail him, the cloth slipping through his fingers....

And then the cloak fell off, landing on top of him.

With a gasping curse, he threw it aside and looked around wildly. There was just enough moonlight shining in through the window to see the room clearly, without his eyes having to adjust too much.

On the floor next to him was one of the thick draperies that had hung from the bedposts--he'd pulled so hard on the dream-Wormtail's cloak, he'd pulled the curtain right off his bed. He heard the faintly accusing chink-chink of the rings above his head as they swung and struck each other, sounding lost without the heavy curtain they'd been holding up.

Gingerly, he lifted a hand to touch his scar. It wasn't hurting, strangely enough. After a dream like that, he would have expected his scar to be throbbing in warning...but it wasn't.

It was hard to catch his breath. He could still feel the pressure of that silvery hand on his neck, slowly and mercilessly strangling him. He tried rubbing at his throat to get rid of the horrible feeling, but it didn't help.

It had been a dream, true, but not a dream that he was used to. He had had many nightmares where he was threatened, even tortured, but this time it wasn't in connection with anything Voldemort had done. This time it was solely about Wormtail, who had once been a close friend of his father and mother...who had sold them to Voldemort...who had unjustly sent his godfather to prison...who had lived among them as Ron's pet rat for so long, until his true form was finally revealed.

Until his true form was revealed.

Quirrell's true form had been revealed. So had Alastor Moody--or the man he had thought was Moody. Both times, he'd nearly been killed. Was there someone else out there right at this moment, watching him, terrified that his own 'true form' would be revealed?

He fell back against the pillows. Forget the curtain; he'd deal with it tomorrow. If he slept, he slept. If he didn't, well...there'd be no shortage of topics to consider until he did.

* * *

He did fall back asleep. However, the dream had so unsettled him that he slept late the next morning, missing breakfast completely and almost arriving late to Potions. Though he was on time, he was the last one to arrive, and he saw a superior smile cross Snape's face as he ran into the classroom, breathing hard.

"I'm glad you could join us at last, Mr. Potter. We would have been sorely disappointed if you had chosen not to favour us with the grace of your presence."

Seething, he wondered how big the rumour would get if someone actually *did* punch Snape in the nose.

The assignment that day was a monster. Snape had said that they would be penalised if they had to start over--"if you can't get it right the first time round, you might as well not even try"--and he didn't want to give the man a reason to look in his direction.

Once class ended, he went immediately to Herbology and threw himself into the work. After a tasteless lunch, he did the same in Care of Magical Creatures, single-mindedly devoted to

dissecting the half-eaten Fire Salamander that Hagrid had found in the Forbidden Forest during his rounds the night before. Most of it was missing, but there was enough left for Hagrid to consider it a valuable teaching tool. The disgusted squeals of Lavender and Parvati, and Hermione's acid remarks to them to "stop acting like children", barely penetrated the fog that was clouding his mind.

After an equally bland dinner, he retreated to an overstuffed chair in a corner of the common room and fell to studying the wall, tracing the crazy patchwork of stone and mortar.

Ginny was the first to gravitate toward him.

"Is something wrong, Harry?" she asked, perching on the arm of his chair. Normally, this display of familiarity would have unsettled him, but he had other things on his mind.

"Nothing's wrong," he said, a bit testily. "I've just got a lot to think about, that's all."

"Is it about Colin?" She toyed with a strand of her hair. "I saw his name on the list, you know. I asked him in class today if he really was trying out."

"I see."

"He said that he was."

"Mm."

"He also said he was looking forward to it."

"Mm." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ron and Hermione wander over and stand nearby, listening to them.

"He also said that he was going ask McGonagall to do his homework for him so he could go snog Angelina Johnson in the middle of the Quidditch pitch tomorrow at midnight."

"Mm."

"You aren't paying attention to a word I'm saying, are you."

The question that wasn't really a question caught his ear. "Mm?"

Ginny scowled, her hands tightening into fists. "Harry--"

Hermione quickly stepped forward to defuse the situation. "What I think Ginny's trying to say is this: are you going to tell us what's bothering you or do we have to drag it out of you?"

"Snippy much?" Ron said to her, arching an eyebrow.

Hermione sighed, hanging her head.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm just a little worried about what happened in Potions today."

"Potions?" Harry repeated, looking up for the first time since anyone had started speaking to him.

Hermione and Ron exchanged a look, and then furtively glanced around the room to see if anyone was listening to their conversation.

Hermione leaned closer, bending over Harry's chair. Ron and Ginny followed suit.

"Do you know how long it took Neville and I to finish the potion today?" she told him in a hasty whisper. "Twenty minutes. *Twenty minutes*. And it was perfectly made. Last year it would have taken us the whole class time, and something would *still* have been wrong with it."

"That's odd," Ginny said, nibbling on her thumbnail.

"But this isn't the first time it's happened, either. The very first day of class, we finished that Purgative Potion in record time. And nothing was wrong with *it*, either. Snape wasn't very happy about that, obviously, but it's not as if he could punish us for doing classwork *right*. Though I could tell he really wanted to."

Harry frowned at this. It had taken him and Ron, working frantically, almost an hour to complete the day's assignment. Paired with Hermione, it probably would have taken at least three quarters of an hour to get satisfactory results--a half-hour if he actually pitched in instead of letting her do most of the work. But to get flawless results in twenty minutes...with Neville Longbottom....

"Something's not right," he blurted out.

His three friends jumped.

"What? How so?" Ron asked, lowering his voice even more.

"Something must've happened to Neville over the summer," he stated. "I'd bet you anything he's been replaced by a fake."

Hermione's mouth fell open. "What on earth--"

"It wouldn't take much." He was sweating, though his face and hands felt clammy and cold. "A batch of Polyjuice Potion, or some advanced Transfiguration spell and hey presto!--one fake Neville Longbottom, ready to go."

Hermione reached over and patted his arm slowly, warily. "Harry, I think you're a bit overtired...."

"I'm NOT overtired!" he shouted, pounding his fist on the cushion.

Hermione started, nearly knocking Ginny off her perch on the chair's armrest. She only just managed to keep her balance.

He hurriedly lowered his voice again. "You remember how weird he was acting in Diagon Alley. I'm telling you, something's not right here. It can't be Neville--the real one is locked in a trunk somewhere, or tied up, or...or...."

Hermione, not surprisingly, was quick to dismiss his argument. "This is Neville Longbottom we're talking about, not Mad-Eye Moody. He still gets letters from his gran--he got one at breakfast today, don't you re...oh, that's right, you weren't there for breakfast. But he got one, all the same."

"You can arrange something like that," Ron said suddenly.

Harry shot a look at Ron, who was nodding grimly. Satisfaction and relief buzzed in his head--at least Ron was on the same track as he was.

"All to keep up the story," he added, flashing Ron a grateful half-smile.

"You don't really believe all this, do you?" Ginny asked fearfully, looking from her brother to Harry and back again. "Do you?"

Wearily, Harry ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know what to believe," he said. "All I know is that Neville's been acting really weird recently for no reason."

"No reason we know of," Ginny countered automatically.

Ron glowered at his sister. "Why are you defending him?"

"The question is--why aren't you?" she snapped back.

"Stop it, you two," Hermione said forcefully. She turned to Harry. "Look, if you're so concerned about this, we'll watch him for a week. If there's any really suspicious behaviour, we'll go to McGonagall or Dumbledore. If not, you two admit that you were being idiots, and we'll forget this whole thing. Deal?"

"Hermione!" Ginny exclaimed, horrified.

"Well, what if they're right?" Hermione said. "It can't hurt to be sure. And with any luck, we'll prove them wrong."

Ron made a face at her, and she rolled her eyes at him.

"I still think you're being paranoid about this whole thing," Ginny muttered stubbornly. "Fake Neville indeed...."

Harry felt a chill like an icy wind come over him as something clicked into place in his mind.

He slowly raised his head, and stared at Ginny with flat, emotionless eyes.

"I would rather deal with a fake Neville than a real Wormtail."

He turned away before he could see the look on his friends' faces. He didn't think he would be able to handle it, whatever it was. Pity or sympathy would have been just as bad as shock or horror.

* * *

The next day was Quidditch tryouts, and it was an absolutely miserable day for it. It had been murky and depressing all morning, but the rain decided to start just after lunch.

The sound of fat wet raindrops was not music to Harry's ears. It meant damp clothes, soggy underwear, and the pervasive stench of wet wool. But the lack of thunder and lightning meant that tryouts were still on, at that was enough to start little quivers of excitement fluttering in the pit of his stomach.

He fled the boredom of History of Magic as soon as he could and hurried back to the dormitory to change into his Quidditch gear. He wanted to get out to the pitch as soon as possible, before Ron could catch up with him. He had to keep his distance until tryouts were over--no matter how much he wanted Ron to make the team, he didn't want anyone to accuse him of favouritism.

Fred and George were already in the air by the time he got there, in the middle of some practice swooping and diving. Their brilliant scarlet and gold uniforms stood out like beacons against the greyness of the sky.

Harry mounted his Firebolt and kicked off, soaring into the air. The tremendous rush he always felt when flying trilled happily in his mind, and he felt all of his stress disappear as he dodged the raindrops.

"Harry! Just the judge we wanted to see!" Fred called out, gliding over to him.

"Judge?" Harry repeated.

"Yes." George pulled up alongside his brother. "We got to talking after you left us at lunch that day, and we came to the unanimous, irrevocable decision that you get the final say over the players."

"What? Why me?" He wiped sweat and rain from his forehead in a futile gesture that did nothing to make him less wet.

Fred explained. "The best way to test the new Keepers is to play them in an actual game. Without the Snitch, of course--we wouldn't ask you to go looking for it in this filthy weather. But since you don't need to look for the Snitch, you can go high, like you usually do, and keep an eye on everyone. That way, we get to see how they play, and you can catch anything important that we miss--good or bad. Sound good?"

Harry knew what they were really saying. That kind of decision was truly a captain's decision. They hadn't named a captain yet, and Harry had assumed that the seventh-years would pick one on their own or share the captain's position between them...but now he wasn't so sure. Did they mean that they wanted him to be captain, or did they already think of him as their captain? And how could he ask without making both them and him uncomfortable?

"I guess," he said finally, trying to sound as nonchalant as he could.

Fred grinned at him. "Good man. Now buzz off."

"We don't want them to know they're being watched," George clarified, seeing the confusion on Harry's face. "Just find somewhere to hide and watch them. We'll take care of the rest."

And they were off, back to their intricate dance of swooping and diving that would mesmerise the casual observer and deeply impress anyone with firsthand knowledge of Quidditch play.

Harry zoomed higher, circling the pitch once or twice before ducking behind one of the tall towers that surrounded it. He found a spot underneath one of the colourful canopies where he could stay relatively dry and still have a good view of the playing field.

From his lofty vantage point, he saw Angelina, Katie, and Alicia lead the prospective players onto the pitch. The Chasers in their splendid uniforms made a sharp contrast to the dripping, forlorn-looking group of candidates.

He spotted Ron's shock of red hair immediately. It was a little harder to pick out Colin's bedraggled figure, but there he was, clinging to a broom that looked two sizes too big for him.

A whistle blew, and the figures below him began to move. Angelina, Katie, and Alicia mounted their brooms and began to toss the Quaffle back and forth, practising one of their typical flying patterns. Fred and George manoeuvred in and out around them, mimicking their usual actions as Beaters. They weren't using the real Bludgers at the moment--Harry figured they would come later, once the second round of tryouts started.

Everyone who tried out was at least moderately good. He could tell who had practised Quidditch before and who hadn't--the latter seemed to spend most of their time trying to stay on the broom without using their hands. Ron was superb--he blocked nearly every shot that the Chasers aimed at him, despite the catcalls and taunts that his older brothers shouted at him. Colin, to Harry's surprise, was pretty good as well. A few shots slipped past him, but for the most part he was good enough to at least be considered for a reserve player. There were one or two others who were definitely worth looking at a second time, in a more realistic game-play situation.

Angelina was the one who called it a day, blowing on her whistle and summoning them all back down. Harry waited until the candidates had left the field, then slowly drifted down to the ground, wringing the water from his soaking-wet clothes.

"Second round is next week," George said as he dismounted. "Let's meet after dinner on Friday and discuss cuts--that way, we can post the call backs before the weekend and give them some time to prepare."

"No mercy on Tuesday," Fred said, smiling wickedly. "Bludgers and all. Let's see what they're really made of."

Harry followed them back inside. He had just under three days to figure out which of his fellow Gryffindors would make the cut--three days where he would have to avoid talking about Quidditch around Ron. And considering the fact that the majority of their non-school related conversations were about Quidditch in one way or another, it would be no small feat.

Oh, well. At least Hermione would welcome their silence with open arms.

* * *

Thursday was upon them again, and with it came another session with Will.

"That's strange," Harry said as he and Ron entered the little room off the library. "Hermione said she'd meet us here."

"Tutoring," Ron said sarcastically, by way of explanation. "Precious little Natalie McDonald needed help with her Charms assignment."

Harry set his books down on the table. "Should we start without her?"

"She'll go spare if we do."

"She'll go spare if she finds out we've wasted Will's time by waiting for her."

"D'you think Will would care?" Ron asked, dropping his own books on the table with a loud thunk.

"How should I know?"

"Well, if you don't know, who would?"

The conversation was going nowhere. Harry pointed his wand at the cold logs in the grate and muttered "Incendio." A roaring fire leapt up, dispelling some of the chill in the room.

"Look," he said. "Let's just tell him Hermione's running late. We can't exactly do anything without her here, anyway."

Ron flopped down in a chair to wait. Harry walked over to the mirror and reached out, but before he could touch the frame, the door burst open and Hermione stormed in.

"Right on time," Ron said pointedly.

Hermione didn't seem to hear him. She was staring at a handful of what looked like shredded writing paper with an expression of the utmost revulsion, as if she was holding some dead, decomposing thing and either couldn't or wouldn't put it down.

"Read this," she said, thrusting the papers at them.

Ron raised an eyebrow, but took the papers from her.

Once they had left her fingers, Hermione scrubbed her hand against the edge of her robes, apparently trying to remove the feel of the paper from her skin.

Ron and Harry spread the torn sheets on the table and quickly pieced them together. Once assembled, they discovered that the paper was a standard sheet of writing paper. It was an unfinished letter, written in a young girl's loopy handwriting. Otherwise, there was absolutely nothing unusual about it.

"So...whoever wrote it dots their 'i's with circles?" Ron quipped, prodding the torn pieces of the letter with his finger.

Hermione gave him a look, but said nothing.

Ron snorted irritably, and walked over to the fireplace, rubbing his hands before the blaze. Harry, left with nothing better to do than feel Hermione's eyes drilling into him, began to read the letter aloud.

Dear Mummy and Daddy [the letter said],

How are you? Everything's fine here...even though the classes are a little [the word 'little' was underscored several times] harder this year. Don't worry, though--I've got all good grades so far. I'm doing fairly well in Chemistry, I think, though it's hard to tell at times. Professor Snape is still as strict as ever. I've even started reading ahead in the textbook, like you told me to--

Here the letter stopped.

"So?" he said, pushing the pieces of paper back to her.

"So?" she repeated angrily. "Is that all you have to say?"

"I don't see your point."

"The *point*, Harry, is that we know the person who wrote this letter-- Natalie McDonald."

Ron groaned. "Oh, bloody hell."

"What are you doing with one of her letters?" Harry asked.

"I found it in the dustbin in the common room, but that's not the issue here," she said. "What's important are the words she uses in it." She stabbed at the torn paper with her finger. "Look here...'Chemistry'. Snape, teaching *chemistry*?"

"Maybe she was making it easier for her parents to understand," said Ron. "I bet they're Muggles."

"Is that so?" Hermione replied sharply. "Well, maybe you'll understand if I tell you exactly what she told me. I found her with her friends in the library--"

"You actually CONFRONTED her on this? I don't believe it!" Ron threw up his hands.

Hermione stomped her foot. "Will you let me finish? Anyway, I found her today and asked her about it. She said that her *parents* told her to do it. She said it's their 'secret code', and went on to tell me about how in their special 'secret code', Transfiguration is 'World Literature', Charms is 'Maths', Herbology is 'Botany'...I could keep going."

"Please don't," Ron muttered.

"It gets better," she continued, ignoring him. "She has to use the 'secret code' at home, too, if anyone asks her how school is going. Especially around their neighbours and relatives. And if anyone asks *where* she's going to school, she tells them that she's in a special programme for accelerated learners at a small public school. That's part of the 'secret code', too."

"Hermione, what are you getting at?" Harry asked. He rarely ever saw her this upset. She looked like she wanted to cry, or scream, or blow something valuable to pieces with a well-placed Incendio charm.

Hermione didn't answer at first, but when she spoke her voice was stiff, held under tight control.

"Natalie's parents are ashamed of her," she said at last. "They wanted their little girl to go to some fancy public school, and when she didn't, they tried to cover it up. Wouldn't want anyone to think she had some 'abnormality', would they?"

The words "St Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys" flashed through Harry's mind, and with them came a sinking feeling of anger. The Dursleys had never liked him, and the feeling was mutual. There was no love lost on either side. But for parents--who should be bursting with pride at their little girl's achievements--to make their daughter lie just so they could keep up appearances....

He felt ill. Ron, finally understanding the gravity of the situation, also looked shocked and saddened by the whole thing.

Hermione, though, was leaning heavily against the wall, barely able to stand.

"That could be me, you know. That could have been me," she said. Her voice was dulled, deadened.

Ron and Harry exchanged glances. So *that* was why the letter upset her so much--it hit close to home.

Suddenly, Hermione's eyes flared in white-hot anger. She snatched the shreds of Natalie's letter from the table, and in the same motion threw them into the fire. The flames consumed the paper in moments, leaving nothing but ash.

"There, but for the grace of God..." she whispered, the sad quote falling thickly from her tongue. Her entire body was trembling.

Carefully, Ron rested a hand on Hermione's shoulder.

"I think we can put this off for a night," he said. His tone allowed no argument.

"I'll let Will know," Harry added soothingly. "He'll understand."

Hermione stared at them, moving her lips to frame a weak protest, but she allowed Ron to lead her out of the room. Harry waited until the door had clicked shut behind them, and then touched the mirror frame with a heavy hand.

When the wreaths of mist cleared, he saw Will standing behind his desk, reshelving a large stack of books. Harry cleared his throat, and the older man looked over his shoulder.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter," he said, slipping a book back into place. "I'll be with you in a moment."

Harry shifted nervously. "Um, actually, sir...would it be okay if we didn't meet tonight? Hermione's not feeling well, you see." It was mostly the truth. Omissions were better than outright lies.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Will said, setting the book he was holding down on the desk. He seemed genuinely concerned. "Not working too hard, I hope?"

"No, no, nothing like that."

"Well, if you like, you can go back to your dormitory." He picked up the book from his desk, ran a hand along the shelf, and put it back into place. "I won't keep you if there are other things you need to be doing."

"Actually, sir, I..."

"Harry, you don't have to call me 'sir'. Heaven knows I get enough of it around here as it is." With his free hand, he indicated his office and the piles of scattered papers that cluttered it up.

He flushed. "Sorry. I just wanted to know...is it just Voldemort who has the power of the Dark, or can other people use it, too?"

"I wish I could answer that question," Will said, setting a book aside and picking up a thin folder. "It would solve a good deal of our problems, and answer a few questions of my own that have been keeping me awake at night."

"Oh." He couldn't keep the disappointment out of his voice.

"Why do you ask?"

"It's just..." He couldn't quite put what he wanted to say into words, and he didn't want to stand around floundering, grasping at straws. "What happens if he kills again?"

"I imagine that killing is the last thing Voldemort wants to do at the moment," Will stated. "If he does have the power of the Dark--which the evidence suggests is more and more likely--then he will avoid using the Killing Curse if at all possible. It's much more satisfying, and far less risky, to have deaths occur in a roundabout way. And for that matter, the Dark is not allowed to kill humans...or witches and wizards. That is the law."

"But what about my parents? And Cedric?" Harry exclaimed.

Will kept his back to Harry, but continued to speak in the same calm, almost maddening voice. "If Voldemort wishes to call upon the powers of the Dark, he is not allowed to kill humans. That is the law."

Harry slammed his fist against the table. "Damn the law! What good is it if people keep dying?"

Will froze, arm suspended in mid-reach.

Very slowly, he turned around.

Harry recoiled involuntarily at the look in his eyes. It was as if a veil that had always covered them had fallen away, revealing their true depths. The gentle, blue-grey calmness was gone. Now, they burned with a cold, relentless light, fever-bright and...and terrifying.

"None but the Dark can defeat the Dark, Harry," the Old One said quietly, with the inexorable finality of a judge pronouncing sentence. "That is the law, and Voldemort knows it."

Fortunately, Harry was spared from having to reply by the searing pain that ripped through his head, culminating in a white-hot ball of agony that lodged itself in the centre of his forehead.

He bit the inside of his cheek and tasted blood. The sweet, coppery tang that filled his mouth only served to remind him of what the pain really meant. It was no more than a brief flare up, already beginning to subside, but he knew that Voldemort had done or was doing something horrible, somewhere...and the burning he was feeling told him there was nothing he could do about it.

Massaging his throbbing scar, he opened his eyes, prepared to explain away his reaction.

But to his surprise, Will was leaning against the bookshelf for support, his eyes closed and face contorted in pain as he clutched his left forearm.

"Will? What's wrong?" he asked, his own pain forgotten.

Will was breathing hard. "Harry--find your Headmaster. Tell him...tell him something's happened. I don't know what it is, but...just find him, and hurry!"

He waved a hand at the mirror, and the mist began to swirl, clouding it over. Harry didn't have time to react before Will was gone.

* * *

He burst from the room, robes flying behind him as he ran through the corridors. As he ran, he thought he saw Peeves drift by and yell something at him, but he wasn't paying attention. He didn't care about being seen or heard; he had to get to Dumbledore's office before anyone else--

"Potter!"

Harry tripped, falling forward and skidding across the stone floor. Muttering invectives, he pulled himself to his feet with the help of a handy suit of armour, turned around, and saw Professor Snape bearing down on him with an unbalanced look in his eyes.

Before he could run in the opposite direction, Snape had grabbed his arm, hand clamping around his bicep like an iron cuff.

"Do you enjoy making things difficult for everyone else, Potter?" he barked, glaring down at Harry from his greater height.

Harry tried to yank his arm free. "Let me go! I have to--"

"What you *have* to do is to go back to your dormitory this instant." He shook Harry viciously by the arm, each shake punctuating his words. "The Headmaster may tolerate your nocturnal wanderings, but I certainly don't. Arrogant, foolish boy...."

He looked as though he wanted to say something more, but his voice trailed off before he could finish the thought. Anger took second place to some other emotion that Harry couldn't quite define.

Harry stopped struggling. It wasn't helping the matter, and it would be easier to make Snape listen to a calm Harry Potter than a frantic one.

"Please let go of me, Professor," he said, fighting to keep control. "I have to talk to Dumbledore."

Snape wasn't prepared to listen to any Harry Potter, calm or frantic. "The only reason I'm not taking points is the fact that I have more pressing matters on my mind than your continued insubordination."

"You're not LISTENING!" Harry yelled. "Do you think I *care* about bloody house points? I have to get to Dumbledore NOW!"

Snape snarled, lips curling back from his teeth with a terrifyingly animalistic rage. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't knock your fool head off here and now--"

Quick as a flash, Harry's free hand had yanked back the sleeve of Snape's robe to reveal the jet-black stain of the Death Eaters, standing out like an angry brand against the Potions Master's sallow skin.

"THIS is the reason!" he shouted, pointing to it. Even in his anger, he had the foresight not to directly touch the mark. "After all this time, you still think...I don't know *what* the hell you think, but you're wrong! I *know* when HE does something, just as much as you do. It hurts me when HE does something, as much as it hurts you. But unlike you, I never asked for it in the first place!"

He'd gone too far.

He knew it the moment the words had left his mouth.

He tried to back away, babbling incoherent apologies, but his foot slipped out from under him and he stumbled forward. His hand just brushed the edge of the Dark Mark.

Snape cried out, as if the contact with Harry had burned him, and flung him aside. Harry hit the wall hard and slumped to the ground, seeing stars. Dazedly, he looked up to see a dark figure looming over him, the hazy light of the wall torches behind him completely obscuring any facial features or expressions.

Snape's voice was barely audible over the ringing in his ears.

"Go to bed, Potter. As you can see, I have my own reasons for going to the Headmaster, and I will tell him of yours as well."

"But you don't even--" he began feebly.

"Potter." Snape's voice sounded harsh and discordant, the echo in the deserted hall competing with the ringing in Harry's head. "Go."

And he was gone, striding down the corridor at an even faster pace.

Harry waited until he was out of sight, then waited a little longer until the sound of footfalls had faded away. He got to his feet and tottered dizzily down the corridor, heading in the direction of the Gryffindor dormitory. But finally, his forward momentum failed him and he fell to ground, the buzzing noise still clouding his mind.

"I tried..." he murmured as unconsciousness swallowed him up. "I'm sorry...I tried...."

Chapter Fourteen - Beyond One's Control

"In no circumstances may hospital zones be the object of attack. They shall be protected and respected at all times by the Parties to the conflict."

--Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field, 75 U.N.T.S. 31, entered into force Oct. 21, 1950: Annex 1, Article 11

Regaining consciousness was a slow and arduous process, like flying on his broom in the middle of a gale-force wind.

He fought long and hard to make the tiniest bit of progress toward awareness, and his efforts were finally rewarded when he woke to the feel of cool, crisp linen sheets against his skin and the slightly sterile smell of the hospital wing.

Thick curtains pulled over the tall windows kept the room into a dreamy twilight state. A flutter of warm breath on his cheek indicated the presence of Madam Pomfrey. Her fingers lightly touched his wrist as she checked his pulse.

"What happened?" Harry whispered to her. Or at least, thought he whispered. The words might not have actually made it past his lips.

"You're to lie here and rest today," she said. "No visitors until dinnertime. Headmaster's orders."

Just as well. He didn't want visitors.

"Okay," he whispered back. His head felt like it was made of blown glass, and he was certain that it would shatter into thousands of tiny pieces if he spoke too loudly.

She nodded and withdrew, leaving him alone.

He dozed fitfully for most of the day, waking often. Madam Pomfrey brought him food, and he was able to down a few spoonfuls of rich soup and some pieces of warm bread, followed by the inevitable chocolate. The food made him full and drowsy, and he fell back asleep.

Once, when he woke after a jumble of murky emotions that might have been a dream, he thought heard the sound of someone crying. He lifted his head just enough to see over the edge of the bed.

Madam Pomfrey was sitting in a chair by the door. She was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief and holding back her sobs, as if she was afraid that the noise would wake her only patient.

Madam Pomfrey was crying.

Whatever had happened last night must have been very bad indeed.

He dropped off before he could think too much about it. Someone would let him know what was going on, soon enough. There wasn't much he could do in a hospital bed when he had barely the strength to stay awake for longer than a few minutes at a time.

The darkness in the room had deepened considerably the next time he awoke, and he heard Madam Pomfrey's skirts rustle as she moved around the ward, lighting the lamps on the walls with a touch of her wand.

Harry was just about to doze again when the sound of someone knocking the infirmary door startled him awake.

Madam Pomfrey made an irritated tsk-tsking noise, and swept out of the room. Listening carefully, Harry could pick out Ron and Hermione's voices, raised in argument with the mediwitch. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but he assumed that it was after dinner, and Madam Pomfrey was trying to keep them out for as long as she could.

Apparently, his friends won the battle of words, because half a second later they burst into the room, ran over to his bed, and began talking, a deafening verbal barrage that left them tripping over each other in their rush to pass on information and yell at him at the same time.

"Classes cancelled, all day--"

"Hermione, it's not like we would have paid attention--"

"McGonagall told us where you were--"

"Tried to get in earlier, but--"

"Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let us--"

"First King's Cross, and now this--"

"What happened to you last night?"

"Why didn't you come back?"

"Do you have **any** idea how worried--"

"Ginny was hysterical!"

"We thought something horrible had happened to--"

"STOP IT!" Harry shouted, waving his arms in the air.

They stopped, faces flushed and tense.

He took a deep breath, more to calm them down than to collect his own nerves. "All right," he said, "what's going on? I've been out of it all day, and this is the first I've heard of anything.

And take it slowly," he added, seeing Ron preparing to start up the barrage of information a second time.

Hermione reached inside her schoolbag, pulled out a bundle of folded paper, and handed it to him. The bundle showed distinct signs of wear, as if it had passed through many hands.

He unrolled it, and discovered that it was the evening edition of the Daily Prophet. There was no way he could have missed what she wanted him to see--the huge, black typeface of the screamer headline did justice to its name.

ATTACK ON HOSPITAL LEAVES WIZARDING WORLD REELING BY: Igraine Postlethwaite, Staff Reporter

Late last night, St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries was attacked by a group of unknown masked assailants, who fired destructive spells and hexes throughout the hospital wards before subsequently Disapparating from the scene, leaving a stunned Ministry of Magic to deal with the aftermath of the wizarding world's most recent and horrific catastrophe.

Several wards were severely damaged in the brutally efficient attack, and the hospital's casualty ward and Continuing Care ward were completely destroyed. Mr Michael Evanston, a mediwizard resident at the hospital, was on call in the casualty ward and witnessed the initial terror.

"I couldn't believe it was happening, at first," he told our correspondent. "[The assailants] were blasting everything they could see. They weren't after anything or anyone, not as far as I could tell. It was...it was like they didn't care what happened, or what they were doing. They just wanted to hurt people."

Investigators will have a difficult time identifying potential suspects, since all of the attackers wore dark cloaks and facemasks to conceal their identities.

Ministry workers are still trying to account for missing patients and hospital staff. As of this edition, there were five confirmed reports of critical injuries to hospital patients and a dozen minor injuries, but no deaths.

Mr Edward Linchley, the Auror in charge of the investigation, had few comments for this Daily Prophet reporter beyond his vow to uncover the criminals behind this unprovoked and heinous crime.

"This attack constitutes a grave violation of international wizarding law," Mr. Linchley declared in his statement to the press. "The Department of Magical Law Enforcement has vowed to find the truth and get to the bottom of the matter, however unpleasant the final analysis may be."

Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, issued an official statement shortly after the attack was reported, assuring the public that the Ministry is "utilising all available resources to discover and bring to justice the perpetrators of this unspeakable crime."

This is the first such attack on St. Mungo's, Britain's oldest wizarding hospital, in its long and dignified history.

The attack shared many similarities to the attack on King's Cross Station earlier this year, and the incident at Quidditch World Cup two summers ago. No casualties were reported at the World Cup, but two Muggles and three Hogwarts students lost their lives in the ensuing panic that followed the King's Cross Disaster.

Patients have been moved to various Unplottable locations around Great Britain for their safety and continued treatment. Families and friends are strongly urged to avoid contacting the Ministry Direct Inquiries Office at this time--a separate means of communication will be established to deal solely with enquiries as to the whereabouts and condition of St. Mungo's patients.

Harry let the paper slip from his fingers.

"Dumbledore announced it at breakfast," Ron said soberly.

"No wonder things went so crazy last night," Harry murmured to himself, shaking his head.

Hermione pounced on his words. "Crazy? How so?"

Harry took another deep breath.

Choosing his words and details with the greatest care, he told them what had happened the night before in the room near the library and in the corridor immediately afterward. He left out the conversation he had had with Will, more for his own peace of mind than out of any embarrassment over his actions. He didn't think he could describe the frightening look he'd seen in the Old One's eyes, even if he had wanted to.

He had steeled himself for interruptions at every turn, but his friends listened quietly, though Hermione's eyes went wide when Harry described Will's sudden pain and Ron stifled a curse when he heard that Snape had thrown Harry against the wall.

"That's the last time we're letting you out of our sight," he said gruffly when Harry had finished. "Every time we leave you alone, you end up here."

Harry didn't care about that. From what he knew about the Dark Mark, he could only be grateful that Snape hadn't done worse.

"It was exactly the same at King's Cross," he said to them, changing the immediate topic.

Hermione's eyes went even wider.

"Your scar?" Ron pointed to Harry's forehead, rather unnecessarily. "Exactly the same?"

"The exact same pain. But Will felt it, and Snape, too." He rubbed his eyes in a very tired gesture. "Voldemort's declaring war against the wizarding world. This proves it."

Ron hissed under his breath, but said nothing.

"What happened at King's Cross must have been a test run," Hermione said dismally. "You can't expect to pull off an attack on something as well-guarded as St. Mungo's Hospital without...oh, *no*!"

She clutched convulsively at Harry's arm. Her face had gone a stark paper-white.

Ron grabbed her other hand. "What's wrong?"

Harry knew exactly what was wrong. "The Longbottoms," he said distantly, feeling his already sick stomach turn in on itself.

The colour drained from Ron's face as well, leaving him as sickly pale as Hermione. Harry had told them both about Neville's parents after they had run into him in Diagon Alley, and they had sworn to keep the knowledge a secret.

"Wait a minute, where's the paper?" Hermione grabbed the Daily Prophet from where Harry had dropped it and swiftly ran her finger down the page. "No, no, *no*--here! Several wards damaged... 'the casualty ward and Continuing Care ward were completely destroyed'." She looked up. "Continuing Care ward. Completely destroyed. You don't think...?"

Harry's stomach was doing an elaborate gymnastic routine inside of him. He felt cold sweat break out on his forehead, and tried not to remember the soup and bread he'd eaten earlier that day.

"What happened when Dumbledore made the announcement at breakfast?" he asked.

"I don't know," Ron said. "I wasn't looking at Neville. Come to think of it, I haven't seen him all day."

"Wasn't he in the common room?" asked Hermione.

"Not that I saw," Ron replied. "He hasn't been in here at all, has he, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "I've been asleep pretty much the entire time. I haven't seen him. I don't think he's been in here, though."

"He probably went to send a letter to his grandmother, poor thing," Hermione said, folding the newspaper and returning it to her bag.

"Or that's what he *wants* us to think," Ron said ominously.

"Ron!"

"Well, we did say we were going to watch him. Why should this change anything?"

"Are classes going to be cancelled tomorrow, too?" Harry asked.

"Probably not," Ron said, scratching his chin. "I think the teachers are trying to get things back to normal as soon as possible."

"Then we can start watching him then," Harry declared.

Hermione scowled at them. "Of all the insensitive, tactless--"

"It's not like we're going to *do* anything to Scabbers," Ron said, cutting her off. "We're just keeping an eye on him, that's all."

Harry frowned. "Scabbers?"

Ron frowned as well, staring at him. "What about Scabbers?"

"You just said 'we're not going to do anything to Scabbers'," Harry said slowly. Of all the slips of the tongue that Ron could have made....

Ron laughed weakly, rubbing the back of his neck. "No, I didn't. I said 'Neville'."

"You said 'Scabbers'," Hermione said, contradicting him.

"I didn't!" Ron snapped at her, darkening in anger.

"You did too!"

The door banged open and Madam Pomfrey glided into the room like a yacht under full sail-- or rather, like a very angry yacht under full sail.

"What did I tell you about upsetting the patient?" she scolded, as if Harry wasn't even present. "Out you go!"

Ignoring their pleading and protests, she gathered them up and marched them out of the room.

"See you tomorrow in class, Harry!" Ron shouted as his head disappeared behind the closing door.

Madam Pomfrey soon returned, and began to tidy up the ward in an oddly violent manner: pummelling pillows into shape, yanking the bedsheets into razor-sharp hospital corners, and mumbling to herself about "no tolerance" and "inconsiderate wretches".

Harry rolled onto his stomach and pretended to be asleep already, waiting for her to work out her anger on inanimate objects and other things that weren't him. But the pretence soon faded, and he fell into a deep and blissfully dreamless sleep.

* * *

Considering the events of the last few days, Harry wasn't at all surprised when Dobby showed up in his room Monday before classes with a note from Dumbledore, saying that there would be no session with Will that night.

The Headmaster had enclosed a brief letter from Will, which Harry unfolded and read as he ran down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

Mr. Potter [the letter read]:

Due to circumstances beyond my control, I regret to inform you that I will be unavailable for our scheduled session this Monday. I have informed your Headmaster and explained the situation, which does not concern you or your friends. Please expect that our sessions will

resume this coming Thursday, and prepare accordingly. By that time, I hope to have some concrete answers to your questions and a greater sense of what direction our co-operation will take.

Will Stanton

Harry didn't know what to think. The letter was brusque but polite, courteous but by no means pleasant. It managed to say everything that needed to be said, and still say nothing at the same time. It was a veritable wealth of non-information.

He shoved the letter into his pocket and headed into the Great Hall. Maybe Hermione could make more sense out of it at the breakfast table.

* * *

That week, he and Ron set out to watch Neville like hawks. It proved to be far more difficult than they had ever imagined.

For starters, there were certain times when they just couldn't watch him--in bed, for instance. It was hard to be always watching him in class, too, because not paying attention to the lecture made the classwork nearly impossible, not to mention the homework. Information they needed to learn for the O.W.L.s was coming thick and fast, and they spent more time trying to recall what had been taught in class than they actually spent in the classroom itself. Their inattention had other consequences, too, most notably in the form of an extended Monday night detention with a strangely vindictive Professor Snape.

To make matters worse, Hermione had refused to give them any additional help, saying "it's your own fault if you miss what we're learning" until they were heartily sick of hearing it. And for all their trouble, they didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, beyond an overall increase in Neville's competency in class.

But every time that Harry was ready to admit that he had been wrong, he seemed to feel the pressure of fingers at his throat, and a squeezing sensation in his chest.

He'd seen too much in his life to let his guard down so easily...even for someone he thought he knew.

* * *

They'd considered putting off the second and final round of Keeper tryouts in deference to the recent events, but with their first match against Ravenclaw less than three weeks away, the Gryffindor team knew that they had to pick a Keeper, and fast.

Fred and George had chosen Tuesday for the tryouts because it was the only day that all of them were free immediately after dinner, and they were fortunate enough to find that the weather had decided to cooperate for once: impossibly blue sky, fine warm day, and above all no pesky cross-breezes that would cause trouble a hundred feet off the ground.

The four people who had made the cuts followed the current Quidditch team members onto the pitch. Harry had known that Ron would make it--his performance during the first round had been top notch. Colin had made the cut, too, despite some initial fears on Angelina's part

that he didn't have the stamina to undergo their gruelling practice regimen. Fred brushed aside her worries with an airy "Eh, we can toughen him up in no time--the kid's got enough guts for it", and that was that.

Besides them, Harry saw that sturdy third-year Tommy Fitzmorris and quick-witted fourth-year Beatrice Tran had also been lucky enough to get a second chance. He recalled that Tommy had blocked one of Katie's best shots, flummoxing the experienced seventh-year girl as he sent the Quaffle flying across the pitch. Beatrice seemed to be in her element when she had played in the rain, using the Chasers' poor visibility to her advantage with some truly excellent saves. Harry wondered if she would play as well in fair weather as she had in foul.

He didn't have much time for wondering, though, because George had stopped and was addressing the candidates.

"Now, this is going to be more like a regular game, with a real score. We're going split up into two teams, and each team will have a Keeper, two Chasers, one Beater, and a Seeker. Angelina and Katie will be Chasers for one team. Alicia will pair up with one of you on the other side. Fred and I will play normally, but with one Bludger--no sense having two of those bastards coming at your heads if you're not playing with a full team. There'll be a Keeper for each goal, obviously. And last, one of you will see if you can keep up with Harry as Seeker--or help whip his arse back in shape if it looks like he needs it. That clear?"

Harry saw Colin practically wriggle with excitement as Ron did his best to look cool and composed.

Beatrice raised her hand. "I'm a bit confused--could you explain the part about how this supposed to be like a 'regular game'?" she said with an impish grin.

"You'll just have to find out--part of being a good Keeper is dealing with the unexpected," Fred shot back. Apparently, he didn't like to have competition in the dry, sarcastic wit department.

George neatly stepped in and divided the teams. Harry found himself paired with Tommy for the first round.

"Your job is to keep up with me," he told the nervous-looking boy. "Don't worry about speed--we're not using the real Snitch today. My job is to see how well you can work *around* the play, instead of *in* it."

With that, he kicked off and zoomed up into the sky. A quick glance over his shoulder gave him the ego-boosting sight of Tommy hurrying to catch up.

The play went rather smoothly, considering the shortage of players. Beatrice and Ron were the first two Keepers, and between them they kept the Chasers busy. Harry used the time to circle the field, practising a few of the tricks he had learned in his "Secrets of the Seekers" book. One of them was a feint that involved diving underneath the other Seeker and then just as quickly soaring upward and away as fast as possible. He was so involved in practising his own moves that he forgot to watch the game, until Fred deliberately aimed the Bludger at him to bring his mind back to the task at hand.

"Oi, Potter!" he shouted in a very good imitation of Oliver Wood's jocular voice. "Should we get the Snitch out and give you something better to do?"

Harry shouted back something that would have earned him a very sharp reprimand from Hermione, and the play continued.

By the end of the tryouts, the scores were fairly close. Colin and Beatrice were the Keepers, and Harry found himself desperately trying to outmanoeuvre Ron. That was the real problem with having your best friend playing against you--he knew all your moves.

Colin was obviously tired, but he doggedly held on, defending his goal as if he'd choose death over a lost game. Perhaps that was why when Angelina, caught in a strong updraft, accidentally threw the Quaffle directly at him, he took it full in the chest instead of ducking like any other person would have done.

Being hit by a Quaffle is not exactly like being hit with a Bludger, but it comes very close. And Colin, who was small for his age, was not entirely prepared for the impact. It knocked him completely off his broom. He plummeted like a stone, hitting the ground hard.

Beatrice screamed.

Harry set his Firebolt into a flat-out dive and streaked for the ground, reaching Colin first. He dimly heard George shouting orders, telling Fred to get Madam Hooch, telling Ron to find Madam Pomfrey, but his first priority was to see how badly Colin was hurt. He leapt off his broom before he landed and ran over to the base of the goalpost where the injured boy lay.

"Colin! Colin!" he shouted, patting the younger boy's shoulder.

Still clutching the Quaffle, Colin opened his eyes and wearily looked up, into the worried eyes of his idol. His face broke into a happy but very off-kilter grin.

"Boy, I really stopped that one, didn't I, Harry?" he said.

With that, the Quaffle slipped from his hands, his eyes rolled back in his head, and he passed out.

* * *

That Thursday night was their belated session with Will. Harry was the first to arrive, and he knew something was very, very wrong the moment he opened the door.

As far as he knew, the only people inside Hogwarts who were aware of the existence of the little room off the library were Dumbledore, McGonagall, Ron, Hermione, and himself. Not even the house elves visited the room--the chair cushions exuded great puffs of dust if one sat down too abruptly, a hand that touched the bookshelves would come away covered in fine grey grit, and the grate was encrusted with the soot and ash of many years. There was a permanent musty odour in the air, and except for day of their first meeting, they had always had to light a fire and heat the room up a bit before they could consider contacting Will.

Tonight, thought, the room was nice and warm from a fire already burning in the grate. The bright, cheery blaze created a very different atmosphere. But while the fire was unexpected, it wasn't disturbing.

The disturbing part was the chair that had been pulled close to the fire, its high carved back facing the door and completely concealing its occupant.

Harry pulled out his wand and crept forward as silently as he could. He tiptoed around the table, cautiously making his way toward the fire. He peeped around the back of the chair, his wand feeling slick from the sweat that soaked his palms.

Sitting in the chair, staring moodily into the leaping flames, was Neville.

Harry barely had time to recover from the wholly expected shock before Neville, sensing that someone else was nearby, looked up.

He grinned. "Oh, hi, Harry!" He sounded cheerful...perhaps overly cheerful.

"H-hi, Neville," Harry stammered, taking a step back.

"You're a little late, aren't you? What took you so long?"

"Quidditch team discussions ran a little--what do you mean, 'what took you so long'?" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

Neville shuffled his feet on the floor. "Well, I know you guys have been reviewing for the O.W.L.s, and I was wondering if maybe I could join your study group. I saw you leave the common room and pass by the library, and I followed you here. This is a great room for reviewing, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Harry tightened his grip on his wand.

"So would it be all right if I joined you? I'd like to start reviewing early, too--I really need to do well on the tests."

Harry swallowed several times, trying to push the lump out of his throat. "I...I don't think that's such a good idea."

"What?" Neville stood up. Harry quickly took another step back.

"D-don't come any closer, Neville," he said, voice cracking as he tried to fight down his rising panic.

"Harry? What's wrong?" Neville took a step forward, and like a strange parody of a pair of dancers Harry backed away again, pressing up against the bookshelf.

Before Harry could reply, the door opened and Ron and Hermione entered. They were arguing about something, but both their heated conversation and their forward motion stopped dead at the sight of Neville reaching out with both hands to Harry, who was flattened against the shelf like a cornered animal.

Harry saw something click in Ron's eyes as he leapt to a horrified conclusion. The situation must have confirmed every single one of his fears in one fell swoop.

Neville, unaware of his friend's inner conflict, grinned broadly. "Great, we're all here!" he said brightly. "D'you mind if we get started right away?"

"Not right now," Ron said before either Harry or Hermione could respond. "We have to wait an hour."

"An hour?" Neville looked confused. "Why?"

"To wait for the Polyjuice Potion, or whatever it is, to wear off, of course," Ron answered, walking toward him. "And for your sake, I hope it does wear off, because I want to see just who's been impersonating my friend all this time."

The menace in his voice was unmistakable.

"Polyjuice Potion? I don't--" The happy light had gone from Neville's eyes. His confused expression was slowly replaced with growing terror as he saw first Ron, then Harry, and finally Hermione pull out their wands and point them directly at him. "What's going on?"

"Who are you?" Ron thundered.

"Wh-what's wrong with y-you?" he spluttered, backing away and knocking over the chair. "It's me! It's Neville!"

"We'll see about that," Ron sneered, advancing on him. "I think a full Body-Bind should keep you in place until we find out what's really going on."

"Ron, wait--" Harry began, but Ron wasn't hearing him.

"You're mad!" Neville cried out, edging toward the door. "I'm getting out of here!"

Ron, with a speed and dexterity honed by countless scuffles with older brothers, darted across the room, grabbed Neville, and forced him to his knees. In a swift, smooth movement, he twisted Neville's arms behind his back and knelt across the back of Neville's outstretched legs, effectively pinning him to the ground.

Neville struggled to stand, but Ron had the advantage of greater weight and complete surprise. He growled a curse and changed his position, leaning with his full body weight on the back of Neville's legs. Neville squealed in pain.

"Stop it, Ron!" Harry shouted futilely.

"Ron! You promised you wouldn't hurt him!" Hermione's wand was pointed at the two of them, but Harry couldn't tell whether it was trained on Ron or Neville.

Ron apparently thought it was the latter. "Come on, Hermione!" he urged. "What are you waiting for?"

"Yes, Hermione, do it," Neville spat bitterly, grimacing as Ron yanked upward on his wrists. "You didn't have any trouble petrifying me four years ago--what's your problem now?"

Hermione's white face went rigid, a frozen blank.

Without a word, she put her wand away and strode over to the mirror. Ron, realising what she intended to do, yelled at her to stop, but by that time she had already placed her hand on the frame.

Harry looked away just in time, but he saw that Neville hadn't been so lucky. He tried to shield his eyes from the dazzling flare of bluish-white light, but Ron's grip was steadfast and the most he could do was crane his neck and turn his head, shutting out the worst of it. Harry kept watching Neville, not the mirror, waiting to assess the other boy's reaction.

Once Neville could see clearly again, he stared at the mirror with an expression of sheer disbelief. His mouth moved, forming words, but no sound came out. Harry watched carefully, looking for fear or some other betraying emotion, but there was none. All he could see was shock, awe, and for some reason what appeared to be the tiniest hint of relief.

He then turned to look at Will, and was even more surprised by what he saw there.

The Old One's eyes, stormy and severe, took in the frozen tableau. Neville, down on his knees, arms pinioned behind his back by a furious Ron. Hermione, hand touching the mirror frame, her worried face just within his line of sight. And Harry, still flattened against the far bookshelf, maintaining his composure only with the greatest difficulty.

"Well...this is an interesting development," Will said neutrally. He looked over at Ron. "Please let go of him, Mr. Weasley."

Ron didn't move. Defiance flared in his eyes as he glared at the older man.

"Let go of him, I said," Will ordered, more sharply.

Harry flinched. If he had been the one holding Neville, he would have obeyed instantly--the power of the command bit into his mind like the lash of a whip.

Grudgingly, Ron released Neville, who scrambled to his feet. He ran over to the mirror, but skidded to a stumbling halt when Will raised a hand, stopping him in mid-stride.

"There is a very fine line between self-confidence and recklessness, Mr. Longbottom." He sounded saddened, faintly disappointed, but not angry. "I think I know why you chose this rather dramatic path, but as you can see, it hasn't exactly come out the way you'd intended."

With his upraised hand, he gestured to Ron, Harry, and Hermione, who had grouped themselves on the opposite side of the room and were waiting to see what would happen.

Neville gulped. He looked as though he was seconds away from crying. "I...I just thought..."

"I know, Neville." Compassion and understanding had replaced the disappointment in Will's voice. "I know. But I am not the one who needs to hear an explanation."

Neville gulped again.

He didn't take his eyes from the mirror, but when he spoke the three of them knew he was talking to them, not Will.

"I was so tired of being stupid," he mumbled.

"Honestly, Neville, you're not--" Hermione began automatically, but she caught sight of Will's cold, set face and was silent.

Neville continued as if she hadn't said a word.

"Sometimes I almost wish I **was** a Squib, like Filch. I wouldn't have to deal with people, then. You're a Squib, and that's that--it's a pity, it's a shame, but you can't do much about it, can you? But to be ALMOST a Squib, that's a different story. You **could** do proper magic, but you can't. And since no one can figure out why, they assume it's your own fault--that if you just tried a little harder you wouldn't be so slow and stupid.

"So everyone tells you you're almost a Squib, that you'd be better off as a Squib. All your life, you think you're a Squib. You even start acting like one. But then someone comes along and tells you that you aren't a Squib, tells you you're **not** hopeless, **not** dumb, and then actually **proves** it to you, and it sticks like nothing else anyone has ever said to you before.

"So you work at it a bit, at not being a Squib for once in your life, and it feels...it feels...."

He turned away from the mirror and smiled at them, the tears streaming down his face a heartrending contrast to the sheer joy that radiated from him.

"Do you know what it was like, talking back to Snape?" he said, almost laughing. "It felt **good**. No, better than good--it was FANTASTIC. I felt like a real wizard. And right then, I thought, 'Hey, why does it just have to be **this** moment that feels good? Why should I have to stop feeling good about something I've done right?'"

The joyous expression faltered. His face began to crumble, the tears coming faster. "So I worked at it a bit more, and good things started to happen...but then **this** happened, and now it feels like something inside of me 's gone. I...I d-don't feel so good anymore. I d-don't know if I'll ever feel g-good again."

His voice broke. He lost the battle with self-control and sank to the ground, weeping quietly. His silent tears were far more painful to watch than the noisiest sobs.

Harry didn't know what to say. He felt as if he'd forgotten something terribly important, and had only just remembered it...too late to do anything about it.

He wanted to sit down, to do something, anything that would be better than standing around feeling helpless. He was afraid of what would happen if he didn't move--but after seeing the look on Will's face, he was more afraid of what would happen if he did.

"You get a chance to change and you take it," Hermione said suddenly, cutting through the sound of Neville's weeping.

Ron and Harry jumped. Even Neville stopped crying, and stared up at her with red-rimmed eyes.

"Hermione?" Ron's voice was no louder than a whisper.

She, too, spoke to the mirror, even though they all knew it wasn't Will she was addressing.

"I know how I must have come off when we met on the train back in first year. I was a horrible little prig. Well, what you saw then was nothing compared to the way I acted before I got the letter from Hogwarts." She pointed to Ron. "When you called me a 'nightmare' that Hallowe'en in our first year, Ron, you remember how upset I got."

"Boy, do I." Ron shuffled his feet, looking very much like the awkward, gangly boy he had been four years ago. "But I didn't--"

She waved away his attempted apology. "Oh, I don't care about that. You were right, anyway. But what bothered me most at the time was how awful it made me feel. I've been called worse before, much worse. You couldn't even imagine some of the names I had to hear, before I came to Hogwarts." She smiled ruefully. "Malfoy could take a lesson or two from them."

"But I didn't care about the name-calling at all--it didn't hurt me. I felt nothing. But when I heard you that day, for the first time in my life a name actually hurt me."

"I'm sorry," Harry said lamely.

Hermione shook her head. "Don't be sorry. I needed to hear it. I did a lot of thinking when I was blubbering in the bathroom. I knew then and there that I didn't want to be...I didn't want to be the way I was before. I decided that feeling hurt was better than feeling nothing."

"So is that why you saved our arses after the troll came along?" Ron asked.

"Don't be stupid, Ron," she retorted, blinking back her own tears. "I just didn't want to see you get squashed. I would have missed you calling me 'know-it-all' everyday."

She fell silent, wiping her face.

A log fell from the fire, popping and crackling in the stillness.

Ron cleared his throat.

"Always thought you were brave, Neville," he said hoarsely. "Ever since you stood up to us that first time. You got the points that won us the House Cup that year--don't you remember?"

Neville laughed at that, a short, barking laugh with no humour in it. "I'm not sure what I remember, sometimes."

"Do you remember who we are?" Hermione asked him.

Neville's eyes went wide, then narrowed in suspicion. "Is this some sort of trick question?" he asked, mopping his face with the sleeve of his robe.

"Answer her," Will commanded from the mirror.

Neville cast him an anxious glance, then sighed and pointed to each of them in turn. "Fine. You're Hermione Granger. That's Ron Weasley, and that's Harry Potter."

"Wrong!" she shouted.

Neville started, nearly falling over.

Hermione knelt down next to him, putting an arm around his shoulders. "Neville, we're your friends--or thought we were. If you don't want to be friends with us after this, we'll understand. But even though we liked the old Neville a lot, I think we can like the new Neville, too. Right?"

"I can like anyone who's got the balls to punch Snape in the nose," Ron said with a grin.

"Ron!" Hermione said warningly, with a nervous glance at Will.

"*Punched* him?" Will said, raising a eyebrow in a very critical manner. "Is this true?"

"NO!" Neville said emphatically, twitching.

"Good," Will declared. "Violence doesn't solve anything. Well, most of the time, it doesn't solve anything. Actually, I can think of quite a few times where violence *did* solve something, but those were extenuating circumstances. And the foul little brat deserved to get chucked into the river, anyway."

"Huh?" said Ron, speaking for all of them.

Will blinked. The abstracted look left his face. "Forgive me...I was recalling something from a long time ago. It isn't important."

Neville got to his feet.

"Well, I suppose I should be going," he said wistfully. "Sorry to be such a bother, Professor Stanton."

"That won't be necessary, Neville" Will said. "Since we seem to have established that you're *not* inherently evil, I see no reason why you can't be privy to our discussion."

Hermione tried to smother her giggle by turning it into a cough, but only succeeded in making a snorting sound that sent her into gales of hysterical laughter.

"All right! All right!" Ron yelled, flailing his arms in the air. "We're idiots! ID-I-OTS! Are you *happy*?"

"I...I am now," she gasped, catching her breath.

"Whenever you're ready, Miss Granger."

Will's deep voice had a sobering effect on her, and she calmed down. She walked over to the mirror and placed her hand on one side of the frame, and Ron and Harry took up their positions on the other side. Neville quickly backed up to stand a safe distance away from them.

"Enter, Watchman of the Light."

"Grant to us your inner sight."

"Enter, for the time draws near."

They waited for the carved pattern in the mirror frame to change from vivid blue to its familiar blinding white, but to their astonishment, nothing happened. There wasn't so much as a flicker.

"It didn't work!" Ron exclaimed, rather redundantly.

Neville let out a choked sob, pressing a hand to his mouth. "Was...is it because of me? Is it my fault that it didn't work?"

Will picked up his briefcase from the floor next to his desk, and ran a hand through his hair. "That may very well be the case, Neville--but not in the way you think. You might say that this is a request for your assistance, in recognition of your determination and devotion to your friends...even after what has happened tonight. You have worked very hard to overcome the obstacles that life has given you. You have seen firsthand what the Dark can do at its worst. You have a place here, Neville."

He closed his eyes. "It is entirely your choice, you understand. The Light cannot and will not force a decision in this matter."

"You must be daft if you think I'd walk away from something like this," Neville said frankly, startling them all. "Of course I'll do it. What do I have to do?"

"You already know," Will said, smiling cryptically.

Harry, sensing that with those words he had been given an important cue, spoke first. "Enter, Watchman of the Light."

Next, Hermione. "Grant to us your inner sight."

Then Ron. "Enter, for the time draws near."

Now it was Neville's turn. He laid a hand on the mirror's frame, directly underneath Hermione's.

"Power will erase our fear," he said, his voice ringing clear and strong.

The carved symbols that decorated the mirror glowed brightly in response, more brightly than they ever had before.

With the soft, elegant swish of robes, Will stepped into the room. Harry shivered at the electric thrill of awe that always ran up his spine at the Old One's entrance.

Will set his briefcase down on the table and gazed at each of them in turn. His ancient eyes lingered for a moment on Neville, who looked as though several of his best dreams had decided to come true all at once.

"And then there were four," he said softly.

Chapter Fifteen - And Then There Were Four

Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.

-- Henry Ford

Without anything more said about the unpleasant incident that had just transpired, they settled down to business. As far as Will or anyone else was concerned, it was as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened--and Harry was happy to leave it that way.

Neville had taken his seat with the utmost casualness, as collected and at ease as if he'd been attending every single session, but once he was seated a bit of his old nervousness seemed to return.

He timidly raised his hand. "Professor Stanton?"

Will peered at him over the top of his glasses. "Please, put your hand down. It makes me feel as though I've just called roll. And it's Will...I'm not grading you on any of this."

"Sorry," Neville said with a little smile. He relaxed, and his shoulders lost their hunched-over look as some of the tension left him. "I was just wondering what I've missed."

"A lot," said Harry, without thinking.

"A whole lot," Ron clarified.

Hermione muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'unhelpful', but said nothing else.

"Don't worry about it," Will reassured the frowning boy. "If you'll stay a little later tonight, after this session ends, I can bring you up to date on what we've done so far. But for today, I think it would be better if you didn't participate. Feel free to ask questions, if you wish."

Neville nodded, and settled back in his chair to watch.

Will continued. "As I mentioned in my note to Mr. Potter, I had hoped that by today I would have some answers to your questions and a better sense of how to go about this experiment of ours. I can give you the latter now--the former must wait until more progress has been made.

"I have seen and studied what you are capable of doing. The powers present in witches and wizards are not that different from my own, but there are a few barriers that would make true coordination difficult. Let me demonstrate."

He stood up and walked over to the fire. He gazed at it for no more than a moment, not moving or speaking, and it went out, snuffed like a candle.

Harry, who was sitting closest to the fire, noticed the change immediately. It wasn't like putting out a fire with one of their basic spells, where one could still feel residual heat emanating from the cooling grate. Whatever Will had done was very different--he felt no heat, no sense of warmth. It was as if the fire had never been lit in the first place.

Will looked back at them. His face was half in shadow, illuminated only by the soft, dim light of a few candles in wall sconces. "Would one of you care to do the honours?"

Hermione quickly picked up her wand, pointed it at the grate, and said, "Incendio!"

The fire sparked to life, leaping and dancing from the logs.

Will returned to his chair. "Control over basic elements...similar powers, with minor variations. But what if we were to try something a little different? Mr. Weasley, will you please stand?"

Ron got to his feet very slowly. He may have had more trust in Will than before, but like any student, he knew that being personally picked for a demonstration was something to be avoided if at all possible.

"I want you to hex me," Will said.

Ron's jaw dropped. "Wh-what?"

"It doesn't really matter to me which spell you choose," the older man said, removing his glasses and setting them on the table. He tapped his fingers on the armrest of the chair. "A hex, a curse, anything you wish. Something strong, of course. Preferably incapacitating. And don't...how shall I put it...'pull your punches'. There's no point in doing it if it's not done properly."

Ron looked at him doubtfully, fiddling with his wand. Apparently, Will's expectant silence was enough encouragement, because after a pause for a few deep, steadying breaths, he aimed his wand and shouted, "STUPEFY!"

At the same moment, Will lifted his hand and said a single word.

Suddenly, Ron was sprawled on the floor, out cold.

Hermione and Harry leapt to their feet. Neville pressed a shaking hand to his mouth. Will, however, merely looked thoughtful, detached from the entire incident.

"A very good job," he said analytically, sounding as if he'd watched the whole thing happen. "Had I chosen a lesser form of defence, *I* would be the unconscious one."

"Is...is he all right?" Neville whispered fearfully.

"Of course, of course." Will leaned forward and opened his briefcase. "I deflected the spell back at him--he got exactly what he gave out. I would like one of you to bring him 'round, though. The spell was quite strong, and I don't know how long it might take for him to regain consciousness without help."

"Ennervate!" Harry said hastily, pointing his wand at Ron.

Ron's body twitched. He let out a long groan, twitched again, and started to roll over onto his stomach. Harry and Hermione ran over to help him up, but he waved them away. Clinging to the edge of the bookshelf, he pulled himself to his feet without assistance and stood there, swaying slightly.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," Will said, putting on his glasses and taking a sheet of paper from his briefcase. "You did very well indeed."

Ron stared at him, then mumbled a dazed "thanks" before teetering over to the table and collapsing into his chair. Harry and Hermione returned to their seats as well, keeping a wary eye on Will.

"What I intend to do is to teach you what you can expect from the forces of the Dark--their powers, their methods, and above all, their limitations." He drew out the last word, emphasising its importance. "And you, in turn, will teach me how to best use and adapt the magic you already possess to counter it."

"Can we do that?" Harry asked. "Combine magic like that, I mean."

"It might take a little time, but yes, I think we can do it. Everything I've seen so far suggests that it can be done. And with any luck, it won't involve knocking each other unconscious. My apologies for that, Mr. Weasley."

Ron made a burbling noise that might have been a 'don't mention it.'

Neville started to raise his hand, thought better of it, and put it down. "You've probably answered this before, and this is probably a stupid question--"

"I'll be the judge of that," Will replied, smiling faintly.

Neville's mouth twitched. "Y...yes. Well, I just wanted to know...why are you helping us? I mean, I know I *don't* know anything, but I can't see how this fits together." The old confusion had once again taken control, and he looked like he was floundering for words. "I'll do anything I can to help, but I don't really understand what's going on...."

Will said nothing. The hint of a smile that had softened his normally impassive face had vanished.

He stood, and strode over to the fireplace. He turned his back on it, facing them, silhouetted by the firelight behind him. When he spoke, his voice held a newer, darker tone, one that sent their hearts racing.

"The attack on St. Mungo's confirmed my fears. The Dark is Rising once again in this land, in the person of Lord Voldemort. It has taken a form that augments its power, and at the same time greatly weakens it. It is our task to find that weakness and use it to our advantage. The Dark thinks that we cannot defeat it in this form, that when the time comes we will back down from a final confrontation. But in this war, the Light gives no quarter, and asks for none!"

It was a call to arms. It was a battle cry. It called to them in their blood and stirred up emotion like a brisk autumn wind catching dry, fallen leaves, whirling them into the air. Harry's hands were clenched into fists as he gazed at the Old One, feeling the rush of power and urgency that drew him to accept the challenge placed before them.

"Come here," Will ordered. "Join hands. Now is as good a time as any to give you a small sample of what you are up against."

They did as he commanded. Harry took one of his hands, and Neville took the other. Ron and Hermione joined hands and completed the small circle.

The air around Will began to glow with a soft white light, shimmering and rippling as it slowly spread around them. The heat of the fire was replaced with a different tingling warmth, as soothing and comforting as a warm blanket.

It was their only protection against the horrible onslaught of emotions that rushed into their minds.

To Harry, it was a little like being in a Pensieve, where one could see a memory of a particular incident. But this was different. Pensieve memories were personal, reflecting the feelings of the person who had placed the memory there in the first place. This was like being in a Pensieve where you could sense the emotions of everyone in the memory at once in a pure, undiluted form, with nothing acting as a barrier or even a buffer.

That was the reason he knew he was reliving the attack on St. Mungo's Hospital, even though he hadn't been there to see it.

Pain was the dominant feeling. Patients and physicians alike were being crushed and trampled in their attempts to escape. All of their struggles only added to the pain of existing injuries. There was a strong sense of shock and horror. Confusion and disbelief mingled together, jangling their nerves and pulling their minds in different directions. And mixed in with all of that was the cacophony of screams and yells, a deafening noise that they couldn't shut out of their minds.

It was a nightmare. It was chaos.

Then, suddenly, the torrent of emotions drifted into the background, creating an emotional backdrop for what they saw next.

There were two hospital beds, side by side, surrounded by darkness. In one bed lay the still figure of a middle-aged woman, though she was so heavily bandaged that it was hard to tell what she looked like. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing shallowly and irregularly. A young, dark-haired mediwitch stood next to the bed. She appeared to be anxiously watching the patient for any unexpected change.

The other bed was also occupied, but the stark white linen sheet had been drawn up and over the still body. As they watched, the bed wheeled itself away from the woman and the mediwitch, out of sight.

Then everything went black.

The ghastly memory faded away, leaving only the healing warmth that radiated from Will's body. Yet not even that could completely drive away the terrible feelings, the icy chill that had settled over them.

Harry opened his eyes as the last of the warmth left him. Ron and Hermione looked drained, mentally and physically exhausted. Even Will showed signs of the strain they had all been through. But Neville....

Neville was staring at the floor. His entire body was rigid.

He answered their question before they could even imagine how to put it into words.

"Gran hinted as much," he said, not looking up. "She wouldn't say anything to me, but I could guess. I s'ppose I should be glad that Mum's okay...they thought she wasn't going to make it, at first. But she pulled through. That's my Mum for you...always a fighter...."

"I'm so sorry." Hermione squeezed his hand gently.

Neville didn't return the gesture. His hand lay limp, unresponsive to her attempt to comfort him. "But she's not even going to know that he's gone...that's the worst of it."

A solitary tear fell onto the stone floor.

There was nothing they could say. Any words of sympathy would have sounded hollow and forced at best.

Will placed a hand on Neville's shoulder, his long, dark cloak draping protectively over the smaller boy's body.

"I must speak to Neville alone," he said quietly. "I will see you all on Thursday evening."

"Yes, sir," they murmured.

They didn't talk at all on the way back to the common room.

The Fat Lady was sitting in her portrait, reading a romance novel and eating from a large box of liqueur chocolates. She looked up at the sound of their approach. The stress of the night must have showed on their faces, because she frowned, her brow creasing in worry.

"Are you all right, my dears?" she asked.

"Not really, but don't worry about us," Hermione said with a little sigh. "Tintinnabulation."

The portrait swung open, and they entered the common room. Luckily, most everyone else had gone to bed, and their usual group of chairs by the fireplace were unoccupied. Mechanically, they sat down, took out their textbooks, and began to study for the next day's classes. They were still sitting in the common room with their books in their laps when Neville returned.

He walked up to them, and without so much as a nod or a hello reached over and tapped Ron on the shoulder.

"Can we talk?" he said.

"Sure," Ron replied. "Pull up a chair."

"In private."

Ron stared at him for a moment, then closed his Charms textbook and set it on the floor.
"Okay."

The two of them walked to the far side of the room, away from the fire and closest to the stairwell entrance. Harry and Hermione did their best not to eavesdrop, concentrating fiercely on the problems in their books, but every now and then they peeked around their chairs to see what was going on behind them.

The conversation was short and subdued. It looked like they had come to some sort of conclusion or agreement, because Neville nodded and headed up the boys' staircase.

Ron returned to his chair. His face was drawn and thoughtful.

"What was that all about?" Hermione asked.

Ron closed his eyes. "He wanted to know what I thought....about Merlin."

Harry bit down on the well-nibbled end of his quill. "And what did you say?"

"I told him I didn't know what to think."

And with that unsatisfying answer, he picked up his Charms book and returned to his reading.

* * *

The time had come to make the final team decisions. With the first match less than two weeks away, against the strongest Ravenclaw team they'd faced in a long time, they couldn't put it off any longer.

It was very late on Sunday night before they all were free and could get together in one place to hold the necessary conference. Fred and George had kicked everyone out of the seventh-year boys' dormitory so the team could convene in private. The twins had also cast numerous silencing charms, locking charms, and a few special spells of their own design to keep anyone--in particular, a certain younger brother--from eavesdropping. There was so much magic in and around the room that Harry felt like he was swimming against a strong current if he moved too quickly.

Once they were assembled, stretched out on the freshly made beds, George started things off.

"Now, we've all agreed that Harry's decision is final. But I think we should each get a chance to prove our point for whoever we think would be the best Keeper. That sound fair?"

They nodded.

"Angelina, what do you think?" Harry said, trying to sound official.

The older girl rubbed the back of her neck. "You're going to think I'm mad to be saying this, but my first choice is Colin."

Alicia looked startled. "Weren't you the one who said we shouldn't call him back in the first place?"

"I know, I know," she said.

"Did you pick him because you feel guilty about what happened?" Fred asked, with his usual bluntness. "It wasn't your fault."

Angelina propped her chin in her hands. "I know *that*, too. It was an accident. But what happened on the pitch proves that he's about as determined as they come. I know *I* certainly wouldn't have tried to catch that shot. We need someone like that, someone who's not afraid to take risks. That's the kind of thing that could have happened during a real game--and I bet anything he'd do the same thing if it happened again."

George grinned. "Win or die trying? Sounds a little too much like Oliver Wood to me--and one was bad enough."

"We'd be bloody lucky if we could get another Keeper like Oliver," Angelina retorted. "And I think the other teams would probably underestimate Colin--that's another point in his favour."

"Well, since we're talking about underestimating people, I really underestimated Tommy," Katie Bell spoke up. "I was certain he wouldn't stop that shot I made on during the first round--that was one of my best shots. I've been working on it all summer. And that little third-year just sent the Quaffle *flying* like I'd practically handed it to him. He could take pretty much anything the other teams' Chasers could dish out. My vote's for Tommy."

"One for Colin, one for Tommy," Harry said. "Alicia?"

"I know we have problems playing games in nasty weather," Alicia said. "That's where we're weakest, where we've always been weakest. Give us a good day, and we can take any of the teams, but a little rain and we're sunk. We need someone who can make up for that...someone like Beatrice. She's a good all-around player, but that little extra advantage might be the thing we need to trump Slytherin this year. If nothing else, she's a flexible player."

"Colin, Tommy, Beatrice." Harry winced. He had an idea as to where this was heading, and he turned to Fred and George with a distinctly sinking feeling in his stomach. "What about you two?"

"Ron," they said simultaneously.

Harry groaned.

Angelina snorted. "Why am I not surprised?"

Fred's eyes narrowed, and George looked offended.

"D'you think we'd pick him if he wasn't the best one for the job?" Fred said angrily. "I care too much about this team for that."

"Besides," George added, "he's been eating, sleeping, and breathing Quidditch all his life--there's not much he doesn't know about the game. He had the best score on Tuesday...only two shots got past him. He's played with us before, and he knows what we're capable of doing. He gets along with all of us pretty well. Do you want me to keep going?"

"That's okay," Harry said hastily, before Fred could pick up the subject and drag out the uncomfortableness even longer. He ticked the results off on his fingers. "So we have one vote for Beatrice, one for Tommy, one for Colin, and two for Ron."

He grimaced. It *would* have turned out this way.

"Did you do this deliberately?" he quipped, trying to lighten the mood.

His attempt at humour was met with a flat silence and five equally flat stares.

"So what's your decision, Harry?" Katie asked, leaning forward.

"Yeah, what's your pick?" said Angelina, leaning forward as well.

Harry pulled away from them, propping himself up on the pillows of George's bed.

"I've got to think this out," he said. "I don't want anyone to say anything--just let me think."

He lay back on the bed, closed his eyes, and began to turn over the possibilities in his mind.

So. My first choice would be Ron, just because I think he'd do the best job. I know how he plays, and I trust his judgement. He's got what it takes to be Keeper. But picking Ron sets all of us up to be accused of favouritism and nepo..neo..nepero..oh, I don't remember the word, but it's bad. And now matter how we'd try to explain it, I don't think we'd get everyone to believe that the tryouts were fair. Then again, they won't care about "fair" if Gryffindor wins the Quidditch Cup this year. Colin and Tommy and Beatrice are all good, but Ron's the best choice by far. We'll be missing five people next year--if the three of them try out then, they'll make it for sure. And /I'll/ have someone with me that I can trust, someone who'll help me build another great team.

He opened his eyes, and looked at the expectant, apprehensive faces.

"Ron Weasley," he said firmly, his eyes daring them to challenge him. "The other three will be our reserve players."

There was a brief silence.

After a moment, Fred yawned, stretched his arms, and off the bed. "I'll write up a list and post it before class tomorrow."

"I'll let Madam Hooch know," Katie said, standing up as well. "She was asking me a couple days ago if we'd decided yet."

"I'll check and see if we've got clean uniforms in their sizes," said Alicia.

As Harry sat, astonished, the seventh-years began to make plans and discuss the routine matters that would have to be settled before the Ravenclaw game. He hadn't expected that his decision would go over so smoothly. In fact, he'd expected that once they'd heard his choice, they would laugh, kick him out of the room, and pick the new Keeper themselves.

Maybe, just maybe, he **was** the Gryffindor Quidditch team captain after all.

* * *

The next day was Monday, time for classes to resume. True to his word, Fred had posted the team roster in the common room earlier that morning, and Harry heard Ron's triumphant "YES!" echo up the stairwell as he headed down for breakfast. But apart from that singular outburst of joy, Ron did his best to keep his emotions to himself...most likely to avoid appearing full of himself.

He accepted the congratulations of other Gryffindors with almost comical dignity, brushing their words of praise aside with benign, sportsman-like statements such as, "Everyone who tried out was really great...I'm lucky I made it" and "All I want is to do my best for the team". But Harry, who sat next to him in Defence Against the Dark Arts that morning, noticed that Ron's notes from that day and from several days before were covered with little doodles of stick figures on stick brooms, defending stick goals from other stick figures who were pelting them with hundreds of circles that could only be Quaffles.

Ron was taking a big risk by not paying attention, though. Professor Figg's class had moved away from a recounting of personal stories and anecdotes of Aurors and various Dark Arts practitioners. She was now teaching them the basic theories of Dark Arts lore, and attention to detail was essential.

"So to review, we've covered some of the reasons for the appeal of the Dark Arts to ordinary wizards. Would someone like to recap?" She scanned the classroom in the practised way that all teachers have, searching for the student who appeared to be the least on-topic. "Mr. Weasley?"

Ron jumped, and dropped his quill. He hurriedly fumbled through his notes, but since he hadn't taken many of them, the answers she was looking for weren't there.

"Umm...." Abruptly, he launched into a loud coughing fit, falling back on the age-old method used by students to buy time to think.

Harry reached over and patted Ron on the back, but at the same time pushed his notes toward the centre of their shared desk. He rested his free hand on the desk in such a way that his index finger was pointing to the answer that Figg was looking for. To conceal his duplicity, he put on his best innocent expression.

Ron got the message, and recovered with remarkable speed. "Umm...the Dark Arts appeal to many wizards because the results of certain spells can be seen in a much shorter time?"

"Why is that?" Professor Figg pressed.

Ron's eyes flickered down to the notes. "Because...because...because the potential for power gain is...is much greater when combined with Dark Arts practices?"

"Are you asking me or telling me, Mr. Weasley?" she said sharply.

"Telling, ma'am," Ron said meekly.

"Very good," Professor Figg said sweetly, smiling at him. "Exactly the answer I was looking for."

Ron exhaled loudly, and grinned back.

Her smile widened, and she added in the same sweet voice. "It's really most unfortunate that it came from Mr. Potter's notes. Five points from Gryffindor."

Harry flushed, ears burning. Ron squirmed and slumped forward in his chair as the class tittered quietly. Hermione shot them a dirty look.

Professor Figg, still smiling, called on someone else to answer her next question. Ron, his face a shade lighter than his hair, shoved his doodles and scribbles aside, pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment and started to copy Harry's notes. He paid close attention to classes for the rest of the day.

Back in the common room that evening, they discovered that Fred and George had decided to hold an impromptu party for Colin to celebrate his return from the hospital wing. He'd been laid up since the day of tryouts, recovering from a fractured collar bone and several cracked ribs. But considering he'd fallen off his broom almost a hundred feet in the air, he was very lucky.

Harry hadn't visited Colin during his recovery, and felt bad about it. He wanted to stick around and hang out with him, talk to him about his duties as a reserve player. But he couldn't stay; he had to collect Neville, drag Ron away from the crowd of adoring first-year girls that had surrounded him the moment he had entered the common room, and take them to meet up with Hermione in the library in twenty minutes. She was attending a prefect's meeting, and had told him to be in front of Madam Pince's desk no later than six-thirty.

He found Neville easily, and together they somehow managed to pry Ron away from the clutching arms of his newly formed fan club. But just as he was turning to leave, he felt a tug at his sleeve.

"Are you going already, Harry?"

It was Colin, gazing up at him with troubled eyes. His hospital stay may have allowed him to partially recover, but he still looked terribly fragile. His right arm was tightly bandaged and in a sling, and Harry caught a glimpse of a mass of bruises on his back as his over-large robe slipped off his shoulder.

"Yeah," Harry said, forcing the words out. "I have to study. O.W.L.s, you know."

"Oh." The younger boy smiled bravely, hiding his disappointment. "Well, I'll let you go. I wish you could stay, though."

"I wish I could, too." This was awful. He couldn't just leave like this. Then, looking at Colin's pale, peaked face, he hit upon an idea. "Tell you what," he said. "When I get back, I'll get out my copy of "Secrets of the Seekers" and let you borrow it."

Colin's eyes lit up like a bonfire on Hallowe'en night. "Really?"

Harry nodded. "You never know who you'll end up substituting for, so it's a good idea to learn as much as you can. So don't go to bed too early, okay? I might not be back until late."

"All right." Colin grinned, and then reached out with his left arm and gave him an awkward, one-armed hug.

Harry patted him gently on the shoulder. "I'll see you in a little bit, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Harry!" he called out as he hurried back to join his friends near the fireplace, where Seamus Finnigan was trying to see how many Chocolate Frogs he could stuff into his mouth at one time.

Watching him leave, Harry felt oddly choked up. It was the happiest he'd seen Colin since last year...since before King's Cross. It was sad that the prospect of being able to borrow one of Harry's books would be so important to him. Did he really have so little left?

He swallowed to dispel the lump in his throat, and checked his watch. "Six twenty-two! Oh, Hermione'll *kill* me--"

Grabbing his book bag, he ran out of the room.

Even though he didn't stop running until he reached the library, he was still late. Hermione looked like thunder as he jogged up to her, and Neville and Ron stood behind her, their faces carefully turned away. Madam Pince looked on disapprovingly, as she always did.

"Glad you could make it," Hermione sniped, tapping her foot impatiently.

"Let's just get going," he said. He wasn't in the mood to argue.

* * *

The next week was the Hallowe'en Feast. Harry was very worried about it, because something always seemed to happen at the feast. And there weren't many ways he could take his mind off his worries--in the interests of security, McGonagall had announced that all Hogsmeade visits had been cancelled until further notice. This announcement was met with varying degrees of disappointment: the seventh-years were livid, as were the third-years who had heard tales of the wonders of Britain's only all-wizarding village and had been looking forward to their own turn for so long. The fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-years were more irritated than anything else.

Harry didn't really care. He knew about the secret passage that led to Hogsmeade, but he also knew that he wouldn't use it this year. It would be stupid to pull such a big risk for such a little lark...he'd learned that the hard way in years past. Hermione would never agree to any suggestion that involved sneaking out of the castle--a prefect had a reputation to maintain.

Ron might be up for it, but if Hermione got wind of it she'd talk him out of it in a heartbeat. And if Ron and Hermione couldn't, or wouldn't, go, what would be the point?

Much to his surprise, Hallowe'en came and went without incident. He didn't have much time to ponder it, though, because the fifth-year classes were growing more and more difficult, and reviewing for the O.W.L.s occupied more and more of their in-class time.

But out of class, there was Quidditch.

The entire team was happy with the way that the tryouts had worked. Fred and George were happy, knowing that the Weasley legacy would continue for another few years at least. The Chasers as a whole were happy, because Ron had come up with a few secret strategies that would help them regain control of the Quaffle if the other team failed to score on him. And Harry was happy, for the obvious reasons.

Ginny and Colin always came to watch their practices. Colin would bring his camera to their practices to take photographs of them in action, and would later give them the photos to show what they were doing right and where they could improve. Ever since he'd finished Harry's copy of "Secrets of the Seekers"--which had taken him less than two days--he'd checked out dozens of books on Quidditch from the school library and was doing his best to become an expert on the theory and practice of the game.

If she wasn't too busy with studying or her duties as a prefect, Hermione would stop by to watch their practices as well. Natalie McDonald nearly always came with her, prompting Ron to make more than a few unflattering remarks about the 'adoring little shadow'.

It was at the end of a very long, tiring practice that Ron brought up the subject of holiday plans. Ginny and Hermione were the only ones left on the pitch; Colin had gone inside to develop the day's film, and Natalie was busy in the library, rewriting an essay for Charms class. The girls were helping them brush the grass and dirt off their robes-- they'd had a mid-air collision near the end of practice and were consequently covered in Quidditch pitch grime.

"Got a letter from Mum today," Ron said as he massaged his aching arms.

"What'd she say?" Harry asked.

"Well, I don't know how she did it, but she got Bill and Charlie to come home for Christmas."

Ginny gasped. "Bill and Charlie? Really?"

"Really," Ron said.

"Mum's never been able to get them before," Ginny explained to Harry and Hermione. "They usually have to work over the holidays. What else did she say, Ron, what else?"

"Well, obviously, she wants all of us to come home for Christmas, too. And she says we can invite Harry and Hermione for the holiday break."

Ginny squealed in delight, and clapped her hands.

Hermione wasn't convinced. "Ron...wouldn't you rather be alone with family? I mean, you said that your brothers don't usually show up for Christmas...."

"All the more reason to invite you!" Ginny said firmly. "You're coming, even if we have to kidnap you!"

"I wouldn't go that far," she said, laughing.

"You're coming with us, and that's that," Ginny declared. "It's about time you saw what a Weasley Christmas dinner is like."

"Goose and turkey," said Ron, his eyes glittering at the thought of home cooking.

Ginny's eyes sparkled as she caught Ron's contagious excitement. "Spicy mincemeat."

"Homemade pumpkin bread...."

"Treacle tarts...."

"Candied fruit...."

"And best of all--"

"Mum's plum pudding!" they chorused.

"A little slice of heaven on your plate," Ron said dreamily.

Harry couldn't help grinning. "Sounds great."

"And you're sure she won't mind?" Hermione asked, still doubtful.

"Mind?" Ron looked shocked. "As far as she's concerned, you two are family already. And what better way to spend true quality time with your family than by stuffing your faces together on Christmas Day?"

"Well, since you put it *that* way," Harry said teasingly, "I guess I'll have to accept."

Ron whooped, punching the air with his fist. "Great!"

Hermione hemmed and hawed for a minute. "I'll write my parents tonight and find out if it's all right," she said at last. "If they say yes, I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Ginny squealed again, and gave her a huge hug.

Together, the four of them headed off the pitch, talking about holiday plans and listening with watering mouths as Ginny and Ron recounted tantalizing stories of Christmas dinners past.

Chapter Sixteen - By the Book

Upon the education of the people of this country the fate of this country depends.

-- Benjamin Disraeli

Harry woke up early on the Saturday of the match against Ravenclaw, long before the sun rose. He didn't get up early very often, but he wanted some time alone, before everyone else was up and running about. His nerves were on edge, as they always were before a match, and he needed a chance to focus and concentrate.

Yawning, he gathered his toiletries and padded quietly to the bathroom. Taking a cold shower was first on his agenda, just to get awake and moving. Then, he'd do some quick stretches, dress, and breakfast with the rest of the team.

He pushed open the door and wandered into the bathroom, the tiled floor cold even through his slippers. He was just about to undress and climb into the shower when he heard a very unpleasant sound coming from the direction of the toilets.

Someone was being sick. Violently sick, by the sound of it.

Cautiously, he walked over to the stalls. The door of the farthest stall was closed, and the ugly sound of retching grew louder as he approached.

He tapped on the closed door with his knuckles. "Are you all right in there?"

"Sod off."

Harry blinked. That certainly wasn't the reply he was expecting.

"Who is it?" he asked.

There was a grunt, another retch, and the sound of someone moving around inside the stall. Harry jumped as the bolt slid back with an angry clatter and the stall door swung open, revealing the pallid, sweat-streaked face of Ron Weasley.

"Ron! You're not sick, are you?"

"What does it bloody look like?" Ron snapped, leaning heavily against the stall door as he wiped his mouth. "D'you think I'm in here for a bit of fun?"

Harry ignored the comment. "Should I get Madam Pomfrey?"

Ron sighed, pushing his damp hair out of his face. "I'm not sick, you git. Well, I **am** sick, but not like tha...ulp!"

He went an interesting shade of green and sank to the floor, making gulping noises. Harry ran over to his bath things and found his toothbrush glass, then filled it from the bathroom tap and carried it over to Ron.

"Drink," he ordered, holding the glass in front of his friend's nose.

Ron drank, slowly. He had to stop once and crawl over to the toilet, but the water stayed down. When he had finished, he looked a little more human.

Harry took the glass from him and refilled it, then sat down next to him and set the water on the floor between them.

"It's nerves, isn't it," he said.

Ron took another sip of water and made a face. "Whatever gave you that brilliant idea?"

"Ron...."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. It's stupid."

"It's not stupid," Harry countered. "Everyone gets nervous before a match, especially their first one."

"You didn't seem that nervous."

Harry shook his head, remembering. "I think I was still in shock at being thrown onto the team in the first place. You actually got picked, in proper tryouts--I was just Oliver Wood's lucky find."

"I bet *he* never spent half the night sicking up in the bathroom," Ron said with a queasy scowl.

"Who, Oliver?" Harry shrugged. "No, he was always fine...at least until about three minutes before we headed onto the pitch. You should have seen him then. Half the time I thought we'd have to tie a bucket onto his broom...for the spectators' sake."

Ron laughed weakly, and drank some more water.

"That's better," Harry said soothingly.

"I don't feel better."

"Well, you've just spent...wait, how long have you been in here?"

"Dunno. 'Bout two hours."

"All right. You've just spent two hours getting rid of everything you've eaten in the past few days. That doesn't mean you'll feel better right away."

Ron grumbled something that Harry didn't quite catch. He took another sip of water and swished it around in his mouth, then leaned back and spat it into the toilet.

Harry stood up. "I'm going to take a shower. You stay here and finish the rest of that water, then clean your teeth and we'll head down to breakfast together."

"Urgh...no breakfast." Ron squeezed his eyes shut.

He sighed. "Look, finish the water and see how you feel. You need to eat something."

Leaving Ron where he was, he quickly undressed and climbed into the shower. The water in the old pipes was icy cold at first, but soon warmed to a nice, refreshing temperature. He quickly lathered and rinsed, wanting to hurry up and get Ron downstairs before Gryffindor's new Keeper lost his nerve completely.

As he stepped out of the shower, his nostrils caught the strong scent of mint. Reaching for his towel, he looked over to the sinks where Ron was now standing. Ron had finished the glass of water, and taking Harry's advice, was preparing to brush his teeth and get the foul taste out of his mouth. He had smeared a goodly portion of toothpaste on his brush and was just raising it to his mouth.

A warning bell went off in Harry's head. "Wait, don't use tooth--!"

It was too late. Ron had started to brush.

Harry could only watch in dripping dismay as his friend's eyes widened, his stomach seemed to ripple, and his face lost the tiny bit of colour it had had.

The foamy toothbrush clattered on the floor as the door to the last stall banged shut.

"...paste," Harry finished belatedly.

He looked out the window as the sound of Ron being sick again echoed off the bathroom walls. The sky was starting to turn pinkish-grey, but the sun wasn't even up yet.

It was going to be a very long day.

* * *

A short (and for Ron, non-existent) breakfast later, the Gryffindor team was robed and ready for the game. Fred and George had taken one look at their younger brother's nauseated face and had quickly moved with their heaping plates of food to the other end of the long table, a gesture that Harry found very touching. He brought Ron some dry toast to eat, which Ron proceeded to take and shred until all that was left was a pile of crumbs. But for all his nausea, Ron looked better when the rest of the team had finished eating and they had left the Great Hall.

Colin, Beatrice, and Tommy were waiting for them at the entrance to the changing rooms. The three reserve players wore the school-issue Quidditch robes as well, even though they wouldn't be playing. Or probably wouldn't be playing...Quidditch games being what they were, anything could happen, and the team didn't want to run the risk of a forfeit in mid-game.

Just before they were about to head onto the pitch, Fred and George paused and turned to Harry. The girls followed suit, and so did Ron and the reserve players. Strangely enough, they

were giving him the same look that he had always seen them give to Oliver Wood right before the start of a game...an expectant, anticipatory look.

He swallowed nervously. "Umm...are we going?"

They didn't move.

Harry felt an irrational prick of anger, but brushed it off. Well. If they wanted a captain, they were damn well going to have one.

"What are you all standing around for?" he demanded, straightening his back and brandishing his Firebolt. "We've got a game to win!"

Their faces broke into grins, and with whoops and cheers they surged out onto the pitch. The reserve players headed for a bench on the sidelines, and the rest of the team followed Harry to the centre of the pitch.

The Ravenclaw team was already there, waiting for them. Harry strode across the soggy grass to stand in front of Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw captain. They nodded to each other.

"Captains, shake hands," Madam Hooch ordered.

He shook Davies' hand, returning the older boy's pressure firmly. It wouldn't do to apply too much force in the handshake, or too little, for that matter.

"Mount your brooms."

Harry mounted his broom, blood rushing in his ears. Dimly, he heard Madam Hooch counting down, and the moment her whistle blew he took off, the exhilaration of flying dancing up and down his spine. Blurs of rich scarlet and bright blue raced across the sky like colourful streamers, darting in and out of his field of vision. There was nothing quite like Quidditch, nothing in the world.

This was the last year that Lee Jordan, the twins' friend, would be providing commentary for the matches, and from the sound of it he was determined to go out with a bang.

"Welcome, one and all, to the first Quidditch match of the season: Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw. Gryffindor is looking good this year, under the direction of their new captain, Harry Potter. With the addition of fifth-year Ronald Weasley as the team's new Keeper, this could prove to be a season to remember. The Weasley family has given their house some fantastic players, and it looks like the youngest Weasley boy will be no excep--"

"Jordan!" Professor McGonagall interrupted him angrily, her voice drowning out the laughter and hoots of the Gryffindor side.

"Just a little pertinent information, Professor. But on with today's game...Ravenclaw Chasers have the Quaffle, heading for the Gryffindor goal...."

Harry swooped through the sky, testing the day's light, favourable wind. His precious Firebolt responded superbly, as always.

He saw Cho Chang, the Ravenclaw Seeker, out of the corner of his eye. She was following him. With a laugh, he zoomed in the direction of the Ravenclaw goal. Maybe a few laps around the stadium would tire her out.

"Ravenclaw in formation...whoa, looks like that Bludger was almost *too* close...heading for the goal...there's the shot--and stopped, stopped by Ron Weasley!"

The Gryffindor side cheered loudly. He could hear Ginny's high-pitched voice screaming her brother's name.

Jordan sounded equally triumphant. "Yes, Ron Weasley is showing the true Weasley colours today. Watching today's game, I'm reminded of a similar situation involving his older brother, Charlie Weasley, long considered to be one of Gryffindor's finest Seekers. Of course, I wasn't around at the time, but I've heard it said--"

"Jordan, I think we'd like to know what's going on in the game."

"Sorry, Professor. Gryffindor has the Quaffle...."

The play continued below, but Harry didn't pay attention to it. Lee Jordan's running commentary was enough for him to get the gist of what was going on as he looked for the Snitch.

"Nice catch there by the lovely Katie Bell of Gryffindor...play back on the Ravenclaw end...nicely done there...."

Cho had stopped following him and was flying in the other direction. It didn't look like she had seen the Snitch, but Harry braked quickly and turned around. Now was not the time to be playing games with the other team's Seeker.

"Pass to Angelina...back to Katie...oh, intercepted by Ravenclaw captain Roger Davies! He's heading back to the Gryffindor goal...he shoots...and it's in! Point goes to Ravenclaw in the first goal of the game."

Harry groaned as he circled over the Gryffindor goal, looking down at Ron. He couldn't see the expression on his friend's face, and he was glad of it.

Play continued with no sign of the Snitch. Angelina slipped past the Ravenclaw Keeper and got in the first goal for Gryffindor, but after that neither team could score. Ron viciously killed every shot that came in his direction, and not even the Chasers' combined efforts could get the Quaffle past the Ravenclaw Keeper again. The crowd was growing restless, and Harry found that he was getting restless, too.

Then, he saw it--a glint of gold halfway across the field.

Cho saw it, too, and she was much closer to it than he was. She took off, heading straight for it.

His heart sank. Even with the Firebolt's superior speed, he wouldn't make it in time. He bent forward over his broom anyway and sped toward the Snitch, hoping for a miracle...or an accident...or both.

The wind in his ears was deafening, but over it he heard someone--it sounded like Colin--shout:

"Use the 'Friend or Foe Feint', Fred!"

Fred needed no encouragement. A Bludger was coming toward him. He whacked it directly at Harry.

Harry had heard Colin and Ron discussing this new play with the Beaters a few days before, so he had a vague idea of what he was supposed to do. He descended quickly, getting out of the Bludger's path, but Cho was so caught up in the chase that she didn't see it coming at her until it was almost too late. She looked behind her, saw the Bludger not five feet from her head, and swerved at the very last minute. The Bludger just grazed the tail of her broom, spinning her around in a dizzy circle.

The Ravenclaw side started howling "Foul! Foul!", and even some Hufflepuffs and Slytherins joined in, voicing their displeasure.

"Close call there for Ravenclaw's Seeker," Jordan commented. "Not technically a foul on Gryffindor's part, since they *were* initially aiming at their own Seeker...."

The Ravenclaw crowd booed loudly, and the Ravenclaw players gave Fred murderous looks.

Harry climbed, getting above Cho to see if he could find out where the Snitch had gone. He'd lost sight of it, and he didn't want to wait until Cho had pulled out of her tailspin to look for it again.

After a moment, Cho managed to right herself. Her hair had come out of its usual neat, high ponytail, and was falling messily in her face and eyes. Harry, flying above her, thought that it made her look even prettier, but as he stared at her he saw something that drove all thoughts of Cho's physical merits from his mind.

The Snitch was caught in her hair! He could see it, its tiny gold wings beating frantically as it tried to escape from the thick black tangle.

As far as he could tell, Cho didn't know it was there. And the Snitch wasn't going anywhere for once--it was a perfect opportunity to end the game before Ravenclaw could have a chance to score. But the only way to get it would be to....

Steeling his nerves, he tipped his Firebolt into a nosedive, narrowly avoiding a passing Bludger and heading straight for the Ravenclaw Seeker.

There was a collective gasp, as if everyone in the stands had decided to hold their breath at once.

Jordan's voice rose over the confused noises of the crowd. "Potter's going into a dive...has he seen the Snitch? But is he...it looks like....what's he doing?"

Cho whipped around at the sound of Lee's puzzled commentary, and as she turned Harry saw the golden sparkle of the Snitch, still entangled in her hair. She stared up at him,

bewilderment changing to alarm and then to panic as Harry barrelled toward her in a streak of crimson, not stopping, a look of grim concentration on his face.

"It looks like...no, it can't be a Wronski Feint...what's Potter doing?"

Cho dove for the ground, trying to get away, but her broom was no match for his. He was gaining on her. Fifty metres away, he let go of the broom, holding on with his legs and trusting the Firebolt's precision flight abilities to keep him from overbalancing. The fierce wind stung his eyes and burned in his nose and lungs.

They were well below the rest of the play by now. The ground was coming closer and closer. If they didn't pull up in the next few seconds, both of them would hit the ground at full throttle.

It was now or never.

With an animal yell, he leapt off his broom and flung himself at Cho.

Cho screamed, reflexively jerking upward on her own broom.

The sudden change of direction freed the Snitch from her hair, and Harry's hand closed over it, accidentally grabbing a few strands of her hair in the process and yanking them out of her head.

He had just enough time to roll over in mid-air to avoid hitting the muddy ground face first.

He blacked out, but only for a moment. He could feel the Snitch squirming between his clenched fingers, a tiny buzz of frustration beating against his palm.

Madam Hooch's whistle blew shrilly, stopping play. As he lay on the soft ground, he saw members of both teams flying toward him, and felt the thudding squelch-squelch of feet on the soggy pitch, running in his direction. The crowd was deathly quiet.

The first person to reach him was Ron. He was dragging Harry's discarded broom behind him, gasping for breath as he ran.

"Harry! Harry! Are you okay?" he yelled, dropping to his knees. Flecks of mud covered his face like extra freckles, and his uniform was filthy with grass stains and more streaks of dirt.

Harry grinned, looking up at his worried friend. He was thinking about how funny it was to be in this position.

"Are you hurt? Where does it hurt?" Ron demanded to know.

"I'm fine," he said with a little giggle. It really was very funny, if you thought about it. If you switched their roles and replaced Ron with Colin, and it would have been just like tryouts all over again. "Never better." He giggled again.

Ron looked horrified, though Harry couldn't tell whether the reply or the giggle was the cause of his friend's shock.

"Fine?" he yelled in disbelief. "FINE?! Like hell you're fine! I don't know what the hell you were playing at, but you--"

"Hey, Ron," Harry said, interrupting him. "I got the Snitch."

He lifted his arm and opened his hand, feeling the strands of Cho's long dark hair tug at his fingers.. The little golden ball fell to the ground and bounced once.

Ron's face went white, then bright red. "You...you...."

He whirled around, robes flying, and shouted to the team:

"HE'S GOT IT!"

The Gryffindor team let out a roar and surged forward as the Gryffindor side exploded with an ear-splitting cheer. Harry found himself being picked up and gently hoisted onto Fred and George's shoulders, even as Madam Pomfrey yelled at them to put her patient down.

"POTTER HAS THE SNITCH! GRYFFINDOR WINS!" Lee Jordan's voice boomed over the frenzied crowd.

He couldn't see much of anything on top of the twins' shoulders, but he didn't care. He knew that he was filthy, his clothing coated with mud. He knew that when things had quieted down, he'd have to face Hermione and Ginny's combined wrath for allowing himself to be so reckless. He knew he'd be incredibly sore for the next week, if he was lucky. And he didn't even want to *think* about what he'd have to say when he saw Cho again. But none of that bothered him at the moment.

He'd won the game for Gryffindor.

Nothing else mattered.

* * *

The pain wasn't as bad as he had feared, but he still hadn't regained all of the feeling in his back and legs by the time their next session with Will came around.

As he'd expected, he'd been chewed out by both Hermione and Ginny-- separately and together--for his actions during the Quidditch match. However, one can only hear 'You're lucky you didn't break your neck!' so many times before the statement loses its effectiveness, especially when everyone else you know seems to think that your behaviour was not only justified, but also nothing short of a stroke of genius.

He was glad when they had prepared the small room and Hermione had touched the mirror. Waxing philosophical about Quidditch would only be a sure sign that he'd hit his head harder than he thought during his fall.

Will was waiting for them when the wreaths of mist cleared.

"A pleasure to see you've all returned," he said as he picked up his blazer from the back of his desk chair and put it on. "I was afraid you four would need some time to recover from our last meeting. But no matter--there is much to do. Shall we begin?"

They took up their positions on either side of the mirror.

"Enter, Watchman of the Light."

"Grant to us your inner sight."

"Enter, for the time draws near."

"Power will erase our fear."

The mirror's blinding light had barely faded before Will turned to the business at hand.

"What would you say has been the most beneficial spell you've learned for dealing with the Dark Arts practitioners, or an enemy in general?"

"Expelliarmus," Ron answered promptly, surprising all of them--even himself--with his quick response. "A fast and effective means of disarming your opponent."

Will's eyes shone with approval. "A textbook definition, Mr. Weasley. Very good." He turned to the others. "Would you all agree?"

They nodded.

"Right, then. On a related note, which spell have you found most effective against Dark Arts creatures?"

"'Expecto Patronum'," Harry said immediately.

Will raised an eyebrow. "I see. Why is that, Mr. Potter?"

"Umm...." Harry mentally kicked himself for replying so quickly. Talking about the Patronus Charm would certainly lead to a number of awkward questions, most of them revolving around the dramatic escape of his godfather Sirius Black from the wizarding authorities. Ron knew the whole story, and so did Hermione, but Neville didn't. And as with anything bordering or firmly in the realm of the illegal, the fewer people who knew of it, the better.

"It's one of the most powerful spells we know, and can be used against Dementors," he said finally, hoping that answering with the partial truth would be sufficient.

To his relief, it was.

"Quite right," Will said. "I believe that two years ago, you learned how to perform the Patronus Charm. When you explained it, you said that the spell was useful against Dementors, as the embodiment of the caster's positive thoughts and emotions. That is the spell I wish to work with today."

"But there aren't any Dementors here," Hermione said.

Will gave her a look. "Indeed, Miss Granger."

"Oh...right." She smiled wanly. "Silly question."

"I can create something similar to the effects that a Dementor would produce in you," Will said. "It would be localised, affecting only the caster of the spell. And since our Mr. Potter has first-hand knowledge of the Patronus, I think it is only fitting that he should be the first...I think 'test subject' is too strong a phrase, but it is as good as any. "

Harry winced. He wasn't going to escape so easily, after all.

"What do I have to do?" he asked. He couldn't stop his voice from quavering.

"Nothing more than what you would normally do. I'd like to try the spell with direct contact, at first. My hand on your shoulder would be sufficient."

"And what would happen?" asked Neville.

"That, Mr. Longbottom, is what we will find out." He moved to stand behind Harry, who was standing with his back to the fire, facing the door. "Are you ready, Mr. Potter?"

Harry held out his wand, trying to keep his hand from trembling. "I'm ready," he said, gripping his wand tightly.

He felt Will's hand touch his shoulder.

Instantly, a wave of burning coldness seized his chest.

Out of pure instinct, he looked around, searching wildly for the Dementor, but there was none there. Will's hand was a light pressure on his shoulder, but the horrible frozen feeling wasn't coming from there. It was building deep inside, tearing him apart from within.

He could see his friends staring at him. Ron was white-faced and still, but Hermione was wringing her hands, and Neville was gnawing feverishly on his thumbnail.

The deep, intense cold penetrated his body, seeping its way into his mind and heart. Faintly, but growing louder by the second, he heard the shouts of his father and the final screams of his mother, her sweet voice begging Lord Voldemort to spare her child, to kill her instead. But mingled with their cries were other screams and shouting voices-- voices he had heard before, voices from King's Cross Station and from the memory of the attack on St. Mungo's. Colin's high, heart-breaking sobs, Ginny screaming in blind terror, Ron frantically repeating, over and over, "Wake up, Hermione...please wake up...."

The happy memory. He needed a happy memory.

Screwing his eyes shut, he tried to block out the cold and focus on the wild cheering of the crowd and the look of delighted disbelief on Ron's face as he had held up the Snitch.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" he shouted.

A rush of white light flared against his closed eyelids, and a great blaze of warmth flooded through his body, driving away the pain and cold. Whatever Will had done, it made him feel stronger, much more powerful. The effects of the Dementor were completely gone.

His eyes flew open in time to see the giant, silvery-white figure of a ghostly stag emerge from the tip of his wand. It was larger than his regular Patronus, so large that Hermione, Ron, and Neville had leapt out of their chairs and backed away to stand pressed against the door. The Patronus nearly filled the small room. It also looked far more solid, less like a ghost and more like a flesh-and-blood animal.

The giant stag turned around, and bowed its head in recognition. But as it lowered its head, Harry saw that there was a strange mark between the antlers, one that had never been there before.

It was a small circle, quartered by a cross.

"Salve, Patronus," Will said softly.

The stag raised its head and stared directly at them for a long moment. Then, it seemed to ripple and vanished, leaving the room as empty as before.

"Quid quid latine dictum sit, altum viditur," Will said solemnly, his deep voice ringing in the silence.

"What does that mean?" Harry said breathlessly, looking up at him.

The corner of the older man's mouth twitched. "'Anything said in Latin sounds profound'. A tribute to the remnants of a classical education."

Hermione laughed, a nervous little laugh that almost sounded like a cough. Ron and Neville smiled uncertainly.

Slowly, they returned to their seats. Harry was grateful to sit and rest his shaky legs, which hadn't stopped shaking.

"Now," Will said, removing paper and pen from his briefcase, "I want you to tell me everything about what you've just witnessed...or, in Mr. Potter's case, experienced. Anything you saw or felt, no matter how insignificant."

"It was a lot bigger than the usual Patronus," Hermione said. "It looked more solid, too. But I didn't notice anything strange."

"What are you talking about?" Ron spluttered. "Didn't you see that huge flash of light the moment he called out the spell?!"

"I thought that was how it **always** happened," she said sullenly.

"Of course that's not how it **always** happens!" Ron was staring at her as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"Well, what are you getting angry at ME for?" she shouted, glaring daggers at him. "Despite what you may think, Ron Weasley, I'm NOT a walking textbook. I AM allowed to make the occasional mistake!"

Harry didn't like the sound of that. Hermione wasn't very good at producing a Patronus. It was a sore subject with her, but she'd never gotten this angry over it. It was frightening.

"I felt a lot stronger," he said hastily, hoping to shift the subject away from observation and into his experience.

Will had been watching Ron and Hermione argue with an odd expression on his face, a look that Harry couldn't quite define. The expression faded slightly as he turned to Harry, but there was a hint of sadness in his eyes that made him appear old and tired.

"I expected as much," he said. "That's the whole purpose of this experiment--to make you stronger. Magic by the book can only give you so much. With this enemy, you need every advantage you can find."

* * *

The month of November came and went in a blur of classes and Quidditch and twice-weekly sessions. If they weren't in class, they were doing homework for class, or thinking about the pile of homework they hadn't finished yet for class the next day. The wizard chess sets and decks of Exploding Snap cards gathered dust in a corner.

Quidditch practices and games took up even more time than before, as practices became more intense and the games came thick and fast. Ginny began to complain that the only times she ever saw her brothers were when they were on their brooms or falling asleep in their food. She was being sarcastic, but she wasn't exaggerating--Harry and Ron often returned from practice and went straight to bed, only to be shaken awake by Neville a few hours later when it was time to head to the little room off the library.

They had been practising all sorts of spells, alone and in combination with Will. Some spells didn't work so well in combination; many of them were no different with Will's help than they had been without it. But some of the spells were vastly different.

After the success of Harry's Patronus Charm, they tried a variety of similar protection spells and shielding charms. Together with Will, Hermione cast a wall of protection so strong that not even a direct curse could penetrate it. Try as they might, neither Ron nor Harry nor Neville could figure out a way around it. Once Will removed his magic from the wall, though, Neville's next spell got through. Fortunately, it was only a Tickling Charm, and once the fit of laughter ended she was perfectly fine.

It was a lesson that they wouldn't soon forget, though. It was a reminder that Will's magic was not only different from theirs, but also stronger, more powerful. He was adapting to their capabilities because they couldn't adapt to his. And as lopsided and unfair as it sounded, for the time being it was their only option.

November was drawing to a close when Will told them that their next session would be a little out of the ordinary.

"We're going to have an audience," he said. "Your Headmaster has requested to see our work in progress, and I have accepted. I think he'll be quite pleased to see what you've accomplished."

Harry smiled thinly. He wasn't so certain. Recently, the front pages of the "Daily Prophet" had been filled with announcements from the Ministry of Magic, reassuring the public that investigations into the "King's Cross Incident" and the "St. Mungo's Incident" were well underway. Every possible lead was being followed. Every enquiry was being made. Every suspect was being questioned.

He had a feeling that every day, something horrible was approaching. And at that moment, there was nothing they could do to prevent it.

* * *

On one of the early December days when they were less awake than usual, McGonagall came around to the Gryffindor breakfast table, taking the names of those students who were staying over the holidays.

Neville was going home, as usual. "Gran wants to have a big family party for some reason. I haven't the faintest idea why--she hates most of my relatives, and the ones she doesn't hate usually hate her."

"Tough," Ron said sympathetically. "Maybe you can get away from a few days and come visit us. I mean, we're already having eleven people in the house...an even dozen won't make much difference."

Neville looked more cheerful. "I'll see what Gran says."

McGonagall had approached their end of the table, and took down the names of a few second and third-years who were staying. She paused briefly when she came to their little group.

"Mr. Longbottom, you'll be going home this year, as usual. And Mr. Weasley, your brothers informed me that you and your sister will also be going home for the holiday." She scribbled something on the parchment she was holding. "Mr. Potter...Miss Granger....I assume you'll both be staying." She started to walk away, toward the other end of the table.

"Actually, Professor, we're going to the Burrow this Christmas," Harry said. "Ron invited me and Hermione to spend the holiday with his family."

"And my parents said it was all right," Hermione added, unnecessarily.

"Hermione and I," she corrected him absently. She gazed at him, then Hermione, with a troubled look in her eyes. One long finger was pressed against her cheek.

"Is something wrong, Professor?" Hermione asked, concerned.

McGonagall shook her head briskly. "No, no, nothing. Never mind. It isn't important."

With that, she strode off, the heels of her shoes clicking and snapping against the stone floor.

"Well, *that* was strange," Ron remarked, dipping his toast into the puddle of egg yolk in the middle of his plate.

"Tell me about it," Harry said.

Hermione frowned. "What do you think was wrong?"

"She's pwobabwy worwied about pwecious wittle Hawwy," Ron said through a mouthful of eggy toast, spraying crumbs on the table.

"Ron, close your mouth!" Hermione exclaimed in disgust, edging away from him.

"Pwiss," said Ron, deliberately getting crumbs on her.

She squealed and smacked him.

Neville and Harry broke up the argument before it could escalate, and they left the Great Hall and hurried down to the dungeons for Potions class.

Harry thought nothing of it until later that evening, just as he was about to get some dinner. He was up in his room, looking for a clean robe--the one he was wearing had frog gut stains on it from a mishap in Potions--when he saw a folded piece of paper on his pillow.

He picked it up and unfolded it. There was a message written on it.

Dear Harry [it read],

Professor McGonagall informed me this morning that you and Miss Granger will be spending the holiday with the Weasley family at their Devonshire home. Normally, I would have no objection to your plans, but after consultation with Dr. Stanton I am forced to concede to his concerns that this might place the two of you in danger. Regardless of what you may have read in the papers, you may take it from me that the investigations into King's Cross and St. Mungo's have produced nothing that the Ministry will accept. It is with your safety in mind that I must forbid you from leaving Hogwarts grounds this Christmas. I apologise most sincerely, and I hope you will understand. Please do not hesitate to speak to me if you have any further questions.

Albus Dumbledore

So that was that. The best-laid plans of Harry Potter thwarted once again by Lord Voldemort.

Harry understood all right. He understood all too well.

It didn't make him any less angry, though. He *wanted* to have a normal Christmas, with a normal family. The Weasleys were as normal as anything could ever get in his life, and spending Christmas with them would have been heavenly. And once again, Voldemort was denying him something he wanted, something he loved.

It wasn't fair.

Hermione would understand, of course. She'd probably sigh in relief, knowing that Dumbledore and Will had their safety in mind. It wouldn't be much of a loss for her to stay over the holiday...he knew she would stay if she had a logical explanation for doing so. There was no way she'd visit the Burrow without him--it would be overwhelming for her to go alone.

So that wasn't a problem. And he could tolerate another Christmas at Hogwarts, even if it wasn't what he really wanted.

But the hard part, the part he wasn't looking forward to, would be breaking the bad news to Ron and Ginny.

Interlude - The Testing

Whether you think that you can, or that you can't, you are usually right.

-- Henry Ford

"For heaven's sake, don't be so worried. They aren't going to ask you to do anything I haven't had you do a hundred times before."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Positively?"

"Mr. Longbottom, for the last time--no."

It was a very long walk from the little room off the library to the Transfiguration classroom, the location of their planned meeting with Dumbledore. They had assembled at seven o'clock as usual, performed the spell to bring Will through the mirror, and left the room. Nothing was said about what would happen during the evening...at least, not until Neville had begun asking Will that exact same question.

Harry had been listening to their conversation for the last five minutes. The Old One's unemotional replies did nothing to assuage Neville's fears. If anything, the questions only became more insistent as they drew closer to the classroom.

He didn't blame Neville for being nervous. He wasn't feeling too confident, either, if the truth be told. And though neither Hermione nor Ron had said a word as they hurried through the deserted, darkened corridors, he could feel uncertainty radiating off of them like heat waves.

Will took out his watch and checked the time, then started to walk a little faster. The four of them trotted next to him, taking two or three steps to each of his.

"I'm not certain," he said shortly. "And repeatedly asking me if I **am** certain won't change that fact."

Harry gritted his teeth. If Will was on edge, he didn't want to **think** about what that meant for them.

Neville sniffled. "I...I just wanted...oh, I don't even know what I want," he said in a small voice, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets. "I just wish this whole thing was ov--"

Without warning, Will paused in mid-stride, coming to an abrupt halt next to a yellowing marble statue of a wizard with one missing ear. He hissed lightly through his teeth, face tight with concentration.

The four of them froze. Neville clamped his mouth shut, and clapped both hands over it for good measure.

Will raised a hand for silence--unnecessarily, since the four of them were barely breathing--and slipped into the enveloping darkness of a nearby doorway.

Following his example, they scurried for cover, scattering among the doors that lined the hall. Harry found himself sharing the relative safety of a darkened doorway with Ron, who was breathing so loudly that Harry was certain the whole school could hear them.

He strained his ears, listening intently. He thought he detected the faint sound of footsteps walking down distant hallways, and the fluttering hum of a voice, but it could have been his overactive imagination. He held his breath and tried his hardest to be silent, invisible, non-existent.

It seemed like an age before Will emerged from the shadows, pulling his cloak closer to his body. The four of them huddled around him, gathering together like timid ducklings pressed up against a mother duck.

Will looked down at the four frightened faces staring up at him, and wearily ran a hand through his hair.

"My apologies," he said. "It wasn't my intent to worry you. But at this moment, there are only seven people in the castle who are aware of my presence...and I intend to keep it that way."

They gazed at him, hearts beating in their throats.

"Listen to me," he continued. "I have little to no idea of what they will ask you to do, or even if they will ask you to do anything at all. But either way, there's no point in stressing yourselves over it. Please trust me."

Neville put up his hand, forgetting where he was. "But what if they ask us to--"

"Mr. Longbottom." Will's voice was faintly reproofing. His eyes glittered dangerously in his shadowed face.

"Sorry," Neville mumbled.

"Please trust me," Will said, more gently this time. "Everything will be fine. You've pleased me with your progress so far. I am very proud of you, of all of you. Know that, whatever happens this evening."

Open compliments from Will were few and far between, and Harry felt the tips of his ears grow hot with embarrassed pleasure. It calmed his jittery nerves, as soothing as a bar of chocolate in Madam Pomfrey's infirmary.

They walked along in silence for a time, and finally arrived at the door of the Transfiguration classroom. Will stopped outside the door and knocked twice.

"Enter," said a muffled voice.

He turned the handle and opened the door, then stepped aside to let the four of them enter the room first.

Out of an instinctive sense to protect themselves against whatever waited inside, they entered in single-file. Harry went second, right after Hermione, shuffling forward quickly to prevent Neville from stepping on the backs of his shoes and accidentally tripping both of them up.

The student worktables had been cleared to the sides of the room, leaving only the vast teacher's desk at the farthest end, opposite the door. Stripped of its desks, the classroom looked empty, almost cavernous. The flagstones, worn down with the passing of hundreds of years of feet and countless diligent scrubblings, shone dully in the torchlight.

Three people sat behind the teacher's desk on its raised dais.

Harry stared down at the ground, trying to cover his initial shock. He had expected to see Dumbledore, and he wasn't at all surprised that Professor McGonagall was there as well. She had known about the sessions from the very first day, and as Deputy Headmistress it was her job to be aware of everything that went on in the school. She had probably suggested the Transfiguration classroom for this meeting-- it could hold more people than Dumbledore's office, and was a better place to perform elaborate spells. But the third person came as a complete surprise.

It was Mrs...no, *Professor* Figg.

For a crazy split second, he had a difficult time recognising her. She wasn't dressed in her normal drab work robe, but wore instead the black and scarlet formal robes he had last seen on the Hogwarts Express. She was an Auror now, not a teacher. The difference was unmistakable.

The more he thought about, the more her presence made sense. What would be the point in demonstrating skills that would be used to fight Dark wizards without the presence of the actual Defence Against the Dark Arts professor?

Figg's official robes would have looked strange in the school setting if it wasn't for the fact that both Dumbledore and McGonagall wore more formal robes as well, ones he had seen them wear at the end of term feasts. Dumbledore sat in the centre, with McGonagall to his left and Figg to his right.

Seeing the three of them behind the large, imposing desk, Harry had the strangest feeling that he was in a court of law. It was like being in one of those police dramas that had always seemed to be on the telly in the Dursleys' house; Aunt Petunia had liked to watch them after dinner. In his mind's eye, he could see the stern judge in his long wig and elaborate costume, and imagined he could hear a rumbling voice say, "Prisoner at the bar, have you anything to say in your defence...?"

Stop that, he scolded himself, breaking off that train of thought. *You're being stupid. This isn't a court.*

But as he studied the three adults through downcast eyes, the awful feeling that he and his friends really were on trial grew stronger.

He swallowed a large lump of nervousness that had lodged itself firmly in the back of his throat, and tried to look very interested in the scuffed toes of his shoes.

With a loud, jarring scraping of chairs, the three adults stood. They bowed to Will, and the Old One returned their courtesy with a curious, old-fashioned formality that would not have been out of place a century earlier--or even ten centuries earlier.

"Good evening, Headmaster, Professors," he said gravely.

"Good evening, Dr. Stanton," Dumbledore said. There was no merriment in his cheerful face; he looked very thoughtful and serious. "I thank you for conceding to our request this evening."

"Not at all, Headmaster."

"We have discussed a few questions that we wish to ask of you and the students. Will you allow them to answer?"

"Of course, Headmaster. Would you rather I not be present?"

"No, no. Please stay."

Dumbledore's polite, ceremonial requests and Will's equally dignified answers were almost too much to bear. Harry's hands tightened into fists, fingernails cutting into the callused flesh on his palms. He would remain calm, he wouldn't say a word. He would be patient and stand through this agonising ritual formality if it bloody killed him.

When he had regained enough emotional control to lift his head and look straight ahead, he saw that McGonagall had stepped down from the dais. She stood in the centre of the open space, directly in front of her desk.

"Dr. Stanton," she said. "I speak to you as a colleague and as a fellow educator. The process of learning is as important to the teacher as it is to the students, and it is my firm belief that true education should never be one-sided. I therefore ask you: what have you learned as a result of your contact with these students?"

Will thought for a moment. "I would say that I have learned two very important things during the time spent on this project. First, I have learned that I must be more flexible. It has been a long time since I dealt with magic that was not my own, and my work with these students has shown me that there is considerable...." Here he paused, and smiled to himself. "I would say there is considerable room for improvement on my part.

"But second, and more important, I came to this place with a very specific goal in mind: to stop the Dark from Rising and in doing so fulfil my duty. I have learned that to some extent I

was mistaking the ends for the means. The valuable part is in the learning, not always in the doing. I had forgotten that--or perhaps, never truly learned it in the first place."

McGonagall nodded. She seemed content with his answer, because she merely said, "I see. Thank you, Dr. Stanton." With the soft rustle of robes, she returned to her seat.

As she sat, Professor Figg stepped down from the dais and took the same position that McGonagall had vacated.

"Will Stanton, Sign-Seeker," she said. She spoke with the same brisk, no-nonsense matter that she had used during the interrogation on the train. "I speak to you as a colleague and as a fellow warrior against the terrible forces of Dark magic. You have dedicated your life to the protection of mankind from the Dark, and have enlisted these students for that purpose. I therefore ask you: what have you done to prepare them to do battle with the Dark and emerge triumphant?"

"Perhaps it would be better if I let them demonstrate," Will said calmly. "Give them a task to perform, or a challenge to face. You shall see that they will not disappoint you."

Harry cringed, but he heard Will's voice drift into his mind almost before the older man had finished speaking.

It's all right. Don't be afraid.

I'm not afraid, he answered, feeling his knees begin to wobble. *I'm terrified.*

Before Will could reply, Professor Figg had taken out her wand.

"So you say," she declared, one hand on her hip. "Well, if you insist--Mr. Longbottom, step forward!"

Neville reacted out of pure instinct. "Defendo Lux!"

Instantly, both he and Will (who had moved to stand behind him the moment Professor Figg had called out his name) were surrounded by a faint, pulsing glow of white light.

The spell Neville had chosen was actually a combination of several basic defence spells they had studied in previous years. Along with whatever Will did--they still weren't entirely sure *what* he did most of the time, but whatever it was, they gladly welcomed it--the spell consisted of a powerful hex deflector and a curse blocker, plus a charm that would supposedly cause an attacker's spell to rebound and strike him or her instead. They had worked on it for the last few weeks, and it was possibly the strongest combined defence spell they had.

Professor Figg looked startled, and not a little impressed. It was likely that she had thought she was aiming for weakest link in their chain. Neville's sense of self-confidence, while far better than it had been in years past, tended to fluctuate under pressure--but his reaction showed a good deal of forethought. Or maybe it was panic. Either way, he hadn't choked up entirely.

"Don't you trust me, Mr. Longbottom?" she said with a little chuckle.

"Not really," Neville replied truthfully.

She laughed at that, a full belly laugh that would have been downright jolly under different circumstances.

"A wise choice," she told him. She was still smiling, a calm, sweet smile that sent chills up Harry's spine. "Let's see just what you've been working on. Education must have a purpose, mustn't it? IMPERIO!"

Harry realised too late the horrible mistake they had made. For obvious reasons, they hadn't tested their new spells against the Forbidden Curses. He mentally kicked himself for being so stupid--of course they would have to face the Forbidden Curses. He'd seen enough of Voldemort's work to know what awaited anyone who fell into the Dark Lord's hands.

"Neville," Professor Figg ordered, putting all of the authority of her years as an Auror behind her words, "you will kill Hermione Granger."

Harry and Ron gasped. Hermione gave a weak, defeated cry and stumbled backwards, fumbling for her wand. But just as she was pulling it from her robes, Ron grabbed her arm, stopping her.

"Don't..." he said. He was staring at Neville with an expression of surprise that bordered on awe. "Look at him."

Harry had been watching Professor Figg like a hawk ever since she had left the dais, but now he followed his friend's gaze, turning to stare at Neville.

During their Defence Against the Dark Arts classes last year, they had been subjected to the Imperius Curse as part of their training in 'constant vigilance'. Only Harry had been able to throw it off in the beginning, and Neville had never quite managed to escape its effects. He had done some marvellous things under its influence, most notably a series of extraordinary gymnastic exercises that he would never have imagined physically possible.

But that was a flip or two, maybe a forward somersault. It was good for a laugh and some teasing later on.

This was a direct order to kill a friend.

To Harry, it was like being back in their first Potions class of the year. Neville's round face, now a nasty shade of yellow-grey, was tightly twisted in the same intense struggle he had gone through when facing down Snape. The hand that held his wand feebly jerked up and down, sometimes pointing it in Hermione's general direction and other times letting it hang limp from his fingers. His other hand was hidden somewhere in the folds of his robe, pressed tightly against his shaking body.

For a very long time, there was no sound in the room except Neville's ragged, irregular breathing. The only thing that moved was Neville's arm, twitching up and down, up and down. All eyes were riveted on the wand, waiting with a sick fascination for the two forbidden words that were certain to come from its owner's mouth.

Everyone started when the wand dropped to the floor, rolled forward in a lazy and lopsided circle, then came to a stop.

"No," Neville croaked.

Figg lifted her wand, breaking the spell. Neville's shoulders sagged, and the glow that surrounded him and Will vanished as his defence spell faded away.

"That was excellent," Will said softly.

Figg coughed derisively. "Remarkable help you gave him, Stanton," she said, drawing the words out in a long sneer that would have put Snape to shame.

Will shook his head. A hint of a private smile played on his lips, though his face was calm and otherwise composed.

"I would gladly accept your compliment, Professor," he said smoothly, "if it was true. But Mr. Longbottom fought off your curse on his own. I did nothing."

Figg raked Neville with a harsh glare, making no attempt to hide her disbelief.

"Is this true?" she demanded.

Neville blinked, looking around the room in bewilderment as if he couldn't quite figure out where he was or what he was doing there.

"I...I think so," he said. His voice was thick and slow, his speech laboured and guttural. He looked over at Hermione with eyes that didn't really see her. "I'm...I'm sorry, Hermione. I-I-I didn't mean...mean to...I didn't mean to scare you."

Her own eyes were suspiciously bright. "It's okay," she whispered.

A look of profound relief swept across his face.

"Okay..." he repeated breathily. "It's okay...it's okay...."

He blinked again, several times. His legs shook as he rocked and swayed precariously on his feet, and he started to fall over backwards. Will leapt forward and caught him just before his head hit the ground, then gently lowered the unconscious boy to a prone position, turning him on his side.

Acting on some unspoken signal, Harry, Ron, and Hermione edged closer together, placing themselves between Figg and Neville. She wasn't going to do anything more to him if they could help it. Not now. Not like this--

But they didn't need to worry. The Defence Against the Dark Arts professor nodded curtly to them, a flat and vaguely satisfied look in her eyes.

"I've seen enough," she said brusquely, and sat down.

The three of them relaxed, but only slightly.

"He'll be fine," Will said, though they couldn't tell whether he was speaking to them or to the adults at the far end of the room. "Let him rest for a few moments."

As Harry moved aside to give Neville some space to breathe, his foot brushed against something that crackled dryly at his touch. Looking down, he saw that he was standing on the corner of a plain envelope. It was old and tattered, grimy around the creases and the flap from repeated openings. It lay a few inches away from Neville's open hand, as if it had dropped from his fingers or slipped out of the pocket of his robes as he fell.

Harry picked it up, and held it up to the light. It looked like there was something inside it--something thin, like a piece of paper, that had made the dry crackling noise.

"What's this?" he said to no one in particular, sliding his thumb under the flap to open it.

Quick as a flash, Will reached over and plucked the envelope from his startled hand.

"*This*, Mr. Potter," he said sternly, holding the letter high, "is Mr. Longbottom's personal property, and therefore none of our business." He knelt down and placed the battered envelope back into Neville's hand and closed the boy's fingers around it.

As he stood up, Dumbledore walked around the table to stand before them. The other two teachers remained behind.

"Will Stanton, Watchman of the Light," Dumbledore said. "I speak to you as a colleague, and as the representative of the wizarding world. We cannot face our enemy alone--there is too much at stake this time for the task to remain unfinished. All too often, pride prevents us from requesting and thereby receiving the assistance we desperately need. I therefore ask you: will you continue to give us your assistance and aid us in the fight against Lord Voldemort?"

Will bowed his head. "It is my duty, Headmaster, and my pleasure."

"That is a great comfort to us," said Dumbledore. "I for one am very impressed with what I have seen tonight. I would like to speak with you later, in private, but that can wait for another time. You may go."

"Yes, Headmaster." Will stooped and lifted Neville into his arms. "Miss Granger, will you carry Neville's wand? He will miss it, when he wakes."

Hermione retrieved it, and returned to stand by his side. Ron and Harry silently joined her, and together they bowed to the teachers and left the room.

Their pace was slower on the return journey. Will couldn't walk very fast with Neville in his arms, and their poor friend had yet to regain consciousness.

"Were...were we supposed to do something?" Ron asked him as they headed back toward the library.

"Apparently not," Will said blandly.

Hermione's face was crimson with fury. "That was a horrible thing to do to Neville."

Will frowned at her. "He stood up to the test he was given, and performed admirably. And as he said himself not too long ago, 'Why should I have to stop feeling good about something I've done right?' When he wakes, I think our Mr. Longbottom will be more than happy about what he's done tonight."

There was a note of finality in his words that they knew very well-- the one that allowed no questioning. As far as he and they were concerned, the subject was closed.

Chapter Seventeen - Watchman's Light

Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light, And usher in the morning; O shepherds, shrink not with affright, But hear the angel's warning. This child, now weak in infancy, Our confidence and joy shall be, The power of Satan breaking, Our peace eternal making.

--Traditional Christmas carol

It was the end of term, and with the first falling of snow that stuck to the ground came the reminder that exams were approaching. Students who had been a little lax about their assignments were now fixtures in the library, burning the proverbial midnight oil and earning the equally burning contempt of Hermione, especially when she found that someone had borrowed a book she needed for an Arithmancy essay, and horror of horrors...*hadn't returned it*.

"Of all the rude, inconsiderate..." she fumed, storming away from Madam Pince's desk. She stalked back to the table where Ron, Harry, and Neville sat and stood in front of them, puffed up with indignation.

"Hermione, calm down," Neville said worriedly, setting down his well-thumbed copy of "One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi". "Is one book *that* important?"

She whirled around, glaring at him. He blanched and buried his face in his class notes.

"I NEED that book!" she snarled. "You'd think that people would have the common decency to return books promptly, especially when there are others who *need* to *read* them...."

"Wait...you mean there's a book in here you *haven't* read yet?" Ron exclaimed in mock surprise. He pressed a hand to his heart and fluttered his eyelashes. "Harry, catch me, I feel dizzy...I think I'm going to faint...oh...oh...OW!"

Hermione, having extracted her revenge with a neat kick in the shin, stomped off to the stacks.

"It's your own fault, Ron," Harry said. "You shouldn't bait her like that."

Ron growled as he gingerly rubbed his leg. "Well, that's no reason to resort to violence!"

"I suppose she felt there were extenuating circumstances," Neville said quietly, smiling to himself.

"What was that?" Ron snarled, turning on him.

"Nothing, nothing." Neville hid his smile behind "The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5".

Despite their worrying, the exams went smoothly for the four of them. All of the reviewing that Will had asked them to do at the beginning of the year paid off in the more practical exams, like Transfiguration and Charms. That freed them up, creating precious time that could be spent studying for other classes--like History of Magic and Potions-- that were less pure magic and more textbook-oriented.

Snape, true to his word, had given as an exam a Potion they had never studied--a complicated elixir used to treat burns caused by dragon fire. But even in that class, they had a strong enough grasp of the basics to produce a correctly made concoction. Harry worked with Neville, and he noticed a muscle in Snape's jaw twitch uncontrollably when they handed him their completed potion. It was far better than any perfect mark could have been.

Some people weren't so fortunate. Harry and Ron returned from dinner one evening near the end of exams to find Hermione sitting alone at one end of the common room, holding a sobbing Natalie in her lap.

From the look of things, they had been there for some time. The shoulder of Hermione's robe was soaking wet, and she looked very frazzled, but she continued to rock the younger girl back and forth, holding her close.

Harry took a tentative step forward, but Hermione shook her head slightly.

"Potions," she mouthed, shooting them a fierce look that told them to let her alone for a while.

They nodded understanding. She went back to stroking the crying girl's hair and murmuring soothing words, and they tiptoed up the stairs to their dormitory.

Ron closed the door behind them and flopped down on his bed, pillowing his head on his arms. "Poor kid," he murmured into the quilt.

"Poor kid?" Harry said, surprised. "I thought you didn't like her."

Ron scowled and rolled over onto his back. "Well, yeah...but no one ever *deserves* Snape."

* * *

Soon enough, the exams were over, the results were posted, and amid the post-exam celebrations and lamentations over grades came yet another vocal disagreement between Ron and Hermione.

It was nearly time for most of the school to board the Hogwarts Express for the holidays. The rattle-bang of packed trunks falling down stairs mingled with loud discussions of holiday plans and travel arrangements from London to various final destinations. Students who were going home gathered in small groups to find travelling friends, while those who had chosen to stay talked about the Christmas feast and dreamed of the long, lazy days that lay ahead of them.

The night before everyone was scheduled to leave, Ginny and Hermione were sitting in the common room, reading in front of the roaring fire and watching Ron beat Harry at wizard chess for the third time that evening.

Out of the blue, Hermione spoke up. "Ron...I've been meaning to tell you this for a while, but I just kept putting it off. I...I don't think I can come to the Burrow with you and Ginny."

"Mm," said Ron, not looking up from the board.

"You CAN'T?" Ginny wailed. The book she had been reading fell to the floor, forgotten. "But why?"

Hermione sighed and closed her eyes. "I've decided to stay at school for the holidays. Tuesday last, I let McGonagall know that I wouldn't be leaving, and I posted a letter to your mother yesterday morning, explaining the situation and apologising."

"But...but...." quavered Ginny.

"I'm terribly sorry to spring this on you at such short notice...I hope you'll understand," Hermione said, smiling apologetically.

"Mm...whatever you want," Ron said with a shrug. He took Harry's last bishop. "Check."

Ginny was distraught. "Please come, Hermione," she begged, her lower lip quivering dangerously. "Mum's been so looking forward to having you visit. And it won't be any fun at home without you--being with all those boys, all by myself. No offence, Ron," she added hastily.

"None taken, brat," he said absently. He nudged a pawn with his finger, prodding it to move forward one square. "Check."

Harry grumbled moodily and propped his chin on his hand, studying the board. His king was in a treacherous spot. Maybe if he moved his knight to take Ron's pawn....

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Hermione said, "but I wouldn't feel right going without Harry. After all, Christmas is a time best spent with family, and I don't see why--"

"'Wouldn't feel right?'" Ron interrupted. For the first time that evening he looked up, taking his eyes off the board. "What kind of language is that?"

"Perfectly sensible language, thank you very much," she said.

Ron folded his arms across his chest. "Sensible language my--"

"Ron!" Ginny scolded, cutting him off.

"Well, listen to her!" he shouted. "There's absolutely no logic in her argument. She says that Christmas should be 'best spent with family', blah, blah, blah, and then turns around and all but declares that she's not going home, either!"

A light went on in Ginny's eyes, and she frowned, brow furrowing in deep suspicion. "Yes, Hermione, why is that?"

"Because...well, *someone* should stay here with Harry," Hermione spluttered. "There's no reason why *he* should have to spend Christmas alone just because Voldemort is making everyone paranoid."

Ron flinched, and glared at her. "Look, I'll tolerate the name when *Harry* says it, but--"

"Fine." She waved one hand distractedly. "Let's just keep to the subject at hand, okay?"

"Fine, then. If you don't want to come to our house for Christmas, you should just say so."

"Now you're being ridiculous," she snapped.

Ron's scowl deepened. "*Don't* call me ridiculous."

"Hermione, you still haven't answered my question," Ginny pressed.

"There's nothing to answer."

"*Now* who's being ridiculous," Ron remarked in a vicious aside.

"Ron, shut up," Ginny said. "All I wanted to know was why spending Christmas here with Harry--"

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger. "Ginny, I already *told* you. I don't want Harry to be here alone over the holiday."

"Harry won't be *alone*, you--"

"Ahem!" Harry noisily cleared his throat.

They stopped arguing, and turned to look at him.

"Is Harry permitted to speak, or is Harry not allowed to contribute to this fascinating conversation that seems to directly concern him?" he said facetiously.

Ron muttered something he couldn't quite catch. Ginny poked her brother and hissed a irritated "Ron!" Hermione stared off into the fire, not looking at any of them.

"All right," Harry said. He did his best impression of Will's stern, professorial frown. "I don't want to spend our last night together listening to this. If Hermione wants to stay at school, there's no one to stop her. She shouldn't have to make up a reason."

"I wasn't making anything up," Hermione said resentfully.

"I know," he replied. "That isn't the point. It's true that I can't go anywhere for the holiday, but that shouldn't spoil everyone else's. I'm not making Hermione stay here...she wants to, that's all."

"But...but I won't get to give you and Hermione your presents on Christmas morning," Ginny said, pouting.

Harry smiled wryly. "The best Christmas present I could get would be for you to apologise--*all* of you."

The fire sent up a multi-coloured shoot of sparks, and a fine rain of ashes pattered down on the hearth.

"Sorry, Harry," Ginny said, smiling meekly.

"I'm sorry, too," Hermione added with a little nod.

Ron just glowered at him.

"Ron?" said Harry, giving him a pointed stare.

Ron huffed, puffing out his cheeks in an exasperated sigh. "Yeah, yeah, I'm sorry," he said. "Now can we *please* finish the game?"

"Go right ahead." Harry leaned back in his chair, feeling an odd sense of fatigue. He didn't want to have to do anything like that again any time soon...it took a lot out of him.

"Right." Ron guided his bishop two spaces diagonally. "Check...and mate in four."

Hermione snorted, and Ginny giggled, grinning.

Harry pushed his king over, conceding defeat. Sometimes, he would swear that Ron was toying with him, drawing the game out and keeping Harry's meagre hopes up until the very last moment--and then crushing him utterly. If he didn't know better, he'd think that Ron actually took pleasure from it...and the suppressed grin he saw on his friend's face as they put the board away did nothing to alleviate his concerns.

* * *

Harry and Hermione saw the four Weasley siblings off the next morning with bright, cheerful words and promises of daily letters.

The twins did their best to cheer up glum Ron and teary-eyed Ginny by spraying them with their newest joke development: Weasley's Premiere Disappearing Ink. The ink was mostly harmless, except for the small fact that the *ink* didn't disappear on contact, but the surface it was sprayed on did. Ginny got caught in the full force of the spray, and the last glimpse that Harry and Hermione saw of their friends was that of Ginny smacking Fred with one hand as she tried to keep the pieces of her vanishing robe from falling off with the other. Her outraged shrieks stayed with them all the way back to Hogwarts.

The two of them spent a pleasant few days together with their remaining hallmates. Endless rounds of card and chess games and snowball fights took up much of their time, and long, leisurely naps accounted for the rest. When they tired of being sociable, there were always plenty of entertainment options. Hermione's parents had sent her Christmas presents early--a giant parcel of healthy but tasty snacks and four or five books--and she was quite willing to share both with Harry. With the help of home cooking and pleasure reading, they bided their time quietly until Christmas Eve.

Harry's first impression of Christmas Eve dinner in the Great Hall was that the people who had chosen to stay at Hogwarts over the winter holidays were a different group from the scattering of students who usually remained. Many students from Muggle or mixed families, like Hermione, had remained at the school, while nearly all of the students from pure wizarding families had gone home.

"You know why it's like that, of course," Hermione had said when he mentioned his observation to her. "Muggle parents--the smart ones, at least--would rather have their children at school, where it's safer. Especially after...well...."

She didn't need to continue. One only needed to have seen the haunted, faraway look that occasionally appeared in Colin Creevey's eyes to understand everything.

Christmas Eve dinner was the usual elaborate affair, with roast turkey and beef and chicken, all sorts of vegetable dishes, loaves of fresh crusty bread, and an array of sweets and desserts that would have done a pastry shop proud. Though the sheer amount of food was staggering, everyone knew it was only a prelude to the feast that waited for them tomorrow evening.

He wondered what Ron and Ginny were doing at that moment. Maybe they were sitting down to dinner, too. Maybe Mrs. Weasley was just putting the piping hot food on the table, smiling broadly as she lifted the lid of dish after dish, asking her brood if they wanted--

"More bread, Harry?" Seamus asked with his mouth full, holding out a basket filled with steaming rolls.

He was one of fifteen or so Gryffindor students who had chosen to stay at the school between terms. There were a fair number of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws at the table as well, but the only Slytherin present was a morose-looking Blaise Zabini.

The teachers who had remained over the holidays were talking quietly among themselves, though their voices grew louder and more insistent with every glass of mulled wine. Professor Sprout launched into a long discourse about the Christmas trees that ringed the Great Hall, loose strands of grey hair flying wildly about her face as she became more and more excited. Professor Sinistra remarked that there would be a meteor shower within the next week, and invited all of them to visit the Astronomy Tower and see it for themselves. And Dumbledore presided over the feast, great waves of contentment and bonhomie radiating from his smiling face.

It was with great difficulty that Harry, Hermione, and their housemates slogged back to the Gryffindor dormitory to collapse in the common room. Drowsy murmurs of conversation drifted through the warm, still air, followed by snoring as people dropped off in their chairs.

Harry let out a tremendous belch that made the pieces on a nearby wizard chess set rattle, and sent an unsuspecting pawn toppling off the table in surprise.

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "I see I wouldn't have missed anything if I'd decided to go home for the break. Is this what you and Ron would do every night after dinner if I wasn't here--gorge yourselves and fall asleep immediately after?"

"Nah," Harry said good-naturedly, scratching his belly. "We wouldn't fall asleep *immediately*. Ron says it's bad for one's digestion."

She was not amused. "Well, I for one don't plan to spend Christmas Eve sprawled in an armchair. Can you drag your bloated body away from the fire long enough to join me in a little...'excursion'?"

"What did you have in mind?"

A crafty smile slowly spread across her face, an expression so unlike her normal business-like manner that Harry actually felt alarmed.

"Go get your Invisibility Cloak, and I'll tell you."

* * *

"Now you can't tell me that this isn't much better."

"I never thought you'd go for something like this."

Under the cover of the cloak, Hermione had led Harry up the twisting flights of stairs to the top of the Astronomy Tower. The night was calm, clear, and cold, with only a few breathy cirrus clouds drifting high in the sky. There was no moon, and no outside light except the dim lantern they had with them, so there was nothing to diminish the milky brightness of the stars spilled across the deep blackness. It was like standing on the top of the world, with only the chill stone beneath their feet to keep them from falling into the endless sky.

"Do you do this often?" Harry asked.

"Sometimes," she said off-handedly, which Harry knew was Hermione-speak for 'every single chance I get'. "Sinistra wrote a chit for me last year, saying that I could come up here if I needed a quiet place to study late at night. But it's more fun this way."

Harry pondered the un-Hermione-like answer, but chose to let it pass.

They stood there for a long time, bundled up against the nose-prickling cold, tracing the familiar patterns of the constellations and planets that they had spent long hours studying in Astronomy class. Hermione spotted the Pleiades almost at once, while Harry pointed out the bright cross made by Cygnus. Soon, they fell to making up stories about their own constellations, picked from the random patterns of stars they saw. Hermione had just finished a story about a cluster of stars that she identified as a man taking a bath in a bucket when Harry raised a hand in warning.

"Did you hear that?" he breathed.

"Hear what?" Hermione whispered, turning white. The thought of being caught sneaking around the school on Christmas Eve was enough to drain all the colour from her face.

Before Harry could answer, the wooden trapdoor in the floor began to open, pushed up from beneath.

He hurriedly closed the shades on the lantern and flung the cloak crookedly over himself and Hermione. They crouched down on the flagstones to minimise the chance of being seen. It

had to be Filch and Mrs. Norris--who else would be in the Astronomy Tower late at night on Christmas Eve?

A head of messy brown hair poked up out of the trapdoor.

Will sniffed the crisp air, eyes closed.

"Beautiful night," he said reverently, his breath drifting up like wisps of smoke.

Still crouching, Harry cautiously lifted the cloak from his head at the same moment that Will chose to open his eyes.

"Good evening to you," he said with a nod.

"Hullo," Harry replied, grinning sheepishly.

"Glad to see that you're taking advantage of this lovely weather. Is that Miss Granger with you?" He peered into the depths of the Invisibility Cloak.

Hermione, hearing her name, scrambled out from under the cloak. She looked suitably abashed. "We weren't doing anyth--"

"Did I ask if you were?" Will interrupted lightly.

Her cheeks, already rosy from the cold, darkened to a vivid crimson.

Will climbed through the trapdoor and closed it as Harry and Hermione stood, brushing chips of stone and dirt from their knees. Harry rolled the cloak up into a tight ball and tucked it under his arm.

The Old One threw his cloak over one shoulder and leaned against one of the parapets that ringed the open tower. In his dark blue robes and long cloak, he almost blended into the surrounding night.

"I had a private chat with your headmaster tonight, concerning your progress," he said. "He is very pleased with your achievements, even more so given the restricted resources and limited time frame we have had to work with. I thought, since I was here, that I would stop by and tell you so myself--but I soon found that a little detour was necessary."

He noticed the Invisibility Cloak stuffed in the crook of Harry's arm. He tilted his head to one side, staring at the magical garment with his detached, professional air. "Is that...would you mind if I had a look at that?"

Harry reluctantly handed it over, the slippery cloth running through his fingers like fine silk or satin.

"Ingenious device," Will murmured as he turned the cloak over in his hands. "Combining practical fashion design and organic materials...the hair of the Demiguise, if I'm not mistaken. I'm certain my colleagues in the Biological Anthropology Department would love to get their hands on a fabric like this." He sounded very scholarly.

Harry shot a confused glance at Hermione, only to discover that she was nodding sagely, a look of complete comprehension on her face.

Will handed the cloak back to Harry. "But enough of that. What brings the both of you up here on this lonely night?"

"She was bored."

"He was being a slug."

Their simultaneous answers made Will chuckle.

"It must be strange to spend the holidays here," he said. "My school wasn't one to permit students to stay after the end of term. I always suspected the teachers wanted us out of there as quickly as possible. Not that it bothered me, you understand--being home for my favourite holiday was exactly what I wanted."

Hermione's face lit up. "Christmas was my favourite holiday at home, too. I used to go to church with my parents on Christmas Eve, see all the candles and beautiful hothouse flowers, listen to the nasty little choirboys howl out the canticles--"

"Easy, now," Will said, raising his hands in mock defence. "I was a 'nasty little choirboy' myself, once upon a time."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes." He smiled nostalgically. "Sunday services in the choir loft, mouldy robes that had seen far better days, dripping beeswax burning our fingers. Plus carol singing through the village in the best of the ancient traditions."

Hermione's eyes went very wide. "You did carol singing, too? Our church choir used to sing outside the shops on Christmas Eve, and the Sunday school classes went with them."

Harry felt that he had to get back into the conversation somehow. "I never knew you could sing, Hermione!"

"Well, what do you expect?" she countered, hands on her hips. "You never asked! I used to sing with the choir every Christmas and Easter until I went off to school. And after that...well...I just didn't see the point."

The offended pride had gone from her voice, and she looked rather embarrassed, scuffing the toe of her shoe against the stone.

"Why is that?" Harry asked.

She hesitated. "Well, I spent the holidays at school, and I wasn't going to church anymore by that time anyway, and...I didn't want to go, that's all. I had other things to think about." She tossed her head impatiently, almost defying them to challenge her choice.

"Things change as you grow older," Will said gently. "What was so important to you when you were small doesn't matter as much, after you've grown up a bit." He regarded Hermione thoughtfully. "And I think you grew up quite a lot, after that first year."

Harry looked over at Hermione, and saw that she was shivering--but she didn't look cold.

"I...I don't really know," she said slowly. "Mum and Dad weren't happy when I told them that I didn't want to go--mostly because I didn't know how to explain it. And I still can't. It's just...it doesn't mean as much to me, not anymore."

"I see." Will's face was unreadable.

Hermione shook her head slightly, as if trying to clear her mind. Her voice regained its normal confidence. "Anyway, I'm a witch, aren't I? Shouldn't I be celebrating Yule or one of those other old holidays? They're probably just as pertinent, when you stop to consider that so many of the contemporary Christmas traditions were originally based on older, pagan festivals that the Roman Catholic Church 'borrowed' in order to...."

She trailed off when she realised that no one was listening to her textbook explanation, and stared down at her hands.

There was an long silence.

Abruptly, Will began to hum a tune that sounded very familiar. Harry's ears pricked up at the soft sound, and he tried unsuccessfully to fit words to the music. It wasn't until Will had gone through the song a second time that he recognised it as the melody of the old carol, "Here We Come A Wassailing".

Hermione had joined in the second time around, humming quietly as well. When they had finished, she looked a little more cheerful.

"I always did like that one," she said.

Will sniffed dismissively. "I wasn't so fond of it...but then again I had to learn a rather high descant for it, and it never sounded quite right to me after that."

"Come on, Hermione, sing something!" Harry prodded.

She shook her head quickly, smiling a smile that tried too hard to be modest. "It's been far too long. I'd probably sound all horrible and croaky."

"Come on, please?" He put on his best pout.

"No."

"Pleeeeeeease?"

"*No.*"

"I bet you're scared."

"I am not!" she said indignantly, though she was gnawing on her lower lip. "I...I just don't want to sing right now, all right?"

"How about a challenge?"

Both of them turned to look at Will.

"A challenge," he repeated. "After all, I have to redeem the honour of nasty little choirboys everywhere. Miss Granger, you will sing a carol of your choosing, and I'll do my best to top you, and so on. Let's see what we come up with."

"I'd never beat you," Hermione said. "You're so much o--" She all but swallowed the taboo word, stopping herself before it could escape her lips.

Will gave her an owlish look. "I might be older than you, but the last time I sang Christmas music my voice was an octave higher. Certain vocal techniques used by a boy soprano might not work for a full-grown man. I'm at a disadvantage in that respect."

"But what happens if you win? Or if I win? How do we win?" Hermione anxiously twisted a strand of hair between her fingers.

"Who said anything about winning? Consider it a matter of personal curiosity."

Left with no other option, Hermione nodded shyly.

But the moment she opened her mouth, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" jumped out as though the song had been waiting in the back of her throat the entire time.

Harry listened with growing delight as the two of them traded songs, running through a wide variety of Christmas music with little outward effort. Hermione sang a lovely rendition of "Angels We Have Heard on High" that featured a rapid and tricky vocal run, but Will merely smiled placidly and countered with its original French version, "Les Anges dans nos Campagnes". Flustered, but not to be outdone, she responded with "O Tannenbaum" in German, paying careful attention to the accuracy of her accent. Will, for his part, sang the chorus and the first two verses of the ancient carol "Riu, Riu, Chiu" with sharp, staccato Spanish precision.

"You're quite good, Miss Granger," Will said when she had finished her next song, a pretty version of "Adeste Fideles" that incorporated both the original Latin and its familiar English translation. "A worthy opponent."

Harry thought so, too, but he knew that if he said so she'd never let him hear the end of it.

"You won't beat him, though," he said wickedly, waggling his eyebrows at her.

Her eyes snapped sparks as she glared at him. "Let's see who'll get the beating, Harry Potter."

Will, sensing the sudden tension in the air, moved toward the trapdoor. "I think that's enough for one night."

"No."

Harry blinked, surprised. Hermione had caught hold of the edge of Will's cloak and was looking up at the older man with shining eyes.

"Just one more," she said. She was calm, but demanding.

Will nodded in acquiescence. He leaned back against the stone wall, waiting silently.

Hermione let go of his cloak and turned away from them, staring up at the sky. Without any introduction, she closed her eyes and began to sing.

"Watchman, tell us of the night, What its signs of promise are."

Harry had never heard the song before, but the tune was pleasant and peaceful. Hermione's alto voice, trembling faintly but sure of the lyrics, rang through the empty night sky like a treble bell.

Then, to his amazement, Will responded as if taking a cue:

"Traveller, o'er yon mountain's height See that glory beaming star."

Hermione spun around, her startled expression quickly relaxing into a joyful smile. Her face was intent and earnest as she sang.

"Watchman, does its beauteous ray Aught of joy or hope foretell?"

Will returned her gaze steadily, answering in all seriousness the question she had asked.

"Traveller, yes; it brings the day, Promised day of Israel."

Harry stood as still as a statue, completely enthralled. He could feel the song around him like a pure liquid, surrounding them, shot through with an enchantment that took his breath away. Listening to them and looking up at the sky, he watched the stars twinkle and shine as they must have done on a similar night nearly two thousand years before.

"Watchman, tell us of the night, For the morning seems to dawn..."

A plain melody, uncomplicated and childlike in its simplicity.

"Traveller, darkness takes its flight; Doubt and terror are withdrawn."

Two solo voices that seemed to fill the world with music.

"Watchman, let thy wanderings cease; Hie thee to thy quiet home."

Was that a slight pause before Will sang his last line? It was brief, no more than a beat, but it interrupted the flow of the music long enough to make the final lines stand out as he and Hermione ended the song together in vibrant harmony.

"Traveller, lo, the Prince of Peace, Lo, the Son of God is come! Traveller, lo, the Prince of Peace, Lo, the Son of God is come! Lo, the Son of God is come!"

The music faded, and slowly, the magic faded as well. They were once again on top of the Astronomy Tower, staring up at the star-filled sky and the wreaths of grey clouds that decorated the velvety night.

Far in the distance, a bell began to toll the hour. They counted twelve strikes.

"Happy Christmas," Will said quietly.

"Happy Christmas," Harry and Hermione murmured.

The words seemed to be a signal for them to depart, and silently they gathered up the lantern and the Invisibility Cloak and trooped off down the stairs, leaving Will alone on the parapet, gazing out into the night.

As Harry walked through the empty halls to the Gryffindor dormitory, his feet felt as though they barely touched the ground. Tomorrow...no, today was Christmas Day. He was at Hogwarts. He was with his friends. They would open presents in the morning, and have snowball fights, and eat far too much at dinner. Life was good. No, more than good...it was wonderful.

In his mind, he could still hear the echoes of the last lines of the carol, sung in the soft alto of one of his closest friends and the rich baritone of a man who had grown to be as important to him as any adult he had ever known.

"Traveller, lo, the Prince of Peace, Lo, the Son of God is come! Lo, the Son of God is come!"

Chapter Eighteen - Christmas Shadows

Do not stand on my grave and weep; I am not there. I do not sleep. I am a thousand winds that blow. I am the diamond glints on snow. I am the sunlight on ripened grain. I am the gentle autumn's rain. When you awaken in the morning's hush, I am the swift uplifting rush Of quiet birds in the circled flight. I am the soft stars that shine at night. Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there. I did not die.

-- Anonymous epitaph

Harry knew that something was distinctly wrong the moment he woke up and found himself tied to a chair in pitch darkness.

A brief struggle told him that further struggles would be a waste of energy. He was trussed tightly, so tightly that even shifting his weight made the thin ropes that bound him bite into his arms and legs.

His eyes hadn't adjusted to the absence of light, so he tried to use other senses to figure out where he was. He wasn't outside, he could tell that much. He guessed that he was in some kind of room. It was overly warm and damp, and there was a strange smell in the air. He couldn't identify it, but it was strong, with a strange, unidentifiable tang that irritated his nose and throat.

A light flared brightly in front of his face, blinding him. When the spots on his vision cleared, he saw a figure wrapped in dark clothing placing a newly lit torch in a rusted wall holder.

There was just enough light for Harry to see directly in front of him--the rest of the room remained in darkness. The wall where the torch was mounted was made of flat, dull slate. A series of four thick, velvety draperies hung on the wall, two on either side of the lit torch. There was nothing in the room to indicate where he was, let alone how he had gotten there.

The dark-clothed figure turned around, and at a glance Harry took in the wispy hair, the rodent-like face, the red-rimmed, watery eyes that stared at him with half-frightened malice.

"Wormtail..." he growled, revulsion churning in the pit of his stomach.

His father's former friend flexed his silver hand, spreading his glistening fingers wide. "Nice to see you again, Potter."

"Why am I here?" he demanded, showing more bravery than he actually felt. His head was starting to hurt; there was a dull throbbing above his eyebrows that made it difficult to see. "What do you want with me?"

An oily grin spread across the Death Eater's face. "I thought you might like to see a special treat that the Master set up, just for you."

He pointed to the wall behind him, the wall that Harry was facing.

"What are you playing at?" Harry said warily, squinting against the inconstant light.

"Why don't you see for yourself?" Wormtail said.

He walked over to the curtain on the farthest left, and pulled back the thick material to reveal the freshly severed head of a large wolf, mounted on a polished wooden plaque. Its teeth were bared in a frozen death grimace. Dark blood still oozed from the stump of its neck, staining the wood black.

"You monster!" Harry choked out, transfixed with shock. The sickly sweet odour had grown stronger. It coated the back of his throat.

Wormtail didn't seem to have heard him. He calmly studied the mounted head, a little smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Dear Remus always was a little careless just before his 'time of the month'," he said. "But I really think he can be excused for his behaviour--after all, he **was** trying to save his friend...."

The second of the draperies fell away, and the shaggy head of a great black dog stared blankly at Harry. Crusts of dried blood matted the thick fur. The overpowering stench, now identifiable as a coppery mixture of blood and rotting flesh, which permeated the air grew even stronger.

Harry slumped forward, gagging on the bile that seared his mouth and throat. He would have fallen out of the chair if the ropes hadn't been there to keep him in place.

"Oh, what's the matter? Wittle boy has a dicky tummy?" Wormtail put on an exaggerated expression of concern.

Harry spat at him, and snarled a wordless threat.

Wormtail ignored the display of helpless rage. He pointed to the two mounted heads with all the pride of a museum curator introducing a brand new collection.

"These are just some of his more recent acquisitions," he said. "The Master's most treasured trophies are ones he has had for quite some time. Sentimental value, you understand." He rested his gleaming hand on the third curtain and ran it down the cloth in an obscene mimicry of a loving caress. "I'm sure that you, of all people, can appreciate a fine work such as this one...."

This time, Wormtail took special care in removing the cloth. Affixed to yet another wooden plaque was the head of a once magnificent stag, antlers bristling like a crown of thorny branches. But where the first two plaques had looked new and freshly made, the third was older, with darker, seasoned wood. The stag's head looked moth-eaten, foul and rotting, as if

some insane taxidermist had started the job and stopped halfway through but decided to mount the head anyway.

Harry felt the liquid warmth of blood trickle down his face. His nose had started bleeding some time before--he didn't know exactly when. His heart was pounding so violently that he thought it would explode. The pain in his head thrummed rhythmically, keeping time with his heart.

Wormtail nodded in approval, and looked over his shoulder at Harry. "There's one more that I think you'd like to see. The Master would have never come across it if it hadn't been for you. Yes...just one more."

Harry couldn't look away as the last cloth hit the floor.

His first horrified thought was that whatever it had once been could not have been human. Its face was suffused with blood, the skin a mottled purplish-red. Its swollen, blackened tongue protruded slightly from its gaping mouth. Its hair, which might have once been thick and beautiful, was befouled by chunks and clumps of old, dried blood.

But the worst part was the eyes. Hints of vibrant green were just barely visible through the burst blood vessels that clouded their brilliance. The eyes stared blindly back at him, mocking him with their eerie similarity to his own as he gazed at the plaque that displayed his mother's head.

His mother's head.

His mother's severed head.

He screamed and flung himself against his bindings, nearly strangling himself as he tried to break free.

"This isn't real!" he shrieked, thrashing about. "It's a nightmare! A NIGHTMARE!"

"Naive, foolish boy." Wormtail's lips were moving, but it was Lord Voldemort's high, cruel voice that spoke through his servant's mouth. "You say this is a nightmare. Well, perhaps it *is* a nightmare, but it's a nightmare you've created for yourself...and I will see to it that you NEVER WAKE UP!"

"You LIE!" Harry screamed, scalding tears mingling with the blood that still dripped from his nose.

The Wormtail-Voldemort thing laughed, a deafening, insane cackle. The room started to grow dark and cold, though the torch still burned like a beacon on the hideous trophy wall.

"You'll never wake up!" Voldemort crowed triumphantly. "You'll never wake up...Harry, you'll never wake up...never wake up...wake up...wake up, Harry...wake up...."

The voice shifted subtly, changed. Suddenly, it wasn't Voldemort speaking...it sounded like Professor McGonagall. But what would McGonagall be doing in this place?

"Harry, wake up." McGonagall's voice grew louder and more insistent. "Wake up, now."

With a supreme effort, he opened his eyes and took stock of the situation. He wasn't tied down to a chair; he was caught in his own twisted bedsheets. There was no Wormtail, no Voldemort, no ghastly row of severed heads. Just McGonagall's blurry, tear-streaked face. Even without his glasses, he could tell she had been crying.

He saw two flesh-coloured blurs--her hands, he guessed--moving over his sheets, pulling at the blankets. She was trying to help him sit up.

He pushed himself to a sitting position, and felt a strange, warm wetness running down his lip and chin. Once his hand was free of the tangled bedclothes, he reached up and wiped at his face.

His hand came away bloody.

Swallowing a scream, he looked down at his pillow. It was wet, but not with shed tears. The once-white fabric was stained a deep crimson, matching the blood that continued to drip steadily from his nose.

McGonagall held out a handkerchief, and he grabbed it and pressed it to his nose, staunching the flow of blood. With his other hand, he fumbled for his glasses and put them on.

For the first time, he could look around the room. The sun had not yet risen, but there was just enough light for him to see by. He turned his head slightly, and saw Seamus and Dean huddled together on Dean's bed, staring at their Head of House and their one remaining roommate with glazed, fearful eyes. Professor McGonagall was standing next to his bed, holding the curtain of the four-poster aside with one hand.

"There's someone here to see you," she said, dabbing her eyes with another handkerchief, the twin of the one Harry held to his nose. With a wave of her wand, she opened the door that led out to the hall.

"Come in, please," she called out.

A tallish man stepped into the room. The dark clothing he wore made a sharp contrast to the bright red spill of hair that fell well past his shoulders.

It was Bill Weasley.

For a moment, Harry could only stare uncomprehendingly at the visitor. But as he stared, a small thread of thought painstakingly knitted itself together inside his head.

Bill Weasley. Bill Weasley, Ron's older brother. Bill Weasley, Ron's older brother, who was supposed to be at the Burrow with the rest of the family. Bill Weasley, Ron's older brother, who was supposed to be at the Burrow with the rest of the family, and who was instead standing in his dormitory before dawn on Christmas morning. Bill Weasley, Ron's older brother, who was supposed to be at the Burrow with the rest of the family, and who was instead standing in his dormitory before dawn on Christmas morning, looking like someone had just--

His heart stopped.

A sinking, rushing emptiness consumed his chest as everything came together at once. The pain in his head, the awful dream, McGonagall's tears. There was only one explanation.

The blood-stained handkerchief slipped from his fingers and landed on the floor. He felt the inside of his nose tingle as it started to bleed again. Blood everywhere...why was there so much blood?

"No, no, no..." he moaned softly, the volume increasing with each repetition. "No, no, *no*--"

"Harry, wait," Bill interrupted. He hurried over to the bed and took Harry's hand, not caring about the sticky, congealing blood smeared on the boy's fingers. "Listen to me--Ron and Ginny are all right. It's all right. They're okay."

"Okay...?" Suddenly, the emptiness went away. He could breathe again.

Bill nodded slowly. Now that he was closer to the bed, Harry could see the dark smudges of shadows under his eyes and the lines of sleep deprivation around his mouth and on his brow.

"D'you mind if I sit down?" he asked.

Without waiting for a reply, he sat on the edge of Harry's bed. He reached down and picked up the stained handkerchief, then handed it back to Harry. Harry dabbed at his nose with the clean corners as he listened to Bill talk.

"We went to the Diggorys for dinner last night," he explained, by way of introduction. "Christmas Eve, and all that. Stayed late, exchanged some gifts, had far too much mulled wine, the usual holiday thing. It was just past midnight when we finally decided to head home--using Floo Powder, of course. Mum was the first one to leave."

He pulled a dirty handkerchief out of his own sleeve and blew his nose loudly. "I knew something was wrong the moment she left. I just had this awful *feeling* that something was going to happen. It looked like Dad had the same feeling, too, because he told Ron, Ginny, and the twins to stay behind and wait for us to come back. He, Charlie, and I followed her as soon as we could.

"There were two people in the house. They were dressed like Death Eaters--all in black, masks and everything. They'd probably been in the house waiting for us to return, and since we came back so late it looked like they'd gotten a little...twitchy. They attacked the first person they saw."

"Attacked?" Harry whispered, praying that he had misheard.

What little light there was in Bill's eyes went out. "Mum's dead, Harry. They used the Killing Curse on her."

His mind fluttered about like a bird that had just hit a window. His first coherent thought spilled from his mouth before he could stop it. "But he said they couldn't...he *said*--"

"Who said...?" Bill started to ask, but shook his head sadly and dropped the subject. "Dad wanted me to come and tell you as soon as possible. He said you deserved to know. But that's not the only reason I'm here."

"What?" Harry took the handkerchief away from his nose. The bleeding had finally stopped.

The older man cleared his throat. "Ron told me you're not supposed to leave the school over the holiday. But Dad also wanted me to ask you, and Hermione if it's all right, to please come to Mum's funeral. We've planned it for the day after tomorrow--there's a few things that have to be taken care of before then."

"I...I..." Harry stammered. He turned to McGonagall, the question plain in his eyes.

She returned his gaze steadily. The deep lines around her nose and mouth made her look far older and more tired than she really was, but her eyes were calm and composed.

"I will ask," she replied. "I don't see any reason why you and Miss Granger shouldn't go--provided a teacher accompanies you."

"If Dumbledore lets you, please come," Bill said. "It would mean a lot to everyone." He ran a hand across his face, rubbing his eyes.

"Of course I'll come," Harry declared. No one, not Dumbledore, not Will, not even Voldemort, would prevent him from attending.

Bill smiled wanly, then stood and started to head for the door, without so much as a glance at either Seamus or Dean.

McGonagall nudged Harry, and said in a low voice, "Mr. Potter, please get dressed and come with me. We have to break the unfortunate news to Miss Granger...and we need you there."

A wave of cold ran through his body, like ice water poured into his veins. He shivered.

Happy Christmas, Hermione, he thought bitterly as he climbed out of bed.

* * *

Neither of them had ever been to a wizarding funeral before. They had to borrow the proper robes for the occasion--he from Dumbledore, she from McGonagall. Not surprisingly, the voluminous hooded funeral robes were all black, made of a stiff, scratchy fabric that rubbed like sandpaper against their skin. A quick alteration spell took care of the size differences, but they still felt like they were swimming in a sea of thick, chafing material.

The funeral was to be held at noon on the 27th, the day after Boxing Day. McGonagall had agreed to accompany them as their chaperone. Dumbledore, stressing the need for security, had worked out a plan where they would arrive immediately before the funeral started and leave immediately afterward. There would be no time to talk to any of the Weasleys. The children grumbled at the restrictions, but agreed. They would agree to any conditions if it allowed them to attend the funeral.

Boxing Day flew by in a murky haze, and the day of the funeral came all too soon. They woke early, dressed early, and sat in uncomfortable silence in the common room for nearly two hours, waiting for McGonagall to come and get them. But when she came, she took them to Dumbledore's office, saying that he wanted to give them a few words of advice.

They arrived in his office to find a fire burning in the hearth and a jar of Floo Powder on his desk.

"I've arranged things with the Diggorys to let you use their fireplace for travel," he said. "There are a few things you should know before you leave. I don't want you to be completely ignorant of what may happen this afternoon.

"You don't need to worry about any ritual phrases or actions. No one will ask you to do anything. You are there to show respect for the dead and for the family of the dead. Keep your hood up at all times-- that's a very important mark of respect." He adjusted his glasses. "Have either of you ever attended a Muggle funeral?"

"No," said Harry.

"I've only seen them on telly," Hermione said softly.

Dumbledore nodded solemnly. "The most important thing to remember is that a wizarding funeral is based primarily on tradition. It has remained essentially unchanged for centuries. Many people, myself included, do not always agree with much of the ceremony, but it is tradition, and as such deserves respect." He paused, then added to no one in particular, "No matter how barbaric it may seem."

"We'll be late, Headmaster," McGonagall said, gently reminding him.

"Yes." He took a handful of the silvery Floo Powder, and tossed it on the fire. The flames blazed high, turning a vibrant green.

"The Diggorys," he said, loudly and clearly.

McGonagall went through the flames first. Hermione followed her, and Harry went last.

* * *

They emerged in the empty sitting room of the Diggory house. Only the fire they had just walked through brought light and heat to the room.

Harry looked around the large, well-furnished room. It could have been a room in any well-to-do Muggle home. Not a pillow was out of place, not a bit of dust was in sight. It was pretty, true, but Harry didn't like it. All he could think of was the cheerfulness and cosy warmth of the Burrow, a sharp contrast to this sterile house. Its painful neatness reminded him of Privet Drive. He knew what it was like to be in a room that had been cleaned to within an inch of its life.

His eye was drawn to a wall covered with framed photographs. He walked up to it to have a closer look.

Every single picture featured Cedric Diggory. A young, skinny Cedric in his very first Hogwarts uniform, grinning toothily. An older Cedric in mid-air, a blur of yellow Quidditch robes diving after the Snitch. Cedric proudly displaying his shiny new prefect's badge. Cedric and Cho Chang in formal robes, a handsome couple, taken the night of the Yule Ball. Cedric posing with his mother. Cedric with his father. Cedric and his parents together, arms around

each other, laughing happily as they posed for the camera. A wall of Cedric. A shrine to Cedric. A memorial for Cedric.

Harry shuddered, and turned away.

The sitting room led into the kitchen, and from the kitchen they left the house through the back door. As she stepped outside, McGonagall pulled her hood over her head, and Harry and Hermione took their cue from her and did likewise. They walked across the manicured lawn, headed for the woods.

The day was cold, grey, and overcast. Only a few weak rays of sunlight were able to trickle through the heavy cloud cover. The wooded path they were taking felt very familiar to Harry, though he didn't remember where he was until he picked out a few of the landmarks he recalled from his after-dinner stroll with Ginny. Could it have only been a few months since he had last walked this way? It felt like an age had passed since then.

He helped Hermione through a tricky patch of snow-covered brambles, untangling her from their sharp thorns as he tried to avoid getting caught himself. The soggy snow stuck to their shoes in obstinate clumps, and soaked the dragging hems of their robes.

They arrived at the small cemetery just as the sun reached what would have been its zenith, if it had been shining that day. Scattered throughout the clearing were little groups of people, dressed in the same voluminous black funeral robes they were wearing. There was no hum of conversation or idle talk; everyone was silent, waiting.

Somewhere in the trees, a bird trilled feebly.

Then, at some unspoken signal, the groups of people began to come together, to congregate at a respectful distance around a barren plot of earth not far from the other graves. The snow had been carefully cleared away from the spot, leaving the ground muddy and brown.

Harry felt a hand tentatively brush his fingers. He reached over and grasped the hand firmly, and felt Hermione's thin, smooth fingers lace themselves around his own callused ones. Her palms were clammy.

There was a crunching noise, the sound of footsteps approaching. Harry turned his head at an strained, stiff angle in an attempt to see out through the opening of his hood.

A small procession was approaching at a measured pace. Peering out from under his enveloping hood, Harry counted no fewer than a dozen people. All of them wore the funeral robes, but their hoods were pushed back, hanging forgotten.

The first person in the procession was an elderly wizard in robes of deep purple and black. Under one arm, he carried a thick book. The colour of his robes may have been muted, but the cut suggested that he occupied the position of importance in the approaching group. He had a very efficient stride, which made him look completely sure of himself and his official position.

A few paces behind him walked Mr. Weasley and his three eldest sons. Mr. Weasley and Percy were in the front, and Bill and Charlie were in the rear. On their shoulders they carried a bier made of rough wood. On top of the bier was a body, swathed in yards and yards of

white cloth. So much fabric had been used in the wrapping that the still figure was a shapeless mass of cloth, barely recognisable as a human being.

Behind the adults were the twins, all the mirth and merriment gone from their faces. Their steps dragged. Ron and Ginny brought up the rear. Ron was all but carrying Ginny, his face a tight blank as he helped his sister walk. She was a wreck. Her peaked face occasionally twitched nervously as she leaned heavily on his arm and let him propel her forward.

The elderly wizard stopped at the head of the cleared patch of ground, and the pallbearers set down their load with the utmost care. The Weasley family formed a half-circle around the bier. Mr. Weasley stood at the far left, closest to the officiant. Ron supported Ginny at the far right.

The officiant nodded respectfully to Mr. Weasley and opened his book. He began to speak very quickly in a language that Harry couldn't understand. It sounded like Latin, but the only Latin he knew was the Latin of spells and charms. He wasn't able to follow the formal pattern of the actual spoken language. He could only stand stiffly and listen to the endless drone of words in miserable incomprehension.

There was no sound from the crowd. Harry thought he heard Hermione sniffing next to him, but it might have been his imagination, or his own irregular breathing. Sounds outside the hood were muffled, but within the hood any noise he made was perfectly clear.

Mercifully, the officiant ended his long Latin oration before Harry's feet had started to hurt from standing still. The sun had travelled a little ways across the sky, and Harry guessed from the shadows cast by the surrounding trees that it was nearly two o'clock.

His speech completed, the officiant closed the massive volume and tucked it under his arm. He turned to the crowd, and said in English:

"On behalf of the Weasley family, I thank you for coming here on this sad day. Now I must ask you all to be witnesses to what will follow, for in unfortunate circumstances such as these there is a regrettable but necessary task that must be performed."

He turned back to the Weasley family. "Arthur Weasley, are you prepared?"

"I am," Mr. Weasley replied, without emotion.

The officiant reached into some hidden recess in his robes and pulled out a long, slender object. He held it out to Mr. Weasley. At first, Harry thought that it was a stick, but a second glance sent his stomach lurching as he realised what it was.

Mrs. Weasley's wand.

Arthur Weasley took his late wife's wand and turned it over in his hands, staring dumbly at it as if it was some strange Muggle artefact that he had never seen before. After turning it over two or three times, studying it from all angles, he grasped it firmly in his hand. For some reason, though, he held it the wrong way round--the tip was pointing straight down. He wrapped his other hand around his closed fist, carrying the wand like a candle held upside down. Clumsily, he knelt down in the snow next to the bier.

Then, he raised his arms high over his head, and with a keening, agonised cry drove the point of the wand deep into his wife's chest.

Harry couldn't stop himself from crying out, but his horrified shout was drowned out by a deafening pop, as noisy as an entire string of firecrackers going off at once. An enormous cloud of cloying, oily black smoke erupted from the bier, obscuring everything in his sight. He held his breath and shut his eyes tightly as the cloud engulfed the crowd of mourners.

It took a long time for the smoke to clear, but when it finally did, he saw through red and irritated eyes that the wooden bier and its sad burden were gone. All that remained was a small heap of greyish-white ashes resting on the fallen snow. Mr. Weasley's hands were empty--Mrs. Weasley's wand was gone.

A weak, fluttering cry pierced the silence, and Harry's head snapped up to see Ginny swaying on her feet. Her face was a sick yellow-grey. Her eyes rolled back in her head, showing a horrible flash of whites, and she fell backward.

Ron wasn't prepared for his sister's fainting spell. Desperately, he clung to her, trying to keep her from hitting the ground, but he couldn't get a good grip on her arm through the rough fabric. She was slipping from his grasp.

Something outside Harry propelled him forward, moving his legs and arms as he ran. He dove, sliding through snow and mud in a frantic attempt to catch Ginny before she hurt herself. He missed her and ended up with a faceful of mud, but thankfully Ginny landed on top of him. He had broken her fall.

He lay still, supporting her as best he could. He heard the sound of hushed voices, of people moving about, but over that was the sound of Ginny's sweet, frightened voice ringing in his head:

'You don't know what wizarding funerals are like. It's...it isn't something....'

She had been to Cedric's funeral earlier that summer. She had gone to pay her respects to the Diggory family and to the deceased, and she had seen...she had seen....

The pressure on his back was gone. Someone had picked Ginny up.

He got to his feet slowly, futilely scraping the mud from Dumbledore's robes with his fingernails. The robe most likely was ruined, but he scraped at it anyway, trying to clean it as best he could. He reached up to put his hood back, but remembered just in time that he had to keep the hood on at all times. It seemed rather stupid, somehow, considering what a spectacle he'd made of himself. He gave a final, half-hearted scrape to Dumbledore's robe, and lifted his head.

He found himself looking directly at Ron.

All of the sympathetic words that rushed to mind died on his lips. Ron was staring into his eyes, and the awful paroxysm of rage that Harry saw on his best friend's face was so powerful that he recoiled from it, cringing away.

"Keep away from my sister," Ron hissed in a low, deadly voice.

Without another word, he whirled around and rejoined his family, falling into step in the rear.

Bill was carrying Ginny, her delicate little body looking small and forlorn in her big brother's arms. The mourning party trudged away into the woods in the direction that Harry knew would lead back to the Burrow. The crowd followed in their wake, a deferential distance behind them.

Harry dumbly watched them leave, then lifted a heavy hand and put back his mud-soaked hood. He turned around and saw Hermione and McGonagall, the only ones who had remained in the cemetery, remove their hoods as well.

Hermione brushed away her tears with the back of her hand, and beckoned to him. The three of them left the clearing, heading back to the Diggory house and Hogwarts.

* * *

The clock in Dumbledore's office was just chiming the three o'clock hour when they emerged from the fireplace. The moment he stepped from the flames, Harry stripped off the dripping, mud-covered funeral robe. Dumbledore raised an eyebrow as he took it from him, but did not ask any questions.

He took a very long shower that afternoon. He stood in the spray for well over an hour, watching the mud wash off his body and gurgle down the drain. When the hot water finally ran out, he towelled himself off, changed into old, comfortable clothing, and combed his hair. He didn't think he could stomach the sight or smell of dinner, so he decided to have a nap until Hermione returned from the Great Hall.

But he couldn't sleep. He stared at the scarlet canopy of his four-poster bed and listened to the wet thud of snow against the stone walls.

Seamus and Dean came back from dinner and went immediately to their beds, not looking at Harry. He knew that they weren't sure what to say to him, or how they were supposed to react, but the awkward silence was too much for him to bear. Grabbing a bulky wrapped object that he had placed at the foot of his bed earlier in the day, he left the room and wandered down to the common room.

Hermione was sitting in an armchair by the fire, reading the evening edition of The Daily Prophet. She looked up as he approached, and wordlessly handed him the front page.

He read the headline, and gasped.

MINISTER OF MAGIC RESIGNS IN ABUSE OF POWER SCANDAL Allegations Force Fudge from Office

BY: Daphne St. John, Staff Reporter

In a move not entirely unexpected to those who have been following developments within the Ministry, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge resigned this afternoon in light of accusations of abuse of power and gross misconduct concerning his handling of the wizarding world's most recent tragedy.

Fudge admitted to the press today that he ordered Dementors at Azkaban Prison to perform the Dementor's Kiss upon the two people who were being held in connection with the Christmas Eve murder of Mrs. Molly Weasley at the Weasley home in Ottery St Catchpole, Devon.

The two people, a witch and a wizard whose names are being withheld pending notification of their families, were apprehended by Mr. Arthur Weasley and other Ministry officials shortly after the murder. A Prior Incantato performed on one of their wands revealed that the last spell it had produced was the Killing Curse, one of the three Unforgivable Curses that can warrant a life sentence in Azkaban.

The accused had been sent to Azkaban to await trial, but earlier this morning, the head guard at Azkaban received a confidential owl from Fudge which explicitly stated that the prisoners were to be turned over to the Dementors.

"I didn't question the orders," the guard later said. "It was signed by the Minister, and that was enough for me."

It is undetermined whether the attackers were acting of their own free will. Sources inside the Ministry and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement hint that the witch and wizard may have been victims of the Imperius Curse. No definite statements on this matter have been released by the Ministry or Ministry officials as of yet.

Fudge did not give a reason for his orders, but many speculate that he was attempting to cover up the murder by eliminating the perpetrators and witnesses to the crime. The Dementor's Kiss, when performed on a person, irretrievably removes the soul from the victim's body and leaves him or her incapable of thought, speech, or action. The accused are now unable to testify or give any information about the murder.

Fudge is currently under house arrest in an undisclosed location, pending interrogation by a special task force of Aurors assigned to the case. The Aurors are also looking into his decision to allow Dementors to perform the Kiss on Bartemius Crouch, Jr., who was arrested last year in connection with the Triwizard Tournament fiasco at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

(For more in-depth coverage, please turn to the next page.)

Harry collapsed into a nearby chair. This was too much.

"So that's that," Hermione said flatly, folding the rest of the paper and setting it on the floor by her chair. "Now they'll never be able to prove that Voldemort was behind it."

"D'you think they were Death Eaters?" he asked. His head was spinning.

"I doubt it," she replied. "It would have been much easier to just grab two unsuspecting people and order them to do it, with a little help from the Imperius Curse."

"What do you think will happen?"

She shook her head, and sighed. "I don't know. I honestly don't know."

Harry felt the tightness that had been building up inside his chest reach painful proportions. He held out the package he had brought down from his room.

"I brought you your Christmas present," he said thickly, thrusting it at her.

Hermione took it from him, and unwrapped it. Her eyes widened as she removed a thick, leather-bound book from the wrapping paper. "Guide to Babylonian Methods of Arithomantic Thought" was printed in gilt letters on the side and cover.

"However did you get this?" she said wonderingly. "When I wrote to Flourish and Blotts to order it, they said that they'd just sold the last copy the week before and it would take a month for another to come in."

"They probably sold the last one to me," Harry said with a grin. "I ordered it a few weeks after school started. I couldn't believe how heavy it was--I was almost afraid that the owl that brought it wouldn't get through. Happy Christmas, anyway."

"Thanks," she said, smiling. It was the first time he had seen her smile since Christmas Eve. "I've got your present up in my room. Do you want me to get it?"

"That's all right," Harry said as she started to get up. "You don't have to go get it now."

Hermione leaned back in her chair. "Remind me, and I'll get it for you before we go to bed."

They sat together for a time in silence. It seemed that silence was getting to be a big part of their lives, these days.

"It seems so strange, not getting a Weasley jumper this year," Harry said drowsily, half to himself.

"What?" Hermione looked up from her new book.

He shrugged, and toyed with the sheets of newspaper that lay on the floor, pushing them around with his foot. "S just that I'm so used to getting a jumper for Christmas. It's strange not to have one."

She stared at him as if he'd suddenly grown another head.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I don't believe this," she said disgustedly.

"What's the matter?" Harry sat up very straight. He was wide awake now. "What did I say?"

Her face darkened. "Are you really that dense?" she snapped. "Don't you have any feelings, any brains at all?"

He blinked, confused. "All I said was--"

"I don't care what you said," Hermione retorted, coldly cutting him off. "Ron's mum is dead, and all you can think about is how she's not going to send you any more presents."

Confusion gave way to anger. "That's not what I said at all!"

"You just...oh, look, forget it, all right?" She pushed her hair out of her eyes. The anger was gone from her face, leaving it slack and exhausted, frog-belly pale in the firelight. "I'm tired, you're tired. It's been a long day for both of us--let's just go to bed."

He was out of his chair before she could even stand up.

"You ALWAYS do that!" he yelled, jabbing at her with his finger. "You start up an argument and then drop it before anyone else gets a chance to explain. Well, it's my turn to talk, and you're going to listen to me for once, Hermione Granger."

Fear flickered through her eyes. "Harry--"

A little voice in the back of his mind told him to shut up before things got out of hand, but there was no stopping him. He was sick and tired of being treated like his opinions didn't matter, and he was damn well going to have his say this time.

"You like to blame people for lots of things, don't you?" he said viciously, finding the words that he knew would hurt her most. "Like to find fault? Well, go ahead and do it all you want, because I don't care *what* you think. It doesn't make any difference, anyway. You're not going to believe anyone but yourself."

"Harry, listen--"

"It's never *your* fault, is it? Did you ever think of that?"

"Harry--"

"Thinking you're so above all of us--"

"Now wait a minute--"

"You probably even think it's MY fault she's dead!"

He was so furious, he didn't see the book leave her hand until it was too late.

One sharp corner struck him high on his right cheek, right below his eye. He cried out, clapping a hand to his face and falling to his knees. His glasses slipped off his nose and fell to the floor. The book landed heavily and slid toward the hearth, stopping just short of the ashes.

Doubled over in pain, he couldn't see Hermione, but he could hear her voice.

"Damn you, you cold-hearted bastard," she said in a thin, dry whisper, like the sound of leaves blowing. "Get out of my sight."

* * *

He did.

He fled the common room, running blindly through the empty halls. He stumbled, tripped and picked himself up, and kept running. He neither knew nor cared where he was going. His cheek throbbed and he couldn't see very well out of his right eye, but seeing wasn't a priority. He had to get away.

Cramps crawled across his stomach and sides, squeezing the air out of him like a boa constrictor around the waist. He skidded to a dizzy halt, clinging to the wall for support. He couldn't run anymore. He seriously doubted if he could even walk.

The stones of the wall he clung to were deliciously cold to the touch of his hot face and hands. He slumped forward, pressing his cheek against the wall. When the cramps had subsided enough for him to concentrate on something besides his own breathing, he opened his eyes.

Not five feet in front of him was the door to the little room off the library.

It couldn't have been a coincidence, but the last thing he cared about at that moment was coincidence. It was somewhere to go.

He pushed open the door and slipped inside, locking it behind him.

He dropped his wand twice before he could say the simple spell to start a fire. The pain in his cheek made his right eye water badly, and he had to keep wiping the tears away in order to see. Once the fire was lit, he sat down in the chair that was closest to the mirror and looked in the glass.

A wild boy stared back at him. Thick black hair dishevelled, glasses hanging askew, a nasty purplish-black mark beginning to form on his cheek. He would have a beauty of a bruise in a few hours, but right now his face was merely hot and swollen. He stared at himself, and loathed what he saw.

On an impulse, he extended a trembling hand and touched the carved wooden frame of the mirror.

He watched as the wild-looking boy disappeared in a swirl of grey mist. The carved pattern of the frame glowed steadily, shining white tinged with faint blue.

Will was sitting at his desk, holding a thick book open with his left hand as he wrote on a pad of paper. Harry could hear a piece of classical music, heavy on the violins, playing quietly in the background.

"I'll be with you momentarily," he said, not looking up from his writing. The pen continued its fluid journey across the paper without a pause.

Harry nodded, then realised Will couldn't hear a nod. He started to apologise, but thought better of it and closed his mouth.

Without thinking, he began to drum his fingers on the nearby bookshelf ledge, staring out into space. He didn't realise what he was doing until he noticed that the soft scratch of pen on paper had stopped.

He blinked, refocused, and saw that Will was watching him over the top of his glasses.

"Would you mind not doing that?" the older man asked. He sounded mildly irritated. "I can hear that in here, you know."

Harry jerked the offending hand away from the bookcase and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Sorry, sir," he said guiltily.

The pen started to move again. After what in Harry's mind felt like forever, Will put his pen down, picked up a slip of paper from the side of his desk, marked his place in the book he held, and set it aside. He stood and walked over to the mirror. He had taken his suit jacket from the back of his chair and was about to put it on, but stopped short when he saw only Harry's wan face staring up at him.

"Just you?" he asked.

"Just me," Harry answered despondently. "And it looks like it'll be that way for a while."

"I see." He peered at Harry, and his eyes narrowed. "Who did that to you?" he asked, pointing to the bruise on the young man's cheek.

"Hermione."

An eyebrow raised. "Miss Granger?"

"Yeah." He reached up and probed the wound with his fingers. He winced. It hurt like hell, but at least it wasn't bleeding. "She chucked a book at me."

"For no reason?"

"I don't know."

"I assume she had a reason for it."

"I don't KNOW!" The outburst exhausted the little strength he had managed to muster. He rested his head against the bookshelf ledge and closed his eyes. "And I gave her the stupid book, too."

"Well, if you gave it to her, you can hardly control what she chooses to use it for."

The Old One's placid but pointedly logical comment brought home the absurdity of the situation in a way that no soothing reassurance could have done. Harry felt the last fiery bit of anger in his heart go out, extinguished like a snuffed candle. It left him feeling empty inside, and very cold.

"Why am I such an ass?" he moaned.

Will coughed delicately. "I sincerely hope that's a rhetorical question."

Harry didn't laugh. "You don't know...no, of course you do," he corrected himself, opening his eyes. "You always know, somehow."

Will tilted his head to one side. "That's part of who I am. But yes, to answer your question, I am aware of what happened to Mr. Weasley's mother." His voice was calm and distant. "I felt it happen."

"So did I. At least, I think I did. It was all confused...I can't really explain it."

"I'm very sorry. I know how much she meant to you."

The sympathy was real and heartfelt. Harry felt his eyes fill with new tears that weren't related to his aching cheek, tears that refused to be blinked away. "But I thought you said that Voldemort wasn't allowed to kill anyone. That the Dark wouldn't let him kill people. But Mrs. Weasley...and Cedric...and...and my parents...."

He trailed off as the tears spilled over. He hadn't cried when Bill had brought the horrible news. He hadn't cried when they went to tell Hermione--she had cried enough for both of them. He hadn't even cried before, during, or after the funeral. But now that the dam had burst, there was no stopping him. The tears didn't fill the emptiness inside him, but they cleared the awful burning sensation out of his head.

Will let him cry for a few minutes, waiting silently. Once Harry had wiped his face and regained control of himself, the Old One spoke in a slow, gentle voice, the same voice that had comforted him on the steps of Privet Drive many months ago.

"Think for a moment. Think very carefully. Lord Voldemort did not kill Molly Weasley. He had his servants do it for him. And he didn't actually kill Cedric, did he? Or Neville's father? Or the innocent people at King's Cross and St. Mungo's?"

"No," Harry agreed. "But I don't see--"

Will held up a hand for silence. "Those of the Dark are not permitted to kill. They may place their victims in situations where they *can* be killed, or encourage those under their sway to bring harm upon themselves, but the law that binds both the Light and the Dark forbids open murder. As I see it, when Voldemort came to Godric's Hollow and killed your father and mother, the part of him that belonged to the Dark reacted very strongly to his actions. The protection your mother placed on you at her death was what saved you from the Killing Curse, but it was the Dark that nearly destroyed *him*--as a punishment, in retribution for violating the Law of the High Magic. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Harry swallowed. He thought he had followed everything that Will had said so far, but it was still a lot to consider. "I...I think so."

"That is what I have come to believe. I know it's hard to understand, but the important thing is this: if he violates the Law again, the Dark will have no mercy on him...and he is quite aware of that. That is why I know that only the Dark can defeat Voldem

Chapter Nineteen - Lost in the Darkness

We participate in tragedy. At comedy we only look.

-- Aldous Huxley

He didn't apologise to Hermione the next day, or the day after, but it certainly wasn't for lack of trying. During his first two attempts at reconciliation, he actually made it a third of the way up the staircase to the girls' dormitory before he lost his nerve. The following day saw him standing outside her door for fifteen minutes with one hand raised to knock, then creeping back to his room and curling into a miserable ball on his bed. The fourth time, he finally worked up the courage to knock on the door, but there was no response.

He was starting to worry about her. He had been going to breakfast, lunch, and dinner on a fairly regular basis, but he never ran into Hermione. Either she wasn't eating, or she was sneaking out of her room late at night to eat, or she was having the house elves deliver food to her. And since rule-breaking and house elf exploitation were two of her least tolerated behaviours, it stood to reason that she wasn't eating.

He winced. Thoughts of Hermione had made the bruise on his cheek throb. It was now a rainbow-hued splotch, with colours that ranged from vibrant yellow-green around the edges to an angry purplish-black in the centre. He had visited Madam Pomfrey the morning after the argument with a not-very-convincing story of falling *up* the stairs on his way to bed. She had tut-tutted and handed him a chunk of ice wrapped in a cloth, but the look in her eyes informed him that she didn't believe him for a moment.

Worrying about Hermione made him worry about other things--like Sirius and Remus. The Christmas morning nightmare had badly frightened him, and he still hadn't recovered from it entirely. Even something as harmless as the sight of slightly undercooked meat at meals was all that was needed to flash an image of the bloodstained trophy wall to the forefront of his mind.

But he knew that his fears weren't entirely unfounded. He hadn't heard anything from them since his birthday. The promised birthday present from Sirius had never arrived, either. Not a day passed that he didn't wonder where they were and if they were all right.

Oh, he knew there were reasons to explain why he hadn't heard from them. The two of them could be keeping a low profile, waiting for a chance to finally clear Sirius' name. They could be off doing some top-secret and dangerous work that would somehow weaken the power of the Death Eaters.

Or they could be dead.

It was a wonder he could keep food down at all, with all the worrying straining his stomach lining.

* * *

New Year's Eve saw him alone in the common room yet again. Most of the other Gryffindors had broken curfew and gone to a party that was being held in the Hufflepuff common room, but he didn't feel like being sociable.

As he sat in his usual chair by the fire, his train of thought kept following the same depressing pattern:

Ron hates me. I hope Ginny's okay. I wonder if Hermione's eaten anything today. What's going to happen with Fudge? Is Sirius all right? Can we really stop Voldemort? But we can't do anything at all if Ron's not speaking to me...or Hermione....

He shook his head abruptly, angrily. It wouldn't do any good to sit and wallow in misery, but it seemed to be all he was capable of at the moment.

He looked down at the carpet slippers on his feet, and past them to the floor. Strewn about his chair were a week's worth of Daily Prophet editions. He had been following the papers since the announcement of Fudge's resignation, and for good reason; a lot had happened since that day. By public and official demand, and despite his protests, Headmaster Dumbledore had been appointed Acting Minister of Magic. Many of Fudge's decisions were being called into question, and every single day the editorial section of the paper was filled a slew of irate editorials calling for his wand, if not his head. But no one had any suggestions for dealing with the threat to the wizarding world. The present political scandal was what occupied people's minds--not the larger, looming problems.

He had spoken to Will the day before to inform him of the most recent developments. The Old One listened patiently, but had nothing new to say, though he did make a vague, passing reference to a person Harry didn't know: a 'Neville Chamberlain'.

"He was prime minister of our country before the last world war," Will had explained, looking rather alarmed at Harry's ignorance. "What in blazes do they teach you children in primary school nowadays? But to return to my point, I'm certain that Muggle Studies scholars will have a field day in years to come, drawing comparisons between him and your Cornelius Fudge. And they wouldn't be far wrong...it's difficult to sympathise with those who do their utmost to avoid the consequences of either peace or war. I'm not a social historian, but even I know that 'peace in our time' is not a viable solution to problems of this proportion. The Dark will Rise regardless of men, but men often help it--however unwittingly."

Harry could only nod. It was at times like this when he truly missed Hermione; she would have been able to explain everything so he could understand.

There was so much going on in his mind, but no one he could talk to. Dumbledore wasn't around--his new position demanded long, exhausting hours in London, and it wouldn't be fair to bother him with petty matters like this. McGonagall was twice as busy as before, since she had taken over the daily workings of the school in the Headmaster's absence. He had tried writing to Sirius, but he always tore up the letters before he could get halfway down the page. What could he write about? 'Almost everyone I know hates me'? 'I'm scared that someone else is going to die'? 'I know it's my fault that Ron's mum is....'?

Where did that come from? he thought suddenly.

You know perfectly well...you just don't want to admit it, a cruel little part of his mind replied.

What are you talking about?

The voice sounded offended. *You can't have forgotten already? You said as much yourself, during that lovely little spat with Hermione.*

He certainly hadn't forgotten. He doubted if forgetting something like that would be so easy. *That was just talk...I didn't mean--*

Do I need to spell it out for you? The little voice took on a nasty sing-song quality. *If you'd gone to the Bur-row, she'd still be aliii-hive.*

That's not true!

Oh, but it is. You're too scared to admit it.

Shut up.

Make me.

It was a pity that punching himself wasn't an option.

He was tired of staring at the fire. It was not quite eleven-thirty, but there was no reason to sit up and see the New Year in alone. He was just about to heave himself out of the comfortable chair and plod up the stairs to bed when he heard the thick sound of footfalls on stone. Someone was coming down the stairs.

He didn't bother to turn around and see whom it was. It probably wasn't Hermione, and he didn't care to talk to anyone else.

The footsteps stopped at the bottom of the stairs, then began to approach the fire at a halting pace, stopping and starting uncertainly.

Harry kept silent, willing the other person to go away.

It didn't work. The footsteps paused behind his chair, then stepped around to stand next to it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a small hand rest on the arm of the chair.

"Harry...is something wrong?"

He looked up.

It was Colin.

He didn't have the emotional stamina to come up with a lie, or even a halfway decent excuse.

"Yes, something's wrong," he said bleakly, turning his attention back to the fire. "But it's nothing you can help. Don't worry about me."

Colin frowned, and sat on his heels next to Harry's chair. "Is it about this?" He poked the untidy pile of newspapers with one finger, stepping delicately around the subject. "Because if it is, I want you t'know I understand."

Harry looked at him, but said nothing.

Colin nodded eagerly. "I really do understand. After Dennis...." His mouth worked silently for a second or two, trying to get the words out, but when that failed he tried a different approach. "After school started, Ron's mum was ever so nice. My mum told me she almost cried when Mrs. Weasley sent her a big basket of mixed fruit. People like you and me could have just popped round to the greengrocer and gotten some apples and things like that, but that basket was specially made to keep the fruit fresh. Enchanted, like. Everything that was in there lasted until Christmas--Mum said in her last letter that she and Dad used the last of the oranges for the Christmas cake. It was lovely of her to do that for us, for people she didn't really know."

Harry ran a hand over his face as Colin's words rang in his head. *Lovely,* he thought. *That's true enough. /She/ was lovely.*

"Ron's mum did a lot of things like that," he said aloud. "I know I'd do most anything to have her back. But like I said, you don't have to worry about me. I'll be fine."

"I *do* worry about you," Colin countered, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"You shouldn't."

The younger boy pouted, his thin face twisted petulantly. "Give me one good reason why I can't worry about you."

"Because it isn't your problem, and you can't do anything about it."

"That was two reasons, and I still don't care."

"Colin--" he said warningly.

Colin suddenly grabbed his hand, and squeezed it tightly. Harry tried to pull away, but the younger boy held fast and squeezed more tightly.

"Look," he said quickly, as if he feared that Harry would interrupt him. "I don't care. You don't understand how much I don't care. You've done so much for me...let me do something for you."

Harry was dumbfounded. "When have I ever done anything for you?"

"Would you like to see the long list, or the short one?" A weak smile shone through Colin's sad eyes. "I think the real question is: when *haven't* you?"

"You don't need this." This was no time for pretence, no time to put up a brave front. "You've got so much else to deal with...why should you have one more thing to think about?"

The ghost of a smile faded, and was replaced with an iron determination that looked out of place on Colin's face. It was almost intimidating.

"I keep thinking about how I don't like seeing my friends in pain. Especially you, Harry." He stood up, his thin body ramrod straight. "Now I'm not moving from this spot until you tell me what's wrong," he declared vehemently.

Resignedly, Harry closed his eyes. He'd been backed into a corner, and there was only one way out.

"Hermione and Ron are mad at me," he whispered, looking down at his lap.

Colin drew a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "I'm sorry."

Harry's head snapped up. "Don't apologise," he said harshly. "Don't apologise for things that aren't your fault."

"I'm..." Colin stopped himself, not wanting to make the same mistake twice. "Do...do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really." He could salvage that much of his pride, at least.

Colin looked as if he was going to say something, but shook his head. "Well, if you do, you know where I am," he said. He squeezed Harry's hand a third time. "I'm here for you, Harry...even if you think no one else is."

Harry felt his cheeks grow very warm. The image of Ron's furious glare, which had been haunting the back of his mind ever since the funeral, dissolved in a hot blur of emotion.

"You're a good friend, Colin," he said hoarsely.

The younger boy merely shrugged. If he was aware of his friend's discomfort, he pretended not to notice. "I try to be, that's all."

He patted Harry's hand and started to walk away. But just as he reached the doorway that led to the boys' dormitory, he paused. "Oh, Harry?"

Harry craned his neck, looking around the back of his chair. "Yeah?"

"Beef steak," said Colin, knowingly.

Harry blinked, wondering if he'd misheard. "What?"

An amused yet wistful smile flitted across the younger boy's face. "Dennis and I used to fight all the time when we were little--hammer and tongs. One of us always seemed to end up with a black eye or worse, so Mum used to keep these big pieces of raw steak to put on it." He grimaced, remembering. "It was awful and slimy and nasty, but I swear it worked every time. And you look like you could use it."

Harry had to laugh at the thought of Colin as a little boy, pressing a chunk of frozen raw meat to his face. His cheek tingled irritably, almost as if it was offended at the thought.

"I'll keep that in mind," he said, chuckling. "Thanks."

"Anytime, Harry. Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year, Colin."

Colin grinned, and headed up the stairs to his room.

Harry bent down and gathered the scattered pieces of newsprint, then stacked them in a pile on top of a nearby table. The house elves would pick them up and dispose of them in the morning. There was no reason for him to hang onto them any longer.

He hesitated only briefly at the bottom of the stairs that led to the girls' dormitories. His fifth attempt was going to produce some results. Hermione would be alone in the room--the other fifth-year girls who had remained at school were at the Hufflepuff party--and if he didn't settle this now it would be hanging over him when Ron and Ginny returned. He didn't think he could deal with both problems at once.

His feet carried him up the long flights of stairs to her room. Three loud knocks on the door produced no response. Not that **that** was going to deter him. He would wait all night, if it came to that, but there was something he hadn't tried yet.

The doorknob.

He rested a cold, sweaty hand on it and was just about to push down when he felt the handle drop by itself.

The door opened, swinging inward. Hermione stood in the open doorway, clad in pyjamas and a dressing gown. Crookshanks was draped over one shoulder, and a bath towel hung limply from the other.

He jumped back a pace, but she didn't move. She simply stared at him. She seemed to be waiting for him to make the first move.

The words spilled from his throat in a garbled rush. "Mione-we-ve- to-alk."

Crookshanks stirred on her shoulder, peering at him with lazy eyes. His tail twitched once and was still.

"What?" she said.

He took a deep breath, and then another. This time the words came out properly. "Hermione...we have to talk."

* * *

He had expected her to slam the door in his face, but instead she stepped aside and let him in. He sat down on the floor, feet tucked uncomfortably underneath him. Hermione sat on her bed and pulled Crookshanks into her lap. She stroked his soft fur absently.

The first five minutes consisted of him making a slew of stammering, faltering apologies that never quite said what he intended to say. He apologised for bothering her so late at night, then apologised for not coming to see her sooner. He apologised for what he had said and done the

night of the funeral. He apologised for being a complete idiot about the whole thing. He was about to apologise for talking so much when he noticed that Hermione had stopped petting Crookshanks and was watching him with a curious expression on her face.

"What?" he said, a little afraid.

"Did I really do that?" she said, pointing to his face. Her voice trembled slightly.

"Th...this?" he said stupidly. "Yeah, I guess. But it doesn't hurt," he added, poking his cheek to prove his point. He bit back a pained yelp--because touching a bruise to prove it doesn't hurt is rather self-defeating when it actually *does*--and bared his teeth in a smile that was more like a grimace.

Hermione let her hand fall. Crookshanks rubbed against it eagerly, but she didn't pet him.

"It's funny...I was really aiming for your forehead," she said with a mirthless grin.

He returned her grin, his cheek still aching. "You've got really bad aim."

"I always did. And you wonder why I don't play Quidditch with you." She tried to make a joke of it. It didn't work, but he had to admire the attempt.

"I'll remember that from now on," he said.

"Oh!" Suddenly, she sat up very straight. "I nearly forgot to give you your Christmas present. Hang on."

Crookshanks leapt off her lap as she stood up, and began to wash himself. She knelt down beside her trunk and pawed through it. With a little cry of discovery, she pulled out a wrapped parcel and handed it to Harry. The ginger cat finished up his brisk toilet and scrambled back onto his mistress's lap as she resumed her seat on the bed.

"I hope you like it," she said, watching him remove the wrapping. "It's not much, but I thought they would come in handy."

She had given him two books: "All Things Wise and Wonderful"--which was the third book in the series of stories by Muggle veterinarian James Herriot--and a weighty volume titled "Divination for Dunderheads: How Anyone Can Learn to Predict Disaster". He bristled a little at the latter book's title, but he had to smile when he flipped to the flyleaf and read the note she had written there:

Dear Harry,

A little help for your Divination homework--after all, even your creative mind can be taxed by the steady stream of drivel that must be invented for each successive class assignment! Best of luck on your O.W.L.s!

All my love and Happy Christmas, Hermione Granger

"Thanks, Hermione," he said. "It's great...and it's not even a jumper."

He heard her breath catch in her throat. She swallowed loudly, as if she had taken a too big sip of juice at breakfast. He looked up to see her gazing at him with tears in her eyes, even though the tears remained where they were.

"I'm sorry, Harry." It was a genuine apology--no hysterics, no sobbing scene, no lecture about honesty. She was being honest.

He replied in kind. "I'll be all right," he said plainly. "I only got what I deserved."

She raised an eyebrow. "Did Will tell you that?"

"No. He kind of hinted at it, though."

"Really?"

"Sort of. What did he say...oh, yes." He sat up, straightening his back as he gave her an imperious stare. "If you gave the book to her, Mr. Potter, you can hardly control what she chooses to use it for," he declared in a deep, ironic voice.

She laughed. "He would say something like that."

Harry laughed, too. "Not exactly what I wanted to hear at the time, though."

They enjoyed the private joke for a moment, until Harry cleared his throat noisily.

"So...is everything okay?" he asked.

Hermione sighed, and lifted Crookshanks out of her lap. The ginger cat miaowed loudly in protest, but at a sharp look from his mistress he resigned himself to kneading the patterned quilt on the bed.

"I don't know," she said, staring fixedly at the quilt. "I tried writing, but I haven't gotten a reply. I don't think we'll hear from him until they all come back."

Harry nodded. That was not what he meant by his question, but he knew it was all he would get out of her.

"One more week," he said, rather unnecessarily.

She pulled at a loose thread on the quilt, twisting it around her forefinger. "I'm scared."

He nodded. "Me, too."

* * *

The week went by far too quickly for Harry's liking, and soon enough the halls were once again filled with returning students.

The Gryffindor common room was unusually subdued that day. Everyone knew about the 'wizarding world's most recent tragedy', and though an unspoken rule had arisen that forbade openly mentioning the 'most recent tragedy', it was obviously preying on everyone's mind.

The usual inane chatter about holiday fun had a darker undercurrent-- thoughts left unfinished, sentences broken off mid-word, laughter muffled and weak.

Harry, with Hermione, Neville, and Colin to back him up, was waiting nervously near the fireplace. He didn't join in the conversations, and no one asked him how his holiday had been. They all knew. And it was only a matter of time before--

The portrait door opened.

Fred and George Weasley entered the common room. Ron and Ginny were close behind them. Ron had a protective hand on his sister's shoulder.

At that moment, Harry would have sworn that the temperature in the room dropped twenty degrees.

All conversation in the room stopped, as if a hidden switch had been flipped. People stared for a guilty half-second, then quickly busied themselves with some trivial task like tying their shoes or ruffling through papers they held--doing anything except looking at the Weasley family.

As if nothing was out of the ordinary, Fred and George immediately walked over to Lee Jordan, who was sitting on one of the sofas near the girls' dormitory staircase. They sat down next to him, and the three of them began to talk in low voices.

No one else moved. Harry saw that a little group of fourth-year girls, all friends of Ginny, had gathered around Hermione, but none of them took a step forward. They, like everyone else in the room, didn't dare to approach Ginny if it meant coming near Ron.

Some stupid sense of honour or pride--most likely the same one that had sent him after the Philosopher's Stone, into the basilisk's den, out to the Shrieking Shack, and through the Triwizard Tournament--needed him into making the first move.

He walked forward, holding out a hand and smiling in open sympathy. "Ron, Ginny, I'm so sor--"

Ron turned cold, empty eyes on his friend, and Harry's words leapt down his own throat and choked him.

"I have nothing to say to you," Ron declared.

Hermione gasped. "Ron!"

Ron didn't move. He continued to stare at Harry with a flat and entirely unforgiving gaze.

"Would you move, please," he said, icily polite.

Harry gaped. His arms and legs felt like lead. "But--"

By this time a small crowd had shuffled forward and gathered around them. Harry felt distinctly uncomfortable at making a scene like this.

Ron, it seemed, had no such problems.

"Would you please move?" he said, more loudly this time. He gestured at Harry with his free hand. "You're blocking the doorway."

Thunderstruck, Harry felt a hand grab the sleeve of his robe and yank him to one side. He turned his head to see Neville dragging him out of the doorway, his eyes telegraphing an urgent signal to keep quiet.

The edge of Harry's robe had only just cleared the door when Ron all but shoved Ginny forward, propelling her toward the girls' staircase. She stumbled, caught herself at the foot of the stairs, and began to climb very slowly, like a clockwork doll with broken springs. Ron went up the boys' stairs without a second glance at the crowd that stood below, watching him in shocked silence.

* * *

In the library that night, Harry finished the last of his holiday homework at a solitary table in the corner, away from the table he usually shared with Ron and Hermione. He wasn't sure whether it was cowardice or self-respect that kept him away from that particular table, but regardless of the internal reasoning he found it difficult to concentrate on his studies.

Fed up with rereading the same page in his Transfiguration textbook over and over again, he decided to get up and wander around the stacks until the library closed. Maybe he could find a library book to take his mind off of everything--preferably something to do with Quidditch, if Colin hadn't checked it out already.

He had just passed by the History of Magic section and was about to round the corner when he heard the sound of voices in a heated but whispered conversation. He started to walk away, not wanting to eavesdrop, but stopped short when he caught the tail end of a sentence.

"....to Harry."

It was Hermione's voice, and she sounded upset. That made him stop and listen more carefully.

"Look, just think about what I said, all right?"

That voice was unmistakably Ron's. He also sounded upset, but not in the same way as Hermione. It was as if she was upset at what he was saying, but he was more bothered by what she *wasn't* saying.

Hermione sniffed loudly. "What is there to think about? You're not making any sense." There was a dry rustle of leather on paper--he could hear her shifting the books she undoubtedly held in her arms.

"That's because you aren't listening," Ron said sullenly.

Hermione inhaled sharply, breath hissing through her teeth.

"I'm going to forget I just heard you say that," she said, a steely edge to her words.

Ron's voice became wheedling, pleading. "Please, 'Mione...."

"No!" she shouted.

Harry jumped, startled by the sudden loudness. He pressed himself against the bookshelf, holding his breath. The spines of the books felt rough and irregular on his back.

He saw Madam Pince look up from her desk across the room. She lifted her head, tiny glittering eyes running up and down the rows of books. Her nostrils flared, almost as if she could sniff out the noisy, troublesome students who were disturbing the silence of her domain.

Hermione must have realised how loud she had been, because he had to strain to hear her next words.

"Harry apologised to me, and as far as I'm concerned that's the end of it." It sounded like she was moments away from crying. "Don't ask me to pick sides. I can't...and I won't."

Ron had lowered his voice as well, but the hurt in it was loud and clear. "How can you--"

Hermione cut him off. "I can't choose between you, Ron. It's not fair to any of us."

Ron muttered something that he couldn't quite hear, but Hermione must have heard it, because she sniffed again, irritably this time.

"I don't care if you get mad at me for saying it--you'll have to fight this out on your own."

"Whatever." Ron tried very hard not to sound betrayed, and failed.

"I mean it," she said forcefully. "I'm sorry if you feel that way, but this is something I can't get involved in. I'm sorry."

Ron made a few noises of protest, but they were cut off abruptly with a muffled thud and crash. The bookshelf that Harry was leaning against shook, and he dropped to the floor.

He looked up, and saw through a gap in the books that Hermione had Ron backed up against the other side of the bookshelf and was staring him down. He couldn't see the expression on Ron's face, but the fire deep in Hermione's eyes could have set the entire row of books behind him alight.

"And if you even THINK of dragging Neville into this, or heaven forbid, *Ginny*, I'll have your head." Her voice was low and dangerous. It made Harry shiver. "This is between the two of you, and it's going to stay that way."

He didn't stay to hear if Ron replied. He couldn't listen anymore. At a jog-trot, he hurried back to his solitary table, collected his books and forgotten notes, and left the library at breakneck speed. Madam Pince's disapproving glare followed him out the door.

* * *

That same night, he was lying on his bed and reading the same paragraph in "Secrets of the Seekers" for the tenth time when he heard a loud, persistent knocking on the door.

"Come in!" he called out, closing the book and setting it aside. He hoped it wasn't Hermione. He didn't want to go through anything similar to what he had witnessed between her and Ron.

The door swung open and Fred and George stormed into the room, followed closely by Katie, Angelina, and Alicia. Their faces were grim.

Harry's stomach lurched. If over half of the Quidditch team had decided to make a surprise appearance in his room at ten-thirty on a Tuesday night, it was a sure sign that something was amiss. He almost wished it **had** been Hermione--he would have known what was coming then.

"Harry," George said ominously, "we've got a bit of a problem."

Why am I not surprised? he wanted to say, but kept silent.

Fred snorted, looking very peeved. "We thought you'd like to know that our dearest darling baby brother came up to us not five minutes ago and proclaimed to the common room at large that he had no intention of playing Quidditch on the same team as you."

Harry's jaw dropped. The pumpkin tart he had eaten at dinner sank like a stone in his gut. "He said what?"

"That you can go to hell, or something to that effect," Fred said darkly.

George shook his head. "Actually, that's the nice version. We've taken the liberty of removing all the naughty words he used."

Harry buried his face in his pillow. His day was going from bad to worse.

"Great," he mumbled. "Super. Abso-bloody-lutely fantastic."

Katie reached over and patted him on the shoulder. "Look, Harry, please don't fret yourself over this. Ron's being an ass, that's all. It's a Weasley family trait...just look at these two prime specimens here." She jerked her thumb in Fred and George's direction.

Fred scowled at her. "This isn't funny, Katie."

"I'm well aware of that, **Fred**," she shot back.

"Leave it, leave it," Harry said wearily, rolling over onto his back and propping himself up on his elbows. "If he doesn't want to play, it's his choice."

"I wish it wasn't Slytherin we were up against," Angelina remarked to no one in particular.

"Well, it can't be helped," Fred growled. His hands were tightly clenched; he was attempting to keep his temper under control. "If **Ron**--he spoke his younger brother's name as though it was an expletive--"wants to be that way, we'll simply have to use the reserve players."

"Can't use Tommy," George commented offhandedly.

Harry looked up, startled. "Whyever not?"

"Didn't you hear? He's in hospital."

Forget about bad to worse. Things had gone from worse to positively horrible. "What?"

George coughed dryly. "Don't ask me how, but he Transfigured his foot by accident this morning. Now he's a permanent guest in the infirmary while Pomfrey and McGonagall figure out how to undo it."

"His foot?" Harry took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes tiredly. "What did he Transfigure it into?"

"A brick," said Fred.

"You're joking." He put his glasses back on.

Fred's mouth quirked in a parody of his normal grin. "I only wish."

"Can't they take him to St. Mungo's?" asked Alicia.

"Don't you mean 'what's left of St. Mungo's'?" Harry said quietly, more to himself than to her.

Katie cleared her throat. "Well, it leaves him out, in any case. So there's Colin and Beatrice."

"Let's just flip a coin," Harry said despondently, sitting up. "I really don't care who gets it-- they're both good enough to play."

"Sounds good," Fred agreed. "Got a coin?"

"Just a minute." Harry rolled off his bed and opened his trunk. He pawed around in the bottom, looking for the Muggle coins he had hidden in the lining. They were left over from his summer with Mrs. Figg, and though they weren't legal tender in the wizarding world they did come in handy for one reason or another...like coin tosses.

His fingers closed around the ridged edge of a pound coin, and he held it up to the light.

"Call it," he said, and tossed it into the air.

"Heads for Colin, tails for Beatrice," George declared.

Harry caught it as it came down and slapped it on the back of his left hand. As he lifted his right hand, he saw the stern profile of the Queen staring up at him.

"Heads it is," he said, fighting back a sigh. "I'll go tell him."

"Wait a sec, Harry." Fred turned around and gave his winning smile to the Gryffindor Chasers. "Lovely ladies, would you excuse us for a moment, please?"

Alicia nodded. "Sure, Fred," she said understandingly. "We'll be downstairs."

"Chin up, Harry," added Angelina with a wink.

"We'll whip precious little Malfoy and his goons...just you wait." Katie cracked her knuckles loudly.

Once the girls had left, Fred and George turned back to Harry. Their faces were deadly serious.

Fred began hastily. "Look, about earlier--"

"Our idiot brother--" George interjected, rolling his eyes.

"He's been like this ever since--"

"The funeral, so please--"

"Don't think it's--"

"About you, 'cause--"

"He's being an ass--"

"As usual--"

"We would have kicked some sense into him--"

"But Dad wouldn't let us--"

"Though Bill would have--"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Harry held up his hands, stopping the rapid fire conversation. His head was spinning. "Listen, it's fine."

"It's NOT fine," George protested. "I know that family is supposed to stick together on things like this, but *you're* like family, too. I know Mum would have laid into Ron with her slipper if she knew he was acting like this."

"She did it often enough when we were little," Fred said, rubbing his backside in remembrance. "Never tolerated sulking, that was Mum."

"We tried to talk to him, but he won't say a thing." The worried look returned to George's face. "Even Bill and Charlie couldn't get a word out. And Dad's been so busy recently...we didn't want to worry him."

Fred smirked suddenly. "Y'know, the one good thing that's come out of all this is the fact that Percy's pulled his head out of--"

"--the sand, so to speak," George finished quickly, giving his twin a sour look. "He's finally convinced that You-Know-Who is back."

"Really?" Harry was startled for a moment, until he realised that if the cold-blooded murder of a family member by suspected Death Eaters wouldn't change Percy Weasley's mind, nothing would.

Cold comfort, at that. Will's words echoed in his mind.

Fred smirk grew wider, his lip curling bitterly. "Never was a more avid convert than our Percy. He'd go on WWN and broadcast You-Know-Who's return to the world if he thought it would help."

Cold comfort indeed. Harry shook his head. "But what about you?" he asked.

"Us?" Fred shrugged nonchalantly. "We're Fred and George Weasley. We always come out on top, somehow."

George nodded his agreement. "Things'll sort themselves out. They always do. Gotta be optimistic, you know."

Harry heartily wished he could share their optimism, but as it was, he felt the tiniest bit better to hear their cheerful words.

"Thanks, guys," he said. "I mean it."

Fred ruffled his hair affectionately. "Any time, Harry."

"Now get some sleep," George ordered. "Practice tomorrow. Let's see how Creevey handles a broom--and hope he doesn't wind up in the infirmary again. Tommy doesn't need company *that* badly."

Chapter Twenty - Finding The Way

Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bed and eats at our own table.

-- W. H. Auden

Fortunately for Harry, Fred and George got to Ron first. They cornered him in the common room immediately after leaving the fifth-year boys' dormitory to tell him of their captain's decision. They had spared Harry the nigh-impossible task of breaking the bad news to his once- best friend.

Unfortunately, the entire house had to listen to the shouting match that ensued.

Harry didn't need to go down to the common room to know what was going on. He could hear the whole thing loud and clear from the relative comfort of his bed, even with a pillow jammed firmly over his head.

The argument quickly escalated. A series of thumps and bangs from below indicated that the quarrel was about to become violent, if it wasn't already. Harry had just made up his mind to get out of bed and go downstairs when he heard Professor McGonagall's voice, booming like the sound of divine retribution.

"I could hear you three corridors away!" their Head of House fumed, her words spiralling up the stairs and through the closed dormitory doors. "I will be taking thirty points from each of you for causing this disturbance. Now go to bed!"

There was another angry shout, one that thankfully was muffled by Harry's pillow.

McGonagall's voice, however, rang loud and clear. "ENOUGH! Extended detention, Ron Weasley! With me! Tomorrow night! And another ten points for your language--care to make it twenty?"

After a long moment, they heard the sound of feet pounding up stairs, and the door flew open as Ron stormed into the room. Harry froze under the bedclothes, holding his breath, but Ron didn't approach his bed. He was more interested in making sure that everyone in the room knew just how angry he was. He stomped around, flinging dirty clothing aside and making as much noise as possible until Seamus sat up in bed, rubbing his face.

"Could you please be a little louder?" he said acidly, his tongue thick with interrupted sleep. "I can't quite hear you."

"Sod you, Finnigan." Ron punctuated his rude remark with an equally rude gesture as he climbed into bed. Seamus rolled over, yanking his pillow over his head.

It took a very, very long time for Harry to fall asleep that night.

* * *

Classes began the next day. The day itself was beautiful, crisp and sunny. This only served to make Harry even more depressed. At least, he thought, the weather could have cooperated to match his mood. Rain would have been nicely appropriate, with a little thunder and lightning tossed in for good measure. Perhaps even hail. Or a blizzard.

Potions was the first class of the day for the fifth-year Gryffindors, and a miserable time was had by all. Even Neville's new sense of self-confidence was shaken by Professor Snape's inexplicably foul mood. Poor Hermione was nearly driven to tears when the Potions Master pounced on a slight inaccuracy she had made in her measurements for the day's class potion and proceeded to explain her mistake to the entire class. Harry had to fight the urge to come her defence--Snape would probably give him detention for insubordination if he so much as opened his mouth.

But Snape's fit of temper was mild compared to a certain red-haired Gryffindor. In an open display of public shunning, Ron partnered himself with Neville when classwork required it, leaving Hermione to work with Harry. And since both Harry and Ron had nearly all their classes together--their schedule that day featured Potions, Herbology, Care of Magical Creatures, and Divination, all of which usually required partners or teamwork--Ron's conduct could hardly go unnoticed.

Hermione muttered a few words to herself about 'childish behaviour', but she sat in between the two boys during class. It seemed that even though she wasn't taking sides, she would at least attempt to keep the peace. Neville helped her, though he had little to no idea of the reason behind the dispute.

Harry informed Colin of the change in the team roster later that day, after a Quidditch practice from which Ron was conspicuously absent.

He could tell that Colin was overjoyed to hear the news. The younger boy hid his glee well--he showed genuine concern for Tommy, and didn't say a thing about Ron's decision. But he couldn't conceal the smile that threatened to split his face in two when Harry told him to be ready to play Keeper against Slytherin that Saturday.

The next day was Thursday. Just before lunch, Neville approached Harry outside the Charms classroom, a worried look on his face.

"Are we still on for...'studying' tonight?" he asked uncertainly.

Harry groaned softly. With everything else that had been on his mind, he hadn't stopped to think about how the quarrel with Ron (or Ron's quarrel with him, to be precise) would affect their sessions with Will.

It wasn't only the fact that Ron was deliberately avoiding him--though that would be an obvious problem. The four of them were working with complex spells that invoked ancient power they didn't fully understand. He had learned enough about magic to know that emotional fluctuations could have serious repercussions on the spell casting. And though Will was well aware of the awkward situation, Harry was well aware that the Old One would not be pleased if the falling out prevented the sessions from continuing.

"I don't know," he said. "Tonight's doubtful. Maybe Monday."

Neville nodded, and slipped away.

Even though he had no appetite, Harry headed to the Great Hall. He had to keep eating for the sake of the team. He couldn't faint from hunger in the middle of a game, especially not one against Slytherin.

He selected a steaming bowl of mock turtle soup, a chunk of freshly-baked bread, and an apple, and wandered over to the Gryffindor table. Ron, Hermione, and Natalie McDonald were eating together at one end of the long table, so he doggedly made his way toward the other, empty end.

He was nearly there when a person who had been sitting down at the adjacent table stood up without warning. They crashed into each other, and Harry found himself on the floor in a puddle of lukewarm mock turtle soup.

Rubbing his back, he looked up to see Draco Malfoy staring down at him. The young Slytherin looked faintly confused, as if he wasn't entirely sure what had happened.

Harry snarled, more in frustration than in true anger. Of all days and all people, it *would* have to be today and Draco Malfoy.

"Why can't you watch where you're going, Malfoy?" he snapped.

Draco pushed his chair in, the wooden legs scraping loudly on the floor.

"Out of my way, Potter," he mumbled, and brushed past Harry without a backward glance.

Crabbe and Goyle, who had been sitting on the opposite side of the table, got up and wordlessly followed their leader out of the hall.

"Clumsy git." Harry wrung the edge of his robe. Soup dripped onto the floor, only to be soaked up by other parts of his clothing and the already sodden piece of bread that had fallen nearby. His apple had rolled away to parts unknown.

With a grunt, he got to his feet and left the Great Hall. He'd have to change clothes if he didn't want to smell like sour soup for the rest of the day.

As he walked down the corridors to Gryffindor Tower, he started to wonder about Draco's reaction. There had been no snide remarks, no cutting comments. In Harry's opinion, this was beyond strange. At any other time, Draco would have used the opportunity for his own amusement. But this time, the other boy had seemed preoccupied; his mind was plainly elsewhere.

Harry wondered as he stripped off his soiled clothing and changed robes. He wondered as he wadded his old robe into a ball and left it on the edge of his bed for the house elves to find and clean. He wondered as he headed to Transfiguration, his next class. He simply could not shake the feeling that something wasn't right.

You're being paranoid, Harry, he scolded himself. *Just because Malfoy's got something on his mind doesn't mean that it's anything to do with you.*

But paranoid or not, the feeling wouldn't go away.

* * *

The Quidditch match was well underway when Harry's mind began to wander. It was a stupid, not to say dangerous, thing for a Seeker to do, but he couldn't keep his thoughts focused on the game.

At the time, Gryffindor was fifty points ahead, and it looked like they were sure to stay that way. The Chasers were in tight formation, wheeling and turning and passing the Quaffle with practiced precision. The Beaters gauged each strike just right to deflect the Bludgers with easy grace. And the terrified replacement Keeper had let only three shots slip past him, which was remarkable when you considered that the Slytherin team had resorted to some rather vicious techniques in order to score.

After Katie and Alicia had scored two goals in under a minute, one of the Slytherin Beaters had timed his strike to coincide with a Chaser's shot on the Gryffindor goal. Colin almost had his head neatly removed from his shoulders as he tried to dodge both the speeding Bludger and the blur of the Quaffle. Ten points to Slytherin.

Fred Weasley had responded in true Weasley fashion--by coming up from underneath and whacking the tail of the Beater's broom with his bat, sending his opponent hurtling to the ground. This unorthodox tactic drew vindicated cheers from the Gryffindor side and angry shouts from the Slytherins. Madam Hooch's golden eyes were narrow slits as she blew her whistle, stopping the game.

A brief time out was called while Madam Pomfrey examined the stunned Slytherin. As Lee Jordan launched into a long, rambling discourse on various fouls perpetrated by dastardly Slytherin players of yore, Harry used the opportunity to call his team together.

"You all right, Colin?" he asked.

"Fine," Colin replied breathlessly. He was still a little dazed, but he was recovering. "Thanks, Fred."

"Not a problem," Fred said cheerfully. "Been wanting to do that to Bole all year."

Angelina pushed stringy, sweat-soaked hair out of her eyes. "No sign of the Snitch?"

"None," Harry said. "Hang in there--I'll try to end this as quickly as I can."

"Don't kill yourself," quipped George, mopping his face with the sleeve of his robe. "You're no use to anyone if you're dead."

Madam Hooch's shrill whistle screamed across the pitch. The play began again.

Harry climbed quickly. Draco was at the far end of the pitch, looking for the Snitch on his own. He had been keeping his distance from the game, and only paid attention to Harry when the Gryffindor Seeker did something unexpected.

But Harry's mind wasn't on Draco, or the Snitch, or any other part of the game. For some strange reason, George's words would not leave his head.

"You're no good to anyone if you're dead."

Not entirely accurate, in his opinion. It was a cynical and terribly morbid outlook for a fifteen-year-old boy, but there certainly were enough people who wouldn't have minded him dead. The Dursleys, for one--wherever they were. No grief on their part. They would have been only too glad to have him gone for good, without the possibility of coming back.

"You're no good to anyone if you're dead."

He could have died any number of times. By all logic, he *should* have died on more than one occasion. He had been saved by everything from well-timed intervention to noble sacrifice to pure dumb luck. But he was still here. He hadn't died yet.

"You're no good to anyone if you're dead."

He hadn't died, true enough. But he couldn't say the same for his parents. Or Cedric Diggory. Or Dennis Creevey. Or Mr. Longbottom. Or Mrs. Weasley.

"You're no good to anyone if you're dead."

It was like having a shopping list in the back of his mind, one that he could pull out at any time if he wanted to tick off names. And Ron's mother had just been added to that list. Her death had been pointless, just like all the others.

"You're no good to anyone...."

Pointless. Without reason. A straightforward case of being in the absolute wrong place at the absolute wrong--

"....if you're dead."

Realisation hit him like a Bludger to the gut.

At that moment, he knew what had been plaguing his mind ever since Christmas. He knew the source of the nagging little voice that wouldn't let him alone, that kept insisting that he was partly to blame for Molly Weasley's death. If he hadn't been forced to stay at Hogwarts--

His head snapped up as the normal din of the crowd spiked in a thunderous roar. On the other side of the pitch, Draco was diving for the ground, a smear of moving green against the darker green grass.

Harry accelerated as fast as he could, pushing his Firebolt to the limits of its speed, but there would be no replay of the Ravenclaw game this time. He was fifty yards away when he saw the tiny golden form of the Snitch sparkling like a star. Draco snatched it a second later.

"AND MALFOY TAKES THE SNITCH!" Lee Jordan shouted. "SLYTHERIN WINS!"

Harry braked slowly, coasting across the field. The Slytherin side was a mass of screaming, cheering faces, while the red and gold of Gryffindor drooped dejectedly. He traced a wide, lazy spiral down to the ground to join the rest of his team.

The Gryffindor team had their best 'I'm-going-to-be-a-jolly-good- sport-and-an-honourable-loser-if-it-damn-near-kills-me' faces on as they congratulated the winners and shook hands, and trooped off to the showers.

Harry stood in the shower until the flow of water ran tepid. Before they left, Fred and George cautioned him about emulating Oliver Wood too closely ("Don't try to drown yourself that way, Harry--takes too bloody long"). Even Colin left him alone when it was clear that the older boy wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Alone with the running water, he turned the revelation over in his head. At the time, he would have been more than willing to dismiss it as irrational, the product of suspicion and overthinking. He could be reading too much into things. And even if he wasn't, if it really **was** true, there was no way to prove it.

But when he had fought his way through the ecstatic mob of Slytherins to shake Draco's hand, he had seen a faint expression cross the other boy's face. It was the same look he had seen for a split-second in Draco's eyes in the Great Hall, though at the time he hadn't noticed it.

It was the briefest hint of fear.

That fear confirmed his own fears. Ron's mother had died because he was supposed to have been at the Burrow on Christmas Eve...or more accurately, because he **hadn't been there**.

* * *

Monday rolled around, and Harry knew they had to meet with Will that night. He persuaded Hermione to persuade Ron to come to the seven o'clock meeting, and told Neville that the evening's 'study session' was still on.

He spent the rest of the day in a losing battle to pay attention in classes, and arrived in the little room off the library at six-thirty. He lit the fire and spent the next fifteen minutes flipping through one of the books that had been on a nearby shelf. It was entirely in German, but then again it wasn't as though he was really reading it.

Neville showed up at quarter to seven, and together they waited in an uncomfortable silence. Five minutes before seven, Hermione darted into the room. Her hair was mussed from running, and she was having a hard time catching her breath.

"Studying...Natalie...lost track of time...awfully sorry..." she said in between gulps of air.

"It's all right," Harry reassured her. "Ron's not here yet."

"Should we wait?" Neville asked.

"He...promised me he'd be here," Hermione said. Her breathing had slowed down somewhat. "Maybe he got held up somewhere."

"Was he in the library?" asked Harry.

She frowned. "I don't know. I was in the common room...that's why I had to run all the way here."

Neville traced a squiggly pattern in the layer of dust that covered the long table. "We can wait for him, can't we?"

Harry sighed. "We don't have much choice."

Hermione and Neville sat down to wait. The minutes ticked past.

At a nerve-wracking twenty-three minutes past seven, the door opened and Ron breezed into the room.

"You're late," Hermione said icily, standing up.

Ron shrugged. "I was busy."

When she didn't question him further, he flopped down into one of the chairs and gave her a pointed stare. "I thought you'd have started by now," he said.

The force of Hermione's glare could have melted glass.

"We were waiting for you," she said waspishly. "It takes all four of us to activate the mirror, *remember*?"

"Well, I'm here now," Ron said, yawning.

"Obviously," Neville snapped.

Alarm flickered in Ron's eyes at the irritation in Neville's voice, but he quickly regained his nonchalant attitude.

"Are we going to start any time soon?" he asked airily. "I don't want to be here all night."

Harry counted ten to get himself under control, then counted twenty when that didn't work. He would *not* rise to the baiting. He would remain perfectly calm.

Without a word, he stood up, walked over to the mirror and touched the frame. Staring fixedly at the mirror, he waited for the mist to clear.

Will was in the process of putting on his overcoat. His briefcase was on the floor next to his desk, and it looked like he was getting ready to leave. Just before the last of the mist disappeared, he half-turned around and noticed that the mirror had been activated. He removed his coat, draping it over his desk chair, then approached the mirror.

"I see you've decided to come after all," he said, his voice eerily neutral.

"Good evening, sir," Neville said, straining to be polite.

Will did not respond to the pleasantries. He folded his arms across his chest and gave them all a stern, inhospitable stare.

"It has come to my attention that there are certain...differences of opinion amongst you at the moment." The calmness was gone, replaced by a formality that bordered on disdain.

"Whatever disagreements you may have in your personal lives do not apply in this room. We have a duty to perform, and I will not permit any kind of distraction to interfere. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," they said in unison, though with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

"At your convenience, then."

The four of them stepped up to the mirror. There was an awkward moment when Ron and Harry had to stand next to each other in order to touch the mirror frame, but the steely light in the Old One's eye quelled any argument before it could start.

"Enter, Watchman of the Light."

"Grant to us your inner sight."

"Enter, for the time draws near."

"Power will erase our fear."

Nothing happened. The mirror didn't react.

"No," Neville whispered, horrified.

Harry stared at the mirror, and felt the beginnings of sick laughter stir inside him. Of course. This *would* have happened today, on top of everything else.

Hermione cleared her throat nervously. "Should...should we try it again, sir?" she asked Will.

He shook his head. "Don't bother. I doubt if a second attempt would produce different results."

"Is it like the last time?" Harry asked anxiously. "Is it...do we need another person again?"

"I leave that for you to figure out, Mr. Potter." He picked up his coat from the back of his chair. "As it stands, I can be of no help to you. Now, if you four will be so good as to excuse me, I am late to an important appointment. I prefer to keep my word when it comes to punctuality."

Ron couldn't stifle a gasp--the Parthian shot had hit home.

If Will had heard him, he made no mention of it. He merely waved an indifferent hand at the mirror. The mist began to swirl over it, darkening the glass.

"When you've sorted things out, please let me know," he said abruptly. He gathered his briefcase and a furred umbrella, and walked over to the door of his office. "Good evening to you."

With that brusque dismissal, the mirror became ordinary glass again, and he was gone.

Chapter Twenty-One - Hobson's Choice

One-half of knowing what you want is knowing what you must give up before you get it.

-- Sidney Howard

Confronted with the dicey status of his closest friendships, the lack of outside adult support, and the knowledge that he was currently in the bad graces an immortal anthropology professor, Harry had little choice but to turn to the routine of classwork and Quidditch.

It was not only for distraction. He honestly could think of no other options.

On what little bright side there was, it gave him a chance to rekindle a relationship that he had neglected for the past few months. He volunteered for a number of extra credit assignments in Care of Magical Creatures class, specifically assignments that allowed him to spend time with Hagrid. Whether it was helping him keep track of the Flobberworms for the fourth-years or using a special lotion and comb to remove parasitical Chizpurples from Fang's thick coat, Harry spent at least three nights a week in Hagrid's cosy hut, talking about everything and nothing with the man who had been his very first friend.

But as the days passed and January rolled into February, he saw Hagrid less frequently. The visits dwindled; twice a week, then only once the next, then nothing the next. Their Care of Magical Creatures class had to be cancelled for a full five days with no explanation other than McGonagall's short announcement:

"Hagrid is away on school business. Care of Magical Creatures will be temporarily suspended, but your classes will resume upon his return."

Of course it is...if forging an alliance with giants is a part of 'school business', Harry had thought at the time. He wasn't blind. It didn't take much to string bits and pieces of information together. Hagrid had never said a word about his work, but Harry suspected that he was secretly working for Dumbledore.

Dumbledore was the Minister of Magic now; the facade that he was merely the 'Acting' Minister had been dropped long ago. The elderly wizard had the resources of the entire wizarding world at his disposal. What was more, he had their attention...and their respect. Molly Weasley's death had shocked even the hardened fence sitters out of their wavering opinions. If anyone could harness that tide of emotion and channel it to a proper use, it was Dumbledore.

Still and all, it wasn't his concern. And it didn't make him any less lonely.

Growing up with the Dursleys, he had learned that the most effective substitutes for thought were physical pain and physical labour. If you wanted to stop thinking about something that bothered you, the simplest thing to do was to occupy your body with something else (preferably something painful) and hope that your brain would follow. With this belief

drifting around at the back of his mind, he lengthened the Quidditch practices to the point where even Colin and Beatrice began to complain.

After a particularly gruelling Saturday afternoon practice, Colin limped up to Harry and begged him to cancel the mandatory training session he had scheduled for early Sunday morning. His timid request was met with a grim silence that was far more final than a flat "no".

Fred and George had long ago stopped making jokes that compared Harry's behaviours to Oliver Wood's relentless drive. They took everything in stride--the extended drills, the repetitive and endless practice games, Harry's unusually short temper--but even their patience was wearing thin. They wouldn't go so far as to stage a mutiny, though. Like it or not, they stuck with him.

But even longer practices weren't enough for Harry. He got special permission from Madam Hooch to reserve the pitch for his own personal use if no one else had made prior reservations. On the days when he was tired of trying to smile, he would go out after dinner with a bucket of fifteen or twenty Snitches and not leave the pitch until the last one had been caught.

There had been a lot of those days, recently.

He pushed himself to keep going. His daily goal was to be exhausted when he went to bed. Exhaustion was good. It made him fall asleep at night, and kept the dreams away.

But despite his fevered pace, his grades began to slip. More than one homework assignment came back to him with an unsatisfactory mark. As a result, he studied even harder, staying up in the common room long after everyone else had gone to bed. The information just wouldn't stay in his head.

One more than one occasion he considered asking Hermione for help, but he knew that she had enough to deal with as it was. She had taken on the responsibility of single-handedly dragging Natalie McDonald through the rigours of Potions. The young girl had failed the end of term exam, and to prevent history from repeating Hermione had become something between a tutor and a fledgling slave driver. She used every reviewing trick she knew--a seemingly inexhaustible font of studying tips--to keep Natalie's grades and spirits up.

In a surprising and altogether ironic twist, Neville Longbottom joined Hermione in her project. He had benefited from Hermione's help in the past, and since he knew all too well what Professor Snape could be like his advice was always welcomed. He told Natalie a number of tales about exploding potions and melted cauldrons, changing embarrassments and past failures into good advice. What was most important, he could laugh over it...something he had never been able to do before.

Harry, sitting by himself in a corner of the common room, often watched the three of them hard at work. He wanted to be happier for them, but a stubborn little part of him wanted to pitch a fit and demand that he be included.

With a little sigh that held more resignation than regret, he opened his copy of "Divination for Dunderheads" and returned to the starchart that was due tomorrow afternoon.

* * *

February is one of the prettiest months at Hogwarts. That is, if it snows. If it rains, the grounds liquefy into a giant mud slick, one's clothes never feel completely dry, and students and teachers alike develop a grey pallor to match that of the dreary sky.

This particular February, it rained. A lot.

Like most of the student body, Harry found that the weather affected his mood. There were days when it was all he or anyone else could do to get out of bed. Classes droned on and on. It didn't help matters that teachers were predicting doom and gloom for him in one form or another. Whether it was Professor Trelawney's usual dire prophecies about the darkness of his aura, or Snape's very real forecasts that they (with the exception of his precious Slytherins) would all fail the O.W.L.s and disgrace the school and their families, he couldn't escape. He was tiring of Ron's petty emotional games. He hadn't really talked to Hermione or Neville or Colin for ages. And one could only study or read or play Quidditch for so long.

Over it all, the rain fell steadily.

It was driving him mad.

One Thursday night in mid-month, he was wandering aimlessly through the library when he saw Hermione standing alone, poking through the Muggle Studies section with a long list of books in hand and three or four tucked under her arm. She nodded politely to him, though she did not strike up a conversation.

He nodded mutely back. But as he passed by her, she stepped backward at the same time and bumped into him. The books spilled from her arm and landed on the floor.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and knelt down to gather them together.

"I'll help you," he offered gallantly, and bent down to help. He tried to pick up the book that had landed closest his feet, but she grabbed it from him, pushing his hand away.

"No, no, it's my fault," she said quickly, averting her eyes. "Thanks all the same, though."

With that, she hurried away.

Harry sat back on his heels, puzzled. Normally, such cold treatment from normally pleasant Hermione would have hurt...if it wasn't for the fact that when she had pushed his hand aside, she had pressed a small scrap of paper into his palm.

He could feel it there now, tightly wadded in his closed fist.

He stood up and returned to his table, then picked up his History of Magic class notes. He looked around to see if anyone was watching as he smoothed out the tiny scrap of paper and placed it on top of his notes.

The piece of paper was so small that he could hardly believe she had managed to write anything it. Its rough, jagged edges indicated that she had torn it from a corner of her notes. Written on the paper, in her precise but tiny handwriting, was a very short message:

Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Ten minutes. It's about Ginny.

He looked up to see her approaching Madam Pince's desk, carrying a stack of books. The sour-faced librarian checked them out and waved her away. She left the library with her books.

He stuffed the miniscule scrap of paper into his pocket. It had said ten minutes, so he waited at the table for five minutes, staring blankly at his class notes. Then, he collected his things and made what he hoped was an unobtrusive exit.

Once out of the library, he hurried through the empty corridors, making his way toward the out-of-order girls' lavatory on the second floor.

A sliver of light streamed from the slightly open door. He pushed it open with his elbow.

Moaning Myrtle, true to her name, was sobbing heavily in the farthest stall, making gurgling noises and splashing about and completely ignoring her visitors. Hermione was waiting for him next to the row of sinks. Her books were in a forgotten heap on the tiled floor.

She looked agitated, and Harry's arrival did nothing to calm her down.

"Where's the note?" she whispered.

"Here." He pulled it out of his pocket.

She plucked it from his fingers and entered one of the stalls, closing the door. The toilet flushed loudly, temporarily drowning out Myrtle's wails.

Hermione came out a moment later and began to wash her hands.

"Can't be too careful," she said meaningfully, her voice slightly louder to carry over the noise of the running water.

"Where did you learn to do that?" Harry asked her, very surprised.

She shrugged and turned off the tap, then leaned over to dry her hands on the roller towel.

"My parents are film nuts. You go to the cinema often enough, watch enough spy films, you learn a few things. But that's not what's important."

He blinked. He'd almost forgotten the reason for coming.

"What's this about Ginny?" he asked.

Hermione leaned against one of the sinks. Shadows of weariness made livid circles under her eyes. "I thought you should know that two of her roommates came up to me last night after dinner. They told me she's been having horrible nightmares."

His jaw tightened.

"Really," he said through clenched teeth.

"Every night for the last two weeks she's woken up screaming." The hand that rested on the white enamel was trembling. "Calling for her mother. That sort of thing."

"No wonder, considering what's been happening," he remarked moodily.

"Sleeping potions aren't working, either. They said she takes enough stuff at night to knock out a Hippogriff, but the dreams still come. And she doesn't remember them in the morning."

"Colin mentioned that she's been falling asleep during classes." He scowled, feeling rage percolate inside him. Colin had told him that three days ago, and he'd brushed it aside and forgotten it. "Snape gave her detention for it on Monday, the slimy git."

Hermione held up her hand to stop him before he could turn the conversation into an anti-Snape rant. "That's not all. They said that when she cries for her mother, they sometimes hear her call out another name...Tom."

"Tom..." A cold sweat broke out on his forehead. "Tom...not Tom *Riddle*?"

He mentally kicked himself. It could only be Tom Riddle, the living nightmare that had tormented Ginny three years ago in her very first year at Hogwarts. He remembered it all too well. She had recovered from the whole ordeal with remarkable speed--she was resilient, if nothing else--and he had been certain that she had escaped from its shadow. But if she was dreaming about her mother...and the dreams involved Lord Voldemort's alter ego....

"Did you try talking to her?" he asked quietly.

"I tried," said Hermione. "I really did. I asked her about it as gently as I could, but she just gave me this awful look...." Her face screwed up, tears glistening in her eyes. "Oh, Harry, it looked like there was nothing inside her. Like looking in a window and seeing an empty room."

Harry slammed his fist against his palm. "Doesn't Ron see what's going on?" he said angrily. "What about Fred and George?"

Hermione wiped at her eyes. "I don't know. I haven't said anything to them."

"Well, say something." That sounded a little abrupt, so he softened his tone and attempted to explain. "I would, but I'm not exactly popular with the Weasley family at the moment."

His attempt at humour missed the mark. Hermione didn't smile.

"Normally, this would be the part where I tell you to go off and do it yourself...but I won't." She stooped and picked up her books, brushing the worn leather covers to remove stray flecks of dust. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, Hermione. I owe you one."

"I'll remember that." She started to head for the door.

He panicked. The first real conversation they'd had in weeks, and it was ending like this.

"You'll let me know if anything happens?" he pressed.

She paused, one hand on the doorknob, and turned her head to look at him. "Of course."

"Right...thanks," he said lamely. "G'night."

"Good night, Harry. Oh, and good night, Myrtle," she called out as she left.

Moaning Myrtle howled even louder. The pipes rattled and clanked ominously. Then, with a rumble of antiquated plumbing, a small tidal wave of water cascaded out of the farthest toilet stall and spread across the floor.

Harry danced backward to avoid the nasty water that threatened to drench his shoes, and hurriedly exited the bathroom before Myrtle sent anything else his way.

* * *

The Gryffindor team crushed Hufflepuff in that Saturday's Quidditch match. The day was cold and rainy yet again, so Harry decided to use Beatrice as the Keeper. He hoped that her knack for playing in foul weather would prove its use.

He was right. The Hufflepuff Chasers had yet to score a goal against her when he spotted the golden glint of the Snitch at the base of the Gryffindor goalpost. It looked like it was trying to keep out of the rain as well. When Harry swooped down and caught the tiny winged ball, it made only a half-hearted attempt to escape.

After their victory, the team was in a much better mood. There were only a few grumbles when Harry informed them that there would still be practice the next day. Tommy, who had finally recovered from his Transfiguration accident, was looking forward to getting back into shape.

Harry was the last to leave the changing rooms after the game. Just as he was about to round the corner that led to the main corridor, he heard the sound of voices at the tail end of a conversation.

"...that we're not doing *too* badly, even if we have to change Keepers every game."

Harry's stomach clenched. It was Ron.

George's voice drifted around the corner, a lazy drawl that was more menacing than a snarl. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing really," Ron replied. "Just an observation. Colin and Beatrice have done a smashing job so far."

"Do you have something to say, Ron?" It was Fred this time, syrupy sweet and very dangerous. "I suggest you say it."

Ron answered innocently, "What is there to say?"

"You're doing it again." Fred sounded like he was doing his best to avoid throttling his brother. "You always used to do this at home, when you didn't get your way. It's not going to work this time."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ron said indignantly, his voice rising.

"Fine," George snapped. "If you're going to be that way, you can go right ahead. But don't expect us to sit around and listen to it."

"What did I say?" Ron's voice was going higher and higher as he became more upset. "All I do is congratulate you, and you go and jump down my throat!"

It was time to step in. Harry rounded the corner as quietly as he could, and stopped just behind Ron. Fred and George were glaring so viciously at their brother that they didn't notice Harry's approach.

"Thank you for the compliment," he said mildly.

The three of them leapt a foot in the air. Ron was the first to recover.

"Not at all, Harry," he said breezily, turning around. "You're doing a fine job. A good captain knows how to arrange his team to the best advantage, and it looks to me like everything is fine...."

Everyone could hear the "even without me" that Ron had omitted from the end of the sentence. But the meaning was there, and the insult was also there, and Harry saw red.

"What was I supposed to do?" he yelled, hands balling into fists. "Go after you and beg you on my knees to change your mind?"

There was no way that Ron could come right out and say, "Yes! Yes, that's exactly it! That's what you'd have done if you were really my friend!". He was forced to settle for a burning glare that conveyed his point silently.

Harry understood the glare and its meaning all too well. He chose his next words with very deliberate care.

"Every single person on my team is expendable, Ron," he said flatly, stressing the 'my' just enough to denote his authority without adding condescension. "Even you."

He didn't stay to see the expression on Ron's face. He turned his back on his friend and stalked away, ignoring the string of expletives that followed his departure.

* * *

There was no longer any possibility of a thaw. The argument was on in earnest. It wasn't one-sided any longer--Harry was actively angry at Ron, and Ron's anger had transformed from passive coldness to outright loathing. In Harry's opinion, Ron was being a arrogant berk, and that was the polite description. He could only imagine what Ron thought of him.

With tempers on edge, it was only a matter of time before the real blow-up came. And when it did come, on a night toward the end of that same week, Harry was only surprised that it hadn't happened earlier.

He was walking back to the common room after dinner. He had planned to go out to the Quidditch pitch and practice nighttime Snitch catching. The house elves had just laundered his Quidditch robes, and all he had to do was collect them and leave. No time for talking, no chance that an awkward situation could arise.

He walked up to the Fat Lady's Portrait. She smiled down at him, and smoothed her voluminous skirts.

"Practice again tonight, dearie?" she asked sweetly.

"That's right," he answered. "Fruit dr--"

Before he could finish saying the password, the portrait swung open. Hermione exited the common room. Ron and Ginny were close behind her.

He was wrong. The awkward situation had come to him.

Harry felt his chest constrict. Ron's face had hardened into a stony glare at the sight of him. Ginny, on the other hand, didn't seem to see him, or anything else around her. Her face was a slack, uncaring blank. It was painfully obvious that she hadn't been sleeping.

Hermione was quick to realise that this was a situation that could turn ugly. She moved to place herself in between Harry and Ron, just as Ron moved to stand in front of Ginny. Ginny, not surprisingly, didn't move at all.

"Hello, Harry," Hermione said neutrally.

"Hello," he replied, equally neutral.

"Are you practising tonight?"

"Yes," he said. "Are you going to the library?"

"Yes."

"I see."

There was a pause. Neither knew what to say.

"Well, good luck," said Hermione, a fake smile plastered on her lips.

"Thanks." Again, Harry responded with an equally fake smile. "You, too."

He stepped aside to let them pass.

The brief, stilted meeting would have passed entirely without incident if it hadn't been for Ginny's robe.

The second-hand school robe, purchased at the beginning of the school year, was rather long on her. Mrs. Weasley had been a firm believer in buying clothes that her children could 'grow into', and used alteration spells that could be adjusted year by year to make the expensive school robes last. With seven children to be put through school, it was a cost-effective solution to a problem that all parents face.

But Ginny hadn't been eating properly, and the now ill-fitting garment hung loosely from her body. Her hands peeked out of the over-long sleeves, and the hem of the robe had come loose and was dragging on the ground. Perhaps some of the magic had left the garment with the spell-caster's death. Perhaps exhaustion had affected Ginny's posture. But whatever the reason, one foot tangled in the hem, and she tripped.

She all but fell into a startled Harry's arms.

Ron was on him in a flash, wresting his sister away.

"I told you to keep away from her!" he yelled.

He tried to prop Ginny up against the wall, but she hung limp in his arms. Harry's first thought was that she had fainted, but a closer look showed that her eyes were wide open and staring straight ahead. It was a chilling sight.

At Ron's shout, Hermione had turned back. A quick glance told her that there was no way to avoid conflict, but still she made one last effort. "Ron, please--"

"You keep out of this," Ron snapped distractedly. Ginny was on her feet, but only just, and he couldn't hold her up and fight with Harry at the same time.

Hermione clapped a hand to her face as if she'd been slapped.

"Don't talk to her like that," Harry snarled, feeling a pulse drumming in his temple. Anger had sent the blood rushing to his head.

Ron was only too eager to turn on him. "I'll do what I damn well please."

"Then do it." Challenge glinted in Harry's eyes. He took a step forward and lifted his chin ever so slightly--an open invitation. "Do it now. Get it over with."

"Gladly." Ron pushed back the sleeve of his robe and flexed his right hand, cracking his knuckles.

Dimly, Harry heard Hermione yelling at them, but he was beyond caring. All he knew was that if he leaned into the blow he could probably take it and stay on his feet, and he would have perhaps two seconds in which to retaliate. Maybe a quick, hard uppercut to Ron's jaw would--

"STOP IT!"

He blinked, and tried to collect his wits. When had Hermione gotten in between them? And when had she taken hold of their collars? He didn't know when, but her hand was there now, inches from his throat.

"You're both acting like children, and you know it." She shook them violently, as if she could shake sense into them. "I've tried to be patient, but I'm not going to tolerate it any longer. Now out with it and be done, or I'M done...with both of you."

She gave them another shake for good measure, and let go of their collars. Disgustedly, she wiped her hands on her robes, then folded her arms across her chest and glared at them like a prefect who had caught two first-years fighting in the corridors.

Ron stared at Harry. Harry stared at Ron.

"It's stupid," Ron said after a good five minutes of silence. "It's stupid and it's awful and I don't want to talk about it."

Hermione wasn't about to let him off so easily. "Well, we don't seem to be getting anywhere *not* talking about it."

Ron's hands were clenching and unclenching, fingers curling like a cat extending its claws.

"Fine," he said bitterly. "You want to know what's bothering me? All right." He turned to Harry and pointed a shaking, accusing finger directly at him. "If it wasn't for *you*, Mum would still be alive."

Harry's legs wobbled. The blood was pounding in his head. The bruise on his right cheek had faded long ago, but the place where it had been was burning with a slow, building heat.

"That's not fair!" Hermione's voice penetrated the roaring in his ears. "You can't blame Harry for that."

"I KNOW it's not!" Ron looked as if he wanted nothing more than to hit something, but there was nothing around for him to hit. His arms flailed wildly in the air. "It's *not* fair, and it's stupid, and it makes no sense, and...and I'm a horrible person for even thinking it. But it's *someone's* fault that Mum's dead, and Harry's....."--his face screwed up, and his voice cracked--"he's...Harry's just...oh, Harry, I'm so...."

"Voldemort's to blame, Ron," Hermione said. She wasn't angry any longer; she sounded heartbroken. "It's *his* fault."

"....but it's mine, too."

Both of them turned to look at Harry, who was staring at the floor.

He looked up at them, anguish haunting his eyes. "I think...I think that what happened on Christmas Eve was meant for me. I mean, the whole bloody school knew that I was supposed to go to your house for Christmas, but only four of us right here knew beforehand that I *didn't* go."

Hermione's eyes widened. "You can't think..." she breathed, unable to finish the thought.

Harry nodded slowly. It had to be said--every time he failed to act on his suspicion, something awful happened. "All it would have taken was for someone like Draco Malfoy to let it slip to

his daddy that Harry Potter would be with the Weasleys at Christmas. Away from Hogwarts, with no Dumbledore around to protect him...."

Hermione hugged herself tightly, as if she could block out the horror of his words. "Harry, don't--

"That bastard. He'll die for this."

Harry's blood ran ice cold. This wasn't one of Ron's idle threats. This was the solemn vow of a man with revenge in his heart--and murder in his eyes.

"Don't be--" Hermione began, but wisely decided to change tactics. "What good would it do? If you succeeded, you'd only end up in Azkaban. And if you failed--"

"I DON'T CARE!" Ron screamed. His face was scarlet, so dark it made his hair look faded by comparison. "He CAN'T get away with it! He can't--"

"It won't bring Mum back, Ron."

The lack of emotion in Ginny's voice silenced Ron more effectively than any spell or charm. Slowly, he turned to stare at his sister. The expression on his face alternated between the rage of before and a new, rising fear.

"Stay...just stay out of this, Ginny," he finally choked out.

Deadened eyes stared back at him. "It won't bring Mum back."

Ron swallowed nervously, unable to look away. "All I want--"

Like flint striking flint, a tiny spark flashed deep inside Ginny's eyes. Her hand shot out and grabbed her brother's arm, yanking him toward her. For the first time in a long time, she looked alive...and furious.

"Have you ever once stopped to think about what *I* want?" she shouted. "Since you obviously haven't, I'll tell you exactly what I *don't* want. I *don't* want a murderer for a brother. I *don't* want to spend the rest of my life being patted on the head and told what a 'brave little girl' I am, how I'm holding up so well in such 'trying times'. And I *don't* want to end up like Mr. and Mrs. Diggory...with that horrible wall of photographs...."

She let go of Ron and buried her face in her hands, all of her energy spent. "I don't...I can't live like this anymore."

"Ginny...." Even though he was a good six or seven inches taller than her, Ron suddenly looked very small and helpless.

"I'm tired of grieving, Ron," she murmured, not looking at him. "I want to live again."

There was a long, frozen silence. Harry looked from Ron to Ginny and back again, unsure of what, if anything, he should do. One false move could shatter the moment and they would all would return to the awful cycle of snubs and shunning. He couldn't move. It was up to Ron and Ginny to sort this out.

Ron cleared his throat suddenly, the noise as loud and abrupt as an explosion in the stillness. He looked up, and Harry was shocked to see tears running down his friend's face. He wasn't even trying to hold them back. He looked bewildered and almost frightened, as if he'd awoken in a strange place with no familiar faces nearby.

"I miss Mum." His voice was the hoarse, plaintive cry of a lost child.

Ginny smiled through her tears.

"I miss her, too," she whispered. "But we're Weasleys. It'll be all right."

She took a step forward and wrapped her arms around his waist. She pulled him toward her and held him tightly, afraid to let go. Ron's arms dangled limply for a moment, and then he returned her embrace, clinging to his sister with a desperate grip.

She rubbed his back soothingly as he cried into her hair, and he supported her shaking body when she couldn't stand properly any longer. Harry and Hermione watched with blurry eyes as the two not-quite-children, not-quite-adults found grief and comfort in each other, letting go of the need to suffer in silence.

Looking at them, a little warning bell went off in Harry's mind. There was something important about the day. He thought carefully. He'd had Astronomy two nights ago, and yesterday had been Quidditch practice, so today was--

"Thursday," he said aloud.

It took Hermione a moment to wrench her attention away from the sweet but tearful scene in front of them. "What did you say?"

He turned to her. "Today is Thursday, right?"

"Y...yes," she said, hesitating.

"Thursday," he repeated, finally satisfied of the day of the week. He had another question waiting. "Where's Neville?"

By this time, Ron and Ginny had broken their embrace and were also staring at him, identically puzzled expressions on their faces.

Hermione's brow furrowed in thought. "In the library, I think...but why?"

"You and Ron go find him," he said briskly. He checked his watch. There was little time. It was nearly seven now. "Check the library, the common room, our room--he's bound to be somewhere close by."

Ron's eyes widened as comprehension began to dawn on him. "Wait--you can't--"

Harry didn't hear him. "Ginny, come with me," he said, holding out his hand. It was more of a command than a request. "There's someone I think you need to meet."

"NO!" Ron snatched Ginny's arm and pulled her away from Harry. His eyes were wild and fearful. "I don't want her to be a part of this!"

With a dexterous twist of her body, Ginny detached herself from her brother's grasp and turned to face him.

"*I'll* decide what I'm going to be part of, Ron Weasley," she informed him, staring him down.

Harry added his own challenging stare, hoping it would be enough to make Ron back down. "This could be what we need, Ron. We have to try."

Something inside Ron seemed to deflate, like the air being let out of a child's balloon. His shoulders sagged, and his entire body slumped, defeated.

Gently, Hermione took hold of his arm and steadied him.

"Give us ten minutes," she told Harry. "We'll meet you there."

* * *

Harry lit the fire in the fireplace with a flick of his wand and in the same motion used the sleeve of his robe to wipe the thick layer of dust off the long table. It got the table clean, but his robe was now covered in grey fluff, which didn't want to be brushed off.

"Gin, could you help me with this?" he asked, scraping at the dust with his fingernails.

From the moment they had entered the room Ginny had been gazing at the rows of books and chairs like a person lost in a dream. Harry's sudden request snapped her out of her reverie, and she scurried over to help remove the dust from his clothing.

"What is this place?" she asked when the task had been accomplished, picking bits of fluffy grey and brown out of her hair.

"You know our study sessions for the O.W.L.s? Well, this is it." He indicated the room with a broad sweep of his arm.

"I don't get it."

"You'll see." He smiled to himself. Will wasn't the only one who could sound cryptic.

He guided Ginny over to the mirror. Her hand felt small and fragile next to his own. His fingers, roughened from playing Quidditch, brushed against hers. At any other time he would have been blushing and stuttering at this display of closeness, but not now. They'd wasted too much time already.

"Don't look directly at the mirror." Without any further warning, he touched the carved wooden frame and at the same time closed his eyes.

Brilliant light dazzled his closed eyelids. He waited until it had faded somewhat, then opened his eyes. The mist had begun to clear, revealing the orderly clutter of the Cambridge office.

Slightly behind him and to his left, he heard Ginny gasp. Her hand snaked into his and squeezed it tightly.

Will was sitting behind his desk, fingers steepled thoughtfully in front of him. The massive desk was clear of books and papers, and there was no sign that they had interrupted him while he was reading or writing. In fact, it was as if he had merely been sitting in quiet contemplation...waiting for one of them to contact him.

Harry tried very hard to ignore the fluttering of his heart. Will's round face was stern and unsmiling, and his entire manner radiated a sense of extreme displeasure. If the Old One had been holding an exam with a failing mark and 'See Me' written across the top in bright red ink, Harry would have believed that it was a bad dream come to life.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter," Will said frostily.

Harry's heart beat even faster. A part of him was glad that Hermione wasn't present. If a situation like this was a bad dream to him, it would have been nothing short of a personal hell for her.

"G-good evening, sir," he replied.

With a deliberate slowness that seemed almost calculated, Will stood and approached the mirror.

"Are the others joining you?" he asked in the same chill tone.

"They'll be here in a minute," Harry answered, praying that it was true.

"For your sake, I hope so." Even though the words should have been worrying, Harry could detect no threat behind them. Just coldness. "Or rather, for all our sakes. There is something we must...ah."

All of a sudden, the austere, forbidding expression vanished without a trace. Harry found himself looking at a gentle smile and placid, kind eyes.

The change had come over the older man's face with such rapidity that Harry was startled. It was like looking at a different person who had somehow been there the whole time, without him knowing it.

"Good evening, young lady," Will said with a courtly bow.

Quickly, Harry turned to Ginny, who was peeking over his shoulder. She was staring at Will with wide eyes and a slightly open mouth.

"Ah...I...I...." she stammered, tightening her grip on Harry's hand.

"Miss Weasley, is it?" Will took the liberty of answering his own question, since it didn't appear that Ginny would be capable of providing a coherent reply. "Of course. A pleasure to meet you at last."

Poor Ginny was even more confused. "I...you...what...?"

Harry took his cue and neatly stepped in. "It's all right, Gin," he said. "This is Will Stanton. Professor Will Stanton, from Cambridge University. D'you remember when he came to school last year?"

It took a few seconds for the information to process. "The...that lecture? The one you acted all weird after?"

In spite of everything, Harry had to laugh. He *had* acted 'weird' after that lecture. Having a complete stranger speak directly into your mind didn't leave much room for normalcy.

"Well," he said, "that's part of it. It's a very, very long story."

Will smiled as well. "And it seems to get better with each telling, in my opinion. But to summarise briefly, your brother, your friends, and I have pooled our resources to find a way to defeat the Dark Lord."

"As if it would be for anything else," Harry muttered to her.

"That will do, Mr. Potter," the Old One said, mildly reproofing. He turned his attention back to Ginny. "I know something of his powers, powers unfamiliar to the wizarding world. But neither the wizarding world nor I can defeat him alone--and that is where you come in, Miss Weasley."

The smile faded. His face was still kind, but serious. "We need your help."

"It won't bring my mum back," Ginny said. She spoke resolutely but emotionlessly, as if she was reciting a difficult lesson she had memorised.

Will looked stricken by her words. Harry saw him struggle to conceal his sadness.

"I know, my dear," he said softly. "I know. But you can stop what happened to you and your brothers from happening to other children and other families. We can defeat the Dark Lord together, but we need your knowledge."

The thought that anyone would *need* her knowledge was a relatively new concept to Ginny Weasley. She blushed deeply.

Flustered, she said shyly, "I...I'm n-not very good at Potions...."

Will's eyes glinted with an amused light. "Neither am I, but we'll work something out."

Ginny giggled. She wasn't standing so stiffly; her body had relaxed.

At that moment, the door to the room opened and Neville, Hermione, and Ron entered. They all looked out of breath, Neville more so than the other two.

Ginny wasted no time. She marched right up to Ron and planted herself in front of him, hands on her hips.

"You silly idiot," she scolded jokingly. "You've been doing this all year and I've missed out on the fun?"

Ron stared at her, dumbstruck.

"Fun?" he said at last. "What fun?"

"Do you mean to say that I'm not 'fun', Mr. Weasley?" Will said, almost petulantly.

Ron, already nonplussed, was completely at a loss, and Will took pity on him.

"I trust things have sorted themselves out?" he asked Harry.

"You might say that," Harry replied cautiously. He knew exactly what Will meant, but wasn't sure how to phrase the response.

"Then there is nothing more to be said on that topic." He turned to the others. "Miss Weasley has been gracious enough to favour us with her presence this evening. There is an important decision that must be made tonight...and I am waiting for her answer."

"You don't have to do this, Ginny," Hermione said. "It's your choice."

Ginny gave her a withering look. "It's no choice at all," she said. "It's like that thing we read about in Muggle Studies the other day, when we were studying those peculiar turns of phrase...what was it? Hobnob's choice?"

Will's mouth twitched. "I think you mean 'Hobson's choice', Miss Weasley. And you're right, it is something of a Hobson's choice-- you're left with little alternative. But the choice is there. It always is."

"Then I choose to join you," Ginny said with resolve. "And if Ron doesn't like it, then it's his problem."

Ron groaned. "Gin...."

"You have no objections, Mr. Weasley?"

"What good would they be if I made them?" Ron said gruffly, thrusting his hands in his pockets. "I just don't want her to get hurt, 's all."

Will nodded. "Spoken like a true older brother, Mr. Weasley. But I understand your fears quite well, and I promise here and now that I will do everything within my power to protect all of you...however little you may need protecting," he added wryly, seeing the indignant frown that had appeared on Ginny's face.

"My dear brother seems to have forgotten that he was only eleven when he nearly went and got himself killed going after the Philosopher's Stone," she said to Will, not looking at Ron.

Ron scowled. "And my dear sister seems to have forgotten that *she* was exactly the same age when a certain diary...OW!" He winced, rubbing the shin that Ginny had just kicked. "Why is it that girls always go for the shins?" he complained bitterly.

Hermione answered without thinking, "Because it's far more ladylike than a knee to the...." She noticed that everyone was staring at her, and she trailed off shamefacedly.

"How exactly do you--" Neville began, perplexed.

Hermione cut him off with a nervous little laugh. "Ah, yes, well, it's not important. Shall we see if the mirror works now?"

"Very well then." Will stepped back to wait.

They took their positions. Hermione and Neville placed their hands on the frame on one side, and Harry, Ron, and Ginny touched the frame on the other. Ginny's hand was just below her brother's.

On a sudden impulse, Ron reached over and wrapped his free arm around his sister. Ginny looked up at him, momentarily startled. Then with a little smile, she relaxed and leaned into her brother's protective embrace.

Harry felt all the stress and tension of the past month flow out of him, as if the magic of the mirror was drawing all of the negative emotions from his body. Things were RIGHT again. All of the old urgency was back, the drive that propelled them forward. He hadn't realised it was missing until it returned to him in a rush.

"Enter, Watchman of the Light," he declared.

"Grant to us your inner sight," said Hermione.

Ron did not hesitate. "Enter, for the time draws near."

"Power will erase our fear," Neville declared, relief shining on his face.

It was Ginny's turn to speak her part. The words were as clear as lark's song on a warm summer day. "Enter, lest the darkness win."

The carved symbols of the mirror frame blazed like blue fire.

Will stepped through the glass and into the room. The ordinary grey blazer and dark trousers he wore transformed into swirling robes of deepest blue. Power crackled in the dusty air, filling them with a delicious tingling that raced through their nerves.

Will's deep, resonant voice added to that sensation. When he spoke, it was as if he was speaking to some part of them that had been long asleep and had only just awakened:

"And then there were five."

Chapter Twenty-Two - And Then There Were Five

"Datta, dayadhvam, damyata." (Give, sympathise, control.)

-- Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (Hindu sacred text)[1]

They seated themselves around the table. Will took a chair from the row that stood along the bookshelf and placed in at the end of the table closest to the fire. The five children took their places after a moment's confused shuffling; Ron, Ginny, and Neville sat along one side of the long table, and Harry and Hermione sat on the other.

Will waited until they had settled down before he began.

"With the addition of Miss Weasley here, I think that we can begin to turn our efforts toward the development of a real system of defensive and offensive spells. I have a few ideas that we can try, but those will come later. First of all, I need to establish a link with you."

"Link?" Neville repeated. "What kind of link?"

"If we are going to develop these new spells to a useful extent, the five of you must be able to call upon the power of the Light even if I am not physically present. To do that, you need a link. Your bodies already have the ability to control wizarding magic, but not the ability to tap into other, older kinds."

Hermione nodded. "So the link will allow us to properly combine the different types of magic?"

"I certainly hope so."

"Great," Neville said eagerly, rubbing his hands together. "What do we do?"

Will smiled. "Well, first I want you to sit very still for a minute. Try to empty your minds, and not think of anything. Keep quite, quite still. Just relax your body, and let your mind follow...."

His placid voice passed over them, wiping the little distractions from their thoughts. It was a nice, drowsy feeling, like the daze that settled over one's mind just before one fell asleep at night. The conflict and tensions that had preyed upon them not half an hour before drifted away on a sea of murmured words.

"Now, then," Will said in the same low, dreamy voice. "Join hands."

With the slow single-mindedness of sleepwalkers, they did as he asked, each taking the hand of his or her neighbour. Ron and Harry found that Will had taken their free hands. Hermione reached for Neville's hand across the table to complete the physical link.

"Close your eyes."

Harry's eyes were drooping and half-shut already, but at Will's command they closed all the way. His breathing was light and shallow.

After a moment, he felt an odd tingle running through his body. It wasn't unpleasant, merely a little ticklish, a warm prickling in and under his skin that was almost like having gooseflesh. Gradually, the strange sensation grew stronger, flooding his body with warmth. Harry shivered as the tingling feeling intensified, building deep inside him and running through his nerves like the steady flow of an electric current.

Just before the tingling reached the point where it might have become painful, a sudden flare of brilliant, blinding white exploded inside his mind, thousands of colours leaping and dancing behind his closed eyelids. The air around him crackled, almost singing with energy. His entire body felt as though it was enveloped in a column of light far too bright to look at.

Dimly, from far away, he heard himself gasp in delight and awe. Was this the master that Will served? Was this Merlin's legendary power? Was *this* the Light?

The overpowering blaze began to fade, and it was all Harry could do to keep from crying out at its loss, which felt as real and painful as the loss of an arm or leg. The delightful tingle dwindled as well, fading until the only hint of its presence were tiny shivers that occasionally spiralled up his spine.

His heart still raced from the experience. He felt oddly energised, full of life. He was sure that he could have run a mile without being winded or played an entire Quidditch match by himself. It was a giddy, almost delirious feeling.

Will released his hand.

Harry allowed himself to let go of Hermione's hand. He opened his eyes and looked around.

To his surprise, his friends looked as fresh and energised as he felt. Their cheeks glowed in slightly flushed faces, and their eyes sparkled. Will, on the other hand, looked rather tired, but a weary satisfaction softened the lines of exhaustion on his face.

"Can all of you hear me?" he asked, speaking directly into their minds.

"Yes."

"Yes, sir."

"Yes."

"Yes."

"This is really weird."

Will's deep laughter rippled in warm waves that spread through their minds. *"I'll take that as a 'yes', Miss Weasley."*

Ginny's already flushed face darkened in embarrassment. Apparently, the idea of telepathic communication would take some getting used to.

"Now that the link has been established, you will be able to draw upon the Light to a limited extent," Will said, speaking aloud once again. "I place a special stress on the word 'limited', at least until you become more comfortable with it. But don't worry, we'll have plenty of time to practice."

His voice took on a more serious note. "Now, as to the specifics of defence and offence. I must remind you that the Dark prefers to work by in very subtle, insidious methods. It will use your fears, doubts, and insecurities against you in a natural way. You would not even know that you were being controlled. It would rather creep into your mind and slowly, methodically turn you against your friends rather than possess your body and soul like the Imperius Curse. It would rather place you in a situation where you run the risk of being injured or killed, rather than having an agent or a servant of the Dark waltz in and attack outright."

"Tell that to You-Know-Who," Ron said under his breath.

Hermione's ears were sharp enough to catch his words.

"Ron!" she said ominously.

Will frowned. "There's no need to be crude, Mr. Weasley. The Dark Lord quite willing to kill, if that's what you mean. One doesn't forget fourteen years of forcible exile. Whether he can or not is another matter."

Ron didn't look convinced. "Of course he *can*."

"In that sense, yes. He has the power to do so. But I meant 'can' in the sense that the power of the Dark will *permit* it." He tapped lightly on the table, emphasising his words. "He tried once, and was punished. He will not receive a second chance. However, he would gladly suffer the inevitable if it produced the desired result."

The discussion of Voldemort's means and ends continued, but Harry wasn't listening. He was preoccupied with a little idea that had sprung up in the back of his mind. It had been there for a long while--at the very least, since the attack on St. Mungo's--but had never found a proper voice until that moment.

He had to tell them, allow them to consider it, but the prospect of putting it into words terrified him. What he was about to advocate was...well, it was something he didn't really want to think about, but it had to be put forward. It was as likely--no, it was *more* likely--to work than any other plan.

"I think I know what we have to do," he blurted out.

The conversation came to an abrupt, shuddering halt.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" Will said, prompting.

Harry took a moment to gather his thoughts. He would have to get this statement exactly right. He doubted he would get a chance to explain it again, once the words had been spoken.

He kept his eyes focused on a worn spot on the wood of the table, because he also doubted that he would be able to finish his statement if he looked anyone full in the face.

"I think...I remember you told me that only the Dark can defeat the Dark, and that the Dark isn't allowed to kill people. That's what nearly finished Voldemort off last time, right? Because of what he did to my parents, and what he tried to do to me. So that's a link there. And since it was *my* blood that helped bring him back, I've got another link to him, a direct link."

He would start babbling if he didn't get to his point soon. "So if I...well, I don't know, taunt him or trick him or something like that, and make him use the Killing Curse on me, then that should finish him off for good and all. I mean, he'll be doubly punished because I don't have my mum's protection on me anymore, and that will...."

He looked up, and his voice failed him as he saw his friends' faces.

They were staring at him with varying degrees of astonishment, shock, and sheer horror, as if they couldn't believe what they had just heard him propose.

Will was the first to speak, breaking the shocked silence.

"Have you developed a death wish, Mr. Potter? Because if you have, I think we would all be very interested in hearing the inner reasoning behind it."

"I...yes...NO!" he spluttered, his mind spinning. Will's hard, critical gaze made him feel very small.

"Then what?"

"It's just...it's just that...well, what other choice is there?" he finished angrily.

"One that doesn't involve self-sacrifice, perhaps?" The sarcasm was bitter, not joking. "I think you've heard too much of this 'Boy Who Lived' nonsense. You're thinking of martyrdom, not warfare."

"But if it's the only way--"

"Only way'? That's not a way, it's a way *out*. You can go down young in a blaze of glory, or you can die in your bed at a ripe old age. But you're dead either way."

"I don't WANT glory!" he cried out, pounding his fist on the table. "I just don't want anyone else to die!"

"And yet your death would suddenly, *magically* fix everything?" Lines of age and sadness, as deep and noticeable as scars, replaced the anger on Will's face. "Too many people have died already, Harry. Don't add to that suffering."

"But--"

"Harry, stop it," Ron said sharply. "You're scaring Ginny."

Ginny didn't look the least bit scared. She looked puzzled, as though she'd never seen Harry before and had no idea who he was.

"Fine," he said. "All right."

Will, hearing the slightly sullen tone in his voice, fixed him with a fierce look that would have struck fear into the heart of the most brooding, rebellious undergraduate student.

"Are you going to abandon this objectionable idea, or do I have to declare this an 'extenuating circumstance' and ask Mr. Weasley and Mr. Longbottom to take you outside and end this discussion in a more...*persuasive* fashion?"

Harry shook his head quickly, and stared down at his lap. Judging by the expressions he had seen on Neville and Ron's faces, they would be only too willing to carry out the Old One's request.

"Thank goodness for that," Will said, his voice tinged with a trace of fatigue. "Your parents would never forgive me if I went and got you killed."

Harry's head snapped up. "My...?"

The corner of Will's mouth quirked in an ironic manner, one that hinted at everything but told him nothing.

"You'll not be suicidal on *my* watch, young man." The hint of a smile faded, and he closed his eyes wearily. "Hmph. I think I should have phrased that better."

The rest of the session passed quietly, skipping through various topics of conversation slightly related to the aborted topic of offence and defence.

Ron related bits and pieces of Ministry information he had received in letters from his father and Percy. All departments, no matter what their area of concern, were working extended hours to prepare for any emergency. The officials in the Department of Magical Catastrophes were on mandatory overtime. There was talk that all Aurors--active, inactive, and retired--were to be called up and pressed into service to counter the Death Eater threat. Security measures had increased at Gringotts' Bank, the Ministry building, and other likely targets for an attack. The manhunt for Sirius Black was still on, though no new leads had been found. Overall, a definite wartime mentality had developed among the Ministry members.

Hermione declared her intention to do further research into alternative forms of magic that might be useful to practice in future sessions, and Neville offered to help her.

Ginny volunteered to check back editions of the Daily Prophet and other wizarding papers for information that might help them learn more about the Death Eaters and their past methods.

Ron took occasional notes, writing down ideas for discreet questions he could ask the older members of his family.

Will sat silently and listened to them talk. He didn't comment on their suggestions or offer any ideas. He merely sat, absorbing all the information.

Harry was also silent. He knew as well as they did that his plan would work. It would take care of the matter with little to no chance of failure. He had promised not to consider it, but that didn't mean the idea would go away, or become any less of a possibility.

It was a quiet, solemn group of Gryffindors that left the little room off the library later that night. Not until they were nearly back to their dormitory did Harry's friends voice their concerns.

"You had me scared in there, Harry," Hermione said in a small voice. "You sounded like you meant it."

He sighed, pushing his glasses up his nose. "I *did* mean it...or at least I think I did. I just don't know anymore."

Ginny rested a hand on his shoulder. "Will's right, Harry. Too many people have died."

"Even one person was too many," Neville added softly.

Harry felt he had to make a token protest. "I just thought--"

"You think too much," Ron huffed, his eyes narrowing. "All of you do. And I swear, if you start thinking that you're going to do this alone, I'll...I'll...."

"You'll kill me?" Harry said dryly.

Ron glowered at him. "You know what I mean."

* * *

That Thursday night may have brought new questions and problems to light, but one long-standing problem had been solved. Harry and Ron were fast friends again.

Things were back to normal between them. Yet this wonderful news posed another, more delicate problem, one that could have compromised the secrecy of their mission.

The rest of the school might have wondered how two people could have gone from loathing the sight of each other to being best of friends again in the space of one night. The strange turn of events might have raised uncomfortable questions that could not be explained away easily.

The five of them had considered this as well, and after a short conference just outside Gryffindor Tower they had formed what was nothing short of a brilliant plan.

Luckily, the trickiest part of the situation--the Fat Lady--had solved itself for them.

Harry and Ron hid around the corner as Hermione, Neville, and Ginny approached the entrance to the Gryffindor common room. Hermione smiled apologetically at the Fat Lady, intending to explain everything to her. However, the Gryffindor portrait informed them that she had left her picture only moments after the argument had begun. She 'didn't much care to listen in on other people's troubles', she said with a haughty sniff, and therefore had not heard

the outcome of the quarrel. They had been so absorbed in the argument that they hadn't even noticed her departure.

Hermione gave her the password and the three of them hurriedly entered Gryffindor Tower, much relieved. When she left the tower that night to complete her nightly rounds as prefect, she had Harry's Invisibility Cloak concealed under her arm. And when she returned fifteen minutes later and gave the password again, she stooped down to remove a non-existent pebble from her shoe. This gave her compatriots just enough time to slip unseen into the common room and hurry up to bed.

Early the next morning, they put the plan into action. Neville started things off by spreading a rumour that Ron and Harry had gone out to the Quidditch pitch the night before to fight out their disagreement. No wands involved, no wizard's duel, just fists and feet. Since everyone who had been in the common room at around seven o'clock had heard their voices raised in the initial stages of the argument, the story was only too believable.

When she arrived downstairs for breakfast, Hermione added to the brewing drama with her own prize worthy performance as the prefect who had caught them brawling. She informed her surprised hallmates that she had docked twenty House points each from Harry and Ron for fighting and for breaking curfew. While this prompted a raised eyebrow or two, the Gryffindors knew there was nothing to worry about: Hermione could and would regain their lost points single-handedly with correct answers to questions in class. And as for Hermione, a cutting remark about 'idiot boys' here and a disgusted rolling of eyes there was enough to sustain the fiction.

A few props rounded out the story marvellously. Obviously, the two of them could not have walked away from their knockdown, drag-out fight unscathed. They had to add a scathe or two, and to do so Harry had raided the Quidditch team's first aid supplies for the needed materials.

The next day, he swathed his right wrist and arm in yards of bandages, and Ron covered one side of his face with a liberal amount of sticking plaster. Suitably attired, they went down to breakfast, laughing and joking together as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Of course, they added a few personal touches for the proper amount of realism. Harry chose to affect a limp. Ron spoke slowly and with difficulty, like he'd taken a punch to the jaw. But as far as anyone else was concerned, they'd fought the matter out and all was forgiven. To use a jolly, if outdated, Muggle phrase, everything was ship-shape and Bristol fashion.

* * *

"I would like to apologise most sincerely for my behaviour these last few weeks. It was rude, unsporting, and unacceptable. There are no excuses I can supply that will make up for the way I acted. I would be very grateful if you would consider allowing me to practice with the team again, but I will understand completely if you do not.

"I would also like to make a personal apology to Harry for my selfish and intolerable behaviour. He has always been a good and supportive friend, and a valuable member of this team. I was wrong to blame him for my problems. I hope that he can find it in his heart to forgive me."

Harry blinked. *That* hadn't been part of the script.

He and Ron had spent the better part of an hour--when they should have been reviewing for Charms class--working out exactly what he was going to say to the Gryffindor team when they assembled later that afternoon. Ron had been ready to walk in and wing it, but Harry quickly convinced him that it would be better to draft and re-draft a proper apology.

As far as he was concerned, Ron was back on the team and welcome. He'd missed having Ron around, and he knew that the team needed his skills and expertise on the pitch. But making an arbitrary decision like that would be pushing his authority as captain. Ron had quit the team, and the whole team had to decide whether Ron would be allowed to return.

But at the moment, it wasn't looking very promising.

The members of the Gryffindor team had assembled in the boys' changing rooms to make their decision. Eight expressionless faces stared at their former team mate, weighing his statement in their minds.

Harry cleared his throat, a little nervously.

"Right, you've heard him," he said. "Would you like a little time to think about it, or do you want to vote now?"

"We'll vote now, if you don't mind," Fred replied blandly.

"By show of hands," added Colin.

"And it has to be a unanimous decision, otherwise it's no-go," Angelina interjected.

Harry was more than a little taken aback. He hadn't expected them to go right to the vote without any discussion, but if that was the way they wanted to do things....

"Okay," he said, trying to sound noncommittal.

"I suppose that's only fair," Ron agreed meekly.

Harry noticed that Ron's face had gone rather pale, and his hands were tightly clenched behind his back. He had to get this ordeal over with as soon as possible. Otherwise, the tension was liable to make him faint...or make Ron explode.

"All those in favour of allowing Ron to rejoin the Gryffindor House Quidditch team?" he said hastily, hopefully.

No one moved.

Harry's heart nearly stopped.

A soft sound that was close to a whimper escaped Ron's lips.

Then, with a deliberately agonising slowness, the eight team members raised their hands.

Harry felt a silly, relieved grin spread across his face. He heard Ron let out his tightly held breath in a loud whoosh.

"All opposed?" he said, deadpan.

Eight hands fell to their owners' sides.

His silly grin grew wider. "Thanks, guys."

"*Thanks*? Thanks for nearly giving me a bloody heart attack!" Ron wheezed, clutching at his chest and glaring furiously at his team mates.

Fred chuckled. "Any time, brother of mine. But there's one condition that comes with your return."

"And what's that?" Ron demanded, suspicious.

Fred raised a finger, shaking it back and forth teasingly. "You can't play the upcoming game against Ravenclaw. That's Tommy's game."

"We've already printed the programmes and notified his parents and put Madam Pomfrey on stand-by alert and everything," Beatrice said with a snicker.

"What's the one after that?" Ron asked.

"Slytherin," said Colin.

A cold light glinted in Ron's eyes.

"That's fine with me," he said slowly. "It'll be a pleasure to give Draco Malfoy a beating he won't soon forget."

Harry didn't like the sound of that statement, or the look in Ron's eyes.

"Let's get out there and practice," he ordered, changing the subject. "And if you want to have dinner tonight, you'll be quick about it."

With a few unnecessary comments about Harry's physical attributes and his taskmaster attitude, the Gryffindors picked up their brooms and trooped out to the field. Just before Ron could collect his broom and follow, Harry caught hold of his friend's arm, stopping him.

"Nice job on the speech," he said, smiling. "Though I don't remember writing that last bit."

Ron looked away. Two faint spots of colour stood out on his cheeks.

"Hermione's idea," he said roughly.

Harry raised a knowing eyebrow. "Oh, really?"

"Of course!" Ron snorted, rolling his eyes. "D'you really think I'd write that sort of drivel about you, much less be able to get through it with a straight face? Not on your life!"

"You didn't have to do it."

"Like I said, it was Hermione's idea, all right?"

"I forgave you a long time ago, Ron."

The spots of colour deepened to a burning crimson, but Ron kept his composure. "You...so you mean I said all that for nothing?"

Harry's smile softened.

"No. Not in the least."

* * *

"...and it's due Thursday at the beginning of class and it *has* to be four feet long and I've NEVER written a four-foot essay before and I really, really, really need to do well on this one because I did just AWFUL on the last one and I'm so scared and I don't know what to do!"

Harry exhaled loudly, wondering if Natalie had really finished talking or if merely taking a rest before continuing.

He was impressed by her lung capacity. Not even Colin had been able to go off on one subject for so long without a single breath. He had been holding his own breath during Natalie's little speech, and his chest ached with the exertion of keeping the air in.

"Calm down." Hermione put down her Transfiguration textbook, and smiled patiently at Natalie. "It can't be as bad as all that."

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Natalie were holed up in the library late on Sunday afternoon. Hermione was going through the Transfiguration textbook, adding extra information to the margins of her notes. Harry and Ron were supposed to be reviewing their class notes on the I Ching system of Divination, but their minds had wandered far from thoughts of ancient China. Ron's eyes had glazed over a good ten minutes before. Harry was more interested in the numerous doodles he had drawn during Divination, squiggly lines and boxes and stick figures doing gymnastics all down the page.

"It is too!" Natalie contradicted, lower lip quivering.

Hermione sighed quietly. Her smile became less patient and more long-suffering. Natalie McDonald's fear of Professor Snape was quickly replacing Neville Longbottom's reputation, and not without reason. The poor girl was shaking at the mere thought of having to produce written work for his evaluation.

I hope she keeps a spare cauldron handy in class, Harry thought idly.

"What was the essay about again?" Hermione asked.

Natalie looked down at her notes. "The uses of the various parts of leeches," she read dully. "Comprehensive, fully detailed. Must be four feet exactly."

Ron coughed, jerking out of his daze.

"Oh, *that* essay," he remarked absently. "I remember that one. Got the worst mark I'd had in a long time. Percy was livid about it."

Natalie wailed, and Hermione gave Ron a dark look.

"What?" he said. "I told him to shove it. Percy was always going on about nothing. He still does."

"Thank you for that entirely unhelpful statement," she said icily.

"Suit yourself." Ron returned to staring at the ceiling and trying to balance his empty quill on the tip of his nose.

"Four feet exactly..." Natalie repeated miserably, propping her chin on her hands.

Hermione's smile now bordered on desperate, but her eyes suddenly lit up as inspiration struck her.

"I know!" she crowed. "Look, go back to the tower, go up to my room and find my trunk. That essay should be in there. You might have to look for it...just put everything back the way it was."

Natalie didn't stay to ask questions. She was out of the room in a flash, sprinting as fast as her knobbly legs could carry her.

Hermione leaned back in her chair.

"Whew..." she breathed.

Ron had a very odd look on his face. "Hermione, we wrote that essay almost three years ago."

"So?"

"You kept it?"

"Of course," she said with a little nod. "I keep all my old papers. Why, what do you do with them?"

Ron folded his arms across his chest. "Throw them out as soon as possible, what else?"

"You throw them *out*?" Now it was Hermione's turn to give Ron a strange look.

"Well, it's not like I'm going to use them again."

"I've always saved mine," Harry said.

The worry lines left Hermione's brow as she visibly relaxed. She gave Ron her best superior 'you see?' smirk and turned to Harry. "And have they come in handy?"

Harry nodded very seriously. "They're good for lining Hedwig's cage during the summer. Or at least that's what I always used to use them for. This summer I tried using them as fire starters at Mrs. Figg's house. The pilot light on her gas cooker kept going out."

Ron grinned broadly at Hermione's expression of utter dismay.

"Did it work?" he asked, overly polite.

"Not really," Harry replied, grinning as well. "Paper was too stiff. But it was fun to watch that one assignment for History of Magic go up in flames."

"The one on the politics of banning flying carpets?"

"No. The one about the Werewolf Code of Conduct."

Thoughtfully, Ron scratched his chin. "I never liked that one anyway."

"Didn't you write it the day it was due?" Harry pointed out. "During Transfiguration?"

"Yeah." Ron picked up his quill and twirled it in his fingers, the point resting on the tabletop. "Fastest I ever wrote a paper. Even *I* couldn't read my own handwriting. But it passed, and that's all I care about."

Hermione rubbed her eyes tiredly. "Please remind me why I continue to associate with you."

"Because we keep you sane," Ron said promptly.

"Or because you're a glutton for punishment," Harry added with a mischievous smile.

Hermione was about to let them have it, but just then Natalie came running up to the table, breathing heavily.

"I couldn't find it," she said.

"What?" Hermione looked at her sharply. "I'm sure I brought it."

Natalie shook her head, mousy plaits flying about her face. "I looked everywhere. I even checked the lining."

"That's strange," Hermione said, more to herself than to Natalie. "I remember packing it...I think...."

"I'll go look again," Natalie offered, painfully eager.

The older girl waved a hand. "No, no, that's all right. I'll look later, after dinner. My essay's just for example. Right now, the important thing is to get some ideas down on paper."

"Okay." Natalie took her seat, and pulled out a fresh piece of parchment.

Hermione flipped through her Potions text. "We should probably start with the internal organs--do you have the diagram that Snape drew on the board?"

"Here it is."

"All right. Now, the secretions from leech intestines can be used as an anti-coagulant to dilute potions that contain animal blood...."

With that savoury observation, all non-school conversation came to an end.

The rest of the time until dinner flew by. The tutor and her protégée delved deeply into the workings of *Hirudo Medicinalis*--the common European leech. Ron's eyes took on their former faraway opaqueness as he chewed on the end of his battered quill. Harry looked down at his Divination notes, concluded that he wasn't going to make much sense out of them, and picked up his borrowed copy of Kennilworthy Whisp's newest Quidditch bible, "The Trouble With Snitches".

Four typical students, prepping for their classes.

* * *

Will opened their next session by removing a small and worn leather bag from his briefcase and setting it on the table. The battered, crudely made pouch was tied shut with a thin strip of braided cord, and looked rather anachronistic next to the modern leather of his briefcase.

"I have something for all of you," he said. He lifted the pouch and began to undo the knot in the cord that held it closed. "The Dark can disguise itself, take different forms to serve its purposes. You will not see the same thing twice. That is why it is absolutely essential to be on your guard at all times."

"Constant vigilance," the five of them chorused, smiling slightly.

The cord dropped onto the table. "Exactly. But even that may not be enough--as I'm sure you know. No, the best way to guard against the Dark is to have early warning of its presence. Our Mr. Potter here has something of an internal early warning system, but it only works in connection with the Dark Lord."

Harry squirmed, as uncomfortable as he always was when he was singled out as an example.

"When the Dark comes, anywhere or at any time, you must feel it," Will continued. "And that is what these are for."

He tipped the bag over the table. Five small light-coloured stones, each no larger than the ball of his thumb, poured onto the wood with a delicate chittering sound.

Hermione extended her hand tentatively and picked up the one closest to her. She rolled it in her fingers, testing its weight, then held it up for a better look.

"Quartz?" she asked, turning to Will.

"Close enough," he replied. "These stones have been enchanted for a specific purpose. If you are in the immediate presence of the Dark, or one under the influence of the Dark's power, the stone will become very cold."

Harry took the stone that had landed nearest to him. It looked and felt like an ordinary pebble, worn smooth in places but rough and unpolished in others. It wasn't cold to the touch, but it wasn't warm, either. He couldn't sense anything out of the ordinary about it.

"What should we do with them?" asked Ginny.

"Keep them with you at all times, but take great care," Will said warningly. "In the presence of the Dark, it will be cold enough to severely burn exposed skin. For that reason I suggest you carry it in a pocket, or keep it somewhere else to prevent direct skin contact."

Feeling a little nervous, the five of them gingerly put the stones in the pockets of their work robes.

"The detection spell is inherent in these stones," Will said. "However, your particular situation demands more than my magic can provide. That is why I paid a visit to someone who has more practical experience with the Dark Arts...Mr. Alastor Moody."

Their chorus of 'constant vigilance' didn't sound so funny anymore.

"I met with him some time ago. Perhaps you may recall the date--I was very nearly late meeting with him." He paused to let his words sink in. "Mr Moody has added his own touch to the stones, a special charm. They will vibrate very slightly if you happen to be around someone who has recently suffered under one of the Unforgivable Curses. The charm can detect the residual energy of these spells for a short period of time."

"How long?" Hermione pressed, ever precise when it came to details.

"Twelve hours. Twenty-four, if the curse was particularly strong or used for a prolonged period."

She nodded understanding.

Something in his behaviour changed, signalling a shift in the topic of conversation. "Mr. Longbottom, would you be so kind as to poke the fire? It's a little cold in here."

Neville obediently rose and moved over to the grate. The scrape of the fire irons mixed with the crunch of burning and charred logs.

"Now, to continue with last Thursday's discussion--"

He was interrupted by a loud, urgent knock on the door.

The children froze in mid-action, creating a tableau that would have been highly amusing if the situation had not been so dire. Hermione's hand hovered over her Charms textbook. Ron had paused in the middle of an extensive stretch, one arm tucked behind his head and the other extended in front of him. Neville held the poker over the grate, arrested in the act of pushing a clump of ashes to one side. Ginny had reached up to push her hair back, fingers tangled in the thin red strands. Harry, who had not been moving, simply froze in his chair. His breath caught in his throat.

Once, twice, three times. The knocking came again, louder.

"W-who...who is it?" Hermione called out, her voice quavering.

"Professor McGonagall."

Relief washed over Hermione's face. "Just a minute, Professor!"

She stood and headed for the door. Her fingers were inches from the doorknob when Ron sprang out of his chair. The chair tipped backward and fell to the floor with a crash.

"*Don't open it*!" he hissed. He was wringing his right hand, twisting his fingers as if a wasp had stung him.

"What?" Hermione stared at him, mouth open in shock.

"It's the Dark! You heard me...don't open that door!"

Harry and Ginny were on their feet in a flash, wands out and ready. Neville gripped the poker and lifted it, prepared to use it if another weapon was required.

"Ron, are you sure?" Ginny asked fearfully. "What is it?"

Ron massaged his hand, rubbing his fingers roughly. "Can't you feel it?" he said in a ferocious whisper. "Cold...so cold...."

Harry slipped a hand into his pocket, searching for the tiny charm. The tips of his fingers brushed across woven fabric, digging deeper until they came upon the roughness of stone.

It was ice cold.

Remembering Will's warning just in time, he jerked his hand away.

"Ron's right," he said, keeping his voice down.

"Miss Granger, is everything all right in there?" McGonagall asked, knocking on the door.

"Yes, Professor, I'll be right there!" Hermione replied loudly.

"Stall her!" Ron ordered.

"But I--"

"Say something, anything! Just STALL HER!"

Hermione turned back to face the door.

"Umm...we're a little b-b-busy in here, Professor," she said, not very persuasively. Ron growled at her, and she made a helpless, agitated gesture in reply.

There was a noise from outside the door, the sound of shuffling and fierce whispering. Then, a second voice spoke--a cold incisive voice that the five students knew all too well.

"I'm certain that whatever you are doing can wait, Granger."

"Snape!" Harry gasped, redundantly.

Ginny covered her mouth with a shaking hand. She looked to be only moments away from being sick.

Neville had gone white as a sheet. The poker fell to the ground with a clang. He hid his face in trembling hands and moaned what they were all feeling:

"We're going to die."

After a dizzy moment, Professor McGonagall spoke again, more firmly this time. "Miss Granger, there is something very important that we must discuss."

"Minerva, please, let me handle this," Snape said impatiently. His voice sounded fainter than before, as if he had turned aside to address McGonagall in a more private manner.

There was a brief rustling of garments, and then his voice returned at its original volume--low, silky, and very dangerous. "Granger, if you do not cease this childish behaviour and open this door by the time I count ten, I can promise you that you *will* regret it."

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, but no sound came out.

The count began. "One...two...."

Hermione whirled around to face the others. Real, hopeless fear lent a desperate light to her eyes. "Harry, we *have* to--"

"I'm telling you, it's the Dark! DON'T LET THEM IN!" Ron screamed his whisper, his voice hoarse and thick with panic.

Snape's warning tones drifted through the door. "Three...four...."

"We're all going to die," Neville moaned again.

"Will you STOP that!" Hermione, Harry, and Ron snapped at him in deafening unison.

"Five...six...."

Ginny grabbed the sleeve of Harry's robe. "Harry, *do* something!" she implored, clinging to him like a distressed limpet.

"Do WHAT? What am I supposed to do?" He tried to pry her off, but she held fast.

Something wasn't right--well, a number of things weren't right, but one thing in particular bothered him. If the voices outside were really those of the Dark or of Voldemort's servants, his scar should have been hurting by now. As it was, there wasn't so much as a twinge. But the burning coldness that seeped into his clothing from the little charm in his pocket contradicted his assumption, informing him otherwise.

"Seven." The Potions Master continued to count, inexorably. He sounded bored by the whole ordeal. "Eight...."

"You're not--"

"--something--"

"Don't let--"

"--listen to--"

"I *said*--"

"Calm yourselves."

Will's firm command echoed in the suddenly silent room.

The sound of counting from outside had stopped as well.

Slowly, very slowly, they turned to look at Will.

The Old One sat quite still in his chair. He was perfectly composed, regal in his calmness. The fire burning in the grate cast a warm halo of light around his chair, but there was a strange, hazy white glow surrounding him that did not come from the firelight behind.

"Well, Miss Granger, what are you waiting for?" He lifted a hand in a gesture that somehow managed to be both imperious and pleasantly sociable at the same time.

"Please...show them in."

Chapter Twenty-Three - Walls Around the Heart

No such thing as a man willing to be honest--that would be like a blind man willing to see.

-- F. Scott Fitzgerald

Harry wasn't quite sure what he expected to see when Hermione opened the door.

Death Eaters, at the very least. Voldemort could have discovered some way to bypass the warding and protection spells and enter the castle without Harry feeling it. Maybe he'd captured all of the students and teachers except for the five of them, and now he was forcing McGonagall and Snape (or using their voices, through magical means) to trick them into opening the door.

But then again, Will had specifically instructed Hermione to show the two teachers into the room. He didn't appear to be at all worried.

Some sort of Dark creature, then. Some foul being of the pit that they wouldn't learn about in Defence Against the Dark Arts classes until their seventh year. He'd read enough books from the Restricted Section to know that a creature of that kind could cause the stone charms to react, provided its magic was powerful enough.

But then again, why would a Dark creature go to all the trouble of imitating the voices of two Hogwarts professors when it could simply wait until the five of them left the room?

Or perhaps they would be expected to face a shapeless, formless mass of evil, the power of the Dark in its purest form.

But then again...no, Harry didn't think he could justify that.

All these theories, each more awful than the last, flashed through his mind in the three seconds that it took for Hermione to open the door. Out of caution--or fear--she had only opened the door partway, just enough for them to see who was waiting outside.

Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape were standing in the corridor. And as far as Harry could tell, they were the real, genuine articles.

The relief he felt was so mindnumbingly strong that it was closer to disappointment.

Professor McGonagall looked relieved as well, very happy to see that everything was all right. Snape, on the other hand, looked like someone had sneaked up behind him and doused him with a bucket of ice water. His body was rigid, his back unnaturally straight. The skin of his face, normally sallow, had turned a colour better suited for a corpse than a living person.

"Stanton...." His voice came from somewhere deep in his chest, as low and ominous as a rumble of thunder before a storm.

Will cleared his throat, and stood up.

"Miss Granger, if you would be so kind...." he said meaningfully.

Hermione hastily opened the door a little wider to allow the teachers to enter.

McGonagall brushed past without a second glance. Snape, after a moment's uncertain pause, followed her. As soon as the door had clicked shut, the Headmistress of Hogwarts nodded to Will, who bowed to her with the same degree of respect and formality he had always shown to Dumbledore.

"Please pardon the interruption, Dr. Stanton," she said.

"No need to apologise, Headmistress," Will replied graciously, his voice as formal as the steps of a ballroom dance. "This must be a most important matter if--"

"I don't believe this." Snape gave Will the malignant glare he usually held in reserve for troublesome Gryffindors. "You overconfident, small- minded--"

"Severus, please!" McGonagall scolded.

Snape wasn't about to listen to teacher. "I knew from the start that allowing you to come last year was a foolish mistake," he said in the threatening monotone that Harry and the others knew all too well. "Do you have any idea what you've done? If the Dark Lord were to discover that Will Stanton, of ALL people, had been consorting with the great Harry Potter and his little band of hangers-on...but then again, you wouldn't **care** about that sort of thing, would you?"

His intonation changed, sliding from disgusted criticism into an exaggeratedly submissive, servile drawl. "Please enlighten me, why exactly do you **deign** to favour we poor, wretched mort--"

"Have you found the Veritaserum counteragent yet?"

Will's question stopped Snape's angry outburst in mid-word.

"Wh...what?" he choked, taken aback.

"That counteragent you were developing for Veritaserum--last I knew, you hadn't finalised it yet. Has the situation changed at all?"

The explanation had given Snape enough time to collect himself. When he answered, his voice was back to its usual contemptuous self. "No, it hasn't."

"That is my reason." Will smiled faintly. "Oh, I don't doubt your courage. Quite the contrary, in fact. But you can't tell what you don't know. And you know as well as I that the Dark Lord would have no qualms about using one of your own concoctions against you, if it suited his needs."

"And you chose to--"

"Albus Dumbledore decided long ago that this matter would be on a need- to-know basis. Besides the children, only Professor McGonagall and Arabella Figg were informed of the situation. You were safer in ignorance...and, for that matter, so were we."

"Severus, this is not what we came for," McGonagall said, frowning at him.

The veins in Snape's neck stood out like quivering blue ropes, but he remained silent.

McGonagall turned to look at Hermione, who had returned to stand beside the chair closest to the door.

"Miss Granger, Professor Snape tells me that his second year students had an essay assigned last week, to be turned in today," she said.

"Yes, that's right," Hermione replied, glad that the topic had changed to the more comfortable matter of schoolwork.

"You have been helping Natalie McDonald study for Potions, am I right?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"What exactly have you been helping her with?"

Hermione's brow furrowed in thought. "Well, the last thing I really helped her with was the essay you mentioned. Professor Snape tends to assign rather"--she cast a wary glance at Snape--"*challenging* topics, so I helped her think of ideas to incorporate in the paper."

"Did you, then," Snape muttered.

Something in his tone made a warning bell go off in Harry's head.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked, alarmed. "Did she fail?"

"No, she didn't," said McGonagall.

Snape reached into the folds of his robes and produced a tightly rolled parchment tied with a thin ribbon. He loosened the knot on the ribbon with a flick of his finger, and deftly unrolled the parchment.

"I suggest you have a look at this, Miss Granger," he said, holding it out to her. He held the end pinched delicately between thumb and forefinger, extended at arm's length, as he was trying to avoid being contaminated by contact with the document.

Puzzled, Hermione took the paper from him, and unrolled it enough to read from the beginning. Her eyes scanned the page with the practised speed of one accustomed to reading and absorbing the information from long documents. Her lips moved silently as she read.

But after a minute, her eyes weren't moving quite so fast. The motion of her lips slowly and eventually stopped. She continued to read, more carefully now. Every so often, she would squint at the paper or move it closer to her eyes, as if she couldn't quite comprehend what she was reading.

As Harry watched her read, the warning bells began to grow louder, more insistent. On a sudden impulse, he reached down to pat at his pocket. The inexplicable coldness of the stone continued to beat through the fabric. The Dark was still present...but how?

"It's...this is..."

Harry's hand fell to his side. Quickly, he looked up.

Hermione had stopped reading. Absently, she let go of the bottom of the parchment, and the document springily snapped back into its neat roll.

"Hermione?" Ron said her name worriedly.

She shook her head. "This...there must be some mistake."

"What is it?" Ginny asked, craning her neck in an attempt to see the document.

Hermione turned to Snape, forcing a brilliant, baffled grin. "This is almost identical to the essay that *I* wrote in second year."

"Almost identical, yes." Snape's lips drew back from his teeth in a superior smile. "With a few sentences and the occasional paragraph deleted to fit it to the length requirements. As I recall, *you* ignored my very clear instructions and rambled on for a good six feet."

Hermione's face went rigid. Her smile froze.

"This...this *can't* be right." The rolled parchment crackled in her tightening grip. "It can't."

Snape couldn't resist a final parting shot. "I can assure you it is. It would be hard to forget a paper so stultifyingly boring."

Suddenly, everyone seemed to be moving at once.

The parchment fell to the floor.

Hermione's hands flew to her face. With a keening, tortured cry, she staggered backward and fell heavily into her chair.

Ginny ran to Hermione and made a valiant effort to pull the older girl's hands away from her face. She hugged her friend, pouring nonsense syllables of comfort and reassurance into deaf ears.

Ron hadn't waited to hear Snape's final remark. He had been in motion before Snape had finished speaking. He sprang forward with an eerie, predatory snarl, and very likely would have succeeded in his intent to rip out the Potions Master's throat if Harry and Neville hadn't leapt to intervene at the last second. And even then, after they had tackled him and pinned him to the ground, Ron fought their restraining grip.

"HOW DARE YOU!" he roared, twisting and writhing like a man in the throes of a seizure.

Neville and Harry doubled and redoubled their efforts to keep him down, though in their heart of hearts they would have been perfectly content to let go and damn the consequences.

McGonagall swept forward, wand raised to deliver an immobilisation spell, but Snape flung out his arm and stopped her. It was hard to tell whether he had done so without thinking or whether he had her safety in mind. But whatever the reason, a thin line of sweat shone on his brow, and not even his characteristic sneer could disguise the glint of instinctive fear in his eyes.

Neville, who was sitting on Ron's back, gave Snape a baleful glare filled with all the hatred and loathing he could muster.

"How can you even suspect her of something like that?" he demanded. His tone clearly indicated that he suspected Slytherin foul play, that Snape had fabricated the damning evidence out of spite.

"Hermione would NEVER cheat!" Ginny said vehemently, her eyes flashing fire.

Hermione was unable to speak in her own defence. Ginny's shielding embrace blocked most of her from sight, but the little they could see was more than enough to know the state of her mind. Violent sobs made her hunched shoulders shake. Her hair, unruly at the best of times, had fallen over her face to create a thick curtain that hid her from view. The endless, maddening sound of her crying rose and fell in jagged spikes. Curled into a tight ball, feet tucked underneath her and arms pulled in to her sides, she looked as if she wanted nothing more than to shrivel up and die.

Harry was prepared to add his own thoughts on Severus Snape to the general opinion, but as turned his head (all the while keeping his grip tight on Ron's hands and his full body weight centred on Ron's ankles) he saw that Will had moved to stand behind Hermione. Will touched the weeping girl's shoulder lightly with one hand, though he made no attempt to calm her.

"This is a very serious accusation," he said, his voice just loud enough to be heard over Hermione's sobs and Ron's struggles. "I trust that there will be further investigation into the matter?"

Harry couldn't tell whether he was addressing Snape or McGonagall, but Snape seemed to take the question as a personal insult.

"Of course! What do you take us for?" Irony twisted the thin line of his mouth. "'Witch hunters'?"

The charged comment hung heavy in the air. Even Ron stopped moving for a moment, temporarily distracted.

Unaware, Hermione continued to sob.

Will turned his attention to Snape with the mild interest of someone who has wandered into the middle of an interesting conversation.

"You said the paper was due today?" he asked.

"Yes," was the cold reply.

McGonagall spoke up, wielding some measure of her authority before the situation could become even more overcharged. "I felt that it was only proper to notify Miss Granger as soon as possible."

"Has the other girl been notified as well?" Will asked.

"Not yet."

That provoked a sharp glance. "Why not?"

"I thought that Miss Granger should be the first to know," Snape said.

"Did you, then." Will's words and tone were a near perfect mimicry of Snape.

Neville, caught up in the tenseness of the moment, let out a high, hysterical giggle that he tried to cover with a feeble cough.

Through a remarkable exercise of emotional control, Snape kept his temper. "After all, it was her paper," he said, artificially casual.

"What actions will be taken?"

"Both girls will be confined to the dormitory outside of classes until the Heads of Houses can arrange a faculty hearing to further examine this incident," McGonagall said. "And until the hearing, Miss Granger will be relieved of all her duties as prefect."

A blood-curdling wail emerged from behind the curtain of hair. Ron uttered a curse and reintensified his efforts to break free.

Will paid no attention to the scuffle at his feet. "And how long will it be until the faculty hearing?"

"One week," McGonagall said with a heavy heart. "Perhaps a fortnight."

"I see," he said thoughtfully, glancing down at Hermione.

"Obviously, you understand the need for thoroughness in matters such as these," Snape added, not without a hint of spitefulness.

Harry was outraged. Hermione's reputation was at stake, and they were discussing the issue as if it was nothing more than a point of business on the agenda of a faculty meeting.

He was about to say something to that effect, anything to point out the lunacy of the accusation, when he noticed that Will was looking at him. There was a quiet mastery in the Old One's eyes that was reassuring and yet alarming at the same time.

Harry nodded imperceptibly, understanding the unspoken order. He would keep silent.

Satisfied, Will turned back to regard the two professors. But in that half-second, something in the room had changed. There had been a very subtle shift in the balance of power, turning it slightly in Will's favour.

"The sessions will continue, of course," he said.

Snape made an outraged noise.

"I think not," he said, sounding scandalised that such a suggestion would even be considered. "According to the rules of this school, a situation of this nature demands that participation in *any and all* extracurricular activities be suspended for the *entire* duration of their probation. Both Miss Granger and Miss McDonald must be confined to their rooms outside of classes."

For the first time, Will's calm facade slipped.

"My dear sir," he said frostily, "do you really think that a case of schoolgirl plagiarism will prevent the Dark Lord from implementing his plans? The sessions must continue."

Snape's glare could have frozen running water. "I warn you, Stanton--"

"I will personally vouch for Hermione Granger's future actions, but I will not be held responsible for what may happen if any more time is lost." The severity of his gaze hinted that a good deal could and would happen if any more time was lost, and that Snape would do well to remember it.

With that particular dispute abruptly ended, he turned to McGonagall. "Headmistress, I appeal to your authority in this matter."

McGonagall hesitated.

From his awkward vantage point, Harry could see her weighing the facts and judging the situation. She had long been a strict adherent to the letter of the law--taking no favourites, punishing her own students as well as those from other houses for infringements of school rules--and to make an exception would go against everything she believed and stood for. But even a strict adherent could see that there were times when such exceptions had to be made.

All of the students in the room, Hermione not the least, had proved that often enough.

"The sessions may continue," she said at last. They could hear the reservation she attempted to conceal. "But I must insist that Miss Granger be escorted to and from this room for each one...by a faculty member."

"Then," Will said, "may I suggest that Professor Snape be that faculty member? After all, who better than he to ensure that the school rules are carried out to the letter?"

Professor Snape looked as though a potion he had been brewing had just exploded in his face.

"He will not have to stay for the sessions, of course," Will added smoothly. "Unless he would care to, that is."

Snape found his voice a moment too late. "Minerva, I--"

"I think that is a very good idea, Dr. Stanton," McGonagall replied, without looking at her colleague. "And I'm sure that Professor Snape would find that idea agreeable."

Snape's breath came hard and fast, whistling through his clenched teeth.

"Excellent. Monday and Thursday evenings at seven o'clock, then?"

"Agreed. Severus?" She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Agreed." Snape spat the word out.

Will inclined his head humbly. "Thank you both. Now, would you permit me to detain these students for a few more minutes? They will be back in their dormitory by curfew--you have my word."

"Of course." McGonagall stooped down and picked up the discarded roll of parchment. She tucked it safely into her robes. Then, she touched Snape's shoulder and firmly guided him to the door.

With a final burning glare at all of them, his cold eyes lingering longest on Will, Snape allowed himself to be escorted from the room.

The second the door had closed, Ron wormed his way out of Neville and Harry's restraining grip. He ran for the door and flung it open in one furious motion.

His shout reverberated, magnified against the stone walls of the corridor. "Just you wait, you greasy, hook-nosed--"

"Mr. Weasley," Will said sharply. "Control yourself."

Cowed, but not calmed, Ron slunk back into the room and slammed the door.

Harry let out the breath he hadn't even known he had been holding.

Scattered pops and crackles from the fire made dents in the silence of the room. Hermione's sobs had stopped some time before; no one quite knew when. Ginny continued to rub her back and whisper words of encouragement, but she might have been trying to cheer up a carved block of wood for all the response she received.

"It's never going to end, is it?" Neville said miserably, rubbing his feet and ankles to restore the blood flow. Keeping an angry Weasley under control required a good deal of physical exertion.

Ron commented darkly, "If it's not one thing, it's another."

"Testing never ends," Will said, unemotionally.

Sweeping his long cloak out of the way, he knelt down beside Hermione's chair. He took one of her hands in his.

Reluctantly, Ginny let go of Hermione and moved aside. She stepped back a few paces to stand beside her brother. Harry and Neville quickly joined the cluster of worried faces that had gathered around Will and Hermione.

Will patted her hand. "Miss Granger."

Hermione didn't move.

Will cupped her hand in both of his, applying gentle but firm pressure. "Hermione."

Her head lifted slightly. The frizzy brown curtain parted to reveal her red, swollen face, surprisingly free of tear marks. She gazed at Will with the pained confusion of a stray dog that had been hit by a speeding car.

"I thought I left it at home," she whispered brokenly.

"I know, my dear."

She shook her head vigorously. "It wasn't there when I looked. I looked everywhere, and it wasn't there. It WASN'T there." Growing panic twisted her face.

Still holding her hand, Will leaned forward and touched the side of her face with the tips of his fingers. He gazed steadily into her frightened eyes. His lips moved in silent speech, whispering words in the ancient language of his magic.

Hermione's eyelids fluttered. The shock and bewilderment drained from her face, leaving it as blank as the painted skin of a china doll.

"Wasn't *there*...." she breathed, a final protestation.

Her head dropped, and she slept.

Will brushed a few stray strands of hair out of her face, and passed a hand across her flushed forehead.

"Rest now, child," he murmured. "All will be well. Have no fear."

Slowly, he got to his feet and moved over to the table. He pulled his briefcase toward him and began to arrange the papers inside it.

"I doubt if anything more can be accomplished tonight," he said. "I must speak to your former Headmaster." He glanced at Harry. "Mr. Potter, I would like you to accompany me--you can carry any relevant information back to your colleagues."

This was news to them.

"T-to Dumbledore?" Harry said.

"Yes. He is in the castle tonight, in his office, and asked me to stop by if I had a chance. I had hoped to present a better report, but such is circumstance." The briefcase clicked shut. "You'll

be back before curfew, though. I have no desire to give Professor Snape more cause for alarm."

No arguing with that. "Yes, sir."

"What about us?" Neville piped up.

"You and Mr. Weasley transport Miss Granger back to your dormitory and put her in bed. Don't worry about waking her--she will not wake again for some time."

"Right," said Ron. An idea lit up his eyes, and he put on a concerned expression. "What a pity that she had another...'funny turn'."

"An excellent idea, Mr. Weasley. I couldn't have done better myself." Will turned to Ginny. "Miss Weasley, go with them. I would like you to spend the rest of the night in Miss Granger's room...prevent her roommates from disturbing her, field any of their prying questions. I trust you to come up with a suitable story."

Ginny nodded. "Okay."

"And Miss Weasley?"

"Yes?"

His calm eyes grew very grave. "Stay with her at all times. Do not let her out of your sight. If she questions your presence when she wakes--though I doubt she will--say that you are guarding her at my request out of concern for her safety."

"Do you expect some sort of attack, sir?" Neville asked in a nervous hush.

"No, Mr. Longbottom," Will said sadly. "I expect--no, I *fear*--that the only harm done will be by her own hands."

Rage flared in Ron's eyes, and for a sick moment Harry thought that he and Neville would have to hold him down again.

"She wouldn't!" Ginny exclaimed, aghast.

In answer, Will lifted one of Hermione's limp hands. Gently, he turned it this way and that, studying it and examining from all angles. He paid very close attention to her fingertips. Then he beckoned to them, inviting them to come closer.

The four students crowded around to see what Will had found.

Underneath Hermione's fingernails were a few flakes of what could only be skin. Four deep, crescent-moon shaped indentations marked each palm when her nails had gouged the soft flesh.

Horrified, Harry's eyes darted from her hand to her face. His stomach turned over as he saw several thin red scratch marks marring her pale cheeks. The redness of her face had concealed

them before, but the marks were plain enough now. Although the scratches weren't deep and hadn't drawn blood, they were enough to unnerve any observer who knew Hermione well.

"Third year." Strain made Neville's voice shake.

Ginny tore her eyes away from Hermione's hands. "Wh-what?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts," he said. "We had to face a Boggart as an exam. Hermione's Boggart was--"

"McGonagall," Ron interrupted grimly. He and Harry both understood what Neville was getting at. "It was McGonagall...telling her she'd failed all her exams."

Will placed Hermione's hand back in her lap.

"Even the famous Gryffindor courage can fail at times," he said. His level gaze scrutinised each of them in turn. "You five have always protected and taken care of each other...I know you will take care of her now."

* * *

Both Ron and Neville cast the Mobilicorpus spell on Hermione. Ron assigned Ginny to walk beside Hermione as she floated along, just in case. He wasn't taking any chances.

Harry and Will saw them safely on their way back to Gryffindor Tower. Harry extinguished the fire in the grate with a wave of his wand, and the two of them hastened through the corridors to Dumbledore's office.

A thousand burning questions were on Harry's tongue, but there wasn't much time for talking. He winnowed his questions down to the most important few, took a deep breath, and started to seek the answers.

"Why did the stone react like that?"

"For the obvious reason, Mr. Potter. We were in the presence of the Dark."

"But it was just McGonagall and Sn..." He fell silent under the weight of realisation. "Oh."

Will stared straight ahead. "Those who have once sold themselves to the Dark will always carry that taint with them. The stones make no distinction between traitor and spy, just as I make no distinction."

The statement was chilling enough, but the complete lack of emotion in Will's voice made the hairs on the back of Harry's neck stand on end.

"Oh," he said lamely. After an uncomfortable beat, he tried again. "Professor Snape doesn't like you much, does he?"

"You don't miss much, do you?" Will replied, neatly turning the question around.

Harry remained undaunted. "And you don't like him, either."

Will sniffed. "Whether I like him or not is irrelevant. He is useful, at times."

Useful. Another prickle of coldness shot through Harry's body.

"Oh," he said again.

Fortunately, they soon came to the immense stone gargoyle that stood guard outside the entrance to Dumbledore's office.

"Vegemite," Will said.

Harry stared incredulously, first at the gargoyle, then at Will.

"Don't look at me," Will said as the entrance opened before them. "I can't stand the stuff myself."

Within moments, they were seated inside the familiar, cosy warmth of Dumbledore's office. The fire was welcoming. Fawkes dozed on his perch, his brilliant feathers gleaming in the flickering firelight. Harry gratefully accepted Dumbledore's offer of hot chocolate, though Will declined politely in favour of tea.

With a brimming cup and saucer balanced precariously on his knees, Will began. "Minister, if I may--"

"You can dispense with the titles, Dr. Stanton," Dumbledore interrupted wearily. "I hear enough of it all day. This place is my sanctuary, my escape from the niceties of diplomacy."

Harry, quick to pick up on the tone of voice, noticed tiny lines of exhaustion around Dumbledore's eyes and mouth that hadn't been there before. His eyes, though still bright, had lost a little of their customary twinkle.

"Point conceded." Will sipped his tea.

Dumbledore adjusted his half-moon spectacles. "So, what news is there?"

"Snape just accused Hermione of cheating," Harry blurted out before he could stop himself. "Of letting someone copy her paper, if you can believe it."

Will set his cup down and gave him a withering look. "That wasn't exactly the news I had intended, Mr. Potter."

Dumbledore sighed. "Another obstacle, eh, Dr. Stanton?"

"Don't trouble yourself with it, please," Will said. "Things will sort themselves out soon enough. They have a funny way of doing so."

"So they do," said Dumbledore.

"And in other news, Miss Ginny Weasley has graciously consented to throw her lot in with us, as it were."

Dumbledore chuckled. "I bet her brother wasn't too pleased."

"You could say that." The corner of Will's mouth twitched briefly. "But progress is being made. Our Mr. Potter and his friends have performed most admirably of late."

"That's a comfort. Better than some of the news I've been hearing."

"Matters that have been kept from the press?"

"Something like that," Dumbledore said wryly. "A few things. Nothing too earth-shaking. But rumours have reached me that Lucius Malfoy has been very ill for some time now."

Will nearly choked on his mouthful of tea. "Has he?"

"Yes. Quite unable to leave his bed, in fact. It's most distressing." There was a trace of irony somewhere in that final remark, but it was hard to spot.

"How long has he been...incapacitated?"

"The middle of January. At the least."

"Cruciatu," Will murmured.

"It would appear so." Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully. "The Dark Lord is not pleased with him...or so I've heard."

"Because he botched the Christmas Eve attack?" Harry said softly, staring into the depths of his cocoa mug.

Dumbledore and Will exchanged glances.

"You're a very bright boy, Harry," Dumbledore said at last. "I thought you might have guessed as much."

Harry set his cocoa down. He didn't trust his hands.

"So he *was* the one," he said flatly.

"Lucius was very careful, as always," Dumbledore continued. "He'd never do it himself. But the Ministry has done some checking, and we've discovered that the witch and wizard who actually carried out the attack were from New Zealand."

"Spending the Christmas holiday in England?" Will asked.

"No," Dumbledore said sadly. "They were on their honeymoon."

Harry didn't want his cocoa anymore. He felt sick.

"And Draco...it was Draco, wasn't it?" he said. "Draco told his dad, and his dad planned it, and then it went wrong and he was punished for it."

"So we'd like to think. But finding enough proof...." Dumbledore sighed again. "Has Draco been acting...strange recently?"

"Yes." Harry didn't have to think twice before answering. He told the whole story of the Quidditch match against Slytherin, of the fear he thought he had seen in Draco's eyes, of the odd little confrontation at lunchtime, of Ron's violent reaction when he had voiced his suspicions. He did his best not to leave anything out.

"Draco seems to be concerned for his father," Will said when he had finished. "Regardless of whether he knows the real reason for his father's ill health."

"Maybe this is what we need," Dumbledore remarked. Some of his old energy had returned. "Something solid and painful like this could be the think to shake Draco. I will let Severus know...he has tried to talk to the boy before, but there might be a better chance now."

The clock chimed the hour.

"Curfew." Will rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I'm terribly sorry...I'd forgotten."

"Don't worry, Dr. Stanton." Dumbledore stood, and traced a small figure eight in the air with his wand. The empty crockery disappeared in the blink of an eye. "I will take him back to Gryffindor Tower. It'll do me good to stretch my legs, and I doubt even Professor Snape would object to the Minister of Magic as an escort." His bright eyes twinkled. "Well, not to my face, anyway."

"Thank you, sir," Will said, closing his eyes.

Harry got to his feet, sorting through the information he would have to tell Ron and the others. The subject of Draco was an explosive one, and he needed more time to organise his thoughts. After all, he had to be somewhat objective.

"We can continue this discussion when I return, if you have the time," Dumbledore said.

"Time is not an issue," Will replied with a small smile.

Dumbledore matched his smile, as if sharing a private joke. He put a hand on Harry's shoulder and ushered him from the room.

As the door closed behind them, Harry caught the feathery rustle of wings and heard the beginnings of liquid birdsong, breathtakingly beautiful. Fawkes was singing, pouring out his healing music to the room's one remaining occupant.

* * *

Before their Transfiguration class the next day, McGonagall pulled Hermione aside and informed her of several important facts--facts which she related to Ron, Harry, and Neville the moment class had ended.

The faculty hearing was tentatively scheduled, slated to be held on Tuesday fortnight. It would be run jointly by the Heads of the four Houses, with McGonagall presiding as Headmistress. It would take place sometime after dinner, giving the teachers enough time to

put aside their classroom duties and turn their attention to the more pressing business. As one of the accused, she was permitted to have one, and only one, other student with her during the hearing. The student would act as both witness to the proceedings and counsel to her.

Hermione accepted all of this stoically. McGonagall, perhaps a little disturbed at her student's blank acceptance of the unpleasant facts, brusquely dismissed her to begin the lecture a few minutes early.

Word spread fast, as it always does. Harry, Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Colin were Hermione's silent and unwavering champions. The second-year Gryffindor girls were very vocal in defence of their classmate. Most of the school, however, seemed to be uncertain about which side was in the right--they'd never seen anything to rival this dilemma. It was impossible to think that teacher's pet, know-it-all, Perfect Prefect Hermione Granger would permit cheating, especially from her own hard work. But there was no denying that she *had* been helping Natalie, and if she had been desperate to raise the younger girl's grades....

Harry was reminded of second year, of the whole Heir of Slytherin debacle. The fearful, uncertain reaction of his fellow students was much the same. But this time Fred and George couldn't do anything to lighten the mood. Even they couldn't make jokes about this sort of thing.

Nonetheless, Hermione continued her routine as though nothing was wrong. She attended all her classes, studied, ate, read a book or two, studied, slept, studied some more, and generally behaved as she always did.

Her friends were the ones whose behaviour had changed. Mindful of Will's warning, they took turns staying at her side during the day. Harry and Ron occasionally used the Invisibility Cloak to watch over her at night if they thought her day hadn't gone well. Ginny dutifully shadowed Hermione to places where the boys obviously couldn't follow-- the lavatory, for instance. It was a tiring schedule, but all that was needed was the memory of the scratches on Hermione's face to bolster their resolve if it started to flag.

They tried to be discreet. It wouldn't do for her to suspect the true reason for their surveillance. But one night after dinner, when Hermione and Ginny had joined the three boys for a quiet hour of studying, Hermione set her book down and casually said:

"I know why you're doing this."

Harry looked up from the chess game that he was currently losing to Ron. "Doing what?"

"Keeping me company. Or following me around, whichever's closer."

Ginny made a pained face. "We're your *friends*. Don't you want us around?"

Hermione frowned at her. "Oh, I do. But you're not here because you want to be."

Neville, sitting on the floor next to his bed, dipped the nib of his battered refillable quill in the inkpot that sat nearby. "Will said that it's for your own protection."

"So don't be silly," Ron said, nudging his bishop to one side.

"But why *me*?" Hermione said peevishly. She got up and started to wander aimlessly around the room. "Harry's the one who needs someone watching his back all the time...not me. Not me."

"You've always watched over us," said Neville, removing the quill from the ink. "It's time we did the same for you."

Hermione whirled round, glaring down at him.

"Oh, really?" she snapped. "Well, if you think you owe me anything then you can all get out of here and find something better to do."

Neville bit his lower lip. Two or three drops of ink fell from the tip of his nib and splashed on the floor.

"That's not it at all!" Harry protested.

Hermione laughed bitterly. "Well, I'm positive that there are far better things you could be doing. Our Transfiguration homework, for starters. It's due in two days...or have you forgotten?"

Exasperated, Ron pushed the chess board to one side and turned to face Hermione. "Listen, we're only trying to--"

"Honestly, you're all sitting around here looking at me like I'm some Howler that's just waiting to go off." Her eyes darted round the room.

"Hermione, please."

"It's not pity, is it?" Her voice rose hysterically. "I won't stand for pity!"

"We're worried, all right?" Ron exploded. "For the last couple of days you haven't been acting like your..." Finding that statement rather inaccurate, he switched to another argument. "How do you know that this isn't the Dark trying to get at you?"

Harry nodded eagerly. "Don't you remember? Will said that it'll happen in the way you least suspect it...it likes to play on your fears."

"See?" Ron said pointedly.

Hermione stared at him for a moment, then slowly shook her head, back and forth. A sweet smile played across her lips.

"I swear, Ron..." she whispered. "I swear. For someone so smart, you can be so *thick* sometimes."

Suddenly, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the little piece of quartz. She held it up in front of them, displayed where they all could see it.

"This isn't the Dark." The sweet smile was still there, but her eyes were as hard as the stone she held in her hand. "This isn't Voldemort, or the Death Eaters, or anything like that. This is

someone taking something that's mine. *Mine*. I'm not going to go to pieces just because some little girl thinks that she can make a fool of Hermione Granger."

The smile vanished. "And now, if you'll pardon me, I'm going to go to the lavatory. Alone."

Without bothering to collect her textbooks and notes, she stormed out of the room. She slammed the door on her way out.

An uneasy silence settled over the room.

"Are we happy for her or are we scared?" asked Ron.

"Scared," Neville said.

"Scared," Ginny said.

"Definitely scared," Harry said.

Neville leaned over, using the edge of his sleeve to mop up the spilt ink. "How do we explain this to Will?"

Harry tilted his head back to stretch a crick in his neck, and noticed that the curtains of his bed were still swaying slightly, affected by the violence with which Hermione had left the room.

"I don't think we'll have to," he muttered.

Ron pulled the chess board toward him and studied it for a few seconds.

"So," he said, "I suppose a general, all-encompassing 'I told you so' would be a pretty bad idea right about now?"

Three sets of eyes narrowed.

"Bad idea."

"Bad idea."

"A very bad idea."

Ron sighed, and took Harry's last rook. "Thought so."

Chapter Twenty-Four - The Place from Which You Came

One may survive distress, but not disgrace.

-- old Scottish proverb

"Today is my last day teaching here."

The announcement completely shocked the fifth-year Gryffindors. On a rainy Friday morning toward the end of March, Professor Figg had simply strolled into the classroom, plopped into her chair, and calmly informed them that effective tomorrow she would no longer be their Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor.

"As some of you may have heard," she continued briskly, raising her voice to be heard over the confused buzz of talk, "Minister Dumbledore has requested that all Aurors return to duty at once--and it seems that that includes the knackered ones they'd hoped would stay comatose."

She grinned at her own self-deprecating humour. "Once my replacement arrives, I will be leaving the school. But before I take my leave, I want to say that it has been a true pleasure to work with some of the wizarding world's most promising young minds." Her grin widened, and her eyes twinkled mischievously. "And as for the rest of you, if you don't get an O.W.L. in this subject I'll come back and make you wish you had."

Then she ploughed into the day's lesson without pause for questions, picking their minds for the tiniest bits of information from last week's reading. As always, Harry found himself struggling to answer questions to her satisfaction. The class had just finished an in-depth look at some of the nastier hexes, and Figg assured them that her successor would continue with her lesson plans--"so don't think for **one moment** that you'll be able to slack off...I know what goes on inside your lazy little minds."

The lecture continued at the same fast clip, and before they knew it the class had ended and Figg was shooing them out the door.

Ron and Hermione had left the room, caught up in a heated debate over the proper uses of the Flesh-Rotting Hex they had covered in class. Harry had stayed behind to wipe up a puddle of ink that had leaked from his quill, and was about to hurry after them when he heard Figg call out:

"Just a minute, Harry."

He turned back, wondering what she wanted.

She beckoned to him. As he approached her desk, she picked up her wand and waved it at the door. It swung shut.

"Two things," she said once he had reached her desk. "First, my replacement doesn't know about your little 'study sessions', and wiser--or more paranoid--minds than mine want it to stay that way." Her beetle-bright eyes bored into his. "Get it?"

"Got it."

"Good." She leaned back and opened one of the drawers in her desk. "Second: take this, but don't open it yet." With a flick of her wrist, she sent a large, bulky envelope sailing through the air.

Harry dove and caught it before it could land on his foot. The plain, yellowing envelope was stuffed to bursting. The contents were far too thick to be ordinary letters.

He flipped it over. Covering the bottom edge of the flap was a large blob of red wax, and pressed into the centre of the wax was an imprint of an 'A' and 'F', written in script and set in a small square.

"That's my personal seal," Figg said, answering the question he had been about to ask, "and it's only official if it's not broken."

"What is it?" he asked.

She deliberately avoided his gaze.

"Everything's in there," she said. "All signed and sealed and terribly important-looking."

Harry groaned. He knew this game. If he wanted an answer, he'd have to draw the information out of her question by question.

"All right then," he began, "who do I give it t--"

Professor Figg's mouth turned down in a sudden scowl, and she sprang to her feet.

"Odious boy!" she exclaimed.

Harry stumbled backward and bumped into the desk behind him. He opened his mouth to ask what he had done wrong, but a closer look at her face showed that the outburst had not been directed at him. She was looking past him, over his shoulder.

"Ill-mannered whelp...don't you ever knock?" she snarled, scolding the person behind him.

He heard a low chuckle, and the sound of footsteps started at the back of the room and grew louder. Whoever it was was approaching.

Harry spun around, clutching the precious envelope and its mysterious contents to his chest.

There, walking toward him, was Remus Lupin.

Harry's jaw dropped, and he let out a rather undignified squeak.

"Whatever possessed you to arrive early?" Professor Figg's querulous voice barely penetrated the noise of the blood thumping in his ears.

Remus bowed grandly. "The chance to see your radiant smile, fair lady."

"Get off," she growled good-naturedly. "My chair's not even cold and you're already here. Were you **that** bored? Or just anxious to get off the dole?"

"Both and neither." Remus smiled at her. "I see you've got Harry staying behind. What did he do this time?"

"What...here...but...you?" Harry's ability to form a coherent sentence had decided to go on holiday.

Remus took pity on him. "One replacement Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, at your service."

Harry's next attempt made little improvement. "But...you...."

"Are a fantastic, inspiring educator?" Remus prompted, grinning. "With the bigwigs at the Ministry returning all Aurors--"

"--even the knackered ones--" Figg interjected.

"--**all** Aurors to active duty, I think that concerned parents might find it reassuring to know that a bloodthirsty beast will be teaching their children how to combat...well, other bloodthirsty beasts."

"Heh," said Figg. "Well put." She leaned over and prodded Harry with the tip of her index finger. "The boy's got something for you, Lupin. Go on, Harry, hand it over."

More than a little dazed, he did as he was told.

Remus took the envelope from him and was about to open it, but stopped at the sight of the large blob of wax covering the flap.

"Your personal seal?" He gave Professor Figg a quizzical look.

Figg nodded once, brusquely. "It's all set up for you. You know the routine."

Remus took the envelope in his left hand. Firmly, he pressed the thumb of his right hand onto the misshapen blob of red. There was a loud pop, like a bottle of champagne being uncorked, and the seal melted beneath his thumb. A thin stream of crimson liquid dripped off the edge of the envelope and onto the floor.

Remus carefully opened the crackling envelope and pulled out a thick sheaf of papers. Some were normal wizarding parchments, but others were the distinctive size and shape of official Muggle government documents. As he leafed through the papers, his face turned an oddly ashen colour. Curiosity piqued, Harry tried to crane his neck to get a better look, but a loud cough from Professor Figg shamed him into grudging patience.

Remus went through the documents once, then twice. After he had finished a third reading, he glanced at Harry, then at Figg, then back at Harry. The sinews of his hands twitched.

"Is this real?" he asked.

Professor Figg huffed. "Well, unless the Weasley boys have gotten hold of it without my knowing, it's not going to turn into a rubber chicken anytime soon."

"What is it?" Harry asked, once again straining to see.

Remus shook his head.

"Arabella," he said slowly, "you know I can't do this."

She dismissed his statement with a casual flutter of her hand. "Don't talk damned nonsense."

"What is it?" Harry asked, a little louder.

"You wouldn't believe the rigmarole I had to go through in the Muggle courts to get those processed." She folded her arms across her chest. "And the wizarding ones were even worse, especially when they saw the names involved."

Harry was getting exasperated. "What *is* it?"

Figg kept talking as if he wasn't there at all. "Between the four of us, I don't know *how* Albus kept this out of the press."

"WHAT IS IT?" Harry all but shouted.

"Probably had a battalion of Obliviators assigned to deal with any problems. And I'll bet there were plenty."

"I'll just come back some other time, then," Harry said desperately, and started to head for the door.

"They're papers," Remus said in an awed voice.

Harry paused in mid-stride. Remus didn't sound sad or angry, but the passion in those two words was enough to stop Harry in his tracks.

"Papers," Remus repeated, "that transfer joint legal guardianship of Harry Potter from Mrs. Arabella Figg to Mr. Sirius Black and...." His long fingers tightened on the documents, as if he fully expected them to disappear. "And me."

Harry had to grab the closest desk to keep his footing. The floor was spinning under him.

"B...but why?" he croaked.

"WHY?" Figg looked as if she wanted to give him a good shake and dock ten points from Gryffindor. "Fourteen years with those blasted Muggle relations of yours, that's why!" She stomped out from behind her desk and over to him, looking as fierce and compact as an attack

hedgehog. "Do you want to dig a little deeper 'round the roots of your family tree? As you've already lived with the worms, maybe you'll find some nice grubs to settle down with. Once they're done gnawing on my old bones, that is."

"Arabella, don't talk like that," Remus admonished, casting a uneasy glance at the still shaken Harry.

Professor Figg reached over and tilted Harry's chin up, making him look directly at her.

"Listen to me," she said earnestly. "It's not pleasant to think about, but my line of work is very dangerous. I am...well, *was* your legal guardian, and as such you're my responsibility. I have to be certain you'll be taken care of if anything happens to me." She grimaced. "And I'm not going to risk being distracted in the middle of laying into some Death Eater filth because I'm fretting over who'll make you wash behind your ears." Her voice was its normal crusty self, but the joke fell flat.

Now that the original shock had processed through his system, Harry was able to think clearly again. In his private opinion, he'd had quite enough of being other people's 'responsibility', but he couldn't very well say that to her face.

"I understand," he replied, as sincerely as he could.

Figg let go of his chin and turned her glare on Remus, who ducked his head and shuffled his feet like a chastised child.

"You see?" she said triumphantly. Still scowling at him, she pointed a bony finger at Harry. "*He* understands. And it's not like you've got much choice in the matter."

Remus massaged his temples. "You know I would give anything for this to work, but--"

"But what? Everything's official. All the real fuss is over with. I've got no objections. It's plain to see that Albus has no objections. And I don't see YOU making any objections." The last was directed at Harry, almost as an afterthought.

"I'll have to let Sirius know," Remus said in a low voice.

"Well, call him in then!" Figg ordered, waving her arms in the air. "Don't keep him waiting in the corridor."

Intoxicating joy blazed through Harry as her words sank in. He gave a whoop of pure delight at the same time that Remus rapped out a warning "Arabella!"

Figg shook a finger at Remus, teasingly scolding him. "You don't get that many dog hairs on those rags you call robes by accident. Buy a decent clothes-brush for goodness sake. Even Muggles use them--you could stand to learn a few lessons from them when it comes to personal grooming."

Still shaking his head, Remus walked to the classroom door. He opened it, and looked up and down the corridors to see if anyone was around. Reassured that no one was nearby, he gave a long, low whistle.

Harry's stomach contracted as the sound of a thin jingling--the noise of dog tags striking against each other--grew louder. It was all he could do to keep from running over and pouncing on the great black dog that poked its nose around the door, peering into the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom.

"Come on," Figg said, tapping her foot impatiently. "Hurry it up. I want to see a sappy family reunion before I go."

The dog trotted into the room, collar tags jingling and tail waving so frantically that it banged into to every single desk and chair between the door and the teacher's desk at the front of the room. With a glad whimper he went immediately to Harry, nosing his hand affectionately and gazing up at him with deep, soulful eyes.

"It's all clear," Remus informed the dog.

Harry jumped back just in time as the Animagus shifted form, then found himself wrapped in a fierce hug--which he eagerly returned.

"Good to see you again, Harry." Sirius's voice was thick with bliss.

"You're all right," he murmured, burying deep into his godfather's warm embrace. "I was so afraid...."

Sirius looked down at him, smiling brightly. His sharp features had softened with the passing of time, and the ragged, haunted look that had marked him as a former Azkaban prisoner had all but vanished. He had filled out, looking the picture of good health. His robes no longer seemed like cast-off garments draped over an emaciated frame. Friendship and freedom had done wonders for him--both physically and psychologically.

"Afraid of what?" Tenderly, he ruffled Harry's hair. "It'd take a lot to get rid of me."

The image of four mounted, severed heads, some with fresh blood still dripping from the stumps, flashed across Harry's mind like a flare of lightning. He pressed himself more tightly against Sirius, as though the older man's presence could erase the memory of that dreadful Christmas morning.

"Almost like old times, eh?" he heard Figg say.

Harry felt Sirius release him, though the older man kept a protective hand on his shoulder.

"Now, what's this you wanted me for?" Sirius demanded warily. "Has something come up?"

"Sirius," Remus said mildly, "Arabella has something for us." Without ceremony, he held out the sheaf of papers.

Sirius accepted the papers and began to read through them carefully. As the documents told their story, Harry felt Sirius's hand tighten convulsively on his shoulder more than once.

"You old hag," Sirius said wonderingly, almost lovingly, when he had finished reading. "If I knew you didn't have a sense of humour, I'd think you were putting us on."

Figg's eyes sparkled angrily. "Don't make me regret my decision, Black. You're not quite in my good graces yet."

"It's..." Harry fumbled for words, an expression, anything to properly describe how he was feeling. "It's like the stories. You're like a good fairy godmother...or something."

"Impossible," Sirius said decisively. "A fairy godmother would never be *that* ugly." A wicked leer creased his features. "Why, she'd be kicked out of the union."

"Blackballed, even," Remus added with a grin.

"Right, that's it." Figg stood up. "I'm not going to stand here and be insulted." With a valiant toss of her grey head, she marched toward the door.

"Good luck...'Mrs. Figg'," Harry said playfully, getting into the spirit of the moment.

"Insufferable brat," she retorted. "You three make a lovely little bunch...near gives me the pip."

Just before she opened the door, she turned around to stare at the three of them. Her eyes were suspiciously bright.

"You take proper care of him, now, do you hear me?" she said gruffly.

Sirius came to attention and mock-saluted her. "Yes, sir!" In a whirl of black fur, he was a dog again.

"Yes, ma'am," Remus said, patting the shaggy head of his faithful pet.

Grumbling and sniffing alternately, Figg exited the room.

* * *

Lupin's return raised Harry's spirits considerably. Now that he knew his parents' friends were safe at Hogwarts, he had one less thing to lose sleep over. His buoyant mood continued through the remainder of the day with surprising results. He earned twenty House points for his good work in Charms, got a very high mark on the homework McGonagall returned to them in Transfiguration, and made it through History of Magic without falling asleep even once--the perfect way to start a weekend.

But if Harry's week had ended on a wonderful note, Snape's forthcoming week could not have been worse. To start, he had been tricked into involuntary participation in a scheme that involved several of his most disliked students and the 'living legend' Will Stanton. He had to take time out of his lesson planning to accompany the Gryffindors to their session, and then had to return at the end of the session to escort them back.

To top everything off, he had once again lost his coveted post of Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor to none other than Remus J. Lupin, and consequently had to deal with the irksome presence of the new teacher's 'pet'. As Remus told it, the poor stray had been found "shivering outside The Three Broomsticks", sorely needing "a kind heart and a good home". Students from all houses flocked to lavish attention on the unfortunate dog, who accepted

their sympathy and the occasional food treat with an almost human smugness. And Snape could do nothing about it.

In a word, Snape was miserable.

Naturally, he was hell-bent on making everyone around him--especially Harry Potter--miserable as well.

That Monday, he gave Harry extended detention for asking for more clarification on the ingredients of the day's potion. (Though he hadn't dared to schedule the detention for that night: Harry rightly suspected that his saving grace was the fact that it **was** Monday.) He had almost given Draco detention--but settled for a reprimand-- after skidding on a patch of spilt rat's saliva that Draco and Goyle had neglected to mop up. Try as he might, he could not get a rise out of Hermione. She didn't react to any of his taunts, and that only made him all the more determined to provoke a response. (He very nearly provoked Ron into a wizard's duel, but mercifully class ended before things could escalate that far.)

When the five Gryffindors assembled outside Snape's dungeon office at quarter to seven, he ignored them. They took turns knocking on his door for a full ten minutes. It wasn't until Harry made a Very Loud Suggestion to use a Battering Charm to break down the door that he condescended to leave his office. And then, he unceremoniously pushed and shoved them up stairs and down corridors, all but tossed them into the little room off the library, and flounced away.

"Well," Ron joked once they had recovered, "at least he's not acting any different than usual."

"It only took ten minutes this time," Ginny said as she pulled her chair up to the table.

"Much better than Thursday," Harry acquiesced. "That time it took nearly half an hour."

In the same high spirits, they made the room ready. A touch of the mirror, and in no time at all the five students and their teacher had settled down to continue the studies they had left off last Thursday.

Since their interrupted session a week and a half before, the main focus of their work had involved tapping into the power of the Light to augment their own spells. They had progressed from small defence spells to the more complex ones. Neville managed to hold a 'Defendo Lux' spell on his own for a good five minutes, while the others pelted him with every hex and curse and charm they could think of. 'Defendo Lux' had become something of Neville's signature spell--possibly with the memory of his testing against Professor Figg's Imperius Curse in mind.

"Or perhaps," as Will later remarked, "it is simply the spell best suited to him. It does happen, you know. Take Mr. Potter's Patronus, for example."

It was an appropriate example. On his last casting of the Patronus Charm, Harry had been able to guide the glowing stag by pointing his wand. The greater degree of control actually allowed him to change the direction and intensity of its attack.

That'll be useful if I'm surrounded by Dementors, he thought, and then immediately prayed that he would never need to use it for that purpose.

Pleased with their progress, Will had called an early end to the session, asking them to jot down their opinions on the most recent improvement in spell casting and technique. For a time, there was only the ticklish sound of quills scratching on paper.

All of a sudden, Ron raised his hand. "Will?"

Harry's head snapped up. He saw Ginny and Neville look up as well, and next to him the sound of Hermione's writing had stopped. The timid quaver that had crept into Ron's voice had surprised them all.

"Yes?"

"Um...would you...er, that is...can I ask you something?"

Will looked up from his own writing. His lips twisted in an amused smile. "Without arguing the semantics of 'can' and 'may'...yes, you have my permission, Mr. Weasley. What would you like to know?"

Ron squirmed in his chair. "It's...it's a bit personal."

"Oh," was the neutral reply. "Personal in what way?"

Ron seemed to have discovered something truly remarkable about his shoes. Head bowed, he directed the question to the floor.

"What is...was...is Merlin like?"

The fire popped and crackled in the uncomfortable quiet.

Harry found himself staring intently at the row of books on the top shelf directly opposite. He couldn't bring himself to look at Will or Ron, and he couldn't look at the others without turning his head and thus drawing unwanted attention.

"I was wondering how long it would be before one of you worked up the courage to ask me that. Well, you asked a question, and you shall have an answer."

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ron raise his head. The apple of his throat bobbed up and down jerkily as he swallowed.

Will leaned back in his chair, propping his elbows on the armrests and steepling his fingers in front of his face.

"He was a strict master--one who would never be satisfied with anything but one's absolute best." He might have been describing a piece of furniture, so disinterested was his tone.

"There was never room for failure as far as he was concerned. A brilliant man, to be sure, even if his behaviour often bordered on the eccentric. And...and...."

He was silent for a long moment. His eyes slid out of focus, no longer seeing anything in the room.

They waited. Tension sang in the air, vibrating like a plucked harp string.

"And lonely." His voice was barely above a whisper, with a curious husky note that stung at their eyes. "So very lonely...though you would never know unless you looked for it. And you'd never get him to admit it."

The fire in the grate popped again, loud in the roaring silence.

The distant, searching look left Will's eyes, and the soft blue-grey abruptly darkened to the turbulent colour of a stormy sea.

"But why do you care about this?" he demanded with cold, knife-like sharpness. "All you would need to know, you could find on the back of one of your Chocolate Frog cards. I highly doubt it would come up on an exam."

Ron recoiled, shrinking back into his chair.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"No. Don't be." It wasn't a reassurance--it was a command. The hard edge in Will's voice had dulled slightly, but only just. "It was a long time ago when we last saw each other, and I am quite content to let fact and fiction blur. Are the legends not enough?"

They didn't know if that question warranted an answer, or even if Will was looking for one.

He closed his eyes. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

The words themselves may have sounded nonchalant, but finality in his voice was absolute and unquestionable. The subject was closed, and Harry knew with a chilling certainty that they would never speak of it again, not even among themselves.

Will pulled a watch from some hidden recess in his robes and checked the time.

"It's getting late," he proclaimed, a little too loudly. "Nearly your curfew."

As if on cue, there was a insistent banging on the door. Snape had returned to cart them back to Gryffindor Tower.

Silently, the five of them gathered their belongings. Murmuring muted goodnights to Will, they filed from the room.

Harry, however, lagged behind, taking his time putting his things away. When Ron passed by, he pulled his friend aside.

"Tell Snape to go on without me," he said quietly. "Tell him I'll catch up in a moment."

Ron gave him a look that plainly said "You're barking mad," but he nodded and hurried out into the corridor--just in time to receive the full blast of Snape's temper.

"Hurry it up, Weasley," Harry heard Snape bark. "I have better ways to occupy my time than shepherding you lot around the school. Where's Potter?"

"He said to go ahead." Ron's voice was muffled by the door. "He wants to talk to--"

Snape cut him off irritably. "Fine, fine. Now get moving, all of you! Damned nuisance...."

The stream of muttered invectives died down as Snape escorted his charges away. Harry waited until Snape's voice was no longer audible, then looked back at Will.

The older man had left his chair and was standing beside the fire, gazing down at it with a single-minded focus that Harry was reluctant to interrupt.

As he waited for his presence to be noticed, a memory from his very first meeting with Will floated to the surface of his mind. He had the feeling that he was looking at a man behind a glass wall. He had never stopped to consider where that feeling had come from. But now he wasn't certain whether it had been purely his first impression, or whether he had fallen under the spell of a carefully projected image.

Either way, he didn't like it.

"Miss Granger's hearing is tomorrow, correct?"

Lost in thought, he almost missed the subdued question. "Yes, sir."

"I see. Do you intend to listen in?"

"I...we're not allowed," Harry replied woodenly, carefully. "Ron's going to be with Hermione, not me. And she told me that she doesn't want me using the cloak to sneak in and watch. So I can't."

Will's bleak, severe gaze flickered toward him for a disconcerting second, then returned to the study of the flames.

"Whatever gave you the impression that you had to be in the room?" he said, so quietly that Harry had to strain to hear him. "Good night, Mr. Potter."

"But I don't--"

"Good night, Mr. Potter." Like it or not, his tone implied, this conversation had ended.

Harry stifled a sigh. "Good night, sir."

* * *

The next day breezed by with frightening speed, and by the end of the Tuesday classes it was obvious that Ron and Hermione were feeling the pressure of the impending faculty hearing.

Ron was outwardly calm, but his inner turmoil manifested itself at dinnertime as he devoured everything in sight, wolfing down his food as if he'd never eat again. In contrast, Hermione only toyed with her meal, preferring to read the enormous book she had brought with her. She opened it to the middle and stared at the pages, but her eyes didn't move. Ron finished her food for her, and would have started on his sister's plate if Ginny hadn't fought him off with her fork.

After they had eaten, or pretended to eat, the three friends left the Great Hall. Harry trailed Ron and Hermione to the Transfiguration classroom where the hearing was slated to be held. He was a little miffed that Hermione had chosen Ron over him, but he knew it was for the best. This way, he and Hermione would know where Ron was. Not that they believed that Ron needed constant supervision, of course, but it gave them a far greater peace of mind, and it made Ron very happy. A good solution for all concerned.

He didn't hang around the classroom after they had gone in. There was no point.

He had several assignments due in the next few days, but the prospect of sitting in the library and trying to concentrate on one specific task was not at all appealing. He was about to go out and practice Snitch-catching until he recalled that the Slytherin team had reserved the pitch that night in preparation for the match against Gryffindor that Saturday. Quidditch was out as well.

His feet led him back to the Fat Lady's portrait.

"What's the matter, dear?" she asked him. The wrinkles on her pudgy face deepened in kindly concern.

"Nothing really," he replied. "Thanks for asking, though."

"If you're sure..." she said helpfully.

"Thanks all the same." He gave her what he hoped was a bright smile. "Widdershins."

The common room was mostly empty; the majority of the students were in the library finishing up homework. A bunch of sixth-year girls sat near the fire, trading gossip. Lee Jordan was sitting at one of the room's writing desks, scribbling something on a torn piece of paper. Two first-year boys were absorbed in a game of wizard chess. Harry had to grin at that—he might have been watching himself and Ron from four years ago. One of the boys' knights had just smashed the other boy's queen in an bold attack that Harry knew would lead to certain checkmate in two moves. He'd lost to Ron often enough to know when defeat was closing in.

He sat down in a chair well away from the others. Idly, he slipped a hand into his pocket and took out the small white pebble that Will had given him. Professor Trelawny had mentioned in a recent class that some diviners in ancient cultures often rubbed small stones prior to practising their craft as a way of working out minor distractions. Like everything else in Divination, he had taken the statement with a large grain of salt, but there was no denying that he had distractions that could use working out. It was worth a try, at any rate. He had nothing better to do.

Having been in the pocket of his robe, close to his skin, the stone was warm to the touch. He turned it over in his hand, feeling the rough and smooth edges and the little irregularities in the stone's surface. The minutes trickled past.

As the worn pebble rolled through his fingers, he felt something tug at the back of his mind. It was as if someone was standing beside him and jabbing at him with a stick, telling him that he ought to be doing something with the stone, to the stone. The feeling grew stronger and more urgent the longer he held the stone in his hand.

Sensibly, he closed his eyes and listened to that feeling.

With the deftness of an artist making a rough sketch before beginning to draw, the outlines of words started to form in his head. Not in English, or in the forced formal Latin of spells and charms, but in a far older language. The spell-speech that Will used at times, when calling on the power of his birthright. The forgotten language that belonged to the Light, to that particular magic that Harry was only just learning to understand.

Under his breath, he recited the words that had formed on his tongue, relishing their strangely familiar pattern. Then, responding to the instructions that whispered through his body, he blocked everything out of his mind. All outside thoughts faded away. The garbled chatter of the common room, the soft background noises, everything died down as if he had turned down the volume on an antique wireless. There was only him, and the stone, and whatever the stone would tell him.

The hidden artist had finished the rough sketch and had begun to work in muted colours. Smooth, sure strokes painted a picture in his mind.

It was of the Transfiguration classroom, seen as he would see it from one of the students' desks near the front. Torches on the walls. The chalkboard at the front of the room. Professor McGonagall, sitting behind her desk...and other people with her, and nearby.

The directness of the link between his stone and Ron and Hermione's stones barely registered in his consciousness. Whatever it was, it was a powerful magic. The stone would tell him everything. All he had to do was concentrate.

The artist quickly filled in the blank spots on the canvas, adding subjects and the beginnings of fine detail. Professor Sprout at one end of the long desk. Professor Flitwick standing on a chair beside her. Professor Snape on McGonagall's other side--the unseen artist took great care to shade in the cold dark eyes and thin-lipped sneer.

Just as he had a clear idea of where he was and who he was seeing, the picture blurred and changed, giving way to not one picture but many, flashing past at a speed that made his head sing with dizziness. There was Hermione, fearfully pale, with Ron standing resolutely beside her. A flash of fingers intertwined--he was holding her hand. A glimpse of mouse-coloured hair and a scared face told him that Natalie was in the room as well, though she was dim and insubstantial, not as visible as the others he saw.

More images passed, some lingering only long enough to register a single detail. Flitwick's normally cheerful face drawn into a frown. A glitter of the torchlight reflected in Snape's eyes.

The visions flew by at the same rapid pace, connected like a narrative. With them came corresponding emotions, painted so that the feelings actually became a part of the picture, as much as a person's skin or clothing. Lingering fear from Natalie, accompanied by guilt so overpowering that it made Harry's head ache. Ron's barely hidden anger, coloured the same shock of fiery red as his hair. Hermione, literally wrapped in a shadow of doubt and shame as she told her side of the story. A mixture of bold, desperate impartiality from the four Heads of House...with perhaps a hint of snide satisfaction emanating from Snape and the occasional flicker of uncertainty from McGonagall.

He could see them holding the hearing. Not as clearly as if he was actually in the room, but the idea was general enough. But at the moment there was far too much indecision clouding the scene for him to tell who was winning the argument, if Hermione would have to--

"Harry! Harry!"

The artist's picture vanished like a burst soap bubble as a voice broke into his thoughts. Disorientation fogged his mind for a breathless second until he remembered where he was-- and realised that he had lost concentration.

Getting to his feet, he saw Colin Creevey running up to him. Heads turned as the young boy sped past, but the Gryffindor students soon returned whatever they had been doing without a second glance, as if to say, "Oh, it's only *Colin*."

Harry was furious at losing concentration, but the flare of anger faded when he saw the jubilant expression on Colin's face.

"What--" he began, but stopped short as Colin thrust a handful of a charred, blackened substance directly under his nose. The acrid odour of burnt paper filled his nostrils, making him cough and paw at his glasses, trying to wipe his eyes.

"Harry, look at this!" Colin said.

Carefully, Harry took the black mass from Colin's hand.

The smell and texture was enough to tell him what it was. He may have been teasing Hermione about the various uses for his old assignments, but he actually *had* used a few pieces of parchment to relight the gas cooker at Mrs. Figg's house during the summer. And what he held in his hand was part of a burnt piece of parchment.

A small section of the edge hadn't caught fire. The crackling paper was dark and falling to bits, but he could make out some of the writing. He hurried over to the fire to have a closer look. Colin doggedly followed.

It was in Hermione's hand. He would recognise it anywhere--she and Ron had scribbled enough notes in the side margins of his schoolbooks to make identification a brainless task. And there were a few phrases he could just make out if he squinted at it long enough:

"...of leech may be obtained through a careful scraping of...."

"...caution must be exercised when...."

"...common medicine...found...and dieffenbachia...."

It was Hermione's paper. He was sure of it.

"Where did you find this?" he asked, turning his attention back to Colin.

"Well," Colin said breathlessly, "I was going to go study, and I went to the library, but it was really cold where I was sitting so I thought I'd go and stand by the fire, so I got up and was

walking past the row of shelves that's right next to the Restricted Section, and I know I don't usually go back there but all the tables I usually sit at were full, and since you weren't--"

"Colin."

The younger boy paused, and took a deep breath. "Sorry."

"That's okay. Where'd you find it?"

"In the fireplace in the library. Not the big one--the little one back by the Restricted Section."

Harry blinked. "But that one's hardly ever lit."

"There were a lot of ashes." Colin held up his hands. They were covered in ash well past the wrists; he had done some digging to find what he was looking for. "Someone used it, and recently, too. The house elves hadn't had the chance to clean it properly."

"Was there any more?"

"Nothing as big as this piece. I saw some other bits, but they're really, really small."

"That's great!" Harry shouted, then remembered where he was and lowered his voice. "That means we can...." He trailed off as a thought struck him and crushed what little hope he had had. "No, we can't."

"Can't what?" Colin asked.

"All this proves is that someone tried to destroy Hermione's essay. It doesn't mean that she didn't burn it herself--after giving it to Natalie to copy."

"But I thought you said that Natalie said that she couldn't find it when she looked?"

"Hermione could have found it later, and given it to her then. That's what Snape would say," he added sourly.

"But couldn't they look for fingerprints? Something?"

"They'd find prints all right. Hermione's *and* Natalie's."

Colin's face fell. "So this doesn't help us at all, does it?"

"Not real...." He trailed off again. This time, the idea that had come into his head had restored most of the hope--not all of it, but most. "It might. It just might."

Colin scratched his head, very confused. His grimy fingers left dark streaks of ash and dirt in his mussed hair.

Harry motioned with his hand, indicating that they should step aside. Together, they walked over to the doorway that led to the Fat Lady's portrait. Once they were well out of earshot, Harry leaned over and whispered into Colin's ear.

"Find Neville and Ginny and meet me in the library. Five minutes. I've got--"

"A plan?" Colin's eyes shone eagerly, alight with some of their old, familiar hero worship.

Harry looked down at the flaking, burnt parchment.

"Something," he said. "It's a start."

* * *

Forty-five minutes later, Harry's 'something' had evolved into a plan. A risky plan, one laced with the very real possibility of failure, but a plan nonetheless.

He knew from the start that he had to keep Colin out of the main part of the decision-making. They could not risk his participation--it held too many complications. Searching for a believable explanation, he was finally forced to appeal to the younger boy's flare for the dramatic.

"You're our very last resort," he said, filling his words with urgency. "If this blows up in our faces, you have to go to McGonagall with the evidence and act like you just found it."

"None of us can do it," Neville added. "It'd look like we made up a story to get Hermione off."

And Ginny, used to soothing the wounded egos of her older brothers, mollified him with the placating phrase: "You're the only one for the job, Colin."

Colin pouted, but nodded agreement.

"All right," he said. "But you let me know what happens, okay?"

"Okay," Harry said. He was glad to see one obstacle out of the way. And it wasn't even a lie--they might actually have need of Colin if the whole thing did blow up in their faces.

Once Colin had left, Harry, Ginny, and Neville formed an impromptu council of war at a secluded table in the library. They talked and argued the idea around in circles, being careful to keep their voices just above whispers. Once all the salient points had been argued to exhaustion, and all objections had been made and countered, their conversation immediately returned to the possible results of the faculty hearing.

"What I want to know," Neville said, propping his chin on his hands, "is why can't they just give both of them Veritaserum or something? Then they'd know for sure telling the truth."

"They can't," Harry said quickly. He didn't want to dwell on the subject of Veritaserum for too long--it brought up a number of bad memories. "You need Ministry approval to use it. And besides, no one's going to waste Veritaserum on something like this."

"So unless one of them owns up..." Ginny trailed off.

"They'll both get punished for it," Neville concluded.

"Expelled?" she whispered.

"Maybe," Harry said grimly. "If they're lucky, they'll end up on probation or something for the rest of the year."

"But Hermione won't be prefect anymore," said Neville.

Ginny looked like she was going to cry. "I can't believe that Snape and McGonagall even *think* that Hermione would let someone copy her homework."

"She wouldn't even let ME copy off her, and I was a lot worse off in that class than Natalie ever was." Neville said the younger girl's name as if he was referring to something particularly rotten.

"Tom Riddle was a straight-A student, once," Harry muttered, low enough so Ginny wouldn't hear.

"But they *can't* do this," Ginny protested fitfully. "They can't. Not to Hermione."

Harry prodded the lump of charred parchment with his finger. "That's why this has to work."

The library closed at eight. The three of them took their time walking back to the dormitory.

Entering, they saw Ron sprawled in a chair by the fire. His robes were in more disarray than usual, and there was a black look on his face.

They hurried over, and Ginny pounced on her brother at once. "What happened?"

"What did they say?" Harry's stomach was a bundle of nerves.

Ron rubbed his forehead wearily. "Nothing. Nothing yet. McGonagall told us that they're going to talk it over later tonight, her and Snape and Sprout and Flitwick. She wants to see us tomorrow after dinner. That's when they'll announce their decision."

"Tomorrow?" Harry frowned. "That seems awfully quick."

"Snape seemed to think it was an open-and-shut case."

"He would," Neville grumbled. He looked around the room. "Where's Hermione?"

"Upstairs, getting ready for bed," Ron said with a shrug. "It's been a rough night."

"And you let her go *alone*?" Ginny yelled.

Ron turned baleful eyes on her. "Well, she didn't ask me to scrub her back, did she?"

"I can't believe you," she snapped, fuming. "I'm going to see--"

Suddenly, Hermione burst into the common room. She looked like she had only just finished a bath. A thick towel was wrapped around her hair, and she held her dressing gown tightly

closed at the throat. She left a trail of wet footprints on the floor as she ran over to them. Her face was flushed, either from exertion or from the heat of the bath water.

"It came!" she cried, waving something white in the air. "It came!"

"What came?" Harry said, trying very hard not to notice the streams of water still running down her bare legs and dripping onto the hearth.

"Last week I wrote to my parents, asking them to look for my paper. If I've left it at home, they'd find it. And I just got an express post owl from them." During her speech, Hermione had somehow managed to tie off her dressing gown, adjust her hair towel to stop it from slipping, and show them the letter, all the while maintaining a decent state of semi-dress.

Ginny bounced on her toes. "What did they say?"

"I...don't know." Hermione flushed sheepishly. "I haven't opened it yet."

She turned the envelope over. Her hand hesitated over the flap.

Ginny bounced harder. "Well, open it, you goose!"

Hermione's hand trembled. Abruptly, she thrust the envelope at Ron.

"Y-you open it," she stammered.

"If you insist." He took it from her, slit the top, and held it out to her.

"What are you doing?"

Ron shrugged. "Hey, I opened for you, but there's no way *I'm* going to read it."

Hermione glowered at him and snatched the envelope away. She pulled out a folded piece of paper. Her brow furrowed, and she looked inside the envelope, pawing through it as though she couldn't find something. She held it upside down and shook it, but nothing came out.

"This is just a letter from Mum," she said sadly. "They must not have found it."

"And are you going to tell us what it says?" Ron said pointedly.

Hermione scanned the letter. "It *says*, Ron, that they can't find it. According to Mum, they've torn the house apart looking for it, and it's not there."

"Could it have been stolen?" Harry asked.

She shook her head. "I know what you're thinking, and I know it's not possible. Not even with magic. There's..." She paused to choose the right word. "There's a special protection on our house that prevents magical tampering."

"Like the one Mrs. Figg used on my aunt and uncle's old house?"

"Something like that," she said slowly. "It's a bit different. But my mum says right here that she remembers seeing it in my trunk when I was packing." She pointed to the paper, indicating the line. "And she'd swear to it."

"And Natalie said it wasn't there." Another question popped into Harry's mind. "Could anyone else have gotten into your trunk at school?"

"Impossible," Hermione snapped, though without her usual crispness. "No one's been in that trunk except me."

"But how could you know?" Neville pressed.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Oh, I'd know. Everything has its place in my trunk. If even so much as a quill was out of order, I'd know as soon as I opened it. And everything was in place that very morning, because I went to get more parchment from it before I went to the library."

"I guess being anal has its good side," Ron quipped. Hermione's face went bright red, and he hastily shouted, "Joke! It was a JOKE! Bloody hell, Hermione, calm down!"

"So no one could have mucked about with it," Harry said thoughtfully. "That day, after dinner--did you check to see if Natalie was right?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "I took everything out of my trunk when I was looking. I know it wasn't in there."

Harry nodded. This was good. The letter from Hermione's mother had eradicated most of the problems with his original plan. One last question, and Hermione's innocence would be guaranteed. "Is Natalie in her room?"

"She should be," Hermione replied. "McGonagall'll be coming around to check on us in half an hour."

"Then we have half an hour." He looked at Neville and Ginny, and saw comprehension beginning to dawn on their faces. "Let's get this over with."

Ron's eyes widened. "Get what over with?"

"I'll explain on the way." Harry put an arm around Ron's shoulders, and Ginny did the same to Hermione. With Neville bringing up the rear, the five of them headed for the stairs that led to the girls' rooms.

Chapter Twenty-Five - Decisive Action

Between today and tomorrow are graves, and between promising and fulfilling are chasms.

- Ruckett

"I'm telling you, it can't fail."

"Why do I get the feeling that I've heard this argument before? More than once?"

"If you're going to be difficult, Ron--"

"Difficult, he says."

"But do you really think she'll fall for it? It sounded good when we were talking about it, but...I don't know."

"If we're convincing enough, I don't see how she can't."

"*If* we're convincing enough."

"Gin, you didn't have any problems with it before."

"I had PLENTY of problems with it before, Harry."

"Then why in hell did you tell me it was a good plan?"

"I'll thank you not to swear at my sister, Potter."

"Like I haven't heard worse from you, *brother*."

"Honestly, we don't have time for this. McGonagall's coming in twenty minutes and if I'm not in my room by then--"

"All right, all right, keep your hair on."

"So who's going? We can't ALL go in."

"...."

"...."

"....."

"Well, *I'm* going."

"As it's your plan, I certainly hope so."

"Does that mean you're not going, Ron?"

"Of course I'm going, you stupid git. Gin?"

"Only if Hermione agrees to go."

"But I'm not allowed to speak to Natalie! I shouldn't even be *seeing* her, let alone speaking to her. If McGonagall came in--"

"That's the beauty of it--you DON'T speak. You're there to...to...."

"To lend credence to your lies?"

"There's no need to get shirty."

"As if I hadn't broken enough rules already--"

"Fine. If you don't want to come in with us, you can go up to your room and wait, or you can stay out here with Neville and keep watch for McGonagall."

"Me? Why do *I* have to keep watch?"

"Because we need you to stall her."

"Oh, oka--hey, wait! How do I do that?"

"Pretend she's asked you a question in class and you don't know the answer."

"Or pretend she's Snape, whichever works better."

"Oh, do shut up, Ron."

"I was only trying to help!"

"D'you have any idea how *unhelpful* that was? Imagining McGonagall with that nasty greasy hair...eurgh...."

"Eighteen minutes!"

"Are you going or not?"

"....all right."

"Thank you."

"I just hope you know what you're doing, Harry."

"Things'll be fine...I hope." The last part was under his breath.

The five of them had been standing on the landing outside the second- year girls' dormitory for a good ten minutes. Explaining the plan had taken Harry less than no time, but the resulting squabble had dragged on long enough to make him nervous about its success.

The key was being convincing. He had to put the weight of his whole Boy Who Lived reputation behind his words. He had to act like the fate of humanity depended on his ability to set things right.

The method disgusted him--regardless of what Snape constantly hinted, wasn't that exactly the sort of behaviour he tried to avoid at all costs?--but if he guessed rightly, it would get the desired response.

If he guessed rightly. If they were convincing enough.

If. If.

He knocked on the dormitory door before he could change his mind.

"Who is it?" a girl's voice called out.

"It's Harry," he shouted back, feeling incredibly silly.

Giggles and squeals of giddy delight, quickly shushed, penetrated the thick wood of the door. The prospect of a late night visit from the famous Harry Potter, Quidditch Seeker and resident hero, subject of many a gushy article in "Witch Weekly", had sent several young hearts a-fluttering.

"Just a minute, Harry!" another girl's voice shrieked. "We're not decent!"

The proclamation was followed by a short burst of nervous giggles and excited chatter. Harry groaned.

"Simpering little idiots," Ginny sneered.

It took a rather long time for the girls to become 'decent'. Harry could feel Hermione twitching faintly nearby, every twitch marking off a precious second wasted.

Finally, the door opened a crack, and the artfully tousled head of Jennifer Spratt peeped out onto the landing.

Harry did a double take. Apparently, her concept of getting 'decent' had also included applying lip colour, rouge, and two lurid streaks of blue eye shadow. Bright red lips pulled back from slightly crooked teeth.

"Why, Harry, what a surprise! What brings you here so late?" Jennifer said archly, trying to sound coy and flirtatious in the way that only a love struck twelve-year-old girl can.

"I need to talk to Natalie." He did his best not to gape at her appearance. "Is she in?"

The lipsticked smile closed over her teeth. Her flirtatious grin gave way to a tight and unfriendly stare.

"Just a minute." She shut the door in his face.

Neville nudged Harry. "Was that *make-up* she had on?"

"Just barely," Hermione muttered.

"Only thing missing was a fright wig," Ginny said with a snort. "She'd have been all set for an early Hallowe'en."

"Ooh," Ron cooed, curling his fingers into mocking claws, like a cat's. "Temper, temper, little miss."

Ginny judiciously punched him in the arm.

The door opened, all the way this time. The breeze it created sent an miasma of musky perfume wafting into the corridor, a synthetic floral scent strong enough to make Harry's eyes water.

The bedroom looked no different than any room inhabited by five girls would look. Discarded work robes and clothing were piled in little islands on the floor. More clothing peeked out from under the beds, rumped and wrinkled as if it had been hastily shoved underneath. Forlorn exercise books and rolls of parchment gathered dust in far corners, though copies of "Witch Weekly", "Young and Magical", and "Hello!"--the latest wizarding world edition--lay open on every bed. One of the girls had brought an old wireless to school, and in between crackles of static WWN blared the Weird Sisters' newest hit single.

With the exception of Jennifer, the occupants of the room were sitting on their beds doing whatever they had been doing before Harry's timely interruption. Barbara Baden-Smith had a quill in hand, writing in her diary. Isolde Yeggernell was helping Lee Jordan's younger sister Philippa put her thick hair into tight plaits. Natalie was the only one facing away from the door. She lay on her stomach on her bed with her legs up in the air, reading "Witch Weekly". She didn't turn around as the door opened.

Harry pointed to the wireless. "Could you shut that off?"

Barbara was closest to it. She rolled over and switched it off.

"Thanks," he said. He raised his voice a few notches. "I need to talk to Natalie alone."

None of the girls moved.

"Please? It's very important."

Isolde Yeggernell slid off her bed and slowly got to her feet.

The Yeggernell family was something of an oddity at Hogwarts. Though most families, especially pure-blooded ones like the Yeggernells, had all of their offspring in the same House, each of the four Yeggernell children had been Sorted into a different House. Isolde, the youngest, was in Gryffindor. Her brother Marke was a sixth-year, a Hufflepuff prefect. Two elder siblings had already graduated: sister Brangaene from Slytherin, brother Melot

from Ravenclaw. But regardless of the difference in their Sorting, all the siblings shared the same straight, fair hair and ice-blue eyes.

It was those eyes, superior and challenging, that were turned on Harry now. Isolde had no intention of being kicked out of her room without a fight. She was a Yeggernell, after all.

"Anything you have to say to her you can say to us," she declared.

It took Harry a moment to work up his nerve to push forward.

"I really need to talk to Natalie...*alone*." He folded his arms squarely across his chest and leaned against the doorjamb to show he wasn't going anywhere. Even if he couldn't play waiting games with them, he had to make it look like he could.

Isolde's cold stare appraised him, weighing his words.

The beginnings of a cold sweat prickled on his scalp.

After a lengthy pause, she shrugged, accepting defeat as gracefully as if she had won.

"C'mon, Jinks." She tugged at Philippa's half-done hair. "Let's all go and see what Pongo and Fen are doing."

"Isolde--" Barbara protested, but stopped short as Isolde levelled an ice-blue gaze at her.

"You coming, Bee?"

Barbara glanced at Natalie, then at Harry, then back at Isolde. She nodded.

"C'mon, then."

Barbara set her quill down and shoved the diary under her pillow, thought better of it, and opened her trunk and threw it inside. She locked the trunk and pocketed the key, then tossed him a little triumphant smirk.

Giving every impression that she had chosen to leave the room of her own accord, Isolde marched to the door. As she was still holding on to Philippa's hair, Philippa had little choice but to follow. She scooped up a handful of hair elastics and scrambled off the bed, wincing when Isolde's tight grip yanked at her scalp. Barbara trailed a few paces behind, chewing fitfully on her lower lip. Jennifer joined her friends as they reached the door.

Harry stood aside to let them pass. A soft shuffling of feet behind him told him that Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Hermione had done the same.

He watched the younger girls file down the stairs to the common room. He had no idea who 'Pongo' and 'Fen' were. Nicknames, he guessed. The younger girls often did odd things like that.

Ron, Ginny, and Hermione followed him into the vacated room. Harry made signs to Neville, telling him to go and stand by the landing to keep watch for McGonagall. Neville went, but

not without making a few signs of his own that indicated his displeasure in a way Harry hadn't thought he knew. Ron's bad influence at work, he was sure. He closed the door.

Throughout his dialogue with her roommates, Natalie had not moved once. She hadn't even looked around. She continued to lie facedown on her bed, scanning the pages of her magazine.

He walked over to stand next to her, to her left. Ron and Ginny took the other side of the bed and stood close together, creating a unified Weasley front. Hermione wandered to stand at the foot of the antique four-poster. She stood there with a confused and slightly disoriented expression, as if she wasn't quite sure how she had come to be there. She occasionally yanked at the high collar of her fluffy dressing gown, pulling the open ends together.

"Hullo, Natalie," Harry said.

Natalie's eyes flicked up at him, then back down to the open magazine.

"I'm not s'posed to talk to anyone," she replied primly, very proper. She glanced over her shoulder at Hermione. "'Specially you. McGonagall said so."

Ginny laughed lightly. "Oh, you don't have to talk to any of us."

"That's right." Ron drew himself up to his full height, trying to look as intimidating as possible. "We're the ones talking to you."

With the tip of a finger, Natalie flipped the page, displaying a showy advertisement for Circe's Choice Cold Creem--Brighten Your Complexion Overnight! at only 10 Galleons 7 Sickles a jar.

"I'll tell McGonagall on you." She threw the warning over her shoulder, allowing them to catch it if they wanted.

So far, so good, Harry thought. *No problems yet.*

"Go right ahead," he said, slipping into his most casual voice. "In fact, go and find her right now. We'll be right behind."

"We've got something for her," said Ron, playing along.

Natalie turned the page. "Then go give it to her and leave me alone."

"I don't think you understand." Harry leaned forward, closing the distance between them. "We've got a part of Hermione's old paper. It's a little bit *burnt*, but it's hers. Her original essay."

That got Natalie's interest. She looked up at him, frowning. She stared into his eyes and at his face, thoroughly searching for any hint of deceit or trickery. Harry carefully kept his expression blank.

She pushed the magazine away and rolled over on her side, propping herself up on her elbow. "So?"

Here came the dicey part. He had to get this exactly right.

"We've also got an eyewitness who saw you burning something in the library fireplace."

He hoped he hadn't imagined the flash of panic that lit up her eyes like lightning, because like lightning it had gone before he knew it.

"So?" she repeated, infinitely calm.

She hadn't called his bluff. There was still a chance.

"Listen," he said sternly, looking down at her over his glasses in a manner that would have made Will raise a shrewd eyebrow. "We all know Hermione didn't cheat. We know you were failing Potions. And we know you had the opportunity to take the essay and pretend you hadn't found it. So either you own up and tell McGonagall you cheated, or we'll go give our evidence to her and...and let her draw her own conclusions." He ended on a deliberately vague note, filled with unspecified threat, and settled down to wait for the reaction.

But to his surprise--and great disappointment--she didn't scream or faint or start to cry.

He had expected that the ultimatum would produce a scene of monumental proportions, with floods of tears followed by a complete confession. All the while there would be pleas for mercy, for understanding, for a chance to set things right. Dramatic and effective. That was how things were supposed to go. He'd had it all worked out in his mind.

But Natalie, it seemed, had forgotten all of her lines in the middle of the performance and spoiled everything.

Her tight, peaked face with its boiled gooseberry eyes stared up at him for a long time, long enough to make him feel uncomfortable. Staring back at her, he noted that there were spots on her face that he hadn't seen before. She had tried to treat the acne with Madam Pomfrey's special concealing cream--there was a small pot of it next to her bed-- but it only made her look spottier.

"All right," she said. "I'll tell her."

Her clamped his mouth shut and held his breath to keep from crowing "You WILL?". When he was sure that he could control himself again, he let his breath out in a long, slow hiss through his teeth.

"Good," was all he said.

"I will," Natalie repeated slowly, "on one condition."

"One condition?" Ron wrinkled his nose distastefully. "You don't GET a condition. You should consider yourself lucky we're telling you this at all."

"Ron," Hermione said warningly.

Ron glowered, but remained silent. Hermione turned her attention back to Natalie.

"What do you want?" she asked, very quietly.

Harry's chest tightened. Once again, things weren't going right. He had not expected Hermione to say anything. Truthfully, his plan had *depended* on Hermione not saying anything, but he didn't fancy tapping her on the shoulder and telling her to be quiet. Better to wait and see where this led, and be prepared to head it off if it looked like going wrong.

Hermione's quiet response, however, achieved more than his veiled threats. Natalie's lower lip quivered, and the spots on her face stood out even more than before. Harry could tell that the fortitude and sheer nerve that had sustained her thus far was fading fast. She was losing her courage before their eyes.

It wasn't a pleasant sight. He had to look away.

"I...I can't...."

"You can't what?" Hermione quizzed.

The words came out in a rush. "I can't let my parents know that I got expelled."

"Figures," Ron said scornfully. "You should've thought of that before you went off and did this damn stupid thing."

The tears came. Natalie's face crumpled in on itself, and she buried her head in her pillow.

"They *mustn't* know!" Her keening wail was barely audible. "They can't! They'd DIE if they found out!"

Both Ron and Ginny flinched, bodies stiffening as if they had been hit with a Full Body-Bind.

In a horrible flash of *deja vu*, Harry felt his skin crawl as the air temperature of the room seemed to plummet.

The Weasley siblings had been transformed. All outward signs of life had disappeared from Ginny's face. The deadened, soulless expression-- the view into the empty room that had frightened Hermione so badly--had come crashing down upon her once more, cutting her off from the world. Ron, however, had transcended the relatively simple emotion of anger. He had passed through shock and fury and rage to reach a deep, abiding malevolence. If he had had his wand at hand, Natalie's worries about expulsion and saving face would have been meaningless. The teachers would have been too preoccupied tracking down and gathering what they could find of her remains to concern themselves with her reputation.

But before either of them could react, Hermione strode around the side of the bed and sat down next to Natalie's prone form.

"So you want me to ask for leniency," she said.

Her matter-of-factness broke the spell that had fallen over Ron and Ginny. Ginny blinked, and her eyes returned to normal--or some close approximation of it. Ron squeezed his hands into fists and redirected his gaze to the beaming smile of the "Witch Weekly" cover girl.

Hermione traced the stitching on the bedspread with her fingertips. "You want me to ask McGonagall and the others to go easy on you. Model-but-misguided student, first offence, won't ever happen again, Brownie's honour, that sort of thing."

There was no sarcasm in her voice. No trace of any spite or malice. "That's what you want?"

Face still hidden by her pillow, Natalie nodded feeble assent.

Hermione's hand gripped the blanket, crushing and twisting the cloth. "Answer me."

"Y...yes."

Ron laughed hollowly. The air had to force its way out of his mouth. "Nothing doing. Hermione wouldn't even consi--"

"Fine."

Ron all but gagged on his words.

"Hermione!" Ginny breathed.

Natalie spun around, flipping onto her back. One of her messy plaits had come undone, and hair spilled lopsidedly around her puffy face and fell in tangles across her reddened eyes. She stared up at Hermione, unable and yet desperately wanting to believe what she had just heard.

"You p-p-promise?" she faltered.

Hermione nodded once. "I promise."

"Oh!" Natalie pressed a hand to her mouth.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck, more than a little frustrated. This wouldn't **quite** ruin his brilliantly constructed plan, but certainly it would make things more difficult for all of them. He couldn't decide whether Hermione was being overly magnanimous or incredibly stupid.

"Oh, thank you!" At that moment Natalie would have fallen to her knees kissed Hermione's feet if the older girl had asked her to. "Thank you!"

Hermione didn't acknowledge the gratitude. The bedsprings creaked as she got to her feet.

"I thought we were **friends**," she said. Not angrily, but regretfully. There was a deep sense of loss in the way she said the word 'friends'; a sense of something unsalvageable.

Astonishment and relief had stopped Natalie's tears, but now they came again thick and fast.

"I...I d-d-don't know," she spluttered when she could catch her breath between sobs. "I was mad. Completely mad."

She hiccupped a few times. "I w-went to get the essay like you said, and I got to your room and opened the trunk and...and...I don't know what happened, but next thing I knew I was in my room and my bed was right there and then I came back later and...it was **there** and...."

"And you copied it."

"I didn't mean to! I was only going to use it to get started, honest I was!"

"Ha!" Ron barked.

"Honest!" Her breathing had speeded up; if it kept on that way she would be hyperventilating in a minute. "I swear it! I came back and I started to write but nothing I thought of sounded right, and it was midnight and I was so afraid and I needed something, *anything*, and before I knew it I'd..."

"Taken Hermione's work and passed it off as your own," Ginny finished, truthfully if not kindly.

Natalie's face went a greyish-white.

Before guilt could push it away, a mean little voice in the back of Harry's mind rejoiced: *Is this the scene you wanted?*

"I would've failed it." She hiccupped again, releasing a staccato string of sobs. "I know I would've. Mum and Dad...I couldn't fail." Turning beseeching eyes on Hermione, she made one last stab at apology. "I...I know I can't ask you to forgive me--"

Hermione looked away. "Then don't."

Natalie was saved from the awful prospect of replying by a rattle at the door.

Harry cursed silently. They'd lost track of time.

Ron ran over, swearing colourfully as he tripped over a book and got his feet entangled in the straps of a discarded bra.

"What is it?" he hissed through the keyhole.

"She's coming!" Neville was on the near side of panic.

"Then head her off!" Ron shouted.

Neville whimpered. "But--"

"DO IT!"

Natalie was forgotten. In a clattering of shoes and slap-slapping of slippers, Ginny and Hermione were already bolting for the door. They were outside before Harry could think to move himself.

By the time he had slipped into the passageway and shut the door behind him, the dragging end of Ginny's old robe had just disappeared up the staircase. Her room was two floors above. Hermione was on the floor above that. With any luck, their roommates wouldn't question a sudden, breathless appearance. Lavender and Parvati could be trusted to keep quiet--perhaps the fourth-year girls would, too.

"...some last-minute revising in Hermione's room! Yes, just me and Ron and Harry, doing some last minute revising! Just us!"

Neville's too-loud voice rang out in the confined stone enclosure of the tower staircase. Ron and Harry quickly straightened their robes and flattened their hair with their hands as McGonagall's pointed hat came into view, followed by the rest of her. Neville trailed doggedly at her heels, stumbling a little when he missed the top step.

"Good evening, Professor McGonagall," Ron and Harry chirruped.

"Good evening, gentlemen." She nodded to them. "Mr. Longbottom tells me that you have a test tomorrow in Herbology."

Behind her, Neville's head was bobbing frantically as he mouthed 'Yes, yes, say yes'.

"Yes'm," Ron lied smoothly. "Got do to good in that class, y'know. Right, Harry?"

"That's right, Ron."

They both knew how fake they sounded, but by some miracle McGonagall didn't press them further.

"I certainly hope you do well then, Mr. Weasley." She faintly stressed the proper adjective. "Miss Granger is in her room?"

"Yes, she is," Harry said, praying it was true. "She was wondering when you would be coming."

"Indeed?" McGonagall paused. She tapped a finger to her cheek, as if a thought had struck her. "By any chance, do you know if Miss McDonald is in her room? Her roommates were downstairs, but I didn't see her with them."

Harry bit the inside of his cheek so hard he tasted blood.

"Why, no, I don't know." With all the manipulative skill of a chess player avoiding a dangerous gambit, Ron delicately sidestepped the question. "We've been in Hermione's room since we got back from the hearing."

"I haven't seen her at all tonight," Neville supplied helpfully, taking his cue from Ron. "Natalie, I mean. Have you, Harry?"

Harry shook his head, fighting back the nausea that the coppery taste of blood had sent churning through his stomach.

"Just as well." She nodded to them again. "Better go to bed, boys. You'll need your sleep for the test. Good night."

"Good night, Professor," they chorused brightly as she headed up the stairs to the fifth-year girls' dormitory.

Once she was out of sight and earshot, their legs gave out. The three of them wobbled over to grab the walls for support.

"Nice try, Neville," Ron said sarcastically. "I think she almost might have believed you for a moment there."

Neville gave him a black look. "You can do your own dirty work next time."

A few floors above them, a door shut with a loud, echoing click.

"I think we already have," Harry murmured.

* * *

They didn't discuss the previous night's events or the faculty hearing until late the next day. Harry had managed to get hold of Colin before breakfast and inform him of the plan's apparent success, but the daily routine of classes and schoolwork occupied his mind until they were all seated at the table in the Great Hall.

Colin was over at the Hufflepuff table, talking earnestly to a pretty, snub-nosed girl whose name Harry didn't know. He'd seen them working together on Muggle Studies assignments. It was likely that they were class partners, or something like that. But it was just as well that he wasn't eating with them--Colin was still a valuable part of the plan. The last resort, so to speak.

He reached for the mustard pot, and used the opportunity to secretly study his friends.

Neville's had just come from the greenhouses, and his fingernails were caked with dirt from some extra-credit repotting he had volunteered for in Herbology. He was being very careful with his hands; he wanted to avoid a mouth full of loam and potting soil.

Ron and Ginny were unusually quiet. Ron certainly wasn't eating as much as he had the night before. In fact, he was taking less food than usual, and wasn't stealing choice bits from his sister's plate. Ginny had also taken smaller portions than normal, but kept complaining of thirst. She had downed almost an entire pitcher of water, and half a pitcher of pumpkin juice as well.

Hermione's appetite, on the other hand, had returned. Just then, she was tucking into the evening's pudding, a rich, cinnamon apple tart, with gusto.

A spicy tingling under his nose brought him out of his musings. He recalled that he had taken the mustard pot for a reason, and hastily smeared a thick layer of the condiment on his slab of roast beef.

As he returned the pot to its place beside the salt cellar, he darted a glance down the table. Natalie was calmly finishing her meal at the opposite end. Her roommates surrounded her, chatting and laughing over something one of them had said.

No sign of nerves on that end.

To prolong the meal, the five of them took numerous but small helpings of food. A potato here, a slice of bread there, the odd candied fruit. They hadn't planned it deliberately, but soon enough they were the only ones left sitting at the Gryffindor table.

Some of the Slytherin and Hufflepuff students had stayed behind as well. There were enough students remaining in the Hall to allow for quiet conversation, but they were all under the hooded yet watchful eyes of Professor Snape, who was lingering over a goblet of wine at the Head Table.

As a prelude to discussion, Ron poked Hermione with the end of his spoon that wasn't sticky.

"Ready?" he said around a mouthful of apple and cream.

She wiped her lips daintily with her napkin. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"I wish we could come with you," said Ginny.

Neville nodded. "So do I. There's--there's something about this that I don't like."

"Well, this is a change." Ron leaned back in his chair. "You trying to take over Harry's job? He's the one with the creepy visions."

Neville frowned. "That's not funny."

"I know it's not," Ron bristled. "It's just...just...oh, what's that Muggle phrase?"

"Whistling in the dark?" Harry suggested facetiously.

Ron didn't notice the sarcasm. "Whatever. Something like that."

Neville's frown deepened. "I know I wasn't in the room, so I probably missed something, but...."

"But what?" Harry pressed.

"I still I don't understand why she agreed to own up all of a sudden."

"You know, I was thinking that, too," Ginny said. "Didn't any of you think it was a bit too...quick?"

Harry used a piece of bread to soak up the juices on his plate. "She certainly didn't panic."

"Maybe she's got something up her sleeve," Ron said, eyes narrowing.

"No," Hermione said confidently. "She would have used it by now, and don't you think we'd have heard about it if she had?"

"Maybe she told McGonagall on us," Neville offered, fidgeting in his chair.

"It's her word against ours," Harry said.

"Exactly." Hermione viciously speared a gooey apple with her fork and dumped most of the pitcher of cream over her plate. "That's probably why she did it in the first place. She thought she could get away with it."

Harry glanced up sharply. "You don't believe what she said?"

Her hand paused in mid-air. The chunk of apple fell from her fork and landed on her plate with a wet plop.

"I don't know what I believe," she said, calm once more.

Ron tossed down his pumpkin juice. "What *I* can't believe is that you agreed to plead for her. After what she did?"

Hermione mopped at the front of her robe with her napkin and said nothing.

Ginny propped her elbows on the table. "Do you think McGonagall will listen?"

"Natalie seemed to think so," Harry remarked.

Ron grunted. "Even if McGonagall agrees, that doesn't mean Sprout or Flitwick will. Not to mention Snape," he said, casting a glance at the Head Table.

Hermione flashed him a easy smile. "It'll all work out in the end, Ron. Trust me."

Something in the tone of her voice bothered Harry, though he couldn't pinpoint what bothered him. He made a mental note to ask her about it later.

"And anyway," she continued, "I think she'll be all too glad to own up. Better to do it yourself than run the risk of having someone else do it for you. She can tell her side of the story, that way."

"Play the innocent," Ginny said sagely, nodding as if she knew exactly what Hermione meant.

"What would you have done if she hadn't confessed?" Neville was looking at Harry, though he seemed to be directing the question to Hermione.

"Exactly what I said," Harry declared before Hermione could speak. "I'd have found Colin and told him to give McGonagall the pieces of Hermione's paper. His story'd be as believable as any of ours."

Neville looked troubled. "But it would only be a story. There wouldn't be any proof that she cheated."

"There wouldn't be any proof he was lying, either," Ron said. "We want doubt, that's all."

"That doesn't change the fact that we lied to her," Neville said stubbornly.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "So? What of it?"

"She lied to us first," Ron said defensively.

Neville looked down at his plate. When he spoke, his voice was soft and sad. "So does that make us right?"

An awkward silence fell upon the table. None of them knew what to say. Ron stared intently at the viscous, muddy puddle of cinnamon and apple mush and cream in his bowl as if it was a scrying device that would reveal a suitable reply.

Harry checked his watch. "It's time."

As one, they got up from the table and pushed in their chairs. Snape drained his goblet and stood as well, handing his napkin to the bobbing house elf that appeared at his side.

The five students left the Great Hall, headed for the Transfiguration classroom. Snape followed them at a moderate but regular distance. Through the fabric of his robes, Harry could feel the little white stone growing colder by the minute.

They stopped outside the classroom and bunched together, moving aside to allow Snape to enter first. He strolled up to them, robes flapping as they always did, appearing to be overcome with the sheer tedium of what promised to be an uneventful faculty meeting.

"Granger, Weasley," he murmured, his cold eyes brushing over them with the most cursory of glances. Harry, Ginny, and Neville might not have existed.

Stiffly, Ron and Hermione walked into the classroom. Through the open door, Harry saw that McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout were already in their seats--exactly as he had observed the night before. Natalie was sitting in the front of the room. He couldn't see who was next to her. Snape's billowing robes partially blocked his view.

Snape had turned around to shut and lock the door, and noticed that the little knot of Gryffindors had not moved.

"Well?" he said curtly.

The word hit Harry with a stinging jolt, like an electrical shock, and he found himself unintentionally blurting out:

"Could we come in, sir? For Hermione?"

A small corner of Snape's mouth quirked in one of his characteristic un-smiles. "Touching, Potter, if nauseating. But each student is allowed one other person as witness and counsel, not three. As I'm sure you know quite well."

"Oh, I know, sir." Harry's mind whirled. "But--"

"Yes?"

The idea that came to him was so perfect that it should have been accompanied by a angelic host singing the "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's 'Messiah'.

"But you see, sir, we were told that all of us should be there for her tonight. As an extra precaution, you see."

The un-smile went away. "And who told you that?"

Neville and Ginny pressed up against him, filling the space between him and Snape with their presence.

"Professor Stanton, sir," he said, all innocently bright green eyes magnified by glasses--and very, very meaningful voice.

For a second, Snape seemed to go some place very far-off. The light went out of his eyes, and with it went all of his usual pomposity and arrogance and condescending coldness. It left his face looking vacant and empty, like an old rubber mask.

"Would it be all right, sir?" Harry asked.

His voice brought Snape back from wherever he had been. Wordlessly, the Potions Master moved to one side, allowing them to enter the room.

Victory strutted and crowed inside Harry, preening itself like a rooster. It didn't happen often--best to enjoy it now, while he could.

But even though he had won the little contest of wills, he did not wish to push their luck. He and Neville and Ginny went to the last row of desks. They took their seats as unobtrusively as possible, picking up the chairs to stop them from making noise on the floor.

Snape hastened up to the front of the room and joined the four Heads of House on the teacher's dais. McGonagall looked as he approached, and in the same movement of her head noticed the newcomers at the back of the room. Her brow furrowed in suspicion, but the ridges smoothed out as Snape quickly leaned over and whispered in her ear.

When he had finished speaking and had taken his seat, she stood and fixed Harry, Ginny, and Neville with a steely eye.

"Before we begin these proceedings, I must demand that all who are not directly participating in this hearing remain silent. Any disturbance, no matter how minor, will result in severe and immediate disciplinary action."

Startled, Ron and Hermione turned around to discover who she was addressing. Natalie looked behind as well, as did the person who was sitting beside her. Harry blanched to find himself under the chilly scrutiny of Isolde Yeggernell.

McGonagall rapped her knuckles on the table, bringing them all back to the subject at hand. She shuffled through a small stack of papers that lay in front of her on the desk.

"In light of evidence presented to me last night, the Heads of House have had to re-evaluate our position on this incident."

An excited quiver raced through Harry's guts. So Natalie had confessed after all. That made things a lot easier.

McGonagall continued. "There is nothing we want more than to bring this unfortunate matter to a fair and unbiased conclusion...."

As she droned on with talk of matters more legal and official than personal, Harry's hand slowly slid into the pocket where he kept the little stone. It was still bitterly cold--Snape wasn't that far from them, after all--so he did not dare to touch it. He held his hand as close to the stone as he could tolerate, and shut his eyes.

This time, he wanted the emotions more than the actual picture. He didn't know if it was possible to filter out the information he would receive, but it was worth a try. Emotions would be more telling than any words that would be said.

McGonagall's voice melted out of his mind. The inner artist went to work again.

First came the sketch of the room and its occupants--clearer and more sharply defined now that he was actually in the room. But without a warning, the emotions that he was seeking crashed into his unprepared mind, much stronger than they had been before.

Every person in the room had a distinct combination of emotions that surrounded him or her, bringing to mind Trelawney's dismal lectures on the colours and vagaries of his aura and the auras of his classmates. As they were sitting closest to him, Neville and Ginny's emotions were the first ones he could distinguish. They were two bunches of nervous energy. Great waves of suppressed fear and worry buffeted him. It was a struggle to adjust to the constant presence of anxiety, but he had to concentrate on the others in the room.

He directed his attention to the teachers at the head table. Sprout and Flitwick seemed to have similar feelings: a pulsating sympathy tempered by lurid streaks of half-ashamed relief. Most likely they were glad that the cause of the trouble wasn't the students of their house. Snape hadn't changed much since the night before. The sense of self-satisfied snideness was stronger, if anything, though there was also good deal of resentment that Harry suspected was directed at him. But the uncertainty that had been flickering around Professor McGonagall was gone, and her impartiality was no longer desperate. Only a few thin, grey lines of sadness marred what would have been the penultimate representation of Justice with her fiery sword.

Next, to Hermione and Ron. The flame of Ron's anger was still going strong, burning like one of those unquenchable candles used on Muggle birthday cakes. Hard to tell whether he was angry **at** someone or angry **for** someone, but then again it was always hard to tell with Ron. From Hermione, however, he got nothing. No sense of shame or embarrassment, none of the feelings that had registered in his mind last night. Determination, maybe, but not even a strong sense of that. She was a warm body in the room; that was all.

Lastly, for Isolde and Natalie. Isolde he dismissed at once: he might as well have tried to find out the feelings of a girl-shaped chunk of Waterford cut crystal. Natalie exuded the guilty shame that he had expected to find, but with it was...no. Again, the readings he was getting from her were too fuzzy to properly examine. Not blocked--only fuzzy.

Ginny's hand accidentally brushed his arm, bringing him back to himself with a jolt. He had returned just in time; McGonagall had sat down and the main part of the hearing was underway.

"Is there any further evidence that either of you wish to place before us?" she said perfunctorily. "I make this request now because after this no further evidence will be accepted by this committee."

In the other pocket of Harry's robe, the one that did not contain the frigid stone, was the charred piece of parchment.

He started to rise, but as he shifted his weight the stone came to rest on the side of his leg. Even through the layers of fabric the cold pierced him to the bone.

STOP! it seemed to shout. ***STAY WHERE YOU ARE!***

Harry obeyed, gritting his teeth, breath whistling through his nose as he rubbed his leg to get rid of the burning shock of cold. Ginny gave him a concerned, fearful look, but both she and Neville stayed quite still. None of them wanted to be kicked out.

For the first time, Professor Sprout spoke.

"Miss McDonald. You have admitted to your Headmistress that you intentionally copied the work of another student--Hermione Granger-- and submitted it as your own?"

A brisk nod. "Yes, ma'am."

Professor Flitwick stood on tiptoe and addressed Natalie as well. "You have also admitted that you did so with the express intent of deceiving Professor Snape."

A more subdued nod. "Yes, sir."

"You have also admitted that Miss Granger's work was obtained without her permission and without her knowledge." Snape's voice held the loose, silky quality that spelled danger for all involved.

"Yes sir." There was no nod, and they had to strain to hear her.

With that round of questioning done, it seemed to be McGonagall's turn again. "And all of these statements are true?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Were they made under duress?" Snape asked. His dark eyes glittered thoughtfully, as if the prospect excited him.

Natalie's throat worked painfully. "S...sir?"

"Did someone force you to say them?" Sprout said with a patient, motherly smile.

To her credit, Natalie did not hesitate. "No, ma'am."

"Very well," McGonagall said. "If there are no further questions...?"

Her colleagues shook their heads.

"Very well," she repeated. "Miss Granger, Miss McDonald. Is there anything that either of you wish to say--before we announce our decision?"

Natalie got to her feet with difficulty, clinging to the table as a means of extra support. "I just wanted to tell Hermione that I...I'm very sorry, and...and I was very fortunate to have had her as my friend."

She sat down very quickly. The pretty little speech had taken a lot out of her.

"Miss Granger?"

Hermione stood up.

"I have nothing to say, Headmistress."

She sat down again.

Ginny gasped, and grabbed Harry's hand. Harry was too thunderstruck to pull away.

Natalie fell out of her chair in her haste to spring to her feet.

"Hermione!" she squealed. "You *promised*!"

"Is there something wrong, Miss McDonald?" McGonagall said, more than a little alarmed by the outburst.

Natalie could not get past the first few words of what she wanted to say. "S-she...she promised that...she PROMISED...."

Hermione shrugged. "I really don't know what she's talking about, ma'am."

"Hermione--" Natalie begged, but Snape cut her off coldly.

"You will be silent, Miss McDonald, and return to your seat."

There was no need for prompting. Natalie's legs gave out completely, and it was only by good fortune that she landed in her chair. She lay crooked in the chair like a puppet that had had all of its strings cut and had been tossed aside.

"You are certain that you do not know what she is talking about, Miss Granger?" McGonagall asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I can't imagine what she means."

It was impossible to tell which was worse--the barefaced lie or the sincere and honest way that Hermione had told it.

The Heads of House leaned together, conferring in murmurs and whispers.

Harry could not comprehend what he had just heard. From the look of things, no one else could quite believe it, either. At the front of the room, Ron was sitting very upright, frozen in place. There was no need to see his face to imagine his expression. Neville's mouth kept opening and shutting; gawping like a landed fish. Ginny had let go of his hand, but she too was sitting very straight in her chair. The skin around her mouth was taut and rigid.

The conference ended, and McGonagall stood again. She held a long roll of parchment in her hand, and Harry saw the dark shadow near the bottom that indicated the presence of an official stamp or seal.

She adjusted her glasses, and began to read from the parchment in a loud, clear voice.

"We the undersigned, having duly examined the evidence and testimony concerning this incident of suspected plagiarism, hereby conclude that Natalie McDonald, second year student of Gryffindor House, is guilty of wilfully and knowingly plagiarising another student's work.

"Since the act of plagiarism is a gross violation of the code of behaviour that governs this institution, we therefore have reached the unanimous decision that the said Miss McDonald will be summarily sent down from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry for the remainder of the school year. Miss McDonald will be suspended from classes for the following week, removed from residence in Gryffindor Tower for the same time period, and will be returned to her family by the Hogwarts Express at the start of the upcoming Easter holiday.

"Reinstatement will be contingent upon the decision of a further Faculty Hearing to be held at a later date. This committee's decision will be noted in the student files. Copies to Records, etcetera.

"Signed, Minerva McGonagall--Headmistress, Head of Gryffindor House."

With a dry rustle of robes and an equally dry expression on his face, Professor Snape stood. "Severus Snape--Head of Slytherin House."

Professor Sprout stood. "Saxifragia Sprout--Head of Hufflepuff House."

Professor Flitwick was already standing, but that did not make his pronouncement any less final. "Filius Flitwick--Head of Ravenclaw House."

Natalie fainted, landing on the stone floor with a dull thud. Sprout, who was standing closest to her, hurried to kneel by her side. She patted the fallen girl's cheek with a firm, light touch in an attempt to bring her round.

"Saxifragia," McGonagall said, "would you please escort her to the guest quarters in the South wing when she wakes? She will be staying there for the next week. I'll have house elves fetch her belongings and deliver them tonight."

"Certainly, Minerva." Sprout continued her efforts. "Come along, now, wake up." She turned to Isolde. "Miss Yeggersnell, if you wouldn't mind...?"

Isolde looked to McGonagall, and asked, "Professor, could I have a glass of water, please?"

McGonagall looked around the table, then settled on a small round glass paperweight near the desk blotter. With a tap of her wand, she Transfigured the paperweight into a glass of water. Isolde took the glass and unemotionally poured its contents over Natalie's head.

The unconscious girl came to with a gurgling scream, and she began to cry. The dangling sleeves of Sprout's work robe soon soaked up the excess water, and together with Isolde she

half-led, half-carried Natalie from the room. McGonagall took the empty glass and returned it to its former state.

Snape, apparently convinced that his part in the proceedings had come to an end, swept out of the room. As before, he paid no attention to the three Gryffindors seated in the back.

Harry was numb all over. He had the feeling that he had just witnessed something horrific but unstoppable, like a car smash or a train wreck. The numbness stayed with him as McGonagall and Flitwick gathered their belongings and papers. It stayed with him as Hermione and Ron stood to bid the professors goodnight and see them out. And it was still there when Hermione and Ron joined the three of them at the back of the room.

"Whew!" Hermione breathed. "I'm glad that's over." The stress and nervous tension that had haunted her face for the past two weeks had vanished, and she was back to her old self once more. She gave Ron a big hug. "Thanks, Ron."

Ron looked like he had been forced to swallow a Bludger whole. He returned the hug with wooden arms.

Hermione then turned to Harry, Ginny, and Neville. "And thank all of you, too, for coming. I don't know what you said to Snape to make him let you stay, but thank you. It meant a lot to me to have you here." She yawned and stretched. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to take a very long and scalding hot bath with plenty of bubbles." And she started to walk to the door.

Harry's arm shot out of its own volition and grabbed her before she could take two paces. Roughly, he pulled her backward.

"Ow, Harry, let go!" she squeaked, twisting her body. "You're hurting me!"

He tightened his grip. "Hermione...*why*?"

Hermione stopped struggling, and smiled at him. Both her smile and her eyes were bland, calm, and utterly without remorse.

"I already told you, Harry," she said. "No one makes a fool of Hermione Granger. No one."

She gently pried Harry's slack hand off her arm, turned on her heel, and walked out of the room.

Chapter Twenty-Six - Transitions and Trepidations

Who is the third who walks always beside you? When I count, there are only you and I together But when I look ahead up the white road There is always another one walking beside you Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded I do not know whether a man or a woman --But who is that on the other side of you?

-- T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land: What the Thunder Said", 359-65

Hermione Granger, the unfortunate victim of a very damaging assault on her character, had been exonerated by the combined Heads of House. She was declared innocent of all charges, free of all suspicions, reinstated as prefect and welcome.

Fred and George were two of the first to know--they wormed all the pertinent information out of Ginny within ten minutes of her return-- and started things off by snatching Hermione before breakfast the next morning, hefting her onto their shoulders, and leading a triumphal parade three times round the common room. They would have made it round a fourth time if her flustered shouts hadn't brought Ron and Harry to the rescue. The twins had also come up with a plan to set off firecrackers in the Great Hall to celebrate her victory, but McGonagall anticipated them, confiscating their equipment with a few well-aimed Summoning Charms.

Gryffindor rallied round Hermione with banners high. The students praised her for her courage in the face of such a trying ordeal, as though they could make up their fence-sitting with a bold display of support after the fact. Those who cheered the loudest were often those who had avoided Hermione like the plague not a day earlier. Everyone knows that the 'contamination' of disgrace is not contagious, but no one wants to sit round the invalid for longer than absolutely necessary.

Not that they were without genuine sympathy. Indeed, they were very happy that Hermione had won. Yet on another level, their stalwart support for her helped them forget that one of their own had been the cause of the problem, and had dishonoured the House name. In the celebrations, Natalie's name was not mentioned once, and she was alluded to only as "that girl". In Gryffindor House, it seemed, Natalie McDonald had become something almost akin to the Dark Lord-- a 'She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named'.

Two groups of Gryffindors were not in a celebratory mood. The second- year girls--now one short--had little to celebrate, unless you believed that additional storage space for their things was apt compensation. They didn't make a fuss, though. Isolde Yeggernell carried herself with the glacial dignity of a freshly-made ice sculpture, and her example was enough to keep her three roommates from hysterics.

Everyone understood their reluctance to join the fun, but what no one could understand was the reticence of Hermione's closest friends.

Hermione wouldn't make a big deal out of things--after all, that would have looked terribly callous and uncaring--but for Harry and Ron *not* to exult in her innocence...well, no one

knew what to think. Logically, Harry and Ron should have been the most rowdy of the merry-makers, but instead they were...not *sulking* exactly, but certainly less than cheerful. Gloomy. Morose, even. And Neville and Ginny weren't much happier.

So it was four glum Gryffindors who were sitting in the common room after dinner, waiting for Hermione to return from her prefect's meeting--and with only one obvious topic of conversation.

Neville had been quiet all day, but it was little shock to them when out of the blue he said, "Is anyone else bothered by this?"

They all knew what 'this' meant. There was no need to go into greater detail.

Ron picked at his teeth with his fingernail and shrugged.

Ginny murmured, "How could you not be?"

"Not that there's anything we can do about it," said Harry.

A loud snort startled them all for a moment, before they remembered that Snuffles was nearby. He had wormed his way into the common room just after dinner, collected pats and head scratches and dinner scraps from his more sympathetic friends, and was now sprawled like a snoring shaggy rug before the fire.

Even though Snuffles was sleeping, Harry lowered his voice before he continued. "And even if there was, would you want to?"

Ron shifted his weight, and gnawed on the ball of his thumb. "We'd have to go through the whole thing again."

"It'd be worse," Ginny said, shaking her head. "Because we're the only ones who could say anything."

"Say anything?" Ron made a face. "What, walk up to McGonagall after class tomorrow and say, 'Excuse me, Professor, but Hermione lied to your face and Natalie got shopped for it, just thought you'd like to know, have a nice day'?"

She scowled. "If you're going to be an ass about it...."

"You know what I mean," he snapped back.

"So we can't do anything, can we?" Neville said despairingly. His hands were working the cloth in the lap of his robe into a mass of wrinkles.

"Nothing that'd make a difference. And like Harry said, would you want to?"

"It wasn't right," Neville said stubbornly, glaring at Harry.

"Look, I never said it was!" His glasses slipped down, and he shoved them back into place. "But she cheated, and off Hermione, of all people. Don't you think she got what was coming to her? Even a little?"

"I'll say." Ron tapped his teeth with his thumbnail. "Tell you something, though...from now on I'll think twice about ever making her mad at me."

"That'd be an improvement," Ginny commented dryly, earning her a sour look from her brother. "At least *something* good came out of this."

Neville was oblivious to the sibling repartee. "What do you suppose'll happen to her? Natalie, I mean."

Ron shrugged again. "Don't know. Any ideas, Gin?"

"I've heard some things, but it's all gossip. Harry?"

"No clue."

They lapsed into silence.

Harry turned the situation over in his mind. The only other person he knew who had been expelled from Hogwarts was Hagrid. Hagrid had ended up as the Keeper of Keys and Grounds, but only through Dumbledore's kindness. And not only had he been expelled, his wand had been snapped. Would Natalie's wand be snapped, like Hagrid's? Surely not, but then again he had no idea what constituted a wand-snapping charge. Would she still be allowed to practise magic? What happened to a witch or wizard who wasn't allowed to practice magic?

The portrait door opened, and Harry looked up to see Hermione walking into the room. There was a jaunty spring to her step--and a wilted pink tea-rose in her hand.

Ron's eyes went immediately to the rose.

"Where'd you get that?" he asked, though the speed and force with which the question came out made it sound more like a prelude to a police interrogation.

"This?" Hermione sniffed at the yellowing petals. "Justin Finch-Fletchly--he's prefect for Hufflepuff, you know--was working in the greenhouse before the meeting and he brought a few of them in."

Ron tilted his head to one side. "A few?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Yes, Ron. He had enough for all the girls...even McGonagall." She tucked the rose behind her prefect's badge and wrinkled her nose at him. "You needn't look like that."

Ron did look like a mule that had put its ears back and was about to kick, but he merely grunted and returned his attention to a jagged hangnail.

"So how did the meeting go?" Neville asked hastily.

"Fine. I hadn't missed all that much. I asked for extra rounds tonight, though, just to make up."

"And they let you?" Ginny asked.

"Of course. One of the Ravenclaw girls wanted the extra time to work on her Ancient Runes assignment." A dreamy, delighted look crept into her eyes at the thought of the class. "She was telling me about it before the meeting started--it sounds simply fascinating. Did you know that some of the runes have principles similar to those used in Muggle physics and calculus?"

Ron stifled a yawn and tried to appear interested. "Really?"

"Oh, yes. I actually thought about taking an introductory calculus course at the local secondary school this last summer, but with the O.W.L.s coming up I decided it would be better to wait until..."

And that, in Harry's opinion, raised even more questions. Natalie's parents were Muggles: could she go back to Muggle schools? Would she even **want** to go back to Muggle schools? Harry certainly wouldn't. Muggle schools had something like O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s, he knew, but she had spent nearly two years at the Hogwarts. Transfiguration and Defence Against the Dark Arts were all well and good at Hogwarts, but not when Muggle children had been learning French and Maths and Modern History. If she went to a Muggle school, she would have a good deal of catching up to do.

And how could a witch or a wizard--even a Muggle-born one--adjust to living as a Muggle, without any contact with the wizarding world? He was sure that some Squibs probably did it. Take that relative of the Weasleys, the chartered accountant or whatever he was. It would be less painful to live as a Muggle, to not be constantly reminded of what you lacked. But that was a conscious choice, and not all Squibs left the wizarding world for the Muggle one--look at Filch. Mrs. Figg had lived as a Muggle for fourteen whole years. He had never thought of her as anything but a batty old woman with too many cats until last summer. But then again, she was an Auror, and she had obviously had training. How could a child like Natalie cope? Could she cope at all?

He swam up, out of the depressing downward spiral his thoughts had taken, and resurfaced only to pick up the tail end of Ginny's words.

"...school in America."

"Good for her." Hermione gave a little toss of her head. "Her parents will probably be thrilled to tell their friends and neighbours that their little girl will be going to a special boarding school abroad where she'll make all sorts of new friends."

Harry winced. **Ouch.** He had missed what Ginny had said--not to mention the majority of the conversation--but now he really didn't want to know what they had been talking about.

"It's on her record, though," Neville said, not meeting her eyes.

"That sort of thing isn't forgotten so easily," Ron added.

Hermione pursed her lips. "I'm glad. It shouldn't be." It was as near to spiteful as they had ever heard her sound.

There was an awkward beat.

"What time is it?" Neville asked Harry, tugging the mass of wrinkles out of his robe.

Slowly, Harry reached out and took hold of Neville's wrist, then turned it so they could both see the watch face and read the numbers.

"It's almost seven now," he said, giving Neville an odd look. Neville occasionally lapsed into his old absentminded behaviour, but never like that.

They stood up. Snuffles, who had been dozing contentedly on the warm hearth, started awake. Thumping his tail on the stones, he peered at Harry with the excited look of the dog that wanted to go for 'walkies'.

"No," Ginny said firmly. "No, Snuffles, you can't come."

Collar tags jangling, the great black dog uncurled himself and sat up. His tail lashed back and forth, narrowly avoiding being singed by the glowing embers.

"We have our study session now," Ron said with forced cheerfulness. "Go find Professor Lupin."

Snuffles whined plaintively and wagged his tail even harder, his hindquarters quivering with the rapid movement. He pushed his wet nose into Harry's hand and made sad, despondent noises.

Harry knelt down and scratched the shaggy head. "It's no good trying to be cute with me," he said quietly, smiling a little bit to soften the blow. "I have to go."

Snuffles whined again, then suddenly shook his head and sneezed, directly into Harry's face.

"Yuck!" Harry pulled off his glasses and scrubbed at his face with his sleeve. He glared at the Animagus, all kind thoughts forgotten. "Did you *have* to do that?"

A whimper and an apologetic bark was his only answer.

"And I was going to bring you something from the kitchens, too." He spat on the lenses of his glasses and rubbed them between the folds of his sleeve, choosing the Muggle method of cleaning over magic. "Now, out you go."

After making a detour to dump a very dejected dog off at the door to Professor Lupin's office, the five of them headed for the little room off the library.

To Harry, it felt like ages since they had been there, not two days. He wondered if Will was still upset. It didn't seem likely. However, if Will knew about the events of the past two days (and how could he not? He knew everything else that they did, or at least he always appeared to know) then Harry didn't favour their chances tonight.

Similar thoughts seemed to be on his friends' minds, because they got the room ready with less talk than usual. Once the pile of ashes in the grate had been swept to one side, a bright, crackling fire lit, and the chairs arranged round the long table, they walked over to the long mirror and took their positions on either side. They all wanted to get any potential unpleasantness over with as soon as possible.

"Enter, Watchman of the Light."

"Grant to us your inner sight."

"Enter, for the time draws near."

"Power will erase our fear."

"Enter, lest the darkness win."

The coiling grey mist barely had time to fade before the myriad of circles and lines and curves carved into the wooden mirror blazed with blue flame, signalling that they had opened the passageway between Will's office and their meeting room.

Will stepped through almost immediately, and without pause for any greetings or other social pleasantries moved to stand beside his chair with his back to the fire. He stood there patiently, waiting for them to sit down.

The children took their seats quickly, with a minimum of noise. Will was only ever like this when he had a lot of work for them. They looked up at him expectantly, prepared to hear their assignments for the session.

To their confusion, he did not speak. He studied them in his quiet, detached way, the silent method of classification that they had come to recognise if not understand.

"Tell me, Miss Granger," he asked, "is Professor Snape still assigned to accompany you to these meetings?"

Hermione blinked, looking surprised. "No, sir. The hearing was over yesterday."

"And since you're with us tonight, I assume that you won."

"Yes, sir."

"The other girl confessed?"

A pause.

"Yes, sir." More cautiously, this time.

"Very obliging of her." It was not a sarcastic comment, which made it sound even stranger. "What was the result?"

Hermione didn't respond right away. Neville, sensing that some sinister or meaningful undercurrent that had entered the conversation, answered for her:

"She was expelled, sir."

Will nodded. "A fitting punishment."

He started to walk round, running a hand along the bookshelves nearest the grate. Every so often he stopped for a closer look at the title of a book. He plucked one off the shelf, opened it and flipped through it without actually reading the print. Harry and the others followed him with their eyes, scrutinising every movement.

Will closed the book, releasing a small puff of dust, and returned it to the shelf.

"How do you feel about this, Miss Weasley?" he asked, brushing at the dust that had come to rest on his robes.

Ginny flushed, then paled, then flushed again. "I...I agree with you, sir."

"Ah," he said thoughtfully. "Many thanks for your confidence in my opinion." He did not turn to face them; his eyes continued to scan the neat rows of leather bound volumes. "Mr. Longbottom, what are your thoughts on the matter?"

Neville jumped. "She...she...Natalie cheated, sir."

"That's all?"

Neville's face had taken on a strained and greyish cast, twisted in an expression much like the one that had appeared during their first Potions class. He fought it off long enough to croak out a desultory, "Yes, sir." Then he leaned back in his chair, teeth gritted and eyes squeezed tightly closed.

Will took another book and opened it to the middle, running a long finger down the page. "Mr. Weasley?"

"She got what she deserved." Perhaps out of fear that his words had sounded crueller than he had meant them to be, Ron added a hearty, "Sir."

Will considered that reply for a moment. He replaced the second book on the shelf, and began to pace again. "And you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry took a deep breath. Why was his heart pounding so fast? "I...I'm just glad that everything--"

"Why are you asking us this?" Hermione interrupted shrilly.

Will stopped moving, so abruptly that it took a moment for his robes to settle round his body. He had returned to where he had started from, next to his chair, but his face was still turned away from them, studying the books on the nearest wall.

Harry clamped his mouth shut, biting the inside of his cheek again and reopening the cut that had started to heal.

Hermione, however, kept going, more out of pure nervous energy than any need to get her point across. "I mean, what does it matter? It's over with. I'm sorry for what happened, but I want to put it behind me and get on with things. Why go over it all again?"

"Because." The single word flicked like a thin whip. "Because, Miss Granger, you reek of the Dark."

Stung, she stared at him, eyes dark with disbelief and horror. Her mouth hung slightly open.

Will rested one hand on the back of his chair and turned to look at them. By some odd trick of the firelight, his round face was all angles and shifting shadows and deep-set fierceness. The light that glowed in his eyes did not come from the flames.

"All of you do." His voice was as cold as the stone that had burned in Harry's pocket the night before. "Or if not the Dark, then something so similar that your combined presence is causing me no small amount of physical discomfort."

His grip tightened briefly on the chair. With his other hand, he made a terse, impatient gesture. "Stand up."

They scrambled to their feet and stood at attention, ramrod straight and without blinking, like soldiers under inspection.

Will began to prowl about the room. His eyes were narrowed, half-closed, and his head was tilted slightly upward, questing like a forest animal that had caught the faint scent of a human being. His footsteps were slow and measured, a deliberate pace that made almost no sound. Only the whispered rustle of his robes told them where he was. Harry suppressed a shiver as the Old One passed by behind him.

By the time Will had made a complete circuit of the room, the damp itch of sweat was building on the back of Harry's neck where the rough collar of his robe pressed against his skin. He would go mad if he couldn't scratch it soon.

"No," Will said at last. "No, the longer I stand here, the more I feel that it isn't the Dark. But it's not simple ill-wishing, either."

He pulled out his chair and sat. When the children didn't move, he made another gesture, less brusque but by no means less commanding. "You may be seated."

They sat, and like two rows of worshippers at service folded their hands in their laps and stared fixedly at them.

"As this will likely affect our continued efforts, I would like a few answers," Will said quietly. "Truthful answers, mind. You have nothing to lose by being honest with me."

He leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers together lightly, the picture of unhurried contemplation. "Perhaps, Mr. Potter, I should start by asking what you hoped to gain through your attendance at last night's hearing?"

Harry's head was fuzzy, hazy round the edges with the darkness that often accompanies a sudden change in body position, as if he had stood too quickly. He blinked away the darkness, only to feel it creep back again.

"I wanted to be there, sir," he answered.

"Because?"

"Because...I think I was afraid of what would happen." That was true, if anything was.

"So you told Professor Snape that I had asked you to attend."

"Yes, sir," Harry said dismally.

"Subtle." The word sounded like an additional punctuation mark on Harry's admission.

"Indirect. And very, very clever." His gaze was opaque, inscrutable. "An undetectable push at the appropriate time...and with my name as well...."

It was Harry's turn to stare at Will, as stunned as if he had been hit by a particularly potent Confundus Charm.

"I have told you before how easy it is for the Dark to gain entry into a person's mind. Now you see what it can do." Will's voice was colourless. "You are very fortunate that no harm came of it, Mr. Potter. Well, apart from the fact that Professor Snape's extreme dislike for me has quite possibly increased tenfold, but at this point that is more tiresome than harmful."

He turned to Hermione, and said in the same colourless tone, "When that young girl asked you for leniency, Miss Granger, did you know that you would not give it to her?"

Hermione stiffened in her chair. Her response was muted but nonetheless straightforward. "Yes, sir."

"Then why did you make a false promise?"

"It was the only thing I could think of."

"Do you think Professor McGonagall would have listened to you, had you kept that promise?"

"Maybe."

"On that same note, would you have *wanted* her to listen to you?"

"I...I don't know." Her eyes did not leave his.

Will nodded, indicating that he had no further questions for her. Hermione, in response, seemed to stand down, looking less like a prisoner in the dock and more like her normal self. They might have been in a courtroom, acting out the established parts of the barrister and the accused.

"What are you going to do to us?" Neville quavered.

Will closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, his expression had changed. He regarded the five of them with something like sorrow and something like frustration, as if he knew what had to be done but did not know how to go about it.

"I'm in no position to pass judgement," he said. "It doesn't work that way. And Miss Granger's flawed intentions aside, we may be better off for it."

All eyes went to Hermione, whose only response was an incredulous "What?"

Will adjusted his glasses, resettling them on his nose. "The Dark has no need for the will-crushing power of the Imperius Curse. Why force someone to submit to outside control when the real means of control are already in place inside? The worries, the fears, the doubts, the self-loathing and hatred...even the good things, the drive and strength of character and courage, are easily twisted for their purposes.

"If this girl, Miss McDonald if I recall correctly, cheated of her own free will, it is only proper that she should be exposed and expelled. If, on the contrary, she was...." He paused to think of an appropriate word. "If she was provoked into it, then you will have rid this place of a pathway that would have allowed the Dark to enter."

Seeing Neville's mouth open in protest, he added, "Oh, I know it wasn't right. Not sporting, or fair play, or even honourable in the truest sense of the word. But sometimes...."

He paused again, but this time it was not to think of the right word.

"Sometimes," he said wistfully, in the voice of one reciting a text that holds a personal meaning, "it is not possible to make things easier for one human being, because that one small thing could mean an end of the world for all the rest."

And Harry, hearing the weariness that Will did not even trouble to hide, wondered who that human being was. Was it Natalie? Or was it--?

"But I cannot--"--here the ancient glow returned to Will's eyes, bringing with it the crackle of power forged from anger--"I WILL NOT permit the Dark to remain in this stronghold. Join hands."

Fatalistically, they did as he asked.

"This will be painful," he said grimly. And before Harry had time to be properly terrified about the prospect of pain, it came.

It was brief, lasting no more than a second, but it was enough to make him feel as though he had been subjected to the blast of a controlled, intense, soundless explosion. When Will let go of his hand, his fingers slipped out of Hermione's trembling, clammy grip; his arms fell to his sides and hung there, weak and rubbery. His chest felt loose, hollow inside. He slumped in his chair, as boneless as a rag doll.

"Rest for a moment." Will's voice penetrated the black curtain that had descended over his vision. "When you feel ready to continue with tonight's work, let me know."

Harry's body rested--it could do little else--but his mind did not.

Growing up at the Dursleys, he had often found himself at the mercy of Dudley, who had the advantage of brute weight and the leverage of an ever-present threat to run off and complain to Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. So when a bored seven-year-old Dudley and his friends decided, one rainy day, to see just what would happen if Harry were to insert a butter knife into a wall socket, Harry had little choice but to comply.

He had awoken in his pitch-black cupboard ten minutes later, the stink of singed hair in his nostrils and the sound of Uncle Vernon's cursing in his ears. His hand hurt, and he couldn't open it or flex his fingers properly. The butter knife was no longer there. Dudley was blubbering noisily somewhere close by. Aunt Petunia was trying to comfort her son without success.

He did not try to figure out why that memory had surfaced.

Within the space of a few minutes, the mental blackness had cleared enough for him to see his friends. Ron, Ginny, and Neville appeared to be as deeply exhausted as he felt. Ginny and Neville soon looked a little more lively, but Ron had to take several steadying breaths before he could push himself to an upright position.

Harry turned his head a fraction of an inch to look at Hermione, and he saw that she had buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders were still. Her breathing was even. And when she lifted her head a moment later, there were no tears on her paper-white face.

Will conducted the session with uncharacteristic harshness, pushing them to their already taxed physical and emotional limits. When they emerged from the little room a half-hour later--the shortened session in deference to Hermione's need to complete her extended rounds before ten o'clock--they had performed all the defensive and offensive spells they knew. With varying and lessening degrees of competence.

Hermione was first out of the room.

"Don't wait up for me," she said flatly, and strode off down the corridor.

Only Harry noticed that the direction she took when she turned the corner was not the passage that led to the Great Hall and the lower floors. She took the stairs that led up, and the only classroom that particular staircase serviced was the Astronomy Tower.

* * *

"Almost on goal, and it's--oh, bad luck! Let's see if the ravishing Katie Bell can retrieve the Quaffle for Gryffindor and break what seems to be a neck-and-neck game!"

Another Saturday, another Quidditch match--Gryffindor versus Slytherin.

The weather was balmy for late March, without the raw, chilly edge of the usual Hogwarts early spring. It was the last time that year that the rival houses would meet each other on the pitch, and with point totals for the House Cup running close any opportunity to contribute would not be taken lightly. Lee Jordan had whipped the spectators (and himself) into a frenzy, and scarves and flags in House colours snapped and fluttered in the brisk breeze.

Ron had wasted no time in re-establishing himself as a Keeper not to be trifled with. There were screams from the more excitable spectators when he performed the very dangerous "Starfish and Stick" defensive move in the first five minutes of the game, dangling from his broom by one hand and one foot to stop a shot on goal. It worked well enough, but once Ron had remounted his broom and was out of immediate peril, Harry heard Ginny's voice rise over the crowd noise, yelling a string of words that made her brothers grin and Colin--who was

sitting on the Gryffindor sidelines with a small notebook, analysing game play--flush a mortified scarlet.

Harry performed a sharp about-face to avoid a Bludger and circled round the Gryffindor goalposts. Gryffindor was about to take its fourth successive penalty shot on the Slytherin goal, thanks to a side swipe that had forced Angelina to bail out, leaping off her out-of-control broom to crash onto the pitch.

"How's it going?" he shouted to Ron.

"Shut your mouth and find that bloody Snitch!" Ron yelled back.

The crowd roared as a battered Angelina made her shot, drowning out any response that Harry could have made and bringing the score to Gryffindor 80, Slytherin 100.

It didn't take long for the game to turn ugly. The Chasers might have been demonstrating every single strategic manoeuvre from the reputable "Quidditch Throughout the Ages" and the less reputable "What Every Chaser Ought to Know About Winning" in their drive to get and keep hold of the Quaffle. The Beaters on both sides seemed to be using all the tricks they knew short of open fouling to prevent the Chasers from getting near the goal. Ron treated every Quaffle that came near the Gryffindor side as if had made filthy and insulting remarks about his family. And wisely, Harry and Draco kept well above the main play as Madam Hooch called fouls and penalty shots one after another.

Draco was hovering over the centre of the pitch, a perfect vantage point to see the gold glitter of the Snitch. Harry spiralled down the goalposts, hoping to draw Draco below the play and get him into the range of Fred and George's Bludger assault.

He cheered inwardly as Draco made as if to follow, but the Slytherin Seeker hesitated just above the middle of the scrum. He seemed to be waiting for a good time to descend.

Lee's voice boomed, "And Hawkshead Attacking Formation from Slytherin Chasers, headed for Gryffindor's goal...let's see if Ron Weasley can stop it--and there's the throw!"

The Slytherin Chaser, a hefty sixth-year, tried to feint by dipping low and then swooping up, but Ron wasn't fooled. He swung round and neatly caught the Quaffle.

The Slytherin Chasers were regrouping and coming at the Gryffindor goal. Fred and George were caught up in a violent Beaters' Duel with the other team. Angelina and Katie were vying for position, and Alicia was streaking for the other side of the pitch, preparing for whatever pre-arranged attack on goal the girls had planned.

Draco chose that moment to tip his broom forward, heading down to where Harry was while staying out of the main venue of play.

Ron leaned back, let go of his broom, gripped the Quaffle with both hands, and threw it directly at Draco as hard as he could.

Madam Hooch's whistle fell from her gaping lips.

There was a collective gasp from the crowd.

Draco turned his head and saw the Quaffle hurtling toward him. He didn't wait to see what would happen. He jerked his Nimbus Two Thousand and One sharply to the right and spun into a turn, going through three complete revolutions before coming to a skidding stop halfway across the pitch.

None of the Chasers moved to go after the Quaffle. It fell heavily to the ground.

"WHAT WAS THAT?!" Lee Jordan was as astonished as everyone else.

And Harry, who had spotted the Golden Snitch at the same time that Ron had thrown the Quaffle, had scooped it up and ended the game without anyone noticing.

* * *

No one spoke in the changing rooms. There was only the hiss and gurgle of water running in the showers and the snap of Quidditch robes being shaken out and put away.

Harry towelled off, checking for any injuries that he might have missed. The adrenaline that coursed through his veins during the matches often made him oblivious to minor cuts and scrapes. Once, after a match against Hufflepuff in third year, he had made it three-quarters of the way through dinner before he noticed that his right sock felt rather squashy. He had removed his shoe to discover that a good deal of blood had seeped from a narrow gash on his calf and run down his leg to form a sticky puddle in the heel of his shoe. He hadn't even known it was there.

Finding nothing out of place, he headed over to fetch his clothes. Fred and George had left already, and only Ron remained on the Gryffindor side. He was whistling tunelessly through his teeth as he pulled on his clothes and wadded his sweat-soaked Quidditch robes into a ball.

One by one, the Slytherin players finished changing and left the changing rooms without so much as looking at Harry or Ron.

The soft padding of bare feet on tile made Harry turn his head. Draco Malfoy was walking toward them, infinitely casual and perfectly poised.

"Lovely plan, Potter," he said as he passed by. He picked up his Quidditch robes and began to fold them, smoothing out the wrinkles. "You and Weasel work that one out all by yourselves?"

"Ignore him," Harry ordered Ron. To Draco, he said dryly, "You're usually such a good loser, Malfoy. It's a shame to see you all bent out of shape."

"Oh, I'm not 'bent out of shape'," Draco replied, his voice as tight and oily as a heated frying pan. "I'm simply curious as to how you came up with such a *brilliant* strategy in so short a time."

He felt Ron tense up, and thought sourly, *Of all the times when Hermione isn't here to keep him calm...* He elbowed Ron in the ribs and said, more firmly, "Ignore him."

Draco gave them a wintry smile. Weasley-bating was always an enjoyable way to pass the time. "I mean, that little lover's tiff you two had must have made life *terribly* difficult."

"And you'd know all about it, wouldn't you, Malfoy?" Ron growled.

Harry tried using Hermione's preferred tactic, knowing full well that it wouldn't work. "Ron, you're letting him get to you."

Draco's eyes widened, then narrowed as Ron's remark sank in. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You have the balls to stand there and act like you don't know?"

"Has he lost it this time?" Draco raised an eyebrow at Harry, who had to exercise all of his self-control to keep from slapping that fatuous smirk off the other boy's face.

Ron spat on the ground. "Filthy Death Eater spawn."

"Watch it, Weasley," Draco snarled, hands curling into fists. "That fat mouth of yours'll get you in trouble."

Ron cackled, loud and hysterical. "Oh, are you going to tell Daddy on me?" he crowed. "Too bad he made a right cock-up of it last time round--he'd LOVE another chance. One less Weasley, let's make a holiday of it!"

Draco looked as if he'd been punched in the gut.

"Look, I didn't know, all right?" he shouted. Pleading had replaced the sneering arrogance in his voice. "I swear I didn't."

"And you expect me to believe you?" Ron took a step forward, but Harry grabbed his friend's arms and held fast. He hated Draco, but he wasn't going to stay by and watch Ron's attempt at cold-blooded murder.

"I'm telling you the truth!"

"Truth? You've got a funny idea of what 'truth' is!"

"Weasley, will you LISTEN for once in your miserable life?"

"That's IT!" Ron bayed. He flung himself at Draco, but Harry's weight held him back. "Let go of me, damn you!"

"I swear I didn't know!" There was nothing Draco could use to protect himself; no spare Beater's bats, and his wand was too far away.

"Malfoy, for god's sake!" Harry felt his grip weaken. He couldn't hold on for much longer, and when he let go--

"You have to believe me!" Draco cried out, backing away and holding his robes in front of him in a feeble attempt at self-defence. "I swear it! In Merlin's name!"

He speaks the truth. Let him explain.

The deep, resonant voice spoke into Harry's mind. It was like Will's voice and yet not Will at all--it was a different person, an older man, but the voice held the same calm authority and certainty that did not allow questioning.

Ron's entire body had stiffened; he had heard the voice as well. There was no sign that Draco had heard it.

Harry let go.

"All right," he said. "Explain. You've got one minute." There was no immediate danger now; Ron wasn't going anywhere.

"Before Christmas." The words spilled out in a stream of babble so unlike Draco's normal confident manner as to be unnerving. "He asked me about it, in a letter I got from him, that was all. He asked me a question and I wrote him an answer, and he didn't say anything about it, and I forgot about the whole thing. Why would I ask him about it? I answered his question. I had no idea. I had no idea. I didn't even know what had happened until I read it...in the papers...."

He glared at Ron, furious and wretched at the same time. And the next thing he said was so astonishing that if Harry had heard it broadcast live by the Wizarding News Network, he still would not have believed it.

"And for what it's worth, I'm sorry. Now get out of my way."

He tossed his Quidditch robes aside and left the changing room, leaving two very bewildered Gryffindors behind.

* * *

Classes will continue, regardless of the problems that weigh upon adolescent minds. And with the classes comes the ongoing struggle for teachers to keep distracted students focused on the tasks at hand. Reminders that the O.W.L.s were fast approaching came thick and fast, used to yank the wandering minds of fifth-years back to the classroom.

Professor McGonagall tightened her grading policies even more than normal, marking ten points off Seamus's homework because the neatly folded sheet of coloured paper he was supposed to Transfigure into a crane had suspiciously papery wing feathers. Professor Binns's lectures became more complicated, filled with meaningless facts to the point where even Hermione found it difficult to remain conscious through the entire class. Snape was insufferable, but that was nothing new.

The only class that brought any enjoyment was Defence Against the Dark Arts, and the reason for that was obvious enough. Remus had neatly stepped in for Arabella Figg, continuing her lesson plans exactly as she had left them. Students who had never been under his instruction soon learned that he was an excellent teacher. Those who remembered him from two years before found that his teaching style hadn't changed at all. He did his best to make the class interesting and practical, substituting hands-on learning for Figg's hair-raising Auror anecdotes. He even went so far as to demonstrate the effects that pure silver had on werewolves--by bringing in a silver spoon, holding it for just a moment in his bare hand, and showing them the results--a raw, nasty- looking burn.

Contrary to what he might have expected, the 'werewolf thing'--as it soon came to be known with understated accuracy--didn't hurt him or his reputation at all. There were no hysterical Howlers from concerned parents in McGonagall's morning post, no threats to withdraw children from school. There wasn't so much as a peep from the normally vocal editorial columns of The Daily Prophet. Teachers accepted it, mildly relieved that they wouldn't have to be nice to an unknown replacement. And as for the students, having a real live Dark creature as professor was the most exciting part of the whole class. What could compare to a bloodthirsty beast--even if he happened to be the most unassuming and mild-mannered bloodthirsty beast they had ever seen?

The Monday after the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch match, Harry was about to leave the classroom when Remus hurried over to him, laying a friendly hand--the non-bandaged one--on his shoulder.

"Harry, can I see you for a moment?" he said.

"Sure, Professor." Harry checked his watch. "I've got class now, but--"

Remus smiled at him. "Oh, no hurry. If you can stop by my office during lunch, I'll have the house elves send up something for us so you don't faint in afternoon classes."

Puzzled, but late for Charms, Harry didn't think to ask what Remus wanted until he was knocking on the door of the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor's office.

"Come in," Remus called out.

A cheerful house elf draped in a stained, electric blue tea towel had just deposited an enormous covered tray on Remus's desk. It let out an excited squeak when Harry entered the room.

"Thank you," Remus said to the elf. "This will do nicely."

The little creature bobbed delightedly and scurried away. Harry held the door open so the elf could exit, then closed it and took the seat that Remus waved him toward.

Remus lifted the tray cover and set it to one side. The platter held piles and piles of sandwiches, made with every conceivable type of filling. Plain bread and butter, freshly sliced cheese, cheese and tomato, egg and tomato, thin rounds of cucumber, delicate watercress with the crusts cut off, salt beef, roast beef, chopped cold chicken, ham and turkey, pungent anchovy paste, even a few that Harry couldn't identify. His stomach turned over at the sight, more from nausea than hunger.

"Go on, have something." Remus selected a thick roast beef sandwich and began to munch contentedly. "I wasn't entirely sure what you like best, so I asked for some of whatever they were making."

Harry took the smallest, thinnest bread and cheese sandwich he could find. He took a minute bite, chewed and swallowed. It showed no signs of coming back up, so he took another bite.

Remus was still chatting away pleasantly. "I was going to ask for whatever dishes you'd swiped from the kitchen most recently, but then I recalled what *I* used to swipe, back in the

Dark Ages." He polished off his sandwich and picked up a second. "And I think that Arabella Figg would gleefully wring my neck if she ever saw me giving you jam- topped sponge cake as a meal."

Harry laughed politely.

"So, what's up, Remus?" he asked, venturing to take another bite. "Is something wrong?"

"Mmrph...." Remus paused in mid-chew. "Just a minute. Your godfather was supposed to meet us here. I should have known better than to expect him to be on time."

As if on cue, there was a sound of scratching at the door.

Remus sighed, then pointed to the door with his wand. The door swung open and Snuffles trotted into the room, tongue lolling, wearing his best 'look-at-me-I'm-just-an-adorable-dumb-animal' expression. His ears pricked up at the sight of the overflowing tray, and before Harry had time to say hello Sirius was leaning over him, reaching for a chopped chicken sandwich on rye bread.

"You're late," Remus said reproachfully.

Sirius shrugged. "It's not my fault dogs don't have watches. And there was this adorable little Hufflepuff girl who found the absolute perfect spot to scratch behind my ear...." He caught sight of the looks that his friend and godson were giving him. "Er, right. Sorry."

Remus turned to Harry. "Sirius mentioned to me the other day that you have these 'study sessions' scheduled twice a week."

"That's right," Harry admitted cautiously. "We've all got O.W.L.s coming up."

"So why is Ginny Weasley included in these revising meetings of yours?" Sirius asked. He had wandered over to the Grindylow tank and was leaning against it, calmly attacking his food.

Harry bit deeply into his sandwich and chewed for longer than normal. He took another bite, and then another, finishing the bread and cheese.

"Because she wants to get a head start," he said, swallowing.

Remus looked pensive. "I see."

****Careful,*** Harry warned himself. ***Be very careful.***

"Yeah," he said aloud. "Hermione suggested it--said that it's 'never too early to join a study group'." He mimicked her voice, grinning as if to emphasise how silly she often sounded.

He was about to congratulate himself on his skilled use of half-truth when he heard a strange noise, like a strangled cough. He looked up at Remus, but Remus looked just as startled as he was. Following the older man's gaze, he turned to Sirius.

Sirius had been in the middle of eating, but now his throat was working rapidly, choking on his food. His face had gone a bright vermilion with a tinge of purple round the lips. But what frightened Harry most was the look in Sirius' eyes. It was the ragged, haunted expression, the mark that Azkaban had left on his soul.

"My god, Remus," Sirius managed to gasp through his half-full mouth. "Look at him. He's *doing it*!"

"What?" Harry cried, alarmed. "Doing what?"

He spun round to face Remus, only to see that the colour had drained out of Remus' skin, leaving dark shadows under his eyes that Harry knew had not been there before.

"Harry," Remus began slowly, haltingly, as if the act of speaking was unfamiliar to him. "We always knew when James...when your father wasn't telling us the truth." Something had kept him from saying 'lying', but the meaning was clear. "He had this funny little habit, you see, of picking at his fingernails--a little nervous tic. Not something you'd notice unless you were looking for it very carefully, but...."

Harry stared at his hands and saw nothing out of the ordinary. The skin round his fingernails might have been a little rough, but he had always put it down to the wear and tear that Quidditch exerted on his hands. Picking at his fingernails...a nervous tic of his father's....

"I don't understand what you wanted to talk to me about," he said angrily, stopping that line of conversation before it could lead to places he would rather not go. "We've been having the sessions all year and no one's said anything. What's the matter now?"

Remus had recovered somewhat, though his face was still pale. "It's just that Arabella Figg said some...things to me, when she wrote to tell me about the teaching vacancy here." His voice had returned to its normal even timbre. "I never dreamed I'd get the job, so I didn't read too much into her letter, but--"

Sirius had also recovered, enough to interrupt. "Can you tell us anything about it? Anything?"

Harry bit his lip. Unbidden, Mrs. Figg's gravely voice popped into his mind:

My replacement doesn't know about your little 'study sessions', and wiser--or more paranoid--minds than mine want it to stay that way.

"I can't," he said pleadingly. "I'm sorry. I prom...." He bit back that dangerous word. "I mean, it's not my position to say anything."

Remus frowned. "Look, this is what we know. We know that twice a week, you and your friends go off and have these revising sessions somewhere in the castle. Professor McGonagall must know about it because she lets you go. Professor Figg knew about it--"

"--miserable old hag practically dangled it in front of our noses," Sirius said with a snort, walking over to Remus's desk.

"But she wouldn't give me any further information."

"And Albus knows about it, because he knows everything that moves in this bloody place."

"If I could tell you, I would." Harry was getting agitated. "You know that."

"Please tell me you're not putting yourself in danger needlessly," Sirius begged. He touched Harry's shoulder gently. "It's not worth it."

Harry roughly pushed the hand away and leapt to his feet.

"Not worth it?" he yelled, suddenly furious. "Cedric? Dennis Creevey? Neville's parents? Ron's mum? They're 'not worth it'?"

The list of names had deepened the shadows beneath Remus's eyes. "Harry--"

"We all serve a master, in one way or another. If there's one thing I've learned this year, it's that." The wild words came from nowhere. Harry had no idea what he was saying, he only knew that it was the right thing to say. "If we're lucky we get to choose who we serve. And the Light--"

"The light?" Sirius said sharply.

He'd said too much. "Damn it all," he swore under his breath.

"What are you talking about?" Remus was getting out of his chair; in two steps he would block Harry's only way out.

"I'm sorry. I have to go." And with that he was halfway to the door.

"Harry, wait!"

"I'm sorry!" He burst from the room, running down the corridors, past a small knot of startled Hufflepuffs and Slytherins on their way to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom.

Gryffindor Tower would be empty, or so he hoped. He wasn't going to Transfiguration that afternoon, and though he had no idea what excuse he would make to McGonagall when she asked, he was sure that he could think of something during the time he would be spending over a toilet in the boys' lavatory, sicking up his bread and cheese.

* * *

The actual dates of the Easter holidays varied from year to year, but they always began after classes on the day before Good Friday. Once classes had ended that Thursday, the students who had elected to go home for the week made a mad dash for the school-provided transport to Hogsmeade. As the Hogwarts Express left at precisely 4.00, those who lagged behind ran the risk of missing the train.

Fewer people than normal had made plans to leave school for the week off, but the crush of bodies in the corridors was not something to venture into lightly. For that reason, Harry dawdled after Divination, taking his time as he descended the numerous stairs that led down from Professor Trelawney's smoky sanctuary and wandered through the less-travelled

hallways. There was no need to rush to his destination-- primarily because he hadn't decided where his destination was.

He wasn't going to the tower and his room, that was certain. It would be a babel of noise until dinner time, and the dull headache he had woken up with that morning had been aggravated by the hazy perfume of Trelawney's class. The library was out: Madam Pince had closed it early to allow for the first part of her yearly book inventory. And his headache had snuffed his appetite more effectively than a tin of Hagrid's toffee, making a visit to the kitchen not only pointless but also unthinkable.

So he kept walking, nodding to the portraits on the walls and stopping to make polite conversation to those he knew. After a short talk with Sir Cadogan, he turned a corner and came across Mr. Filch mopping the worn stones, and quickly backtracked to avoid a lecture about tracking dirt on freshly-cleaned floors. He stayed well clear of the dungeons.

He wasn't surprised when he found himself standing outside the door to the little room off the library. Truthfully, he had expected to end up there sooner or later. Despite the holiday they were to have a session with Will that night at the usual time.

"Might as well stay." He rested a hand on the pitted metal handle. "Quiet enough round here, at least."

He lit the room's fire and dragged two chairs in front of it. With a wave of his wand he Transfigured one of the chairs into a large, plushly upholstered footstool, growling as the effort sharpened his headache. He sat down in the chair, propped his feet on the comfy footstool, and closed his eyes, letting the warmth of the fire wash over him.

He couldn't seem to concentrate on any one thought. From Hermione's predicament to Draco's unnatural behaviour to his own deception of Sirius and Remus--everything that he knew to be for good cause but which made him feel nastier than Bubotuber Pus.

Dumbledore had spoken of the easy choice and the right choice, but he had never mentioned that somewhere in the background was the *absolute* right choice: not absolute because it would solve all problems with a minimum of consequences, but absolute because there was nothing to dilute it. Like the blade of a sword, or the centre of a candle flame. But putting it into everyday, human terms only made it more difficult to understand. He couldn't sort it out.

His headache wasn't helping matters. It was a low, dull ache, more annoying than actually painful, but it had settled in and had flared up off and on ever since the Quidditch match. Hot baths and before dinner naps helped for a little while, but it always came back. He hoped he wasn't coming down with something.

He dozed--it couldn't be called sleeping--for a while. His next contact with real time was a rattle at the door.

"It's open!" he shouted, and then remembered that he had locked it and therefore, it wasn't. He fumbled for his wand and clumsily cast the de-locking spell.

Hermione and Neville walked in, looking very put out.

"You missed dinner," Neville said unnecessarily.

He shifted position, rubbing his hands to warm them. "Wasn't hungry."

"So we guessed." Hermione deposited two napkin-wrapped parcels on the table. "But we saved you a roll and a chicken leg in case you were. And some chocolate cake."

Harry deliberated, but decided against adding anything to the turmoil in his stomach. "Thanks, but I'm fine." He closed his eyes.

The next thing he heard was the sound of chairs scraping on stone, grating against his temples and rattling his skull.

"Make a little more noise, why don't you?" he said loudly, opening his eyes and then closing them to slits as the fire bombarded his retinas with light.

"You're in a right mood today," Hermione said, annoyed.

"Sorry." He wasn't at all sorry, but it was the thing to say. He'd been saying it for almost a week straight, and it ranked right up there with 'I'm fine' as a nicer substitute for 'Leave me alone, can't you?'. "I've had this stupid headache all day."

"Did you ask Madam Pomfrey for anything?" she asked.

"No."

"Then do you want me to go *get* some for you?" she offered, raising her eyes to the heavens with a look of pained exasperation.

"Everything of hers tastes awful. I swear she makes it that way on purpose."

"Her headache stuff usually has powdered willow bark in it. That's why it's bitter."

"Spare us the Potions lecture," he grumbled. "Whatever it is, it's nasty and I don't want any."

The pained look was quickly replaced with disgust. "Looks like someone needs a Cheering Charm. Industrial-strength."

Harry made a face at her, and she made one back.

"Are you sure you want to stay?" Neville said, the end of his last word tilting up in the way it always did when he was worried.

"Yes, yes. I'm fine."

"But if you're not feeling well--" Neville persisted.

He pressed a hand to his forehead. No fever yet. "I don't feel well enough to tell Will that I'm not coming."

Just then, Ron and Ginny came in, forestalling any further debate on that subject. Moodily, Harry turned his footstool back into a chair and privately mourned the loss.

He joined his friends at the mirror, and let Ginny do the honours of touching the frame.

The mist whirled and coiled, making smoky patterns behind the glass. But as the mist dissipated, a low sound drifted through the mirror, volume increasing as the image of the office sharpened into crisp focus. The last of the greyness vanished, and they heard, loud and clear:

"...that you don't mind, Stanton."

They froze. A man's voice--but definitely NOT Will's voice.

"Oh, it's no trouble at all."

That was Will, but they couldn't see him or the other man. Their view of the room was limited to Will's desk and the surrounding area. They stood like statues, barely breathing.

There was movement near the edge of the frame, and Will stepped into their range of vision. He wore a long, academic-looking gown made of a dull black material, a little like the cloth of their work robes but cut in a way more suited for form than function. He did not look in their direction.

"Always glad to be a proof-reader," said Will, speaking to the man who was still out of sight. "There's nothing more enjoyable than finding fault with someone else's work."

"So *that's* why you always volunteer for tripos," the other man replied archly. They could all but hear him wink.

The two men enjoyed a laugh--the other man quite pleased with his sense of humour, Will apparently guilty at having his 'secret' discovered.

"Well, I'll let you get back to your own work," the other man said. "You're not going to be here until all hours, are you?"

"Burning the midnight oil, as always." There was a self-deprecating tone to Will's voice, poking gentle fun at his colleague.

"As always?" The other man sounded horrified. "My god, man, don't you ever sleep?"

"Fresher papers are usually enough of a narcotic, I've found," Will drawled. They caught a glimpse of a laconic smile. "I save them for last. Inexpensive, easy to digest, and decidedly *not* habit-forming."

There was another burst of robust laughter from the other man.

Will moved out of sight again, presumably steering his visitor to the door. After a few exchanged 'goodbyes' and 'take cares', they heard the squeak of hinges as the door shut, and the click of a key turning in a lock.

"You can breathe now," Will announced. "It's all right."

Five tightly-held breaths gusted out, rattling like the noise of wind in the eaves of an old house.

Will strode back toward his desk, sheaf of stapled paper in his hand. He picked up his briefcase from the floor and set it on his desk, opening the latches with a flick of his thumb.

Now that the interloper had gone, Harry's attention was drawn to the long black gown that Will was wearing. He had seen Will in normal clothing, the professional, dark-coloured suits and blazers he wore in his office and in the Muggle world. He had seen him in the flowing, midnight blue robes that comprised and at the same time set him apart from his role in the wizarding world. But the black stuff academic dress was a strange combination of the two, neither one nor the other.

"I'm sorry to put you through that," Will said, removing papers from his briefcase and inserting new ones. "Unfortunately, he cornered me after Formal Hall and wouldn't leave off until I 'offered' to read his latest article before he sends it to press."

He studied the stapled papers in his hand, then set it aside. "Well. I suspect that Dr. Philip Pryce's "Linguistic Developments in Mid- Sixteenth Century Provençal Dialects" will be as much of a soporific as student essays."

Ron ventured to ask the necessary question. "Did he--"

Will smiled reassuringly. "No, no, he saw nothing. Only I know the mirror's there." He chuckled. "Do you really think I would have a floor-length mirror in the middle of my office wall, directly opposite my desk? My colleagues already think I'm odd--they don't need to add 'insufferably vain' to that description."

His good humour soothed their jittery nerves, and they grinned.

Will started to remove his gown. "If you'll allow me a moment to collect my things and get out of this fancy dress, I'll be right with you."

It was at that moment that Harry felt a wave of dizziness rock him where he stood. He grabbed hold of the mirror frame, hoping that it would hold him up until Will had entered through the mirror and he could sit down again.

"Harry?" Hermione--or was it Ginny?--caught his arm.

"What's wrong?" Neville asked.

Tenderly, he massaged his forehead. "It's just a stupid headache," he mumbled. "I'll be fi...AH!"

Pain drove him to his knees as the 'stupid headache' seemed to take offence with his remark. But it wasn't just from his scar--it was everywhere, squeezing his head with a vice-like grip on all sides. He couldn't even open his eyes. In blind desperation, he clutched at his head and cried out.

Strong arms grabbed him about the waist and hauled him into a chair. Ginny's hair--or maybe Hermione's?--brushed his hands as she bent over him. He smelled shampoo, strong and chemical and burning in his nose.

Burning...the odour of burning hair...a wall socket and a butter knife...a flash of light...not white electric light but *green* light....

"Give him room!" someone--sounded like Ron--shouted, and the smell went away and with it went the green light, but he could still see it there behind his eyelids.

He wanted nothing more than to roll up into a ball and wait for the pain to go away, but he knew had to stop the green light. Stop the green light...how mad was that?

There was the taste of chocolate on his lips. Someone was pressing chocolate into his mouth. Reflexively, he licked his lips. A tiny crumb of sweetness melted on his tongue, and suddenly, mercifully, the pain wasn't quite so bad. More chocolate. More chocolate found its way into his mouth, and then he could see again. The pain was there, but it no longer threatened to tear his head apart.

"Will," he gasped, lowering shaking hands from his face and tilting his head up to look through bleary eyes, "it's HIM...."

Chapter Twenty-Seven - Devils on Horseback

Consider, when you are enraged at any one, what you would probably think if he should die during the dispute.

-- William Shenstone

Harry's vision, made fuzzy by excruciating pain, had cleared at last. Enough to see through the mirror, into the office...enough to see Will.

The Old One stood stiff and very straight, as white and motionless as a marble statue. He had paused in the act of removing his academic gown; the muted dark grey of his suit was a stark contrast to the black stuff material that hung crookedly on his shoulders, half on and half off. His right hand was closed in a death grip round his left forearm. The expression on his face froze Harry's blood--cold rage and endless anger held in tight check, the face of Wrath Incarnate.

"Safe running," he muttered. "Of course. It would be so." He was staring off into the near distance at something only his eyes could see. "But no hostages this time, not for them. Ideal for the purpose, though the benefits of elimination hardly seem to outweigh the costs. But the chance is there, and they needs must take it...."

Then he was looking at them, and speaking to them in a high, remote voice that sent shivery echoes reverberating in their minds.

"One of you, notify Headmistress McGonagall that the passengers on the Hogwarts Express are in grave danger. The train will not make it to London. I will do what I can, but there is the chance that the Dark may already be upon them."

He slipped his arm back into the sleeve of his gown, and before their eyes it shifted and changed, the dull black of academia transforming into billowing robes of midnight blue. "Once you have found her, stay with her until I send for you. As for the rest of you, remain here. **DO NOT LEAVE THIS ROOM.**"

With that command, his entire body seemed to ripple, shimmering like heat waves rising from burning sand. He vanished.

The long mirror went empty, blank and slate grey. A heartbeat later, it returned to its normal reflective state.

That heartbeat was all the time the five children needed to recover.

"Gin, you're fastest," Ron said, pointing at his sister. His face, though paler than normal, was calm, and his tone was straightforward and business-like. "You'd get to her before any of us could."

"Check her office and the Transfiguration classroom first," said Neville, equally straightforward.

"No, don't," Hermione contradicted. "She wouldn't be there now. Try the staff room."

"If you can't find her, look for Snape." Harry rubbed his forehead. The throbbing ache was there, but after what it *had* been nothing short of a full strength Cruciatus Curse would bother him. "If Will and I felt it, then HE probably knows something's wrong, too."

Ron added crisply, "If you can't find him, try to get hold of Dad or Percy, someone at the Ministry. On second thought, get hold of them anyway, even if you do find Snape."

"Right." Ginny nodded, and ran for the door.

"Wait!" Hermione shouted. She ripped the glittering prefect's badge off the front of her robes, ignoring the jagged tear it left in the fabric. "Take this."

She tossed it to Ginny. Ginny caught it.

"That should be enough if anyone tries to stop you," she said as Ginny lopsidedly pinned the badge onto to her own robe. "And if you show it to the painting of the milkmaid outside the staff room and tell her that it's an emergency, she'll let you in without asking for the password."

Ginny clutched at the badge, gripping it like a protective talisman. Her worried gaze flitted past all of them to land on her brother, where it sharpened to a fretful glare.

"Don't...don't you go doing anything brave!" she cried harshly, though 'foolish' or 'stupid' or 'suicidal' would have been better fitted to the tone of her voice. "That goes for all of you!"

Before Ron could make a suitable comment, she hiked her over-long robes up to her shins and rushed out of the room. The door slammed shut. The clatter of running feet receded into the distance.

"Now what?" Neville asked, turning away from the door to face his friends.

Harry pushed himself to his feet. His legs were shaky, but his head was clear.

"We find out what's going on," he said resolutely.

With an indifferent sweep of his arm, he cleared the massive table of books and parchment and writing utensils. The grease-spotted napkins that held his dinner fell to the floor, their cold contents forgotten. The chunk of chocolate cake had served its purpose; there was no need for it now.

They took their places round the table: Ron at Harry's right, Hermione and Neville on the opposite side, facing the mirror. Harry planted both hands on the table, partly to steady himself and partly to add force to his words.

"This isn't just Voldemort," he declared. "There's something else going on, something I've never felt before. And we've got to know what it is."

"But we can't leave!" Hermione exclaimed, aghast. "You heard Will!"

"Leave?" He frowned at her. "Who said anything about leaving?"

The moment he had heard that the Hogwarts Express was in danger, his mind had been working quickly, sorting through and discarding possible options and plans. Once they had been ordered to stay in the room, however, all of those options had been narrowed down to one: the stone. If it could show the inside of a draughty Transfiguration classroom, it could certainly show all of them the terrible crisis at hand--the next best thing to being there. And if all four of them used their stones at the same time, they would see it as it happened, second by second, the battle unfolding as fast as the mysterious artist could lay down brushstrokes.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the small white pebble. Cupped in his open palm, it was warm to the touch. The Dark wasn't in the room with them; it was out there, doing who knew what. Well, soon *they* would know.

"Do you have yours?" he asked, holding out his hand to show them the stone.

Ron, Hermione, and Neville scabbled in their pockets, hunting for their stones. Ron had to do a little more searching than the others, and growled in panic as he dug deeply into his robes, but the next second his eyes lit up and he held his stone aloft in grinning triumph.

"Right." Harry closed his hand round the stone, pressing it into his palm. "We can use these to see what's happening on the train. There's no reason why we shouldn't know what happens."

"How?" Ron asked.

"Close your eyes," he replied. "Listen to it. Do what it tells you to do."

Praying they would understand, he closed his eyes and waited for the familiar feelings to stir within.

The pain in his head faded into near nothingness as the Light's power took control, breaking the hold that the Dark had over his body. First came the outlines of words, Will's spell-speech chanting into his ears and the eerie prickling that ran through him as he recited the spell. He thought he heard other voices speaking with him, male and female, high and low wreathing through the magic, but what happened next put all thought from his mind.

The two times he had used the stone, the rapid-fire series of images and emotions had formed in his head with delicate precision, the work in progress of an unknown, unseen artist. He had learned by now how to read the shifting pictures. He was able to piece together the events for the greatest comprehension, never lingering too long on one vision.

But this time, it was as if the artist had already completed the full painting--and had shoved it in his face.

Blazoned across his mind's eye was the empty corridor of a train car on the Hogwarts Express. From the look of things, the artist had been standing well toward the back of the car to paint the picture. To the right was the neat row of closed compartment doors. To the left were the long windows of the corridor, most closed, some opened a crack in the hopes of letting some air into the stuffy car. The globe lamps on the walls between the compartment

doors had not been lit; the windows faced west, and the sun had not yet dipped below the horizon.

From where he was, he could see outside the train as well. They were passing through one of the more desolate stretches of their journey, travelling across the wild moors and tilled patches of farmland in southern Yorkshire. The setting sun had streaked the sky with an array of colours not often found on an artist's palette. No human hand could mix paint with enough precision to capture that exact shade of vivid crimson. To Harry's reeling mind, it looked like the sky was bleeding.

The entire image was far more lifelike and detailed than anything in his past visions. It was accurate down to the most unflattering of details. The fitted carpet of the train corridor was faded, worn down the centre with the passing of countless feet and spotted with grease where food had been spilled. The wood and metal of the car, though well cared for, showed black marks and scuffs. The moorland flashing by the windows was distorted with grey smudges left by fingerprints on glass. It wasn't a painting--it was more like a wizarding photograph.

And like a wizarding photograph, it was moving. The image of the car seemed to rock and sway with the rhythm of the train. Within seconds, Harry found that he was rocking and swaying as well, unconsciously adjusting the motion of his body to match that of the train.

And then his world blinked, or it seemed to blink, or anyway he was conscious of a sudden and unexpected *shift*, and he opened his eyes to discover that he was no longer seeing a picture of a train.

He was IN the picture.

He was ON the train.

And Ron, Hermione, and Neville were on the train, too.

Naturally, he staggered at the abrupt transition from standing on solid stone to standing on a moving train, and nearly lost his balance. Neville, on the other hand, was so shocked that he *did* lose his balance. Harry had to catch him to stop him falling on his face.

"Wha...whah...?" He clung to Harry like a frightened child grasping its mother's leg.

Completely disoriented, Ron kept looking from side to side and up and down, turning round in uneven circles. "Where--where are we?"

"It's the train." Hermione pushed her hair back with trembling hands. "We're on the *train*."

"It can't be!" Ron cried, though the dismay on his face showed that he knew perfectly well that it could be--and it was.

He looked to Harry for explanation, but Harry wasn't listening. He was staring at the stone in his palm. The stone that was no longer warm to the touch. The stone that seemed to be growing colder by the second.

"They're coming," he said. Hurriedly, he put the stone back in his pocket before it could burn his hand. He motioned to the others to follow suit.

"Does that mean Will couldn't stop them?" whimpered Neville.

"I don't know." Harry shivered. The stone was safely in his pocket, but the chilly tingle it had left on the skin of his hand had not gone away. If anything, it was spreading, raising gooseflesh on his arms and the back of his neck.

"Are **we** supposed to stop them?" Hermione asked.

"I don't **know**." His head was starting to hurt again; irritation sharpened his voice.

"Malfoy," Ron growled, baring his teeth in a carnivorous snarl. "It's Malfoy again, isn't it?"

"I don't KNOW, all right?!" Harry yelled. "I don't--"

"Hey, what's with the shouting?" a muffled, sleepy voice called out.

"Oi!" grumbled someone else. "Shut it out there, can't you?"

Preoccupied with more immediate problems, the five of them had not realised that the volume of their conversation had increased with each passing minute. Their argument had attracted the attention of the rest of the train. Compartment doors were opening all down the car as the curious, annoyed passengers stuck their heads out to see what was going on.

"Who's making all that racket?"

"What's going on?"

"Is something wrong?"

"Hey, it's Harry! Harry Potter!"

"Harry?" A door close to the front of the car opened, and Colin Creevey's head poked out into the corridor. His eyes went round as saucers.

"Harry!" he exclaimed, his voice and face torn between delight and worry. "How did you--?!"

But Harry didn't hear him. His scar had started throbbing again, a sick, fast rhythm that kept even pace with the driving thrum of the train. **The Dark is coming for you,** it seemed to hiss. **The Dark is coming for you...coming for you...coming...coming....**

"Everybody, get away from the windows!" he bellowed.

"WHAT?" he heard a girl scream.

"Get DOWN!" he shouted, and acting out of pure instinct he shoved the person nearest at hand--Hermione, he later found out--to the floor of the corridor. "GET DOWN!"

He dove for the floor, but as his feet left the ground there was a ghastly, ear-splitting squeal like the sound of a thousand fingernails on a thousand chalkboards, and he **didn't** hit the floor but kept on going, suspended in puzzled mid-flight--

--until his right shoulder collided with what felt like a wall and he spun sideways, still moving--

--and then his body twisted, flipping head over heels to crash to the floor, and he was sliding across the floor on his back, still moving--

--and something else, something HEAVY that wasn't a wall, collided with him and it seemed to be on top of him, and there was a silvery sound of glass shattering, but he was sliding, skidding, and still moving--

--and then he and the something HEAVY--which wasn't directly on top of him any longer, thank goodness--hit *another* wall and he finally stopped.

He wasn't knocked out, but the impact jolted every bone in his body, worst in his legs and back where he had landed against the wall. After a moment's stunned immobility, he opened his eyes, only to quickly squeeze them tight shut as a light patter of broken glass rained down upon his head.

Once the stinging shower had ended, he raised himself to a sitting position. Gingerly, he brushed needle-sharp shards out of his face. His hand came away damp and pink, covered with tiny scratches.

Looking round groggily, he saw that he had travelled the entire length of the car and come to rest against the door that led to the next car. There was glass all round him, but the only thing damaged was the light fixture directly over his head. The glass globe had shattered. The windows on both sides were intact, though. Nothing else appeared to be broken--including him.

The compartment doors had all been flung open by the sudden stop, and Harry saw that other passengers were dragging themselves into the dim corridor. Some grunted and groaned; others turned the air blue with cursing; a few of the youngest students wailed, terrified. Many were bleeding from cuts on their faces or hands. All were badly shaken.

He heard a low, wheezing moan close by, and spun round.

Lying next to him was Neville, face contorted, groaning as he tried to sit up. Judging by where and how he had landed, he had been the something heavy that had crashed into Harry. But unlike Harry, Neville had hit the far wall almost head on. He looked like he had picked a fight with Crabbe, Goyle, and a Bludger--and lost.

"Neville!" Harry crawled over to his friend, picking his way through the glass.

"Arm...*hurts*...." Neville gasped. He rolled onto his back. His left arm hung uselessly at his side.

"Is it broken?"

"Don't know...oh, DON'T!" he cried, pulling away as Harry tried to feel for broken bones. "Hurts too much--"

"Harry! Neville!"

Ron tumbled out of a nearby compartment; he had been flung sideways by the sudden stop. With a nimble twist of his body, he used the momentum of his forward roll to right himself. He ran to them. "You all right?"

Harry took the hand that Ron held out to him. "I'm fine," he said as he got to his feet, "but Neville's--"

A shrill scream rent the air, tearing down the length of the corridor.

Ron whirled round. "That's Hermione!"

He sprinted away, flying past stunned passengers, shoving them aside as he checked compartment after compartment in his single-minded search. Somehow, Harry lifted Neville off the floor and propelled him along as they chased after Ron. Neville's moans became yelps when the running jarred his injured arm, but he let Harry guide him. They were not far behind when Ron came to an unexpected halt in front of a compartment near the back end of the car.

Ron took one look into the compartment and recoiled, flattening himself against the opposite wall. Alarmed, Harry and Neville hobbled forward to see what had startled him.

Neville was first to look inside. He uttered a word that Harry hadn't thought he knew.

Filled with dread, Harry looked as well.

He fought an urgent need to be sick at the sight of Natalie McDonald's prone, still form sprawled on the floor of the compartment.

The fact that she was lying there and not moving was bad enough, but there were other, worse things to consider. Her fragile-looking body was bent at an unnatural angle. There was blood everywhere: oozing sluggishly from gashes on her face, crusting in her hair, puddling beneath her body, filling the air with its sickening coppery stench. Her head lolled to one side. A thin, pinkish fluid seeped from her ears.

Hermione was curled up on the seat nearest the compartment door, hands over her eyes and screaming fit to wake the dead.

"Ron!" Harry shouted hoarsely, though he had no idea why.

Ron, though, seemed to know what Harry was asking of him. He did not need to be asked twice.

He hurried into the compartment. Taking Hermione (who screams showed no signs of letting up) very firmly by the wrist, he dragged her out and down the corridor, removing her from the gory scene.

Harry wondered *how* Ron would be able to calm her down. It seemed an impossible task. He watched as Ron put a hand on Hermione's shoulder and pulled her close. It wasn't an embrace, or even a comforting hug. There was no proper name for it; it defied all of Harry's attempts to describe it. Ron's lips were moving, though Harry couldn't hear what was being said.

Miraculously, whatever he said and did worked. Within a matter of moments Hermione's shrill screams had stopped, replaced by loud, violent sobbing. She slumped against the wall, held up by Ron.

Satisfied that Hermione was in good hands, Harry took one last look at Natalie. Staring at her limp, broken body, he felt horribly guilty. She may have been a cheater and a liar, but no matter what she had done no one deserved to die that way.

Sick at heart, he was about to close the compartment door and leave her where she was, but a tap on his shoulder made him look round. Neville was peering over his shoulder, his eyes clear and bright with a thoughtful, incisive intensity.

"Harry, could you step aside, please?" he said briskly.

Mutely, Harry moved to one side.

Carefully cradling his bad arm with his good one, Neville strode into the compartment. He knelt down at the side of the unconscious girl. He did not touch her, but his eyes swept up and down, looking more closely at her face and bending over to study the congealing pool of blood that had soaked the carpet. His fingertips brushed her limp wrist, feeling for a pulse, then checked her neck for the same. Harry could only watch in silent awe as Neville, this strange brisk Neville who seemed to know exactly what he was doing, examined Natalie with a physician's trained thoroughness.

After a minute, he sat back on his heels.

"She's not dead," he proclaimed. "Out cold, but not dead. Not yet, at least."

"But...but there's so much blood!" Harry spluttered, horrified and light-headed with relief.

"It's all from these cuts on her face. She must've scraped herself something awful when she hit her head." He stood up. "Doesn't look good, though. She still breathing, and her heart's still going, but only just."

"We've got to get her out of here," Harry said.

"No." Neville shook his head. "We can't risk it."

"Why not?"

"What if her neck's broken? Even a Mobilicorpus spell could kill her!"

"Well, we can't just LEAVE her!"

"Of course not," Neville snapped. The shouting made him grimace, and he pressed his injured arm against his side, holding it as immobile as he could. Then, with his uninjured hand, he whipped out his wand. He drew a deep, steadying breath. "DEFENDO LUX!"

Instantly, both he and Natalie were surrounded by a faint white glow that illuminated the entire compartment, bringing light to the rapidly darkening room.

"Anything that comes in here'll have to deal with me," he said. The determination in his voice was like a steel rod, straightening his spine and squaring his shoulders. "Go and help the others."

Harry hesitated for a fraction of a second too long, and Neville's eyes flashed steel to match his voice.

"Go ON!" he ordered.

Harry hastily scrambled out of the compartment, only to run smack into Ron and Hermione. Hermione was still weeping loudly, great heaving sobs that no amount of soothing could quiet. Ron had been trying his hardest to do so, and he was more than a little desperate.

Hoping that Hermione would listen, Harry came right to the point. "Natalie's not dead," he said. "She's still alive."

Hermione broke off in mid-sob. "Wh...what?"

"How do you know?" demanded Ron.

"Neville...he looked at her and said she wasn't dead. She's hurt, but she's alive."

Hermione burst into fresh tears.

"Where's Neville now?" Ron asked, patting her arm.

"Looking after her," Harry said. "Natalie, that is."

Ron looked very relieved. "Ah, good. He'll know what to do."

"He will?"

Ron smiled wanly. "Hey, you'd learn a thing or two about injuries if *your* family kept dropping you out windows and chucking you off--" He stopped short, staring out the window. "Harry, look! Outside!"

Harry looked, following Ron's gaze. He saw nothing. The rolling, windswept moor was bleak and empty in the crimson twilight. Only a few stunted and stubbly trees broke the desolate monotony of the landscape. There was nothing and no one for at least three or four miles, not even a stray sheep.

"What am I supposed to be looking at?" he asked, straining his eyes to see into the distance.

Hermione sniffled, wiping her nose with the sodden edge of her sleeve.

"Don't you see it? Look, there!" Ron pointed. "Look at the sun."

Harry squinted, shielding his eyes to block the worst of the glare. He saw--or thought he saw--a small dot on the horizon, compact against the blood-red setting sun. He thought it was another tree very far in the distance. But as he stared at it, the dot began to increase in size.

First it was a dot, then an irregular blot, then a widening smear of blackness that coalesced into a group of shapes, a knot of dark figures.

They weren't growing in size--they were coming toward them.

He blinked rapidly to rid his vision of the coloured spots that the sunlight had left on his retinas. As he rubbed to clear his eyes, he felt something odd. The Hogwarts Express was stopped, but he could feel vibrations under his feet. It wasn't the rumble that would have indicated the approach of another train. It wasn't the tremor of footfalls. It was a different feeling, a measured, rhythmic cadence that made the earth tremble.

The beat of many hooves.

The repeated rhythm of horses at full gallop.

"Riders," he said suddenly.

Ron blinked, confused. "What?"

Harry stared out the window, watching the dark figures draw nearer. They were widening still, fanning out, forming a sweeping curve that threatened to encircle the stalled train. "They're riding horses, but they're not...."

"Not what?"

His head felt funny; he couldn't think properly. "They're not--"

His words were cut off as a cacophony of noise erupted inside his head. Screaming, yelling, pleading voices, indistinguishable from one another except for the odd word or half-sound; Hermione's voice melting into his mother's which melted into Colin's which mingled with Ginny and Ron and his father and others he couldn't identify, drowning each other out as they fought to be heard.

The cries of friends and family were so loud that he had to shout to hear himself. "Ron, they're Dementors!"

Hermione gasped, tears forgotten. She pressed her face to the train window, flattening her nose against the glass and leaving a smudge.

"They're on horses," she said. That was what Harry assumed she had said by the way her lips moved. He couldn't hear her. "They're *riding*."

"But Azkaban's hundreds of miles away!" Ron yelled. Harry could hear him, but dimly, as if they were shouting to each other underwater. "What are they DOING here?"

His question wasn't made to be answered, and would not be as long as the Dementors and their mounts held Harry's full attention. The horses were all of a uniform coal-black, galloping furiously, tails and manes whipping against the wind. Their fiery eyes rolled wildly in their heads and their sides were flecked with foam, but their masters spurred them on without mercy.

And the masters were themselves the stuff of nightmares, the demons who stalk childhood's darkest dreams--black cloaks streaming behind them like great banners heralding death and destruction; the bony, clutching hands stretched out in blind search of their prey as they rode, soundless in the chase. Deep black hoods drawn low concealed the faceless horror beneath the cloth.

"Are they going to capture us?" Ron said fearfully. "Is that why they stopped the train?"

"No hostages." He didn't care if he could hear his own voice. An awful realisation had come crashing down upon him like a tidal wave. "That's what Will said, right?"

Ron shuddered, filled with nameless fear. "You...you don't think--"

Harry smiled mirthlessly. "How's your Patronus looking, Ron?"

A nervous giggle escaped Ron's lips.

"Never mind," Harry continued, quite calm now that he knew what they were up against. "One happy memory, that's all you need. It's not as hard as you think."

Ron saw the lie for what it was, but accepted it.

"I-I'll try," he said.

"I can..." Hermione began to say, but shook her head. "No. There has to be someone to stay with the others. They'll listen to me. And as I can't do a proper Patronus, I'll go and keep everyone together so you two can get on with things."

Harry and Ron were shocked into silence at Hermione's open admission of her problem with the spell. Hermione, however, took their silence for reluctance, and her eyes narrowed.

"Well, come on!" she said impatiently. "I can keep up a defence wall better than either of you, in case you've forgotten. Go and hold them off as long as you can!"

With that, she ran to the front end of the train.

Harry and Ron, not wishing to waste any more time, ran to the back.

Harry went right and entered the empty compartment closest to the rear of the train. He opened the compartment window, wriggling his torso to slide through the narrow opening.

Ron veered left and threw open the door that led outside the car. He gripped the polished handrail with his left hand and swung like a door on a hinge, most of his body hanging out over the tracks.

They were in the last car of the train, so there was nothing behind the train but a long stretch of empty rail--and the approaching Dementors. There were at least a dozen of them. They were about five hundred metres away from the train, rapidly closing in.

Out came the wands, and two strong voices shouted into the twilight:

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The brilliant stag leapt from Harry's wand and charged the closest of the Dementors. The black horse reared, screaming with an almost human voice, and the Dementor had to fight to keep control of the animal and to avoid the sharp antlers of the Patronus at the same time. The Dementor yanked at the reins so viciously that the horse reared again, hooves pawing the air, and horse and rider turned away with the stag in full pursuit.

"Ron!" Harry shouted as the Dementors shied away from the stag. He had not heard any sound of failure or success, and panicked at the thought that something might have gone wrong. "Are you--"

"I DID IT! I DID IT!"

Harry grinned broadly. Panic gone, question answered. Concentrating as fiercely as he could, he turned the Patronus round to attack the next Dementor.

"Can you keep it up?" he asked.

"Long as I have to," Ron retorted gleefully. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

Harry managed to drive off two more Dementors before he had to recast the spell. The sheer joy of seeing the magnificent stag rout their attackers was enough to make him laugh aloud. The screams that had battered his mind were gone. The Dementors weren't affecting him at all.

Harry caught a brief glimpse of Ron's Patronus as it as it chased away two Dementors at once, and it was a breathtaking sight. For a Patronus Ron had conjured a mounted knight that could have come straight off a chess board. It did not wear armour, only a simple tunic and cloak, but it expertly wielded a massive sword, cutting a wide swath through the charging black horses. Unencumbered by the weight of armour, the knight's spectacular combat skill and horsemanship showed through. It was awesome, majestic. Any king would have been proud to have such a warrior.

"Good one!" he whooped as Ron's Patronus sent three Dementors flying away as fast as their horses could run. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

He and the stag scanned the area, but no enemies were in sight. The Dementors, it seemed, had fled.

"That the last of them?" Ron called out.

"I think so." He let the spell fade away and cautiously slid back into the compartment. His ribs ached from keeping his full body weight on the thin ledge of the windowsill. Casting a Patronus so many times in succession was tiring work, and as long as they had a bit of a breather he might as well make use of it.

"See anything?"

"No."

"Good."

"You tired?"

He heard Ron sigh. "A little. I just hope Hermione's oka--AH!"

Harry spun round in time to see Ron's body disappear through the open door. At first he thought Ron had slipped or lost his balance and had fallen out, but from the way he fell...it looked like he had been *pulled* out.

"Ron!" he shouted. "RON!"

There was no reply.

Gripping his wand, he ran over to the open door, fearing the absolute worst. They'd missed one of the Dementors, one had slipped past them, he was going to look outside and watch it suck the soul out of his best friend--

--but it wasn't a Dementor.

It was Wormtail.

And he had Ron by the throat, both hands wrapped round Ron's neck.

He had dragged his captive about ten feet from the train, well out of Harry's reach. Ron's body was between Harry and him, and even though Ron was almost a head taller, Wormtail had him in such a way that only the very tips of Ron's toes touched the ground. In that position Ron couldn't fight back without running the risk of losing his precarious footing...and strangling himself.

"Let him go!" Harry shouted, stupidly.

Wormtail peered round Ron's head, wisely using the boy as a shield.

"Stay where you are!" he commanded. "You don't want to startle me. I might *slip*...."

To make his point, his fingers twitched convulsively. Ron let out a loud, gasping squawk.

Harry inhaled. He couldn't stop himself from shaking, but he had to keep fear out of his voice. "Let go of him."

"You're hardly in any position to be giving orders to *me*, boy," Wormtail sneered.

He looked away from Harry and started talking to Ron, a smooth stream of words that were spoken with his voice but which definitely did not sound like him. It was too rehearsed, too fluid to come from his own mind. The Dark--not Lord Voldemort, but the true force of the Dark-- was speaking through its servant's mouth.

"Well, then, young master. I would hazard a guess that right now your dear friend is wishing with all his heart that he had killed me when he had the chance. And he would have, too, for all his talk of nobility and friendship and family honour. I saw it in him, in his eyes. How terrible and heartbreaking to see cold-blooded murder looking at me through his Mudblood mother's eyes.

"But you could have saved me, you know, back there in the Shrieking Shack." His voice took on a childish, petulant tone, wheedling and sulky. "I *begged* you, my good, kind master, to save me. I had hoped that all the years I spent as your faithful pet would have possibly meant something to you." His lips curled back, revealing a set of yellowed and uneven teeth. "I was wrong."

The rambling words gave Harry hope--and an idea.

"Wormtail, *I* saved your life two years ago." He spoke forcefully but persuasively. "Remus and Sirius would have killed you as soon as looked at you. You owe me, both for that and for what you did to my parents." He stood very straight, filled with the white-hot fire that teeters on the razor edge between fury and panic. "You owe me a wizard's debt, and I'm claiming it now. LET GO OF HIM!"

He was sure that it would work, but Wormtail only laughed.

"Saved my life?" he said, incredulous. "Do you even hear yourself?" He turned back to Ron, addressing him once more. "Can you believe the boy? Whose life did he save?" His face contorted in a sudden spasm of pain. "*I* know it wasn't mine."

Harry felt a cold hand close over his heart, much as Wormtail's hand encircled Ron's all too fragile neck.

"Let him go," he said again, though with nowhere near the force and confidence he had felt a moment before.

Wormtail ignored him. "But enough of that," he said to Ron, who by this time was making little burbling sounds as he struggled to draw breath. "It's time for me to pay back the only debt I owe--so I'm going to take my time with this."

He began to walk forward, pushing Ron ahead of him, carefully stepping from the brittle grass of the moor onto the loose gravel that lined the railway tracks. Step by step, he backed Ron up against the train. Planting his feet firmly apart, he braced himself for his task.

"Yessss," he hissed, sibilant with pleasure. "Yes, I'm going to enjoy wrapping my fingers round your nasty little throat, feeling your dying pulse throb against my palm, listening to you gurgle your last breath awa--"

He got no further. Just as he started to tighten his hands, a great flash and a crackle raced through the air, as if lightning had struck the train.

Reflexively, mindlessly, Harry threw up his arms to shield his eyes. The premonition saved his sight, because in the next moment a great wall of flame, searing white, leapt up from the ground to form a blinding barrier on either side of the train.

Dazzled by the brilliance, he saw the white light spread, following the straight line of the train tracks on both sides. It stretched parallel before and behind the train as far as he could follow, forming a road edged with fire. The road traced a path across the moor, leading who knew where.

He and Ron and Wormtail and the whole of the Hogwarts Express were enveloped in an open tunnel of cold white light.

Wormtail screeched suddenly, shrilly, and released Ron. He crouched down, covering his head with his arms, screaming with the voice of the damned.

Gagging and coughing, Ron fell to the side, toward the open door. In one movement Harry reached out and grabbed Ron's robe, hauling him back onto the train's platform and to safety. He held Ron close, keeping his wand trained on Wormtail. If the traitor recovered and tried to attack again, he would be ready.

Wormtail did not recover. His cries were abruptly cut off as he changed form, so quickly that it could not have been voluntary. All that was left was a large and dirty-looking rat, squealing and rolling on the ground, kicking up loose gravel as it scuffled.

Then Harry blinked, or thought he had blinked, because he felt an odd sensation similar to the one he had felt when he had been transported onto the train. All he knew was that one moment he was sitting on the train and Ron was coughing his lungs out beside him, and in the next moment Will was with them as well, standing over Wormtail and watching him writhe in his torments.

A look of the most profound contempt passed across the Old One's face as he stared at the rat, but icy neutrality closed over his features, wiping away emotion like a fresh eraser passing across a chalkboard.

He took a step back and swept his cloak, the dark blue almost black against the blinding whiteness surrounding them, up and away from one shoulder. With great dignity, he made a deep, reverent bow--to no one. Yet as he straightened up, the flames on either side of the train flared high. The uppermost part dipped and curved inward, as if it was returning the bow.

And then, with the ceremony completed, the barrier of light vanished, leaving them alone in the deepening twilight.

With the disappearance of the light, Wormtail stopped moving. His grimy pink tail twitched feebly and was still. To all appearances he was quite dead, though Harry knew he wasn't.

Staring down at the rat, Will extended his right arm, the fingers of his right hand spread wide. He pointed at Wormtail, and commanded:

"Show me his...human form."

There was a loud pop, and Wormtail was human once more. He was cowering on the ground with his arms over his head. He lifted his head, saw Will and froze, red-rimmed eyes glazed with terror.

"So," Will said, voice quiet and deathly cold. "Peter Pettigrew."

At the sound of his name, Wormtail flinched as though he had been struck.

"Go back to your master." The coldness sharpened, honed like the blast of a winter wind. "Go back and tell him that the Watchman of the Light bids him remember the fate of those who Ride with the Dark. And pray that this message will give him enough cause to spare your neck, when you return and report the news of your failure here...and he learns how you have overstepped your authority."

He lowered his hand, and as if a spell had been lifted, Wormtail snapped out of his frozen state. He turned tail and fled, scrambling on all fours at first and then transforming into his Animagus form to get away faster. The last Harry saw of him was a dark dot streaking across the moor.

Once he was satisfied that Wormtail had gone, Will turned to Harry and Ron.

"I'm not going to ask how you ended up here," he said mildly, far from the harsh scolding they had expected to receive. "I really should have known better when I left you--even with my very explicit instructions to stay put. You should consider yourselves lucky."

Harry gulped. "Lucky to be alive?"

"Lucky that I'm not going to take you to task for recklessness that could have got you killed." He sighed, if the dry, depressed noise that came from deep in his chest could be called a sigh. "Come to think of it, we seem to be going for dramatic re-enactments here. New cast, a little choice role-swapping...though using Dementors as Riders was rather theatrical. A bit over the top. But not bad, considering."

"But did we do it, Will?" Harry pressed. "Are they gone?"

"Gone?" Will raised an eyebrow. "Oh, yes, they're gone. You and Mr. Weasley drove them back. And very efficiently, I might add." His eyes shone with rare emotion, filled with calm but nonetheless open pride. "You have an excellent way with a Patronus, Mr. Weasley."

The tips of Ron's ears turned bright pink with flustered delight.

Will let them savour the compliment, but his next words were sobering. "However, your triumph came at a cost--one I had hoped to avoid."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"Lord Voldemort had enough foresight to know that an attack of this nature would provoke a response from the Light. He has, in essence, forced me to show my hand."

Ron scratched his head. "But didn't he know about you before?"

Will frowned. "He would be a fool not to know. No, this attack was both a challenge and a confrontation, a pointed reminder to me that I alone of the Light stand between your world and his plans for a new Rising." He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "And a reminder that I am...somewhat restricted in my approach."

Harry didn't like the sound of that. "So...what happens now?"

"Now, Mr. Potter, you and the others must find the sixth person and complete the Circle. And in that, you must be alone. I cannot help you in this search."

Ron made a soft, despairing noise.

Will's mouth twitched in the ghost of a smile. "Come now, Mr. Weasley. I have a feeling you'll find it easier than you imagine. By Monday fortnight, after the Easter holidays, you'll have your sixth companion. And the end of your own quest will be near. But first..."

He beckoned to them, and they slid from the train and jumped to the ground; not a long jump, but enough to be startling.

"First," he said wryly, "we'll have to think of what to tell them."

He pointed to the front of the train. A large number of black-robed figures were scattered around the front cars, looking in the windows and running about, gesticulating wildly. The babble of voices raised in argument drifted down toward them. Harry didn't recognise any of them until he saw a stretcher floating away from the train--and Madam Pomfrey bustling along beside it.

"Ginny did it!" Ron said proudly. "I knew she was the right one."

"Miss Weasley did her job well." Will pulled his cloak closer about him. "They arrived sooner than I would have hoped, even figuring in a time delay for the news to spread."

Puzzled, Harry looked at his watch. It was seven twenty-two.

"Twenty minutes?" Impossible--it had felt like a lifetime.

"Harry!"

He looked up, and saw that Remus Lupin was running toward them. The Defence Against the Dark Arts professor had kilted his baggy robes almost to the knee, and they flapped behind him as he ran. He slowed down, skidding on the gravel, and came to a jerky halt.

"Hi, Remus," Harry said sheepishly.

"What the devil is going on?" Remus demanded between heaving breaths. He looked like he could not decide whether to hug Harry or shake him soundly. "What are you doing here? *How* did you get here?"

"Uh..." Ron began, but Remus wasn't finished.

"I'm sitting in the staff room, trying to relax and enjoying a nice cup of tea, and out of nowhere YOUR SISTER--"--this to Ron--"--comes running in yelling something about attacking the Hogwarts Express and drags me to find Professor McGonagall. And I get dragged along some more and then told to Apparate to Doncaster, *Doncaster*, of all places, and we get here and find ten students hurt and two dozen more talking about Dementors and walls of fire and--" He broke off suddenly as he realised that Will was standing to one side, listening to him yell. "Who are YOU?"

Nervously, Harry glanced at Will, only to discover that the older man's critical gaze had gone through one of his lightning-fast and very disconcerting changes of expression. Where there had been grave scrutiny and distrust, there was a wondering, almost pleased light.

"My word," he said softly. "Can it be Remus Lupin?"

Remus's jaw dropped.

There was an uncertain beat.

"Should...should I know you?" Remus asked.

Will smiled at him. "I would be very much surprised if you did. It's been quite a while."

Harry felt that he should step in and try to make the best of an awkward situation. "Remus, this is...."

"A friend," Will interrupted. "Who is just leaving." And true to his word, he turned away, but paused. "Until next Monday, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley. Enjoy your Easter. And may I say that it was good to see you again...Professor."

He winked at Harry and Ron, and nodded to Remus, who returned the nod as if his neck had rusted.

With that, Will started to walk away from the train, heading across the moor with a steady stride.

Harry watched him walk away, waiting for him to vanish with a shimmer into the evening. But Will kept walking steadily into the distance, and instead of his body, it was the landscape in front of him that seemed to shift and change. The vivid purples and oranges and scarlets of the evening sky and the contrasting grey span of moor rippled, blurring like warm air rising from a fire.

Slack-jawed with astonishment, Harry saw two massive wooden doors-- larger than the great entrance doors of Hogwarts--materialise upon the wild moor. They were not there one moment and there the next, as if they had always been there and no one had seen them until that moment.

The doors opened slowly as Will approached, revealing a darkness that held no threat, only the promise of welcome. As he passed between them, they slowly swung closed.

Once shut, they disappeared.

A high thread of bell-like music twisted and twined its way across the moor. It filled Harry with a strange yearning, a desperate need to hear more, but as soon as it had come it was gone, whirled away and carried aloft on the wind.

Chapter Twenty-Eight - Calling the Six

The camera is an instrument of detection. We photograph not only what we know, but also what we don't know.

-- Lisette Model

The Hogwarts Express, with the addition of a few passengers, reached Platform Nine and Three Quarters only half an hour after its scheduled arrival time.

Apart from Professor Lupin and Madam Pomfrey, the only other Hogwarts faculty member to Apparate to the scene of the attack was Professor McGonagall. The mass of dark-robed figures Harry had seen clustered round the front of the train were Aurors, or people who might have been Aurors, or people who simply looked official and intimidating enough to be Aurors. And there were a lot of them: over a dozen, by his count. He, Ron, and Remus were standing on the uneven gravel of the rail bed near the rear of the train, away from the bustle, but they could still watch the Ministry officials at work.

The first thing the Aurors did--after ensuring that all the children were well away from the train--was to go over every inch of the Hogwarts Express. The hiss and crackle of detection spells finding traces of Dark magic rose above the nervous babble of frightened students. From basic detection spells, they moved to physically examine the engine and the coupling mechanisms between the cars, checking to see if anything had tampered with them. They cast Disarming Spells, Hex-Dispelling Charms, any number of counterurses, and a complicated-looking spell that created a very loud boom but did little else. It seemed that they were leaving nothing to chance.

Some of their faces were familiar. Harry recognised one or two whom he had seen last September at King's Cross, after the attack there. The only face he could connect with a name was that of Edward Linchley, the Auror who had worked with Mrs. Figg and had later been in charge of the investigation into the attack on St Mungo's. Linchley seemed to be in charge of the other Aurors this time as well, supervising their work.

The last colours of daylight had left the sky long before the Aurors were finished. Scattered stars glittered against the dull blackness, and a chilly night wind raked the lonely moor. Harry and Ron shivered in their school robes, wishing for the thick material of their warm winter cloaks. Except for the wind and the noises of the Aurors' investigation, it was eerily quiet.

By Harry's watch, a good forty-five minutes had passed by the time the students were permitted to reboard the train. The Aurors boarded the train as well, settling in among the jittery passengers. It looked like they were trying to keep some pretence of normality...as if a dozen senior Ministry of Magic officials always rode the Hogwarts Express to London during the Easter holidays.

Harry would have loved to have seen more, maybe talked with Linchley and asked after Mrs. Figg, but as soon as the train started moving Remus collared him and Ron and herded them

like strayed sheep into the last compartment of the last car. He left them there and returned a minute or two later, Hermione in tow.

"Neville's with Madam Pomfrey," he informed them curtly as he closed the compartment door. "We're to stay out of the way until we get to London."

The next three hours were quite possibly the longest three hours of Harry's life. It wasn't an exaggeration. It actually felt as if time had slowed, dragging out minute after minute, stretching to unbearable lengths. He and Ron sat on one side of the compartment, staring down at their hands or their shoes or the floor or looking out the window at the flashes of light that flew past...anywhere but at Remus. Remus sat quietly across from them. He seemed to be trying to catch Harry's eye, but Harry wanted no part of that. Hermione sat--or rather huddled in the corner nearest the window--on the same side as Remus. She rested her forehead against the windowpane, and sat so still that she didn't appear to be breathing. Her eyes were closed.

After the train had pulled into King's Cross, Litchley and the other Aurors left. They had to present their reports to the Minister of Magic and give him a proper assessment of the incident. But before they left Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, Harry saw Litchley round up the disembarking students. From his somewhat restricted viewpoint through the window of the last car, he watched with dull acceptance as the chief Auror proceeded to carefully Obliviate any memories the passengers might have had of the attack.

Harry picked up bits and pieces of the story in the following weeks, enough to form a general idea of what the Ministry wanted the students to believe. Officially, the Hogwarts Express had been forced to make a sudden stop in South Yorkshire, on the main line between Doncaster and Retford. There had been serious mechanical problems farther down the line, some difficulty with a faulty signal near Peterborough, and the train had had to wait until it was repaired. The cuts and bruises that the students had suffered were attributed to the suddenness of the stop. Naturally, the Ministry of Magic was replete with apology: terribly troubling, regrettable that it should coincide with the holiday week, steps will soon be taken, etcetera, etcetera.

He, Ron, and Hermione were allowed to leave the train only after the other passengers had departed through the barrier, back to the main part of the station. The three of them shuffled onto the deserted platform, more than a little disoriented by its emptiness. Remus told them that they could walk about and stretch their legs, but the grim look on his face told them that they would be wise to stay as close to the train as possible.

"Where's Neville?" Harry murmured to Ron when he thought that Remus wasn't looking.

"Dunno." Ron yanked at the collar of his robe up, tugging it higher in a vain attempt to hide the livid marks that were beginning to show on his neck. The bruises left by Wormtail's clutching fingers stood out sharply on his skin. "Probably still with Pomfrey."

"His arm did look pretty bad," Harry admitted.

"Yeah." Ron winced as his knuckles brushed against one of the darker bruises.

"I hope he's okay," Hermione whispered, more to herself than to them.

"Mr. Longbottom is fine."

The three Gryffindors whirled round to see Professor McGonagall walking toward them.

"He will return soon," she said. "He volunteered to help Madam Pomfrey convey Miss McDonald to the nearest wizarding hospital."

"St Mungo's?" Ron said hopefully.

McGonagall shook her head. "Unfortunately, their casualty ward is still inoperational. The nearest wizarding hospital with a fully-staffed casualty ward is in Islington."

"That's close," said Harry. Islington was a London neighbourhood just north of King's Cross Station.

"A few streets away," their Headmistress replied. "As I said, they should be back soon."

True enough, Neville and Madam Pomfrey returned just under an hour later. Neville's arm was in a sling. The sling was tightly bandaged to his chest, immobilising his entire arm. They looked weary, but they came bearing good news.

"She'll live," Madam Pomfrey told McGonagall. "A messy business, to be sure, but the real danger has passed."

"She...she'll be all right?" Hermione's voice was barely audible.

Madam Pomfrey hesitated for a fraction of a second too long.

"There were some...complications," she said softly.

Seeing horror and the darkness of self-loathing spread across Hermione's face, she quickly added, "She has some of the finest mediwitches and wizards in the country looking after her. They'll do everything they can for her, you mark my words."

Hermione's face had gone very white, and her mouth was a thin, pale line against her colourless skin.

Instinctively, Ron moved closer to her, but she just as quickly moved away from him, shuffling back a step or two to put a distance between herself and him. He didn't try to follow her.

"Were her parents notified?" Remus asked, shifting the subject off of dangerous topics.

"They were sending someone to fetch them as we left. There are so many Muggle-repellant charms round the place that they'd never be able to get in on their own."

"I see," McGonagall said with a sigh. "I suppose I should write to them. They deserve to know the truth, even if we're keeping it out of the press."

Madam Pomfrey nodded. "Well, when you do, be sure you tell them who kept their little girl alive until help came." She smiled at Neville. "She owes a lot to his quick thinking. Didn't move her, kept her warm. He did all the right things."

Neville accepted the compliment with quiet dignity, a secretive smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"We'll make a mediwizard of you yet, young man," the school nurse said cheerfully. "Once that arm of yours is back to normal, that is."

"I think some sort of award is in order, Mr. Longbottom," McGonagall said. "For all of you...though it will have to wait until we figure out exactly what happened."

The greater part of the train ride back to Hogwarts consisted of exactly that.

Despite Remus's initial outburst, no one had bothered to ask Harry and the others how they had ended up on the Hogwarts Express. The Aurors were more interested in immediate questions of security and threat. The teachers had to deal with the more pressing matter of calming and controlling over two dozen scared children. But with the Aurors gone and Neville and Madam Pomfrey back aboard the train, the **real** interrogation could begin.

Since three adults had to question four children, the first round of questioning saw Neville talking to Madam Pomfrey, Hermione talking to Remus, and Harry and Ron speaking together to Professor McGonagall. The idea was that they would switch, allowing each story to be heard three different times to clear up any inconsistencies. There was no time for Harry and the others to get together and come up with a single story, so they chose their words carefully, testing to see what should and should not be mentioned.

To keep things simple, they agreed that they had halted their informal revising session when Harry had suddenly felt excruciating pain in his scar. They had sent Ginny off to find help and stayed to look after Harry. Somehow--and this part was made deliberately vague--they had ended up on the Hogwarts Express just before it came to its unexpected halt. They had then separated to deal with the crises that followed: Neville to watch over Natalie, Hermione to gather the passengers together in a forward car and keep up a defensive wall, and Harry and Ron to take on the Dementors.

Keeping the stories straight wasn't easy. Some teachers knew more than others and therefore could be told more than others. That was the reason why McGonagall received **all** the information and Madam Pomfrey received a rather expurgated version. They told her the truth, of course...just not all of it.

Remus was trickier. In terms of actual knowledge he was somewhere in between McGonagall and Pomfrey, but telling him too little was just as dangerous as telling too much. He could be told about Wormtail nearly strangling Ron, but not about what had caused the traitor to flee. He had seen Will, but had no idea who the strange man was. It made Harry's job a lot harder, picking and choosing what to say. As a result, he was very, very careful to sit on his hands when speaking with his father's friend. It wouldn't do for a nervous tic he hadn't even known he had had to silently negate everything he was saying.

Once every possible drop of information had been squeezed out of them, McGonagall turned them over to Madam Pomfrey. Fearing that they might still be suffering the effects of the Dementors' Dark magic, she plied them with innumerable pieces of rich chocolate and ordered them to have a lie down and rest until the train arrived at Hogsmeade.

They took an empty compartment in one of the forward cars and made themselves as comfortable as they could. In deference to his injured arm, they let Neville lie down on the cushioned seats. That way, he could stretch out full length and not have to contort himself to make room for someone else. He fell asleep immediately, snoring softly.

Hermione, however, lay down on the seats on the other side, turned her back on her friends, and didn't say another word for the rest of the ride. She might have fallen asleep, but Harry very much doubted it.

Harry and Ron, lying in a smushed, half-upright position on the floor, talked for a time, whispering to each other in the warm darkness of the compartment.

"Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"You feeling all right?"

"Yeah." A low grunt. "Neck still hurts, though."

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, it's not like you could have done anything. I had my wand in my hand, and I couldn't do a thing."

"Yeah. But I'm still sorry."

"Look, it's all right. Honestly."

There was silence for a time before Harry spoke again.

"Ginny's going to kill us, you know."

"Yeah."

"What was it she said? Don't go doing anything brave?"

A quiet chuckle. "Something like that."

"She'll never believe us."

"*I* wouldn't believe us."

"True."

"Yeah."

"Hey, Ron?"

"What?"

"...what's your dad going to say?"

A long pause. "I've no idea."

"D'you think he'll be mad at you?"

"Course not. Dad doesn't get mad at anyone."

One could almost hear Harry's eyebrow go up. "Really?"

"Well, except for Percy...sometimes. And Malfoy's dad, but he's a bastard and deserves it anyway. And he used to get mad at Fred and George if they messed with his stuff. But--"

"So he'll be mad."

Ron sighed. "Probably."

"Would he send you a Howler?"

"Dad? No."

"That's good."

"He'd get Percy to do it."

"Oh."

The Hogwarts Express sped on through the night, past towns and cities, across open lands, and into the wilds of the north.

* * *

But Percy didn't send a Howler. And for that matter, neither did Mr. Weasley. Ron's Howler came later that evening--in the form of a very, VERY angry Ginny Weasley.

It was three in the morning when the four Gryffindors returned to their common room, but Ginny was still awake. She was pacing agitatedly, occasionally tripping over her robes when she didn't watch where she put her feet. When her exhausted brother and friends emerged from the portrait hole, she let out a happy cry and rushed toward them.

The next moment she was eyeball to eyeball with Ron and screaming in his face.

"I can't BELIEVE you!" she yelled. "I TOLD you not to go running off like a bloody idiot and what happens? The moment I leave, the *second* I'm out of the room, you go and end up on the train, doing exactly what Will told you NOT to do, and you could have been killed and did you even ONCE stop to think about me? Or anyone else? Even for a minute? *No*, of course you didn't, because you're Ron Weasley, big strong bloody STUPID Ron Weasley who goes charging in without thinking, like ALWAYS. Well it would have served you right if you'd gotten yourself killed, and I wouldn't feel a bit sorry for you, not one single little BIT!"

Tears ran down her face as she railed at him, and when Ron wordlessly opened his arms she grabbed him and hugged him as if she never wanted to let go.

Harry, embarrassed, turned away. He looked round to see where the others had gone.

Hermione was no longer there. He hadn't seen her leave, hadn't even heard her climb the stairs. She had slipped away without anyone noticing.

Neville was standing stiffly to one side, every bit as uncomfortable at the display of sibling emotion as Harry was. He grinned weakly, but winced suddenly and scowled at his injured shoulder, hissing through his teeth.

Harry started to turn away, but came to an abrupt halt as he felt something cold and wet touch his hand. He looked down and found himself caught in the dark, worried, and impossibly reproachful eyes of Snuffles.

"Don't give me that," he grumbled. "It's bad enough dealing with Remus--I don't need you laying guilt on me, too." He knelt down and rubbed the dog's ears. "How'd you get in here, anyway?"

Though dogs are not exactly able to convey the impression of absolute disgust through facial expressions, Snuffles made a remarkably successful attempt.

Harry got the message. "Right. Dumb question." A yawn that threatened to break his jaw told him that sleep was better than standing round arguing with an Animagus.

He stumbled over to the staircase that led to the boys' dormitories. Snuffles followed him closely, collar tags clacking against each other. Harry was about to tell him to go back to Remus, but thought better of it. He needed Sirius' solid presence tonight as much as Sirius needed to reassure himself that Harry really was all right and safe.

"You'd better not snore," he said warningly.

Snuffles thumped his tail on the floor, eagerly whining agreement.

Together, they climbed the stairs to the fifth-year boys' room and crept in as quietly as they could. It made little difference, as Dean and Seamus were already fast asleep, but sneaking round the school had become second nature to Harry and when he was very tired he tended to slip into familiar habits.

He peeled off his grimy work robe and kicked off his dust-coated shoes, but didn't bother to remove the rest of his clothes. He pulled back the bedclothes and crawled between the sheets, inhaling the sweet scent of fresh linen. Snuffles scrambled onto the bed, turning round three times to curl up awkwardly at the foot.

Harry was asleep before his head could properly sink into the softness of the pillow. He did not hear Neville and Ron sneak in five minutes later.

The great black dog stayed awake, keeping watchful vigil until the first hints of dawn began to glint on the horizon, but just before the sun rose he too put his head down on his paws and drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Harry spent almost all of Saturday asleep, waking only for dinner and a long, hot shower, and then returned to bed until late Sunday morning. By Easter, he was feeling remotely human again.

Snuffles had left sometime late Saturday night; he had probably gone back to report on him to Remus. Harry didn't care. He enjoyed having the bed all to himself once more.

Ron slept through Saturday entirely, an immobile lump under his bedclothes. Harry had to prod him awake for Easter Sunday breakfast.

Neville, on the other hand, did not leave his bed. Madam Pomfrey had ordered strict bed rest for him for an entire week to allow his arm time to heal. Even so, he couldn't sleep much for the pain in his shoulder, and had to spend his time propped up on pillows, catching naps when he could. His meals were brought to him on trays by a small army of house elves. The other boys were eagerly invited to eat whatever food he couldn't finish. Bed rest may have been boring, but he didn't seem to mind much.

To Harry's astonishment, Dean and Seamus did not ask what had happened. Either McGonagall had gotten to them first and had spun a believable tale, or they had become so accustomed to sharing a room with The Boy Who Lived that one more strange and remarkable occurrence made no difference to them. Whatever it was, Harry had to envy them their self-possession, if not their uncomplicated lives.

'Uncomplicated' was the key word. For students at Hogwarts, the Easter holidays were a decompression time, the last chance they would have to truly relax before exams began. Doing absolutely nothing was the norm. Anyone who attempted to revise in the Gryffindor common room during the holidays ran the risk of being kidnapped by Fred and George, smuggled outside the castle, and dumped unceremoniously in the frigid lake. Even Hermione would normally take a short break during the week--though only after two successive Easters past had seen her storming back into the common room, dripping rivulets of water from her sodden clothing.

Thus, Easter Monday marked the start of a whole week of freedom.

Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione were enjoying a late breakfast that day, demolishing a mountain of buttered toast, when Harry's snowy owl swooped into the Hall, circled round the Gryffindor table three times, and lighted next to him.

"Hi, Hedwig," Harry said, scratching his owl's feathers affectionately.

Hermione nibbled at a corner of her toast. She had been working on the same piece of toast for some time now: she had barely eaten any of it. "Harry, you've got something."

"Owl post?" Sure enough, Hedwig was clutching a large manila envelope, addressed to him in a cramped handwriting.

"Who'd it fwom?" Ron asked, talking round a mouthful of bacon.

"Can't tell," he said. He took it from his owl's talons and turned it over. "There's no return address."

Ron's eyes widened. "That's odd." He swallowed his food.

"Could it be a trap?" Ginny asked fearfully.

Harry shook his head, but he made no move to open the envelope. "Hedwig wouldn't take it if it was a trap...I think."

Ginny was already edging away from Harry and his suspicious post. "M-maybe we should leave it there for now and let McGonagall look at it, or something."

"Or give it to Snape," Hermione said, setting her toast aside. "He could tell if there's poison or anything on it."

"*Poison*?" Ginny was practically under the table.

"Well, they might have put something in the sticky part of the seal or on the edges of the paper. There are all sorts of poisons that can enter your body through the skin if you're not careful."

"Reading ahead in our Potions text again?" Ron teased.

She glowered at him. "*Someone* has to."

"Wait a minute," Harry said suddenly. He had been studying the envelope more closely. "This is Colin's handwriting."

"How do you know?" Ginny didn't sound convinced.

He pointed to the address. "Look at the way my last name's written. Colin does this weird thing with double letters; he sort of squashes them together. It's the same with the double 'e' in his name."

Ron squinted at the letter. "You're right. It's hard to see, but you're right. That's his handwriting."

"But what's Colin doing sending you a letter?" Hermione asked.

"I think I'd have to open it to find out," Harry said sarcastically. Ignoring the black look Hermione gave him, he picked up an unused butter knife and slit the top of the envelope.

"Harry, be careful!" Ginny squealed.

He rolled his eyes and reached inside the envelope. He pulled out another, smaller envelope, then hunted round some more and produced several sheets of slightly wrinkled paper. He set the smaller envelope aside and smoothed out the wrinkled sheets.

The sheets of paper were not typical letter parchment. Colin's letter had been written on several sheets of flimsy blue-lined notepaper, with uneven edges that made it look like it had

been torn from an old school notebook. The printing was jumpy and the paper itself was splashed with ink blots, as if it had been dashed off and sent in a great hurry. It was dated the day before, Easter Sunday.

Dear Harry [it said],

I honestly can't believe I'm writing to you about this. You'll probably think I've gone completely gaga. I wouldn't blame you. But I have to tell someone, and I know you're the only one who'll understand. It sounds so stupid, writing something like this. But here goes.

"What's it say?" Ginny asked, her fear over the letter's contents forgotten for the moment.

"Ginny!" Hermione admonished. "What if it's something personal?"

Ron snorted. "Personal? From Colin Creevey? Not on your life."

"Just let me read it over first," Harry said, "and I'll let you look at it when I'm done...if you can wait that long, Ginny."

Ginny scowled at him, and slapped more jam on her toast.

Grinning, he turned his attention back to Colin's letter.

So anyway [Colin continued], I got back home on Friday. Mum wanted me to come home for Easter--my grandparents and aunts and uncles and some cousins were all set to come to our house for a big family Easter dinner. We had lamb and real mint jelly. You should try my gran's mint jelly. She makes it herself with mint she grows in pots in her kitchen and it's really corking stuff. But that's not what I wanted to tell you.

I don't think I've ever told anyone, but my dad was the one who taught me all about photography. It's his hobby--he's done some really great work. He even turned our upstairs toilet into a darkroom (Mum wasn't half upset about that), and I've helped him develop his film ever since I was tall enough to fill the basins. I'd promised to show him how I develop film with the special potions that make the pictures move. He was so excited when he saw some of the snaps I took at Quidditch practices, and he wanted to see how it was done.

I had a new roll of film that I hadn't developed yet, the most recent one that was still in my camera. I had a couple exposures remaining when I left school, so I took a few snaps on the train. Nothing fancy or anything, just a shot or two to finish the roll. So when I got home, I developed them like I always do. Two sets of prints: one done the Muggle way with regular paper and one done with a special kit I bought in Diagon Alley last year. (It cost nearly all my birthday money, but it was worth it.) Wizarding ones always take longer to develop--you have to alter the normal developing process a bit--so I started them first and let them soak in the proper solutions. I don't want to bore you with details, but I showed my dad how it worked, and then we developed the negatives the Muggle way while we waited for the wizarding ones to be ready.

(Oh, this was Saturday, by the way. I would have written sooner, but Mum made me stay with the company all this evening. I hope this letter gets to you in time.)

So anyway, I was just taking the first set of prints (Muggle prints from one of the other rolls of film, not from the last one) out of the stop bath when Dad tapped me on the shoulder.

[Here, there were a lot of scribbling and crossouts, as if Colin had tried several times to write something but didn't like any of his attempts]

Sorry [it continued after the crossouts]. I can't write a proper conversation so I'll just say that he asked me if I'd done something wrong with a couple of the wizarding prints. I went and checked the ones he was talking about, and sure enough the last three prints I'd made were blank. They weren't overexposed or processed wrong or anything like that. It just looked like there was nothing there. So I told him I'd try doing them over again while the first roll of Muggle prints were drying. Just then Mum yelled at me to go to the shops and pick up some carrots for dinner. (I really hate the way my mum cooks carrots-- they're all nasty and mushy.) But I went because I wanted to think about what I'd done wrong with the prints. I hadn't skipped a step or anything like that. All the other photos came out fine...it was only the last three that were blank.

So I got back with the carrots and redid the wizarding ones, but the same thing happened again. The last three prints of the last roll of film were blank. By that time I'd run out of the potions I needed to make wizarding prints, so I just decided to do them the Muggle way, since I had all the equipment set out.

I've sent you what came out--it's in the other envelope. They're the last three prints of the last roll of film, the ones I took on the train, done the Muggle way. They're only proof prints, and they're not very good. Dad could do them tons better than I could, but I didn't want him to see them. (I had to tell him that I'd overexposed them and that the potions wouldn't work with the overexposed shots.) But now I'm babbling, and I should send this before my parents come and yell at me for being up so late.

Harry, I hope you understand this. I feel like I should know what's going on, but I don't, and I know that you're the only one who will. Hope you had a good Easter. See you back in school on Sunday.

Yours truly, Colin Creevey

"Well?" Ginny piped up. "What is it? What'd he say?"

"Ron," Harry said briskly, "hand me that other envelope."

Startled by his friend's tone of voice, Ron passed him the smaller envelope. Harry didn't bother to take care opening it. He slid his finger under the flap and tore it open.

Three black-and-white photographs slid out, landing among the dirty breakfast dishes and used cutlery.

Hermione and Ron gasped, drawing a sharp breath at the same time.

"Is that--?" Ginny began in a tremulous voice, but stopped short.

Hurriedly, Harry shoved the breakfast dishes and platters aside with one hand and spread the photographs out on the table with his other hand. He had to see them better. He had to be

certain that they were there, to prove he wasn't still asleep and in the middle of a rather realistic dream.

The first print was not very clear. There was the grey of the open moor land in the background, a large black blur in the foreground, and an irregular blotch of light near the bottom right hand corner of the picture, as if Colin had taken the snap through the compartment window and in his haste had forgotten that the camera flash would reflect on the glass. Though the subject was far too blurry to be identifiable, it had to be one of the Dementors, riding past on its midnight black horse.

The second was far more interesting--to put it mildly. Colin had apparently remembered to open the compartment window and remove the obstruction of the glass, for there was nothing to mar the perfectly clear image of Wormtail, caught with his silver hand wrapped round Ron's throat. If his feral snarl and maddened eyes didn't give away his murderous intent, the frantic purple of Ron's face certainly did.

The last print was not nearly as exciting, but nonetheless dramatic. It was of Will in his dark robes, profiled against the dazzling white of the wall of flames. Colin's skilful photographic eye had managed to capture the Old One just as he straightened up from his bow, and he had also captured the sense of complete mastery and authority that surrounded Will like a second cloak.

* * *

Some days later, long after the original shock had passed, the four of them sat down together and tried to figure out exactly who had first figured out what to do with the photographs. Ginny swore up and down that it had been Harry's idea, but Hermione pointed out that she had been the one to suggest that they act upon said idea. But regardless of whose idea it had been, all four of them had leapt up from the table at once and sprinted out of the Great Hall, up the stairs, and through the second-floor corridors to the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom and office.

Harry reached the door to Remus's office first. He knew that Remus would be awake--it was nearly ten in the morning--but even if he hadn't been sure he would have pounded on the door with the same desperate urgency.

"Remus!" he shouted, rattling the door handle.

Hermione was a few steps behind him. She, too, started pounding on the closed door. "Professor Lupin! Professor Lupin!"

Ron and Ginny soon brought up the rear, more slowly than normal. Ginny seemed to be yelling at Ron about something. Harry was only able to catch the tail end of her words "--and you didn't TELL ME?!" before the door flew open, knocking him backward into the Weasley siblings and sending them all crashing to the floor.

"What is it? What's going on?" Remus barely had time to get the words out of his mouth before the four children had streamed past him, into the main part of his office.

Snuffles was crouched in one of the room's rickety chairs with the morning's Daily Prophet crumpled under his paws. He had likely been reading it in his human form when the knock

came at the door--his contorted position was a clear indication of a hasty transformation. He leapt off the chair when he saw Harry dash inside, but froze when the other Gryffindors followed his godson into the room.

Harry turned to Ginny first. "Ginny, can I trust you not to scream?" he said breathlessly.

"What?" she exclaimed.

"Can I trust you?"

She stiffened, affronted by his insult to her sense of self-control. "Of *course* you can. I'm not stupid."

"Fine." With that, he looked over at Snuffles. "Sirius, there's something you have to see."

The great black dog hesitated. His eyes darted from Harry to Ron to Hermione to Ginny and finally back to Harry.

"Please, Sirius," Harry begged. Of all times for his godfather to err on the side of caution.... "It's about Wormtail."

The traitor's name acted like a key turning in a lock, because there was a loud pop, and a heartbeat later Sirius Black--in threadbare pyjamas, patched dressing gown, and bedroom slippers--stood before them.

"What's happened, Harry?" he said huskily. Worry and fear creased his worn face. He hadn't shaved yet, which only served to add to the appearance of a prisoner on the run. "What's that rat done now?"

Ginny gasped, and a tiny squeal forced its way through her nose, but true to her word she didn't scream. She inched closer to Ron and Hermione.

"It's all right, Gin," Ron said soothingly. "It's okay."

"Don't start that," she snapped, but she didn't take her eyes off Sirius.

"Harry, what is it?" Remus had moved forward to stand beside Sirius. He placed a steadying hand on his friend's shoulder.

"We've got proof," Harry said, breathing hard. "Proof that he's not dead." Before either of the older men could react, he thrust the photograph of Wormtail and Ron into Sirius's open hands.

"This...this is..." Sirius stared at the photograph, his mouth hanging open.

"Where did you get this?" Remus said sharply.

"Colin took it," Harry replied. "You know Colin Creevey, right?"

It took a moment for the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor to connect the name with the student. "Fourth year, Gryffindor. The one who always has the cam--"

"The camera," Sirius interrupted him. His hands were shaking so violently that he could barely hold the photograph. His eyes were dazed, unseeing. "The Muggle-born boy with the camera. My god, Remus...do you know what this means?"

"But when did he take it?" Remus said, taking the photo from Sirius's hands before he could damage it.

"On the train," Hermione said. "He was on the train, and he took the picture--"

Ron took over from her. "But the Aurors put a Memory Charm on everyone but us, so he didn't remember it--"

Ginny cut in, quickly, "And he sent it to Harry because he thought--"

"Because he thought I would know what it was, and what to do with it." Harry was sweating: his palms were damp and clammy and were leaving smudges on the other two photographs. "This is what you need, isn't it, Sirius? This proves that you were innocent the whole time...that you didn't kill Wormtail."

"'Cause for someone who's supposed to be dead, he sure felt alive to me," Ron said, pulling down the collar of his robe and rubbing his throat tenderly. The marks of grasping fingers were slowly fading, green and yellow round the edges but deep purple in the centres.

Something snapped deep in Sirius's eyes. With a roar, he sprang forward and grabbed Harry, crushing him in a hug so violent that the younger boy let out a high squeak of shock.

"WE'VE GOT HIM!" Sirius crowed, spinning round and round in dizzying circles, carrying Harry with him in his ecstatic fit. "Harry, Harry, Harry, HARRY! This is it! This--is--IT! We've got that bastard for good and all! Lock him up in Azkaban and throw away the key! Ha HA!"

Harry barely had a chance to return the embrace before Sirius was off, whirling about the room, capering nimbly on his toes, dancing a jig in his ratty dressing gown and slippers, grabbing a very startled Remus and attempting to do an Argentine tango with him--and laughing merrily the whole time, happier than they had ever seen him.

The happiness was contagious. Hermione and Ginny were laughing with him, clapping their hands delightedly at his exuberant and ungainly dances. In its tank, the Grindylow poked its head out of its weed-covered habitat, alarmed by the uproar. Ron grinned broadly at Harry as Sirius waltzed by, dragging a feebly protesting Remus with him as he sang tunelessly at the top of his voice.

The celebrations had reached a fever pitch when all of a sudden Hermione gasped, clapping her hand to her face.

"Wait, wait!" she cried out.

Sirius stopped abruptly in mid-polka, and Remus almost fell over his own feet. Ron and Ginny's smiles faded like sunlight behind a dark cloud. Five pairs of eyes turned to look at her.

"What is it?" Harry said, dreading what he would hear.

Hermione stared back at him, her face troubled. "Harry, Muggle courts won't accept photographs as evidence anymore. It's...it's too easy to tamper with them, if you know how to do it. So if wizarding courts are anything like Muggle ones, they could say that you made this photograph yourself."

"*Made* it?" Ginny echoed. "But how?"

"I don't know. That's just what I've read. 'Photographic evidence of crimes may be inadmissible in a court of law'."

Harry shook his head. "Not if we've got the negatives and someone who can develop them. Colin has them, and we have Colin."

"Or we will, once classes start again," Ron added.

"But they wouldn't accept it as proof," Hermione countered stubbornly. "Not *legally*."

"Forget the courts!" Sirius said scornfully. "Forget legal! Who gives a damn if they won't take it?" He pointed to the photograph still clutched in Remus's hands, now rather worse for the wear. "Put that picture on the front page of the Daily Prophet and THEN see who cares about proof!"

"Sirius, please--" Remus began.

"Oh, shut up, Moony!" Sirius barked. "Go and do something useful-- get the fastest owl they've got in the Owlery." The dazed delight returned to his face, and he crooned, "That lovely, BEAUTIFUL snap's going to the Daily Prophet, special delivery! Stop the...what do they say in the newspapers when there's a really big story?"

"Stop the presses'?" Hermione offered timorously.

"YES!" he shouted, punching his fist in the air. "Stop the presses! Hold the front page! Make way for the biggest scoop of the cen--!"

The triumphant shout died on his lips as he spun round and saw Professor McGonagall standing in the now-open doorway.

The photograph slipped from Remus's hand and landed on the ground, face down.

Hermione let out a little cry and stumbled backward, bumping into Harry. Harry stumbled as well, but used the opportunity to bend down and snatch the dropped photograph. As he straightened up, he stuffed it and the other two pictures that Colin had taken into his robes.

Professor McGonagall didn't notice his fast retrieval. She was rather more preoccupied by the sight of a convicted, escaped murderer standing in the middle of a Hogwarts professor's office, clad only in pyjamas. Her eyes widened, and one hand flew to her throat, but she quickly recovered.

"May I borrow Harry for a moment, Professor Lupin?" she asked, quite calmly.

It took Remus two tries before he found his voice. "A...A...Of course, Minerva."

Harry hurried forward as McGonagall held out a thin white envelope.

"This letter just arrived for you, Mr. Potter" she said. "By express Muggle post."

"Muggle...?" A letter by Muggle post could only be from Will. An express letter...an express letter meant that it was urgent. He took it from her and tore into it, pulling out the letter with hands made clumsy by nervousness.

Dear Mr. Potter [it read],

I am sitting in my office with a very fidgety owl beside me, waiting for me to hurry up and pen a reply to a most pressing letter from Minister Dumbledore. But before I reply to his query (which you needn't worry about just yet), I wanted to get this letter out to you before the postman comes. I'll have to keep this brief.

There will be no meetings this week, either Monday or Thursday evening. Mr. Longbottom is in no fit condition to be casting spells, though by Monday week he should be well enough for us to resume our sessions. However, we (and yes, I do mean 'we') have been asked by the Minister to attend a meeting that same Monday at 7.30 PM, in his office at Hogwarts. Don't worry, it will be nothing like the last one. There will be no trials or testing--only questions.

By now, I'm guessing that you've discovered the identity of your last companion. You should have no difficulty getting him to your 'study session' by 7.00. I will be waiting for you--all six of you--there.

I remain, in haste, Will Stanton

Harry slowly folded the letter. His mind was racing.

"Is it about your aunt and uncle?" Sirius asked hoarsely, in hushed tones.

"No," Harry said. "It's nothing."

Remus's eyes narrowed. "Harry...."

"It can wait until Monday week."

"Monday week?"

"Next Monday evening," he said meaningfully, returning Remus's level gaze. "At seven-thirty. In Professor...in Minister Dumbledore's office."

Sirius started. "How do you--"

Remus cut him off. "Monday it is," he said deliberately. "Will you tell us what's going on then?"

"Yes," Harry replied, hoping with all his heart that that statement would not turn out to be a lie.

McGonagall cleared her throat. "If you've no further business here, children, I will escort you back to your common room."

"We're done, Professor," he said.

"Finished, you mean?" she corrected automatically.

"Yes."

With that, the four Gryffindors shuffled out of the office, not daring to look at Professor McGonagall or each other. Remus and Sirius were left standing next to each other, staring after them.

"Until Monday, Harry," Remus called out. His voice cracked slightly on Harry's name.

The office door swung closed.

* * *

Harry thought that he'd never make it through the full Easter week. He woke up early every morning and didn't fall asleep until late at night, kept awake by the nervous buzzings and flutterings in his stomach. It was an effort to maintain a show of normality, to pretend that nothing was out of the ordinary. He played chess with Ron and lost every time, played countless games of One-handed Exploding Snap with Neville and lost almost every time. At least the losing was normal enough, but he could have played better if his mind had been even remotely focused on the games.

Ginny occasionally joined her brother and her friends for their daily pastimes, but Hermione didn't seem to be interested. She spent quite a lot of time sitting before the common room fire, holding Crookshanks in her lap and stroking his fur absently. Harry or Ron or Ginny would have to call her name several times before she heard them, and even then her responses were vague, half-hearted. After this had happened three nights running, they gave up on asking her anything and let her alone. She didn't notice.

Their explanations for her odd behaviour varied. Ron proclaimed that Hermione was going through what he expertly called 'a mood'. Ginny said (with some superiority and a good deal more authority) that it was a 'woman's thing', and that the boys should leave her be and quit pestering her. Neville shrugged and accepted their explanations, and after a while so did Harry. Hermione could take care of herself--he was more concerned with how to approach Colin when he returned from the holiday.

He had written to Colin the moment he got back to his room on Easter Monday morning. The note he had sent was a short one:

Colin,

I got the pictures just this morning. Don't feel bad about sending them-- you did the right thing. I can't explain it all right now, not in a letter, but we can talk about it when you get back to Hogwarts.

Harry

P.S.: Could you make a few more copies of those three pictures? Muggle-style copies are fine. And could you bring the negatives of the pictures with you when you come back to school? It's very important--please keep it secret, and don't let your parents or anyone else know.

He hoped that would be enough to keep Colin busy for the week. He knew that if he specifically requested copies of the pictures, Colin would slave over the prints to get them as perfect as possible. The younger boy's hero-worship wasn't as obvious anymore, but there was no denying that it was still there.

At the same time, he sent a few lines to Will as well, using a plain barn owl instead of Hedwig and marking the letter for Muggle-style postal delivery for greater security.

Dear Will,

I got your letter...I hope this reaches you safely. Just in case it doesn't (though you wouldn't be reading this if it didn't, but you never know), I won't say anything about you know what, but I promise we'll be ready.

Sincerely, Harry Potter

He very nearly added a postscript to that letter, saying something along the lines of "You knew, didn't you? You knew that someone-- that Colin had taken those pictures on the train," but he decided against it. Something like that would be too difficult to put into words without giving too much away, and if the letter were to be intercepted before Will could receive it...no, better to wait until Monday.

If he could wait until Monday.

The stress he had laid on secrecy in his letter ensured that Colin wouldn't run up to him, demanding to know everything about everything, as soon as school started again. What he hadn't guessed was that Colin would take his request for secrecy to heart. The younger boy said nothing about photographs or meetings or anything like that. The school day on Monday passed without him saying so much as greeting Harry in the hall.

Trust Colin to go overboard, Harry thought wryly.

He quietly pulled Ron, Hermione, and Neville aside after lunch and told them to be in the little room off the library by quarter to seven at the very latest. Ron promised to let Ginny know, and the four of them split up immediately, not wanting to be noticed whispering in corridors.

Harry made the first move after dinner. Colin was sitting cross-legged on the floor in the Gryffindor common room, scribbling furiously on a piece of parchment. He looked up as Harry walked by, and a small, shy light danced with excitement in his eyes.

"Hey, Colin," Harry said casually. "Are you busy this evening?"

"No, not really." Colin was equally nonchalant. "Why?"

"Well, Ron and Hermione and Neville and I were planning to do some revising for the O.W.L.s tonight, and I heard that you just finished covering localised Heating and Cooling Charms in class today. How'd you like to practise them with us tonight?"

Colin's entire face lit up in a way that made Harry's heart ache. On any other person it might have been for show, a deception to fool anyone who might be watching them, but no one could fake that degree of sheer delight.

"Wow!" he said. "That'd be smashing!"

"Come on, then," Harry said, already heading for the door. "We want to start by seven."

Colin shoved his books aside and leapt to his feet. "Sure!"

They left the common room and hurried through the halls, heading in the direction of the library. Colin kept up a steady stream of talk, yammering on about this and that, not noticing or caring that Harry was quiet, monosyllabic in his replies.

Soon enough, they reached the little room off the library.

"Is this where you go?" Colin asked, looking up at Harry. "I've never been in this room before. Is it nice?"

"Not many people know about it," Harry replied. "It's nice enough."

He pointed his wand at the lock and muttered a special charm that only he and the others knew. After Snape and McGonagall's unexpected visit, they had charmed the door so that it would only open for the five of them. He pushed on the door and let it swing open.

The fire was already lit, glowing in the grate with jewel-like colours of reds and oranges and golds. Seven chairs had been drawn up to the long table, and the others were seated round it; Ginny and Ron on one side, Hermione and Neville on the other. The two chairs closest to the fire, on either side, were empty, as was the one at the far end of the table.

"Hi!" Colin said brightly.

No one responded to his greeting. Their faces were serious, their manner no-nonsense and grave.

Colin's bright smile faltered slightly.

"Is everything ready?" Harry asked, ushering Colin into the room.

"Whenever you are," Ron said quietly. There was no mistaking his tone--he was deferring to Harry, allowing him to take charge.

"What's ready?" For the first time, Colin seemed to grasp that this wasn't an ordinary revising session, and that Harry wasn't planning to talk about localised Heating and Cooling Charms. Uncertainty and nervousness flickered across his face. "Harry?"

The four Gryffindors seated round the table stood up as one, rising to their feet in a gesture that looked expertly choreographed, perfectly timed. Harry knew that it hadn't been planned, but even so it was physically impressive. He heard a sudden, sharp intake of breath; one could only guess the impression it had made on Colin.

He walked over to the mirror and stood in a position that would shield Colin from the full force of the flare of light. Extending his hand, he touched the intricately carved wood of the frame. He didn't look back at the younger boy, but kept his eyes fixed on the mirror.

When the mist cleared he saw that Will was standing beside his desk, holding his academical gown aloft and running a hand over it in an attempt to manually smooth out the wrinkles in the black fabric.

"Right on time," he said. He draped the gown over the back of his desk chair and approached the mirror with a smooth, measured tread. "Good evening, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded a brief hello in return.

Will's gaze roamed across the assembled students for a moment before coming to rest on the steadily widening eyes of Colin Creevey.

"And to you also, young man," he added, smiling genially.

"Will," Harry said, feeling that it was up to him to make the necessary introductions, "this is Colin Creevey. He's Muggle-born, a fourth year in Gryffindor." Feeling that that had gone well, he turned to Colin and said, rather more grandly than he had intended it to sound, "Colin, this is Professor Will Stanton of Cambridge University."

Colin stared. His eyes were as wide as Harry had ever seen them.

Will spoke lightly. "So you're the lad with a knack for photography."

There was a flash of blind panic in Colin's eyes.

"I really wish I could have you take my next driving licence photo." Will's voice was gentle, self-mocking in an attempt to prevent that flash of panic from flaring out of control. "Maybe then I wouldn't come out looking like I'd sneezed in the middle of the snap, as it were."

Colin bit down on his lip, hard.

Will glanced sideways at Harry. "What exactly **did** you tell him?"

"I...I didn't know where to start," Harry said lamely.

"You're slacking on me, Mr. Potter." There was only a faint note of reproof in that statement; the words were harsher than the tone. "I'd have thought--"

There was another flash in Colin's eyes--this time, of recognition. "You were at Dennis's...at my brother's funeral."

Harry's breath caught in his throat as his stomach turned in on itself. Squirming against the tension that had tightened the air in the room, he stared down at the floor, only looking up again when he heard Will's soft reply:

"Yes, I was."

Colin stared at Will pensively, in the frank, disconcerting way that very young children often have when they assess the trustworthiness of an unknown adult.

"Mum didn't know who you were," he said bluntly. "You didn't look like one of Dad's friends from work--my dad's a milkman, and you don't look like a milkman--and most of our other relatives live far away, out in Australia and places like that, and they couldn't come. Dad actually thought you were the new vicar for a bit, at least 'til he saw you didn't have a collar."

"Vicar, you say?" Will raised an thoughtful eyebrow. "That's a new one. Though I'm not entirely sure I like it."

"You were there," Colin said, as if Will hadn't spoken. He was in another place, much farther away than Australia or the lands where long-forgotten relatives lived. "But I asked them about it a little later, later that night, and they didn't remember it. They didn't remember you at all."

He seemed to turn his words over in his head. "I thought I had dreamt about you being there." A tremor shook his lower lip. "I have a lot of dreams about it. About that day. Sometimes I don't know what was a dream and what wasn't."

Harry heard someone behind him snuffle quietly--it sounded like Ginny.

Will looked sad, and very old. "I'm very sorry."

"You were in the picture, too." Colin changed the topic so quickly that Harry coughed, startled. "The one I took even though I don't remember taking it. How come it didn't work when I developed it the wizarding way?"

"Certain types of magic are simply not compatible," said Will, slipping into a lecturing tone for a moment before he paused, continuing in a less severe manner. "My power may interfere with the magic used in the developing process--but then again, I don't know enough about wizarding photography myself to try and explain it properly. But as for Muggle photographs...."

"...they wouldn't detect the magic," Colin finished, picking up the idea. "They'd only detect the light."

Will's smile returned, more wistful this time. "That's quite poetic."

"Is it?"

"I think so."

"Colin," Harry said suddenly, "what he's trying to say is...is...." Lost, he looked to Will for help, better phrasing, anything that would salvage his position, but the Old One merely smiled down at him in his most maddeningly placid way.

"Don't make me do your job for you, Mr. Potter," he said, folding his arms across his chest and looking down at Harry over the top of his glasses.

"Right." Dejectedly, Harry started over. "We--me and Hermione and Ron and Ginny and Neville, that is--we've been working together all school year, trying to find the way to defeat Voldemort. And Will-- Professor Stanton, I mean--he's been helping us, because he knows all about Dark magic."

"But he's not a wizard," Colin said.

Ginny went very white, and Ron gave a choked squawk. Neville looked like he wanted nothing more than to bury his face in his hands and die. Hermione seemed to be suppressing hysterical laughter.

"No," Will admitted logically, "I'm not. It puts me at a terrible disadvantage, I know, but we all have our shortcomings."

Harry couldn't tell whether or not that was supposed to be a joke, but he didn't want to wait and hear Colin's reply. "He's immortal, Colin. I don't have time to explain all of it now, but you'll have to trust me on this."

"Trust you?" said Colin, looking from Harry to Will and back again. "Trust you about what?"

"We need your help, Mr. Creevey." Will had apparently decided to rescue Harry from his predicament. "We need you to help us drive the Dark Lord back once and for all. It is your choice; I cannot force you in this matter. But we need your help."

"What do I have to do?" Colin asked with the swiftness of one who had made his choice a long time ago.

Harry glanced back at his friends, and they quickly took their positions on either side of the mirror. Hermione and Ginny guided Colin to stand beside them on their side.

"Just watch us, and you'll see what to do," Harry said. He touched the frame again, and declared: "Enter, Watchman of the Light."

They took up the chant as the tingling sensation of ancient power stirred in their blood.

"Grant to us your inner sight."

"Enter, for the time draws near."

"Power will erase our fear."

"Enter, lest the darkness win."

Colin's voice was as resolute as the others. He stood tall beside Hermione and Ginny, smiling with a fierce confidence and pride. "We the Six now call you in."

The carved symbols that edged the wooden frame blazed even more brilliantly than before, shining like starlight and sunlight and the brightest moonlight all combined.

When they could see again, Will stood before them in the little room, looking serious but pleased. His blue-grey eyes were serene, but just beneath the calm surface was an intense glow that burned brighter than any flame.

"And then there were six?" Ginny said softly, though it was hard to tell whether she was asking Will, her friends, or herself.

"When the Dark comes Rising, six shall turn it back." Will spoke as if in a dream. "And now that your Circle is complete, the last and hardest part of this battle may begin."

Chapter Twenty-Nine - Better Off Not Knowing

I know now that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.

-- Edith Louisa Cavell, 1865-1915

(British nurse, executed as a spy
during World War I for assisting
the escape of Allied soldiers)

Power.

Not power, but Power.

It filled the little room, and was so concentrated that the children could almost see it. When they had activated the mirror, they had activated this Power as well; the complete circle had wakened it to its purpose. It was like a living thing, a great slumbering beast that had lain dormant for a very long time and had only just begun to stir. It was stretching now, slowly becoming aware of its surroundings as it tested the air, searching for signs of threat or hidden danger that it would need to guard against. The Power joined the six of them together: a deeply set link that heightened their senses to a feverish intensity. Everything in the little room, from the leaping warmth of the fire to the dusty surface of the long table, seemed to be alive with rich, vivid colours. The crackling of the fire was tingling, electric. They could *feel* it consuming the fuel in the grate, and if they had wanted to they could have reached out to the brilliant flames, tasted them and touched them and talked to them for hours.

The sensations were nearly overwhelming, but the most exciting and terrifying feeling of all was the knowledge that this Power was theirs to command.

Their magic.

They stood like stones or statues, unable to move or breathe or do anything but adjust as the awesome magic coursed through them.

Will stood quite still as well, studying them in silence and smiling the faintest of smiles. He allowed them to savour the feeling for a few breathless moments, but in the next moment he had pulled out his watch and opened it with a flick of his wrist.

"Well, it seems that we have fifteen minutes to bring Mr. Creevey here up to where we are now." The watch snapped shut with a tiny click.

They stared at him with unfocused eyes.

Unhurriedly, he returned his watch to some hidden pocket in his robes, walked over to the chair nearest the fire, and sat down. "I suggest you get started."

The even tones of his voice had broken the initial shock of the spell, but they were still more than a little dazzled. As their heads began to clear, they darted uncertain looks at each other.

Gradually, though not unexpectedly, all eyes turned to Harry.

"No," he said flatly once he realised what they were asking of him. "Not me. Not this time."

"Just sit down and start talking," Hermione said with a little toss of her head. "It'll be easier that way."

"Easy enough for you to say," he grumbled.

"Come on, Harry," Ron prodded.

He glared at his friends. "Why me?"

"You're the only one of us who knows everything from the beginning," Hermione replied, coolly logical. "From the *very* beginning."

"She's quite right, Mr. Potter," Will agreed, crushing Harry's fleeting hope of appealing to him for a respite. "It's your story, after all."

There was no way round it. "Fine."

He stalked over to the table, looking as put out as he dared to be with Will's sharp eyes still upon him, and sat down heavily in his chair.

The others took their seats, outwardly calm but inwardly relieved that they would not be the ones to tell the complicated tale. Colin slid nervously into his place opposite Harry. A hopeful grin quirked the corners of his mouth, though it was quickly withdrawn as a wave of shyness overtook him. Colour flooded his cheeks, and he ducked his head bashfully.

"Right," Harry said gruffly. "D'you remember last year, when a bunch of us had to hear that extra lecture on Defence Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies...."

Mindful of the time, he told the story as quickly as he could, digging in the dusty corners of his mind. Hermione was right: the telling did come more easily the more he spoke. He had never believed that he had a gift for story telling, especially when the stories involved him--it felt too much like boasting, too much like being a show off. But he talked, and talked, and was interrupted only when Hermione corrected him as to detail, when Ron added some sarcastic comment to one of his statements, when Ginny scolded her brother for his comments, and when Neville tried to shush the others so Harry could continue.

Colin listened attentively. He squirmed at Harry's near-capture on the train to Exeter, grinned at the retelling of Neville's verbal besting of Professor Snape, paled considerably at a carefully edited description of Mrs. Weasley's funeral, bristled with almost comic indignation at the darker story behind the cheating scandal, and furrowed his brow as he tried to remember the magically erased image of the Dementors on horseback. But more often than

not his eyes would turn to Will, who was leaning back in his chair with his chin propped on one hand as he listened to Harry spin out his tale. An odd searching quality would sharpen the expression on the younger boy's face, only to fade as he jerked his attention back to the lengthening story.

A very thirsty Harry finally concluded with a hoarse, "...so I told the others to meet us here at seven tonight, and...well, here we are."

"Ten minutes," Will said absently. "Very well done."

"I'll say." Neville grinned. "I couldn't have done that in a million years."

Harry swallowed the mass of phlegm that had built up in his throat and grunted something unintelligible in reply. His tongue felt thick and heavy, and he would have given all the money in his Gringotts vault for a large glass of water. His head had started to ache as well.

Colin looked over at Will. "Would you...I mean, can I...could I ask you...?" Another wave of shyness cut him off in the middle of his sentence.

"Ask away," the older man said. "Though your friends would tell you that you might not like my answers."

"Okay." Colin fidgeted in his chair. "I *think* I understand, sort of. I mean, lots of things make more sense now, 'specially some of what happened after Christmas and everything. But how come...and this is a really stupid question, sir, and you've probably explained it already and I don't--"

"Easy now," Will said, holding up his hands in mock surrender. "The question first. Everything else afterward."

"Sorry." Colin tried again, more slowly. "Why...why did those Aurors erase our memories? Us on the train, I mean."

Will sniffed. "They probably wanted to keep your parents from yanking all of you out of school. Can you imagine trying to tell your mother that you and your schoolmates were besieged by Dark creatures intent on devouring your soul? Particularly after what I'm told happened to you during your first year here?"

Colin shuddered. "It was awful."

Hermione, who had shared Colin's experience with the basilisk, smiled sympathetically, but her smile quickly faded when he continued:

"Mum didn't let me out of her sight that whole summer."

The Old One laughed quietly. "I rest my case."

Colin laughed as well. His smile wasn't quite so shy.

"But what *I* don't understand," Neville began, sensing a break in the conversation, "is why the four of us ended up on the train in the first place."

"Me, too" Hermione said, nodding. "Professor McGonagall was asking me about it on the ride back, and I didn't know what to tell her. I said to her that it was the stones you gave us, but--"

"No," said Will. "That isn't possible."

"It's not?"

"If it was, it shouldn't have been. The spells that I placed upon your stones aren't designed to affect the user--certainly not in such an alarming fashion. You can use them to see and observe, yes, but that wasn't what I had in mind when I gave them to you. They were intended as a warning device against the Dark, not for anything as dangerous as teleportation. Whatever put you on the train was not the work of the Light."

Hermione already had her next question prepared, even if she fumbled a little when choosing her words. "But you said that Mad...I mean, that Profe...*Mr.* Moody also put spells on the stones--spells to detect the Unforgivable Curses. Could your magic and his have reacted to each other?"

"That was what I thought when I wrote to Alastor Moody early last week, asking him for his opinions about the matter. And his reply informed me, in no uncertain terms, that it wasn't possible."

Hermione almost put her hand in the air, but remembered where she was and hastily put it down. "But if he--"

"He had no explanation as to why you should have been transported to the Hogwarts Express. Instead, he advised me--rather unhelpfully--to accept the whole thing as a 'Potter Effect'." He smiled ironically at the thought. "And that's a direct quote."

"So if he doesn't know, and you don't know...." she trailed off, frowning.

"I prefer to see it as a highly volatile combination of competing magics and human emotion." Will took off his glasses and started to polish the lenses. "You wanted to know more, to know what was going on and to help even if it meant putting yourselves at risk. And your heightened state of emotion, combined with several powerful location- based spells and greatly amplified by the energy of multiple casters--"

He stopped suddenly, and put his glasses back on. "But there I go, lecturing again."

He had stopped himself just in time. Neville and Ron's eyes had almost completely glazed over, and Harry wasn't far behind them. Hermione's eyes, however, had been sparkling with absolute fascination. She looked more than a little distraught at the end of the discourse on magical theory. A sour look had developed on Ginny's face, presumably from the thought of the brave stupidity of her brother and his friends. Colin was gnawing his lower lip, plainly confused but trying not to show it.

Will sat up very straight, and inclined his head soberly. "Whatever the cause, I sincerely apologise for putting you four in danger. In the end the fault does lie with me."

There was an awkward beat where no one seemed to know what to say. Harry's cheeks felt hot, and although he was sitting close to fire he knew it wasn't from the flames.

"Shall we go, then?" Will stood, pushing his chair away from the table. "It's nearly half-past."

The students got to their feet. Half a dozen people crammed into a relatively small room made manoeuvring difficult at first, but after a moment's scuffle they were clustered by the door. Ron was about to turn the handle, but Will suddenly cleared his throat, stopping him before he could open the door.

The Old One had not moved from his position before the fire, and the flames behind him created an odd silhouette effect, throwing him into shadow. He waited until the sounds of shuffling feet and rustling robes had died down before he spoke.

"I ought to warn you, before we leave this room, that the meeting we are about to attend will touch upon painful matters." His voice was serious, though not without compassion. "You may be confronted with memories you would rather see forgotten, or hear things that confuse or alarm you. But you must know that you are not alone in this."

He closed his eyes, and the fire in the grate went out as suddenly as if he had poured a bucket of water over it.

"Six drove out the Dark before. Six will do so again." His final words came to them across of the darkness of the room. "Remember this, whatever you hear tonight."

* * *

A ticklish murmur of conversation and talk poured out of Dumbledore's office through the partially open door. As Will pushed the door inward, Harry gazed at the people within with a strange, floating detachment, as if he was a bored theatregoer watching the curtain rise on the second act of a mediocre play.

The office furniture and random knickknacks had been moved out of the way, clearing a very large space in the centre of the room. In the centre was a wide circle of more than a dozen mismatched chairs, some more comfortable-looking than others. The large fire was lit, as were innumerable candles over their heads. A gust of warm air wafted past their faces.

But above all, Dumbledore's office seemed to be crammed full of people. Indeed, with their arrival there were more people in the room than Harry had ever seen in there at one time.

Sitting before the fire was Professor Snape, deep in earnest discussion with a grave-faced Dumbledore. Fawkes was perched precariously on the mantle above them, preening his glossy feathers. Dumbledore did not turn their way, but Snape saw the movement out of the corner of his eye and glanced sideways at the opening door. His jaw tightened briefly, as if he hadn't liked what he had seen. With barely a pause he resumed his conversation.

Standing off to one side was Professor McGonagall. She was listening politely, if not attentively, to a man that Harry didn't know. The man was thin, fair-haired and fair-skinned, with a fast-receding hairline that made him look older than he probably was. His gestures were fluid and animated, punctuating whatever he was saying. Neither he nor McGonagall noticed the newcomers.

Closest to the door was Mrs. Figg, draped in the vivid black and rich scarlet of her official costume. She was chatting with another man who in only the kindest of terms would be

described as 'well-fed'. His vast stomach strained the front of his out-of-fashion robes. His wrinkled, florid face swelled with laughter at a joke he had just made.

Mrs. Figg was the first to notice their arrival.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, advancing on them. "I was just wondering when you'd all decide to make your grand entrance." Her gravely voice turned the statement into something of an accusation, though her eyes snapped and sparkled with mirth.

Will took the hand she held out to him and bowed over it.

"Fashionably early, madam," he intoned wryly.

She chuckled as he released her hand, and ushered them away from the door, toward the centre of the room. Harry and the others followed Will closely, crowding round him like a band of nervous ducklings trailing after a mother duck.

"I think you know most everyone here," Mrs. Figg said. "We're still waiting on a few people, but I can start the introductions now. Save us some time later."

As if on cue, the red-faced man she had been speaking to swaggered toward them.

"Evening all!" he boomed. One or two candle flames on the nearby wall wavered, flickering with the force of his voice.

"First boy." Mrs. Figg jerked her head in his direction. "This apoplectic lout here is--"

"Fletcher," the man proclaimed. "Mundungus Fletcher, Department of Magical Catastrophes-- Head of the Dark Arts and Practices Division."

He could have been anywhere between forty and seventy years old; between the wrinkles and the hearty, youthful grin it was difficult to tell. For all his bulk, he had a force of personality that exuded great energy, rather like a manic Father Christmas. His eyes were dark and shrewd in his fleshy face, revealing more intelligence than one might have suspected at first glance.

Mrs. Figg ran through their names as Fletcher moved among them with his greetings. "Hermione Granger, Colin Creevey, Ron and Ginny Weasley--"

"Can't ever forget a Weasley," Fletcher said, his grin widening. "No matter how many of you lot there are." He shook their hands with the whirlwind, practised impartiality of one used to attending political functions.

"--Neville Longbottom, and Harry Potter," Mrs. Figg continued, ignoring him. "And you've met Dr. Stanton before."

"Busy year for you, Mr. Fletcher," Will murmured as the other man gripped his hand and began to wring it reverently.

"You might say that, sir," Fletcher replied good-naturedly. "You might say that. We've had enough paperwork to fill Gringotts twice over. And speaking of paper...."

He half-turned, and called out to the young man who was chatting with McGonagall. "Here, de Havilland, have you met Dr. Stanton yet?"

The young man spun round, startled.

"Dr. Stanton?" His voice was light and cultured, with the clipped speech of a radio newsreader. "I'm certain I would have remembered if I had."

Professor McGonagall nodded to them, then quietly excused herself and drifted over to where Dumbledore and Snape were seated.

Mr. de Havilland stepped aside to let her pass by him and approached their group. One hand flew up to his forehead to smooth back what little remained of his hair. The other was extended in hesitant greeting.

"Vincent de Havilland, sir," he said, taking Will's hand. "An honour to meet you at last."

Harry frowned suddenly, thinking. There was **something** about both Fletcher and de Havilland's voices, something in the way they spoke to the unassuming anthropology professor that was...no, not exactly respect, not deference, but an **awareness** of something. He couldn't put it into words, not even to himself. It was frustrating.

Will smiled. "My pleasure, Mr. de Havilland."

Another round of handshakes and introductions followed. By the time they had dispensed with the greetings, de Havilland looked more than a little starstruck at being in the presence of so many celebrities.

"Are you in the Ministry as well, Mr. de Havilland?" Hermione asked in the prim, polite voice she tended to reserve for teachers.

"Good heavens, no," Fletcher said before the younger man could reply. "This here"--he slapped de Havilland on the back, nearly knocking him off his feet and into Ron--"is THE best managing editor the Prophet's ever had, and I'm not just saying that. You wouldn't **believe** some of the stuff that used to get printed before he came along." He wrinkled his nose. "Take that awful Skeeter woman, for instance. I don't know how the editors could allow a harpy like that--"

"Mundungus, **please**." de Havilland stared down at his feet, cringing with embarrassment.

"Don't you say 'please' to me, young man," Fletcher retorted archly, folding his arms across his chest--or rather, over top of his stomach. "I've heard you call her things that I won't repeat in mixed company."

With that said, he turned on his heel and strode away toward where McGonagall and Dumbledore were listening to Snape talk.

"T-t-terribly sorry...please excuse me..." de Havilland spluttered. He bobbed his head to them and hurried after the older man.

"*He's* the editor of the Daily Prophet?" Ron asked incredulously, staring at the rapidly retreating back.

"Six months now, it's been," Mrs. Figg replied. "He's a good enough lad. Was in Hufflepuff when he was here. Does the job, enthusiastic, loves his work. The Prophet needed someone like him."

"Rather convenient for you as well, to have such excellent press connections," Will said neutrally.

She raised an eyebrow. "He's useful enough, when you need to keep things quiet."

"Ah." Will's tone remained neutral. "Wonderful thing, a free press."

"Free press?" The old woman snorted. "You take my word for it--young de Havilland's better than most. He at least puts up a fight when we tell him to kill a story."

It was Will's turn to raise an eyebrow. "I don't know whether to admire your honesty or deplore your lack of principles, so I think I'll quietly excuse myself and say hello to your former colleagues."

He drifted over to the crowd near the fire, leaving the six children huddled together in a defensive little knot.

Mrs. Figg wrinkled her nose. "And *I* don't know how you've put up with him for so long," she said to them. "Is he usually this much of a prig or have I caught him on an off night?"

Her tone was flippant, but Harry could detect the same odd note of awareness in her voice that he had heard in de Havilland's and Fletcher's. Tempered by her usual acidity, perhaps, but there nonetheless.

Mrs. Figg looked ready to add a few more choice remarks about Dr. Will Stanton, but just as she opened her mouth there was a knock at the door.

"Seems I'm playing hostess tonight," she said as she strolled over to answer the knock.

Standing in the doorway was Remus, with Snuffles's massive bulk sitting close beside him. Remus had a firm grip on the dog's collar.

"I thought there was a leash law in this country, Lupin," Mrs. Figg drawled, looking directly at Snuffles as she spoke. "Mustn't let a mongrel like this run loose."

Snuffles gave a low growl, baring rows of gleaming teeth. He strained forward, pulling Remus into the room. Once they were safely inside and the door was closed, the Animagus resumed his human form with a pop.

"Who are you calling a mongrel, you shrivelled-up old bat?" he barked.

Sirius may have towered over her by a good six inches, but the old woman let out a cackle of laughter, completely unintimidated by him.

"Well, well, what's this?" she said, clucking her tongue and looking him up and down. "You didn't get all tarted up just to meet us, did you?"

Even in jest, she was being truthful. Both men wore what Harry suspected were their nicest robes, sporting fewer patches and mending marks than their usual clothing. Sirius in particular had made an effort to tidy himself up. He was clean shaven, and although his fingernails showed signs of having been chewed short they were neatly trimmed and clean. He had brushed out his long hair, pulled it back and tied it with a length of string to keep it out of his face. With just that little bit of care, he looked less like a dangerous fugitive and more like a respectable young wizard who had simply fallen on hard times.

Remus put a restraining hand on Sirius' shoulder, and smiled at Mrs. Figg. "You don't like it, Arabella?" he asked mildly.

"At least you're making an effort, for once," she retorted.

Hermione suddenly spoke up. "I think they look very nice."

"Do you?" Mrs. Figg couldn't keep the surprise out of her voice.

"Yes," she said firmly. Something in her would not allow her to stand by and let a Hogwarts professor be jeered at, even if a former Hogwarts professor was the one doing the jeering. But to prove her point, she needed to go a step further. "Don't you think so, Ginny?"

Ginny was staring at Sirius as if she'd never seen him before. A faint flush had crept into her cheeks.

"I'll say," she blurted out. The flush rapidly blossomed into a full vermilion blush when she realised what she had said.

"It seems I'm outnumbered," the older woman said, sniggering.

With another growl Sirius wrenched his attention away from the old woman, shifting his indignation onto his godson. "All right, Harry, you promised us that...."

"Am I missing something?"

Harry looked over his shoulder to see Will walking toward them. His friends quickly drew aside, clearing a spot for Will to stand just behind him.

"Back so soon?" Mrs. Figg asked. "Conversation not to your liking, I take it?"

Will said nothing, so she grunted and turned back to Remus and Sirius, prepared to initiate another round of introductions. "Now, gentlemen, this is--"

Will raised a hand, stopping her. "Actually, we've met already."

"H...have you?" She glanced at him, then back at the newcomers. Her eyes narrowed. "And when might that have been, may I ask?"

It was easy to see why she did not believe him. Remus was stunned into complete immobility; his mouth hung slightly open. He certainly remembered meeting Harry's 'friend', but his eyes darted from Will to Harry as he tried to draw a logical conclusion from insufficient information.

Sirius was also staring, though there was more puzzlement than shock on his face. He squinted at Will, looking for a clue that would allow him to recall when--or if--they'd met.

"It's been a while since we last had a proper conversation." Will's faint smile had returned. "Twenty-odd years or so. I don't imagine they'd remember me in connection with my younger self."

Remus drew a sharp breath.

"Younger...?" Sirius trailed off, perplexed.

"Then you...oh, never mind." Mrs. Figg waved one hand dismissively and returned to her introduction, a tad miffed at the interruption. "Well, Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, may I *once again* introduce Dr. Will Stanton of the University of Cambridge."

The singular flash of recognition showed that the name had clicked in Remus's mind, but not in Sirius's.

"Professor Lupin. Mr. Black." Will smiled warmly. "Harry's told me so much about you both. He's a very fortunate young man to have you as guardians, and as friends."

"Angh..." Sirius croaked, then hastily cleared his throat. He stuck out his hand and braved a smile. "I mean, thank you. I only wish that Harry...or *someone*..."--he shot an openly hostile glance at Mrs. Figg--"had told us more about you."

"I had my orders, Black," the old woman said sourly as the two men shook hands. "Need-to-know basis only--neither of you needed to know. Doesn't take brains to figure it out. And unlike Snape over there, you two generally don't go about barging in where you're not invited."

"SNAPE?" Sirius hissed, whirling on Harry once more. "You told SNAPE before you told US?"

"I...I'm sorry," Harry stammered, quailing under the double force of his guardians' glares. "I wanted to tell you, honestly. But it was just--"

Will swooped into the conversation with the deftness of a bomb squad technician about to defuse an explosive device. "Professor Snape was less than pleased to see me, Mr. Black." He turned to Remus. "And I think you'll agree, Professor, that our last meeting wasn't exactly the right time or place to make introductions."

Remus nodded dumbly. Sirius was still fuming, but a loud noise from the direction of the fireplace made all heads turn to see what had happened.

The flames had gone the brilliant green of Floo Powder, and a tall, thin wizard had just stepped out of the fire. He was brushing soot from his robes. Harry's heart did a double flip in his chest when he saw who had arrived.

It was Arthur Weasley.

"Terribly sorry to be late, Minis...Albus," Mr. Weasley was saying to Dumbledore. He nodded distracted greetings to Snape and McGonagall. "Finishing up some paperwork from the last raid on the Trumpington estate. Leave it to Hector Trumpington to mess about with--"

Ron had been facing away from the fire, but he spun round at the sound of his father's voice.

"DAD?" he said, disbelievingly.

Mr. Weasley jumped.

"Ron?" He did a double take. "Ginny? What are you...oh!" One hand fluttered to his throat as he caught sight of Will.

"Come in, Arthur," Dumbledore said kindly, guiding him away from the hearth before his robes could catch fire. "Don't worry, you're not late. It's only just seven-thirty now."

He raised his voice, addressing the assembled adults and students. "Shall we start, everyone?"

And like that, the meeting began.

The idle socialising stopped, and those who had been standing found chairs round the circle and sat down. There was a tense moment when Sirius had to walk past Professor Snape to reach the seat beside Remus, but nothing worse than a deep glare passed between the two men.

When all had taken their places, one could see a definite pattern to the seating arrangement. Dumbledore sat closest to the fire. Fawkes settled quite comfortably on the back of his owner's chair, as if he intended to listen in, too. Snape, McGonagall, and Lupin--the three faculty members--sat to his left, and Mundungus Fletcher, Mrs. Figg, and Mr. Weasley--the three Ministry officials--sat to his right. Sitting directly opposite Dumbledore was Will, with the six children arranged in a similar fashion: Ron, Hermione, and Harry to Will's right; Ginny, Neville, and Colin to his left. Sirius and Vincent de Havilland occupied a sort of no-man's-land on either side.

As Harry sat down, he felt Sirius take his hand and squeeze it, hard. He squeezed back, trying to be reassuring.

There was no offering of tea or the normally ubiquitous hot cocoa: Dumbledore came to the point straightaway. "First of all, whom should we know about?"

"Alastor and young Linchley are out at Azkaban," Mrs. Figg said, clasping her hands round her knee. "As it seems we can't work with the Dementors now, everyone's on rotating shifts to keep things under control there."

"How is it?"

Her face darkened. "Not going as well as we'd like. Fortunately, the effects of prolonged Dementor exposure haven't worn off yet. But it's only a matter of time before someone gets up enough strength to make a break for it."

"I see. And the Dementors?"

"Patronus casting is holding them so far. There're enough people to keep them under control at the moment."

"Do you need anything?"

"We're all right for now. Believe me, when we need something, you'll know."

"I'm sure you will, Arabella. Thank you. And as Hagrid left just this evening, we're otherwise all present and accounted for." His quiet gaze moved past her, to Fletcher. "Anything to report?"

The large man shook his head. "We've been turning that bloody train inside out all week, but there's nothing wrong with it. The only thing we found was that the emergency brake in the engine had been pulled."

"Pulled?" Mr. Weasley asked sharply.

"Pulled," Fletcher repeated. "Manually. No magic used at all, not even a trace of it." His jolly face was grave. "No one tampered with that train, Albus. At least, not from the outside."

"Mm," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "Arthur, Vincent, any news?"

"Nothing new in the raids," Mr. Weasley said briskly, in a tone very different from that of the absent-minded man Harry knew. "Suspicious things, yes, but then again that's the rule rather than the exception in my line of work. We're taking every precaution, of course."

"There was a bit of a row over the last Sunday issue, but it was about the advertisements, not the articles." de Havilland pulled out a large white handkerchief and mopped his shining forehead. "The Borgin and Burkes representative was rather adamant about keeping their regular double on the fourth page."

"Why is that?" Dumbledore asked.

"Well..." de Havilland hesitated, but decided to plough on. "You see, sir, we've recently switched the obituaries to the fourth page, where there's more space. All of the other businesses who have space on that page have agreed to change the location of their advertisements. But Borgin and Burkes informed us that, given recent events, the overall readership--"

Fletcher grimaced. "Don't say it, man."

"Abominable taste," McGonagall murmured, deeply disgusted.

"About what you'd expect from Knockturn Alley's premiere shopping establishment," Mrs. Figg declared in a voice that dared anyone to challenge her.

Dumbledore sighed. "Well, then, if there is no further points that should be brought to our attention, my main reason for convening this meeting is a matter of some delicacy--"

"Oh, just tell them, Albus," Snape broke in waspishly.

It was the first time Harry had heard him speak all evening; there was a rough edge to the normal icy smoothness of the Potions Master's tongue. Snape fixed the assembled company with his glittering glare, and said flatly:

"My services are no longer required by the Dark Lord."

The responses ranged from de Havilland's strangled gasp to a long, slow hiss of expelled breath from Sirius.

The questions came rapid fire.

Mrs. Figg was first. "When?"

Snape's face was under tight control, so tight one could see bluish ropes of veins standing out on his neck. "There was a...meeting, very early last Saturday morning. Even *he* never calls us at that hour, so it was plain that something was wrong."

"But you went anyway?" Fletcher asked.

"When one is Called, one comes, or does not dare to come again. But once the...formalities...were out of the way, the Dark Lord informed us that he knew of a Ministry spy in our midst. And asked his loyal Death Eaters what should be done about it."

His thin lips twisted into a grimace of a smile. "I'd been expecting it, you understand. They've had enough plans go awry recently to raise suspicions. I listened with half an ear to them bandy accusations and toss curses about--until Nott stepped forward.

"He'd been tortured, of course. You could practically smell it on him. He rattled off some statement about how he'd informed me of the attack plans on the Hogwarts the week before, and had thought nothing of it until he'd heard it had failed. Then, like the ever-faithful servant he was, he had immediately hurried to tell his Lord that Severus Snape had turned traitor once again.

"Even a child could have seen it for what it was. No one knew about the attack beforehand, least of all me. But once that was out, one thing led to another, and before I knew it someone had cast a Pendeo Charm and I was hanging from the ceiling upside down." His smile was frigid, mirthless.

"What was it that tipped them off?" Remus asked, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"Must've been the Gringotts raid," Fletcher muttered to Dumbledore. "I knew we should've been more discreet about the precautions."

"There *was* no Gringotts raid," Snape snapped, glowering at the Ministry official. "That was the next thing that came out. For at least the last six weeks--and probably before that--all the plans and orders I've received have been feed."

Mr. Weasley gasped.

Mrs. Figg swore.

Sirius squeezed Harry's hand so tightly that the bones ground against each other.

Dumbledore looked very tired all of a sudden.

"Feed?" de Havilland asked timidly.

Snape whirled round, pinning the other man to his chair with a burning look.

"Feed, you fool. Trash. Tripe." He leaned forward and spoke with exaggerated slowness, pronouncing every syllable carefully as if he was speaking to a very dull child. "Mis-in-for-ma-tion."

"And they just *let* you go?" Mrs. Figg said severely.

"Why not? Nearly everything I've reported for the last few months has been false, one way or another." His hands were shaking badly; Harry had never seen Snape so on edge. "There was no midnight raid planned on Gringotts, no plot to torch the houses of Muggle-born witches and wizards, no kidnapping attempts, no robberies, no poisoning the wells, nothing. They've been feeding me lies the whole time, and fool that I am I ate them all up."

Dumbledore reached out and took one of Snape's hands, but Snape recoiled, yanking his hand away.

"Like a fool," he repeated bitterly, casting a baleful glance at the former Headmaster. "Like a damned fool."

"We all knew it would happen, Severus," Dumbledore said softly, but the softness concealed a steely edge. "Sooner or later. We can only be thankful that you are still with us now. You are still alive."

Snape laughed, a laugh with no humour in it. "Thankful?"

"Yes." The voice was still soft, but this time the steel was no longer concealed. "Thankful."

The Potions Master was silent. His body seemed to shrink, to draw inward. The arrogant sneer that at times seemed a permanent part of his features slowly left his face, and his chin sank into his robes until only the cold black glitter of eyes remained against the dull black fabric.

Dumbledore spoke to Snape. "Who did know about the attack on the Hogwarts Express, then?"

"Only Wormtail, as far as I could tell." Snape's voice, so alive and cutting moments before, had become a listless monotone. "And whatever guards he had to bribe at Azkaban."

"By Wormtail, you mean Peter Pettigrew," de Havilland said.

"Unless you know of any other Wormtail," Sirius growled, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

de Havilland quickly shut his mouth.

"But why was he there at all?" Fletcher tapped his foot on the floor. "Dementors would have been enough, surely. Especially if they were on horses, as I've been told."

"Horses." Mrs. Figg huffed. "What next?"

"May I hazard a guess?"

All eyes turned to Will. Even Snape briefly glanced in Will's general direction before sinking back into private contemplation of his own miseries.

Dumbledore said, "By all means, Dr. Stanton."

Harry noticed again that sense of awareness. *But it's always been there,* he just as quickly told himself. *You haven't really noticed it before tonight.*

Will paused, collecting his thoughts.

"I think--and this is only guesswork, mind--that the creature you call Wormtail used his Animagus form to creep onto the train at Hogsmeade Station. He could conceal himself somewhere near the front of the train and hide there until the appropriate time...which for some reason happened to be just outside Doncaster."

"There's a long stretch of rail there," McGonagall said, though no one had asked for explanation. "Open country--not many towns or villages. Nowhere to pass through."

Will nodded sagely. "So it would seem that he hid and waited. And with surprise on his side, he would need only one spell to fell the driver, another to set off the emergency braking system--"

"And then he'd turn back into a rat to watch the Dementors at their work," Sirius finished. His voice was seething with rage.

"But when he saw that someone was ruining his master's plan..." Remus began, piecing things together.

"He panicked." Will turned to McGonagall. "Headmistress, you were there. Did you get a good look at the front of the train?"

"Yes."

"Did you happen to find the engine driver?"

Professor McGonagall looked startled, and a little ashamed. "Why, no."

"Then you probably never will," Will said grimly.

McGonagall removed her glasses and tenderly massaged the bridge of her nose.

Will continued, more delicately. "Though we can't be entirely certain how he disposed of the body--"

"There are ways," Mrs. Figg interrupted, drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair. "They don't need to be mentioned here. And the man wouldn't have to be dead for them to work, either."

"So he deals with the driver--how he does so is not important--then hurries to the rear of the train to see what has happened. And when he arrives...." He turned to Ron, and said apologetically, "I don't mean to force you, but--"

"It's all right, sir." Ron's face was very pale, but the hand that pulled aside the collar of his robe did not tremble.

Reflexively, Arthur Weasley's hand fluttered upward once again to clutch at his own throat. His gentle eyes were wide and dark with horror.

"Ron!" he choked out, transfixed by the mottled, fading bruises that encircled his youngest son's neck.

Ginny was never one to let an opportunity go by. "You idiot," she whispered furiously, staring down at her trembling hands clenched tightly in her lap.

"Miss Weasley." Will's voice was reproving, though it was missing the sharpness that would have made it a true reprimand. "Fortunately, that particular stretch of track runs upon the ghost of an ancient magic- bordered road--an Old Way. Its power can be harnessed to break the power of the Dark. But I couldn't risk anything unless both Wormtail and young Mr. Weasley were standing on the track. I was lucky."

The choice of pronoun changed the colour of Arthur Weasley's face from white to greyish yellow. Little red splotches stood out on his neck where the pressure from his fingertips had marked the skin. He was unable to speak.

"I'm okay, Dad," Ron said hastily, frightened by the expression on his father's face. "Really, it's all right."

Mr. Weasley did not look at all reassured.

"With their Patronus Charms, young Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter saved over two dozen lives that night," Will said. "Knowing the Dementors, that much is plain. But *my* question to all of you is this: what would have happened if the Dementors had taken control of the train?"

"Any number of things," replied McGonagall, seeking to regain some of her normal efficient manner. "You'd strand nearly all the students at the school...only one or two live in Hogsmeade proper. In the event of a direct siege, we would have no fast way to evacuate students or teachers."

Remus added, almost as an afterthought, "To some extent we'd be held hostage here."

"The Dark Lord could use it to launch raids on London proper," Fletcher said. "Even--no, *especially* on Muggle London. You'd have a ruddy great horde of Dementors sweeping through King's Cross, with Death Eaters behind to finish off those who get away...."

"You're forgetting the train itself," Mr. Weasley commented. His work had taught him never to neglect the object acting as the vessel for magic. "The Hogwarts Express...that's a large source of energy to tap for Dark purposes. Far larger than anything we could muster at short notice." The tremor in his voice was noticeable, but under control.

"And the psychological advantage as well," said Mrs. Figg. "Who's to say that wizards and witches wouldn't flock to him, offering whatever they had to give in exchange for their children's lives? Especially if they had a train full of living corpses as proof of his intent?"

As the ominous possibilities and conjectures came forth, each one worse than the last, Harry found that he was straining to pay attention. The words were running right out of his head like sand whispering through a sieve. The voices jumbled together, growing dimmer, under there was nothing but a mass of low noise buzzing in the back of his mind. But in place of the voices, a different and entirely too familiar sensation swelled to fill the gap.

Without realising it, he had begun to probe the emotions of the room.

His hand wasn't anywhere close to the warestone--in fact, Sirius was still clinging tightly to the hand that would have been nearest his pocket--but he was doing it all the same. And even then, once he realised what was going on he surrendered eagerly to the feeling. Adults, he well knew, always tended to hide the worst from children, unconsciously seeking to shield them from the darker side of reality. Far better to find it all out now than learn of it later.

It was a struggle to see clearly, at first. He was almost foundered by the great, dismal waves of misery that Professor Snape exuded like a foul miasma. The misery was a combination of separate strident emotions: anger and self-loathing and a crushing sense of failure, liberally mixed with what Harry thought at first was remorse. After a moment, however, he changed his mind. It was unmistakably self-pity.

Once he had recognised and registered one set of emotions, he reached out again, testing and probing. The next strongest feeling he could detect was coming from--

Mr. Potter. That isn't polite.

Will's silent voice broke into his thoughts, ruthlessly snapping his concentration.

But I...I didn't mean... he started to say.

You are among friends here. There's no need for that.

The coldness of the admonishment brought a hot surge of shame rushing to Harry's face.

S...sorry, sir.

Not wanting to leave himself open to further rebuke, he wrenched his mind out of the daze. It skipped a few times, like a stone skimming across a calm lake, to land firmly in conscious thought.

Fortunately, no one had noticed his distraction. The adult witches and wizards were still talking, and his friends were listening quietly, no doubt forming their own conclusions. Will was listening as well; none would have guessed that he and Harry had just been carrying on a private conversation of their own.

Apparently, the subject of Dementor attacks had been left behind for the time being. Three stiff sheets of glossy paper were being passed from hand to hand, and by the looks on the faces of the adults it was plain that Colin Creevey's photographs were having quite an impact. He had missed part of the conversation, but those who weren't absorbed in studying the photographs had tight, tense expressions.

Snape's raised voice was the first thing that clearly registered in Harry's head.

"Out of the question. If you publish that, Wormtail will be dead before the first person looks at the front page the next day." He might have been stating a physical absolute, like the boiling point of water.

Vincent de Havilland frowned at him. "Come now, Snape, that's going a little too far."

"Too far'?" Snape sneered. "Well, I wouldn't show that little picture to Mr. Mandelbrot Phipps, if I were you."

"Mandelbrot PHIPPS?" de Havilland shouted, aghast. Snape might have been spitting on his grandmother's grave, he was that taken aback. "You're mad! The man's been on our staff for fifty years, if a day!"

Snape's sneer deepened, and de Havilland continued, shaken, "Why not three days ago...surely you *must* have seen that op-ed piece he wrote! Blasting the Ministry for not doing more to track down the St Mungo's suspects...you should've *seen* the replies...he couldn't...he CAN'T be a--"

"You should hear him when he's been drinking," Snape interrupted in the cold, silky voice he used for pointing out the more obvious errors of his students. "A few glasses of Ogden Old Firewhiskey and he'll proudly rattle off every single hex he cast at King's Cross Station. In chronological order."

de Havilland's mouth snapped shut. The room was so quiet that Harry could hear Colin's fast, irregular breathing, amplified by the silence.

Seeing that he had commandeered everyone's attention, Snape continued. "The Dark Lord has kept Wormtail with him for two reasons: he's easily manipulated and he's legally dead."

Mrs. Figg said knowingly, "Take away one of those and he becomes a liability,"

"And we all know what THAT will mean. And then you'll have no proof of anything, Black, so don't curl your lip at ME." The last was directed at Sirius, who was regarding Snape with the look of a man who has seen something loathsome crawl out from under a stone.

"Severus has raised some valid points, Sirius," Dumbledore said, not wanting to press the point too greatly.

Sirius's reply came through a clenched jaw. "I've waited fourteen years to see that vermin rot in Azkaban...but I suppose I can wait a little longer."

Dumbledore looked profoundly relieved. "Which means that Mr. Creevey's photographs and negatives must not leave this room, tonight or ever."

Colin's lower lip quivered as he gingerly handed the negatives to de Havilland, and Dumbledore saw it.

"Don't worry," he said soothingly, collecting the remaining photographs that the others passed to him. "They'll be quite safe here."

He set the photographs and negatives on his lap, and tapped the pile with his wand. In the blink of an eye, they had shrunk to the size of postage stamps.

"I will store them in a safe place," he said, tucking the tiny pieces of paper and film into some hidden recess in his robes. "And as a number of us have school or work tomorrow, I think that will be the last order of business for tonight."

He stood, and the room was filled with the sound of rustling robes as the other nine adults and six children got to their feet.

Dumbledore surveyed them all a final time, and said, "I thank you for your attendance, and wish you safe journey."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Ron and Ginny were flying across the room, into the outstretched arms of their father.

Mr. Weasley held them close, his too-pale face buried in the ruddy shock of his children's hair. What was visible of Ginny's face was wet with tears, and Ron's eyes had a suspiciously damp glitter to them. After a moment, Mr. Weasley gently tilted Ron's head up, revealing the mass of bruises. He ran a tender hand across Ron's neck, as if he could wipe the damage away with his touch. Ron, in response, leaned his head against his father's shoulder, closing his eyes. He looked more at peace than Harry had seen him in a very long time.

Watching them made a pang of fierce but guilt-ridden jealousy stir in Harry's heart. He had to turn away.

Turning away, unfortunately, made him run smack into Mrs. Figg.

"Oof!" She stumbled backward, bumping into Will.

"Are you all right?" he asked, steadying her.

"Of course. *You're* a teacher, you should know that one gets used to having brats underfoot."

Harry mumbled a not very apologetic apology and tried to slip past her, but before he had taken two steps she reached out, collared him, and pulled him toward her.

She rapped him on the head with her knuckles and cocked an eyebrow at Will. "Speaking of brats, has *this* one been giving you trouble? More than the usual Potter Effect-related incidents, that is."

"Quite the contrary," Will replied sincerely. "Mr. Potter and his colleagues have been of immeasurable help. The Light owes them a debt of gratitude far beyond my power to repay."

"Smooth." Mrs. Figg smirked at him. "Very smooth. Ever the clever turn of phrase, Dr. Stanton."

Will shrugged, putting on a grin of false modesty. "One picks things up along the way."

"Cryptic."

"So I've been told."

"Shrouded in mystery."

"How else?"

"Absolutely insufferable."

"Madam, you make me blush."

The old woman laughed. "Well, it's a comfort to know that some things in this world won't change. Dark wizards may come and go, but Will Stanton will never give you a straight answer if he can help it." Chuckling at her own joke, she stumped away.

No sooner had she left them than Remus and Sirius had hastened forward and taken her place. From the speed with which they approached, they'd had a hasty exchange of ideas and were now in search of the answers that Harry had been unwilling--or unable--to supply. They didn't bother with greetings or formalities this time.

"'One picks things up along the way'?" Remus repeated, frowning. "That *was* what you said to Arabella just now, wasn't it?"

Will nodded, patiently waiting for the other half of the question to surface.

"And you said that we met twenty years ago?"

"Give or take a few years, yes."

"You were at King's Cross," Sirius stated suddenly. He sounded confident, completely sure of his memory. "First year--our first year. At the end of the Easter holidays. You were there...you were--"

"Waiting for a delayed train to Slough."

"But trains going to Slough don't leave from King's Cross," Remus said slowly. "They leave from Paddington."

"Ah." Will's eyes lit up. "I wondered if you would remember that."

Sirius grunted. "So if that was the case, why were you there?"

"I was waiting for you, naturally. That was the first and the last time the five of you would all go home for Easter...am I right?"

The sudden fear that flashed across Sirius's face showed that whatever answer he had expected to hear, Will's response was nowhere near it.

"And...and you knew we would be there?" he asked, his voice a ragged whisper. "And who we were?"

"Yes, and yes. Well, a modified 'yes' for the second one," he corrected himself. "I can't take full credit for that."

Before either man could answer, Dumbledore's voice cut across the room. "Dr. Stanton, may I trouble you for a moment?"

"Of course," Will said in a slightly louder voice, then nodded to Remus and Sirius. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen. It's good to see you both well, after so long." And he was gone.

Sirius gaped, at a loss for words.

It was Remus who looked at Harry and asked, "Is...is he?" There was a good deal more to the question than two single-syllable words, but the longer, more complex meaning was plain enough.

"Yes," Harry said simply.

Remus glanced round the room. Snape and McGonagall were gone, off to make a final check of the school before the prefects finished their rounds. Will was with Dumbledore. Mundungus Fletcher and Vincent de Havilland had already departed, presumably by Floo Powder, and Mr. Weasley appeared to be leaving as well. He was over by the bright green fire, giving Ginny a hug as he listened to something Ron was saying. Hermione, Neville, and Colin were clustered together by the door, talking among themselves.

He turned back to Harry.

"Tomorrow night," he said sternly, in a tone that allowed no argument. "Tomorrow night, after dinner, you will come to my office promptly at seven. Your godfather and I need to discuss this further, but tomorrow night should give us ample time for talking. I--WE want the answers, Harry, and you're going to give them to us."

"Fine," Harry said sullenly.

Remus frowned. "And just so you don't 'suddenly discover' that you have a Transfiguration test you need to revise for, consider yourself on detention with me. If you don't show up, you'll have to accept the consequences. Loss of House points, for starters."

"But you'll show up, because I'll be waiting for you, right outside the Gryffindor common room." A dangerous light glittered in Sirius's eyes. "You'll show up if it means I have to haul you there by the scruff of your neck."

"All right, all right, I get it!" Harry threw up his hands. "You don't have to twist my arm."

Sirius nodded curtly to him, and winked at Remus. "Well done, Moony."

"Why, thank you, Padfoot. I haven't lost it quite yet, it seems." Remus flashed an overly polite smile at Harry, and said, "Goodnight, then."

"Sleep well, Harry," Sirius chimed airily, and resumed his Animagus form.

Man and dog exited the room with a regal stride.

Harry felt weak at the knees. Remus was the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, but he had once been and at some level still was a Marauder. He had likely had enough experience with Hogwarts detentions to be a bit more...CREATIVE in his choice of punishments. And if he was angry with Harry....

It didn't bear thinking about.

He let his legs carry him over to where Will and Dumbledore were. Evidently, Mr. Weasley had just left; there was a greenish cast to the flames, Ginny was scrubbing her face with the sleeve of her robe to remove the tear-marks, and Ron was staring into the fire with a glum air. Neither were listening to the adults, but Harry had drifted close enough to pick up what was being said.

"With all due respect, Minister..." Will had started to say, but Dumbledore cut him off with an cough.

"Come now," said the old wizard. "You and I know perfectly well that 'with all due respect' means that you're about to say something you know I don't want to hear." His tone was light, but his face was serious. "Just say it, and I'll respond."

"Very well." Will had the look of a man about to rest his head on the chopping block. "You, Albus Dumbledore, are as wholly short-sighted as Mr. Potter here when it comes to what you like to call destiny. Where is it graven in stone that the defeat of the Dark Lord will mean your death? What ancient prophecy foretells it? What dust-covered, hand-lettered volume contains a passage that proclaims it in the most veiled and...dare I say, cryptic of allusions?" His mouth twisted into an ironic smile. "I'd like to see it, if such a thing exists."

Dumbledore returned the smile without the irony. "I would have thought that you of all people would place faith in prophecy, Dr. Stanton."

"There is little difference between a prophecy and a well-timed and executed bit of doggerel, Minister," Will replied dryly.

Dumbledore said nothing, but his smile made Will sigh quietly and add:

"I only say this for your sake, sir."

"I know. And I am most honoured that you think so highly of me to say so."

"The wizarding world would benefit more from your life than your death. One doesn't need to exercise foresight to know that."

"Has he been doing this to you as well?" Dumbledore stage-whispered to Harry, nudging him. His eyes twinkled merrily.

Harry knew better than to answer with the truth. "No, sir."

"Lucky you." Dumbledore smiled at Will, who was regarding both wizards with thinly veiled dissatisfaction. "Thank you, Dr. Stanton, for your advice. I will keep your thoughts in mind."

His smile was kind, but it was also a dismissal. Will, understanding, bowed formally and left the office without another word, forcing the children to scramble after him.

They finally caught up to him outside the entrance to Dumbledore's office. He was staring at the dust-coated gargoyle that guarded the entrance. They approached him cautiously, as the look on his face showed that his dissatisfaction was no longer hidden.

"I could have been speaking to you, for all the good it will do," they heard him mutter to the gargoyle.

Impassively, the gargoyle stared back.

The Old One made an exasperated-sounding noise.

For the first time, he noticed that the six of them were standing nearby, keeping an wary eye on him and an eye on the nearest escape route down the corridor. He rounded on them, robes billowing.

"What **is** it with all of you?" he demanded. "It can't be purely cultural. Any researcher worth his salt would agree with that conclusion if I were to publish my findings tomorrow." The Cambridge professor--albeit a deeply vexed one--had returned. "So tell me, is there something in the water here, in the food? Is it part of your curriculum, a required class in meaningful last words and dramatic final scenes? Or is it simply one of these odd Gryffindor traits that Professor Snape seems to enjoy ranting about?"

Although keeping silent was not normally among the odd Gryffindor traits, the six children recognised that at that moment it would be safest to do so.

They did not have long to wait before the blaze of anger faded from Will's face, leaving deep lines of exhaustion in its place.

"No, don't tell me," he said wearily. "I have a feeling I'd be better off not knowing."

Chapter Thirty - In Strictest Confidence

Our own heart, and not other men's opinion, forms our true honour.

-- Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Colin was all but asleep on his feet as the six children made the long trek from the Headmaster's office to the Gryffindor common room. He stumbled with every third or fourth step, constantly bumping into Hermione and Ron. Every time he accidentally collided with either of them he would jolt awake and apologise, but more often than not a yawn would break through and his words would be lost in a rush of air. It had been a very long day for him, on many levels, and though he had held up well thus far his stamina was fast failing.

When they reached the Fat Lady's portrait (she was so engrossed in devouring a fancy gilt box of chocolate-covered cherries that she didn't question the lateness of their arrival), Hermione gave the password and the picture frame swung aside. It was well past curfew, so the only students left in the common room were a pair of third-year boys dozing over several opened Ancient Runes textbooks, awash in a sea of crumpled parchment.

While Hermione woke the boys up and helped them gather their discarded papers, Harry and Neville took it upon themselves to guide bleary-eyed Colin to the foot of the stairs. Gentle prodding was enough to keep him moving.

They waited at the bottom until the heavy sound of his footfalls had faded away, and then moved aside to let the groggy third years plod upstairs as well. Once they were certain that all was quiet above, they returned to where Ron, Ginny, and Hermione were standing, warming their hands by the common room fire.

"A Galleon says he'll be out before he can get his shoes off," said Ron, chuckling. He flopped into one of the chairs closest to the fire and stretched out his legs, propping his feet on the little ledge created by the raised stones of the hearth.

"Two Galleons says he won't even bother with his shoes," Harry countered with a smile.

A huge yawn distorted Ginny's grin. Quickly, she hid it behind her hand. "How could you blame him?" she said. "I'm ready for bed myself."

"Bed sounds lovely," Hermione agreed, pushing a dangling strand of hair out of her eyes.

"Is everyone going to bed now?" Neville asked.

"In a bit," said Ron. "There're a few things I need to take care of down here."

"Like what?" Ginny asked.

"Er...." He scuffed the toe of his shoe on the hearthstones. "Like a Divination paper."

"Our essay? But...but that was due today!" Neville looked appalled.

"I've been busy," Ron said with great dignity. "I told Trelawney I couldn't hand it in on time because my horoscope said that today was a bad day to complete unfinished projects."

"Don't tell me she actually believed you." Judging by the expression on Hermione's face, her opinion of Professor Trelawney had sunk to new lows.

Ron smirked. "I also told her that because Harry's horoscope said it was a good day for intellectual pursuits, he'd help me make sure it was perfect."

Harry--who until that point had been dozing peacefully, leaning against the back of Ron's chair--started awake. He spluttered wordlessly.

"Well, we'll leave you alone, then," Hermione said sweetly, though there was more venom than sugar in her voice. "After all, it's important to do well in Divination. But don't stay up *too* late."

That said, she flounced off to the girls' staircase with Ginny not far behind. Neville, glancing from Ron to Harry as if he wasn't sure which of them had the worse luck, mumbled an uncertain "G'night, then" and headed toward the stairs as well.

Still spluttering, Harry turned to Ron, prepared to tell him exactly what he could do with his Divination paper. But the knowing smirk had faded from Ron's face, and at that moment Harry knew that the homework in question had been finished long before.

"Sorry 'bout that," Ron said quietly, a far cry from his jeering tone of moments before. "I didn't want to say anything in front of the others. *You* know how Hermione can get when she really gets going, and...."

He trailed off, then beckoned to Harry, motioning him to sit in the chair opposite. Once Harry had sat down and made himself comfortable, Ron continued in the same quiet voice.

"I just thought you ought to know what Dad and Ginny and I talked about tonight," he said.

Harry bit his lip hard. He was dying to know, naturally. He'd been dying to know ever since they had left Dumbledore's office. But he'd already gotten in trouble once that night for being nosy. Even now he could still hear Will's cold reprimand echoing in his head:

Mr. Potter. That isn't polite.

An hour later, it still gave him the shivers. And some small part of his conscience (which oddly enough seemed to enjoy using Will Stanton's voice to make itself heard) was insisting that whatever had passed between the Weasley family was none of his business.

"If...only if you're sure," he said, hoping that a show of reluctance would drown out the frosty disapproval of the Voice-That-Sounded-Far- Too-Much-Like-Will. "I mean, I don't want to...."

"Who else am I going to tell?" Ron slid down a little in his chair. He folded his arms across his chest. "And for that matter, who else are YOU going to tell?"

When Harry didn't respond right away, he sniffed knowingly. "Yeah. Thought so."

"Your dad did look pretty surprised to see you," Harry admitted. He tucked his knees up under himself, settling down for a long listen.

"He wasn't expecting to see us--all of us--tonight. He only heard about the meeting a couple days ago, and he thought that it would just be you there."

"Me?"

Ron nodded morosely. "He knew about you. He thought you'd speak for all of us."

"Oh." That made sense in a way. He'd played the central role often enough, willing or not.

"Dad didn't think Ginny and I were as involved. Especially not Ginny."

There was an undercurrent of defensiveness in that statement that Harry did not want to approach. "But he knew about Will?" he asked. "And what about the train?"

"He knew about Will. Dumbledore told him that, when the news of the attack on the Hogwarts Express reached him. But I guess seeing Ginny and me there tonight, and hearing about what happened with...." He gestured half-heartedly at his neck, a quick, indifferent gesture that managed to explain everything and a good deal more. "I don't know."

There was a beat of uncomfortable silence before Harry said, in a small voice:

"I'm sorry, Ron."

Ron merely shrugged.

Harry knew that particular shrug too well to let things just end there. "Was that all you talked about?"

"I guess."

"Ron...." Getting answers out of Ron Weasley when he didn't want to talk was worse than getting Hagrid's toffee out of one's teeth.

"That was it."

"Ron...." If Ron was going to be stubborn, he would soon find out that Harry could be just as stubborn.

"You can ask Gin if you don't believe me."

"Ron--"

"Look, go ask her right now. I'll wait."

"*Ron*--"

"Will you STOP IT?!" Ron's explosion came with the suddenness of a volcano erupting. Violently, he pounded the arm of the chair with one clenched fist. "Stop saying my NAME!"

"R--" He halted just in time. Force wouldn't work; he would get nothing unless he changed his tone. More gently, he said, "What did you talk about? You know I won't tell anyone. What's wrong?"

Ron's answer came slowly, forced out through gritted teeth:

"There's...I have to do something."

"Do what?"

"It's...." Ron leaned forward, hunching and drawing his shoulders in as if to shield himself against cold or wind. He opened his mouth, then shut it, then opened it again. His breath whistled through his nose, deep and slow and jagged.

Harry was literally on the edge of his chair. If he moved forward another inch he would fall off.

Come /on/, Ron, he pleaded silently. *Just a little...."

But Ron, at that very instant, let his shoulders fall and turned his head away. He slumped in his chair, sliding down even farther than before. His chin sank onto his chest. Oddly enough, sitting in that position, he looked eerily like the defeated Professor Snape of a few hours before.

"It's nothing," he said bleakly. "Never mind."

"Ron!" Harry yelled.

"It's *nothing*." He gave Harry a look, one that plainly said that asking him again would be pushing the bounds of their friendship.

Frustration made Harry want to pound his head against the wall--or better still, pound Ron's head against the wall.

"Don't do this," he begged, not caring how desperate he sounded. "Please."

Ron sighed, more exhausted than annoyed. "Look, you wouldn't--"

"I wouldn't what?" snapped Harry, cutting him off. "Understand? What wouldn't I understand?"

A tight, grim smile sharpened Ron's face. The smile stopped before it reached his eyes. "Oh, you'd understand all right. That's the least of it."

"Then what--"

"You'd understand, but you'd only try to talk me out of it." He slid down further, slouching so low in the overstuffed chair that the soles of his shoes were almost in the fire. "And with the way things are going now, you'd probably succeed."

"But--" Harry began, then stopped. Getting angry would have required energy, and now that he really wanted to let Ron have it he found that he didn't have any to spare. His head hurt. His eyes felt funny, hot and raw and itchy and sticky all at the same time. The flames of the candles on either side of the fireplace looked blurry, as if the lenses of his glasses were covered with smudges. Even though it wasn't at all bright, the candlelight stabbed at the back of his eyes.

He pushed himself to his feet.

"I'm going to bed," he said curtly.

"Okay." Ron didn't turn his eyes from the feeble glow of the fireplace embers. "Night."

Fortunately, lack of energy once again prevented him from doing something he would likely have regretted later on. Without another word, he left his best friend behind and stormed upstairs.

* * *

Even with the decent amount of sleep he managed to get that night, he did not feel better when he woke up the next morning. The headache was still there, a low steady pain that had settled in his temples and showed no signs of going away. The funny feeling in his eyes hadn't gone away either; it seemed to alternate between dry itchiness and gummy soreness.

Deciding not to go to class took all of two seconds. There were far worse things than spending the day between cool linen sheets in the infirmary, where the loudest noise would be the whispered rustles of Madam Pomfrey's robes.

But until then he had to listen to the thuds, clomps, and shuffles of his friends getting ready for class. It was amazing how much noise four boys could make even when they weren't trying to be loud. Dean in particular--at least he thought it was Dean--had a heavy tread that Harry could feel through his mattress. Grumbling a few choice words, he shoved a pillow over his head, pulled up the covers, and waited for them to go away.

The light, hesitant touch of a hand on his shoulder made him nearly jump out of his skin.

"Harry? Are you getting up?"

He poked his head out from under the blankets to see Neville looking down at him. The two of them were the only ones left in the room.

"Don't feel good," he mumbled. His voice was still hoarse with sleep--it made him sound worse than he actually felt. "Think I'm getting a cold. Get the assignments for me?"

"Okay. Feel better." Neville hurriedly ran a comb through his hair and hurried from the room.

Harry burrowed deeper into the drowsy warmth of the bedclothes and let himself drift into a half-doze. He waited until he was certain that classes had started for the day. Only then did he get out of bed.

Madam Pomfrey swooped upon him when he showed up at the door of the hospital wing in pyjamas, dressing gown, and slippers, complaining of headache. She tucked him into a freshly made bed, slipped two hot water bottles (enchanted to stay at just the right temperature for hours on end) between the sheets, prepared a cooling compress for his forehead, and dosed him with a thin dark-coloured potion. He tasted the whippy bitterness of willow bark and made a face.

"Up too late with your books, no doubt," the mediwitch said, half-scolding and half-soothing as she piled more blankets on top of him. "I declare, they run all of you ragged with schoolwork."

He smiled weakly up at her, and cuddled the hot water bottles to his chest. He was sure that Madam Pomfrey knew more than any of her patients thought she did, but it was a lovely thing to be taken care of by someone who believed that the root of your troubles lay in one too many late-night revising sessions.

Though come to think of it, he told himself, *that's not very far from the truth.*

"You're not the first I've had come in here with a nasty headache." Madam Pomfrey remarked. "I had a full stock of Migraine Potion not two weeks ago, and now here I am giving the very last dose to you." She gave his pillow a final pat and left the room, disappearing through the side door that led to the dispensary.

The potion, for all its foul taste, worked like a dream. He was asleep within minutes, and slept peacefully until she woke him at noon for a light lunch of toasted bread and cheese and a flavourful chicken broth. Surprisingly, his headache was almost gone, and he didn't feel the tiniest bit drowsy.

"That's the beauty of my Migraine Potion," Madam Pomfrey said proudly when he told her so. "Severus Snape's not the only one in this place with a dab hand at brewing medicines."

"Could you make it taste a little better, then?" he asked hopefully.

She chuckled throatily. "The worse it tastes, the better it works."

He spent the rest of the day lying in bed, watching the lazy way the April sunlight moved across the room, making the shadows of furniture and objects lengthen and stretch. Bright squares and rectangles of light formed crazy patchwork patterns on the dull grey stone of the floor. Madam Pomfrey checked in on him occasionally, but left him alone to rest and relax. Even the bitter aftertaste of potion that remained on his tongue didn't bother him much. He could take off his glasses and close his eyes for a moment, and then--

He came to with a start.

Fumbling for his glasses, he slipped them on just as Madam Pomfrey entered the room, bearing a tray that held another steaming bowl of soup and several thick slices of toasted bread.

"Want some dinner, dear?" She set the tray down beside his bed. "The house elves sent this up from the kitchens."

"What time is it?" he asked warily.

The mediwitch checked the little gold-coloured timepiece pinned to the front of her robes. "Just quarter to seven."

Quarter to seven.

Dinner was usually over by six-thirty.

He catapulted himself out of bed, upsetting the soup all over the tray and the floor. Madam Pomfrey cried out, hurrying for a cloth to catch the scalding liquid, but as she ran in one direction Harry was running in another, pulling on his dressing gown as he dove for the door. He left his slippers behind. They would only trip him up.

He must have looked a strange sight dashing through the corridors in his pyjamas, hair uncombed and more unruly than normal, cold bare feet slapping and slipping on stone. Gryffindor's common room was several floors above the hospital wing, and the staircases seemed to multiply before his eyes. He took the stairs two, sometimes three at a time. Once the Fat Lady was in sight, he sprinted the last few yards with a speed he seldom had outside of Quidditch practices.

A menacing black lump of fur was waiting for him.

Snuffles was keeping guard underneath the massive portrait, sitting very upright, bold and stern as a sentinel. When he saw Harry jogging toward him he growled his displeasure, upper lip fluttering over rows of teeth.

"Let...me change," Harry panted, bending over to catch his breath. "I'll...be right...down."

Haughtily, the black dog got to his feet and trotted aside to let him pass, but not before the Fat Lady had noticed him.

"He's been waiting for you," she told Harry reproachfully. "Almost an hour now, I think. Password?"

"Periwinkle," he gasped. He squirmed through the portrait door before it could open all the way.

Once inside, he fled upstairs and pulled on his clothes, then ran to the boys' bathroom and splashed water on his face. He rinsed out his mouth to clear away the last traces of the potion taste. A bit more presentable, he clattered back down the stairs, nearly bowling over a gaggle of first-year girls who were chatting outside the staircase entrance.

Snuffles was trotting back and forth like a soldier on parade when he emerged from the portrait hole. Harry didn't have time to think of an appropriate apology before the Animagus had seized the edge of his robes in dangerously sharp teeth and started to haul him bodily down the corridor.

Harry yanked on his robes, trying to wrest them out of the dog's firm grip. "I can walk by myself, you know."

Snuffles ignored him. After a few more feeble tugs at his clothes, Harry resigned himself to being dragged along, down flights of stairs and through the halls to the Defence Against the Dark Arts office. There was no sense arguing with a cross Sirius Black.

He was very glad when they arrived and Snuffles let go of his clothes. To his dismay, he found a large damp patch on the back of his freshly-laundered work robe. It was thoroughly wet with dog saliva.

"I hope the house elves can get this clean," he said snippishly. Being treated like a child had put him in a rather childish mood. "Hermione'd have a fit if she knew you were making more work for them."

Ignoring his waspishness, Snuffles prodded him toward the closed office door.

"All right, all right, I get it!" Half-heartedly, he nudged the Animagus aside with a foot, and knocked on the door.

"Come in," he heard Remus call.

Steeling himself, he pushed on the door and hurried inside, remembering to hold it open so Snuffles could follow.

Remus, to Harry's surprise, was not sitting behind his desk. Instead, he was sitting in one of three chairs that he had arranged in the centre of the room. Two rubbed, worn plush armchairs faced a wooden chair with a small stuffed cushion on the seat and a mended leg. Remus sat in one of the plush chairs, and Snuffles trotted forward and scrambled into the other.

"Sit down, Harry." Remus gestured to the rickety wooden chair as graciously as if it was a luxurious, richly upholstered divan.

Harry sat, perching on top of the cushion. Almost as an afterthought, he wedged his hands firmly underneath the cushion.

Time to get this over with, he told himself.

"What do you want to know?" he said aloud, addressing both man and dog.

A loud pop echoed in the room, and suddenly Sirius was leaning forward in his chair, grim-faced and forbidding.

"Everything, for starters," he declared.

"Or as much of everything as you can tell us," said Remus.

"But you'd better have a damn good reason for leaving anything out," Sirius added warningly.

"Start from the beginning, preferably."

"Keeping in mind that we don't know where the beginning is."

"Though we do have a pretty good idea, based on what you and Arabella *haven't* been telling us."

Sirius snapped his fingers. "Oh, and we can stop you at any time, if we have a more specific question."

"That's right--almost forgot about that."

"So whenever you're ready, you can go right ahead and start."

Their wishes made known, the two men reclined, leaning back in their chairs with identically calm, superior smiles. The smiles proclaimed their intention to wait all night--and longer if need be--to get the answers they wanted.

A number of flippant, sarcastic, and downright rude responses came immediately to the tip of Harry's tongue. Diplomatically, he chose what was perhaps the least offensive.

"Am I allowed to ask a question first?" he asked. "Just one small thing, before I start."

"I suppose," Remus sighed.

"If you must," drawled Sirius, languidly waving one hand in front of his face.

Harry smiled to himself. *Let's see how much you like /this/, 'for starters',* he thought wryly--and let them have it:

"What do YOU know about Will?"

"Will?" Remus repeated.

"Professor Stanton."

"And exactly how long have you been calling him 'Will'?" Sirius asked, arching an unsympathetic eyebrow.

"Since--" He glowered at his godfather and his favourite teacher. "You didn't answer my question."

Sirius glowered at that, but after a brief glance at Remus he said, "Well, we know that he's...that he's...he's...." After a few uncertain seconds he turned to Remus. "You tell him, Moony."

Remus shot his friend a hostile glare before turning back to Harry. "The thing is, Harry, I happened to find this the other day...." Gingerly, he reached into his robes and took out a small book, bound in worn leather. The spine was cracked and frayed round the edges, and nearly all of the gilt paint had rubbed off the leather, but there was enough light for Harry to just make out the words of the title--"Ancient Legends of the British Isles".

"Oh," he said. "That one."

Remus nearly dropped the book. "You've read it?"

"Hermione did, last year. I know what it says."

"I see." He tapped the cover gently with one finger and set it on the floor beside his chair. "Well, I've read through it three times now-- through the parts that matter, at least--and I still cannot bring myself to believe all of it." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I've seen and heard of a lot of things in my time, but legend is one thing and this is--"

"I mean, he was OUR AGE," Sirius interrupted.

"Or said he was."

"This little Muggle kid waiting for a train--"

"You'd never have thought anything of him to look at him--"

Sirius shook his head wonderingly. "And we sat there and *talked* to him."

"We actually *talked* to someone who knew...." Remus's throat worked for a moment, as if he couldn't get the words to come out.

Harry finished for him. "Who knew Merlin?"

Remus passed a hand across his forehead. "Yes."

"Pretty much," Sirius agreed. "All I can say is, you've got a very powerful friend there, Harry."

"But what else do you know?" asked Harry.

Remus gestured with empty hands. "That's it."

"We're counting on you for the rest of it," Sirius said.

"Oh. All right." He took a breath and let it out slowly. Another explanation. Staring down at his lap, he tried to imagine how Will would go about it. He drew a blank.

"All right," he said again. "You said you read the book, so you know something about the Dark and the Light. Will--Professor Stanton-- believes that some of Voldemort's power comes from the Dark." That sounded simple enough.

Sirius opened his mouth, but Remus quickly silenced him with a hand on his arm and a small shake of the head.

Harry kept going, ploughing through before either of them tried to interrupt again. "Over twenty years ago, there was a battle between the Dark and the Light. The Dark came Rising, and the Light drove it back for all time. But before the battle took place--and it could have been months or even years before, no one knows--Voldemort made a deal with the Dark. He would get part of the Dark's power, and the Dark would remain with him...no matter what happened during the battle with the Light."

He paused, and glanced up. The two men were staring at him with unfathomable expressions.

"Go on," Remus said emotionlessly.

Harry swallowed. "So...he has the Dark's power, and he can use it in ways that we can't fight with ordinary magic. Because the Dark's not magic exactly, not like the Dark Arts. It's just *evil*." He couldn't suppress a shudder. "It can get into your mind and make you do things, make you think horrible things. It can make people hurt themselves, or hurt others. And Will thinks...he thinks that it's what kept Voldemort alive when the curse he tried to use on me backfired."

He was starting to babble; he needed to find somewhere to end this explanation before it turned into gibberish. "It's hard to explain, and Will could do a much better job than I could, but that's all, really."

He lowered his eyes, and waited.

There was a long silence.

Remus broached the first question. "So he--Dr. Stanton, that is-- approached Professor Dumbledore?"

"I think it was the other way round," Harry said, immensely relieved that they had understood at least part of what he had said and he wouldn't need to start all over again. "That's what it sounded like to me, when we met him last year. He gave a lecture about Defence Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies, and we...talked." "Talked" was one way of putting it. He didn't think that his guardians were quite ready to know exactly *how* they had talked.

"A guest lecture?" Remus said reflectively. "That's interesting. I do remember Albus mentioning something to me when I was here two years ago, about arranging for a guest speaker on those topics."

"Really?" Harry said.

"Yes. But he never said who it would be."

A corner of Sirius's mouth twitched. "That must've been some lecture."

Harry smiled thinly. "Oh, it was." He was about to turn the subject toward the events of last summer, but a fantastic idea popped into his head. "Look, do you want to talk to him? 'Cause he's probably in his office now. It's just seven o'clock now."

Sirius frowned. "How can we meet him if he's in his office?"

"I can show you where we have our sessions. We can meet him there."

"Are you sure he wouldn't mind?" Remus said, frowning as well.

"I don't think he'll mind." He tried not to stress the 'think' too much.

Remus and Sirius mulled over this for a moment, and then stood up. Harry scrambled to his feet.

Remus strode over to a small cupboard in the corner of the room. Reaching inside, he took out his well-worn cloak.

"Lead the way, then," he said decisively as he slipped the cloak onto his shoulders. "Let's see what Dr. Stanton has to say."

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, Remus, Harry, and Snuffles were at the door of the little room off the library. Normally, it would have taken less time to get there, but Harry had taken a very roundabout path. He wanted to stay away from the main library entrance. The only person they had seen on the way was Argus Filch, and he was too preoccupied with a jar of silver polish, a soft cloth, and the tarnished decorations on a newly dusted suit of armour to notice them as they passed by. Harry was very thankful that Mrs. Norris was nowhere in sight; Snuffles may have been an Animagus, but he wasn't above chasing the Caretaker's cat through the corridors to prove that he could act like a normal dog.

And like a normal dog, Snuffles was nosing around the edges of the door, whimpering excitedly. He looked up at Harry and Remus and barked once, short and staccato, as if to ask, *Is this it?*

"Yes, it is," Harry told him.

Remus deftly slipped his fingers through the dog's collar and pulled him to one side, ignoring the sour rumble Snuffles made.

"After you," he said to Harry.

"Uh..." He hesitated. "Could you cover your ears?"

Remus's smile went from one of amusement to one of bemusement when he realised that Harry wasn't joking. "What?"

"You heard me," said Harry, very clearly. "Cover your ears."

Obediently, the Defence Against the Dark Arts professor put his hands over his ears, turning his back on the door for good measure. Snuffles, however, merely stared at Harry expectantly, his ears cocked and alert and his tail waving briskly.

Harry gave him a pointed look. "You, too."

The great black dog tilted his head, apparently weighing his godson's order in his mind, but with a whuff of breath like an exasperated sigh he lay down on the floor. With another whuff, he covered his ears with his paws.

Satisfied, Harry turned back to the door.

The decision to create a special locking spell to the little room off the library had its origins in McGonagall and Snape's unexpected interruption. An added measure of protection was plainly in order. So with Hermione on probation and essentially restricted to Gryffindor Tower, Ginny and Neville had spent long hours poring over dust-coated spellbooks in the library. Neville had even wormed a pass out of Professor Trelawney to get hold of a book from the Restricted section. He had originally intended to further 'examine' some of the more nasty demises that lay in store for the fifth-year Gryffindor class, but as he later told them, what could you do when a thick volume entitled "Lock, Stock, and Hemlock: Serious Privacy Enchantments for Serious Wizards" practically fell into your hands?

The locking spell they finally chose was fairly obscure, one that couldn't be nullified by a simple 'Alohomora' or one of the other basic opening Charms. Yet it wasn't terribly complicated or elaborate, either--a third year could perform it, if he put some effort into the casting. Only the five of them knew it; Colin would have to learn how to cast it soon if he wanted to get into the room by himself at any time. A witch or wizard experienced in Charms, like Professor Flitwick, would probably know of it, but it would take a bit of trial and error to figure out the exact spell they had used.

It was this spell that Harry murmured, tapping the pitted metal of the door handle lightly with his wand. The lock sprung open with a soft click.

He couldn't open the door just yet, though. They had added a second protection. A fraction of the Light's magic (courtesy of Will, who had seemed quite pleased with their extracurricular research) acted as a sort of chain-latch on the inside. Linked to the locking spell, it was both reassurance and extra precaution. But all that was needed was a touch of his hand on the metal door handle to take care of that.

Task completed, he turned back to Remus. The older man was humming to himself, singing tunelessly under his breath. When Harry tugged the edge of his sleeve, he uncovered his ears and turned around.

"All set?" he asked.

Harry nodded, then knelt and patted Snuffles on the head. The dog got to his feet, shaking his head so hard his ears flapped outward like flags in a stiff breeze. He followed Harry and Remus into the little room.

Once Harry had closed and locked the door behind them, Sirius returned to his human form. He and Remus looked round the room, their eyes examining and evaluating everything, their faces careful blanks.

Remus ran a hand over the bookshelves. Sirius bent down to study the carvings that decorated the edge of the long table. Harry, meanwhile, took an inordinate amount of time lighting the fire.

"So this is where you go?" Sirius said suddenly, making both Harry and Remus jump.

Harry took the poker and stirred the fire, arranging the coals to make it burn more evenly, then straightened up. "Yeah."

"It's a nice room," his godfather said magnanimously. He nodded once, firmly, as if giving it his personal seal of approval. "Very nice."

Harry and Remus exchanged glances. Remus rolled his eyes. Harry hid a smile.

"And Dr. Stanton meets you here?" Remus asked.

"Yes."

"How does he get in?" Sirius said, scratching his head. "That's grate's much too small to be on the Floo Network."

Harry pointed to the large mirror in its ornately carved wooden frame. "Through there."

"*Through*...?" Sirius echoed disbelievingly.

"Well, not tonight," he said hastily, before visions of Will Stanton prowling the school whenever he wished could enter his guardians' heads. "There's a special spell for that, but it can only be done when all six of us are present. We can still talk to him, though."

"Show us," said Remus.

Harry replaced the poker among the fire-irons and approached the mirror, his right hand outstretched.

"Be careful," he said, stopping his hand a few inches from the wood. "Don't look directly at it."

"Right," said Remus.

Sirius grunted something that sounded like assent, but the cynical noise became a sharp intake of breath as mirror flared to life.

The initial blaze of light dimmed as swirling silvery mist obscured the three wizards' reflections, creating wreathing coils and patterns behind the glass. As swiftly as it had descended, the thick mist whirled away, revealing the familiar sight--familiar to Harry, if not to the others--of Will's Cambridge office.

Only Will wasn't there.

And his office was in chaos.

Harry's heart leapt to his throat in sudden, awful fear. It looked as if the room had been ransacked by someone in a great hurry. Books were strewn everywhere, as haphazardly as if they had come together and collectively decided to explode off their shelves, landing where they fell. A small circular dustbin lay on its side in front of the desk, and crumpled sheets of paper spilled from it onto the floor. Files, folders, and still more papers were scattered across the carpet.

Will was nowhere in sight.

"What in...?" Remus breathed fearfully.

"It COULDN'T be...." Sirius's voice trailed off.

Harry tried to speak, but his mouth had gone completely dry and his tongue felt like it was glued in place. But before rational thought could give way to panic, a calm, logic-driven part of his brain swiftly stepped in and took control. Step by step, it pointed out a few things he might not have noticed otherwise.

True, the rows of shelves lining the walls were empty of books, but their contents had not been scattered by violence. They were grouped in stacks of varying height, laid out in some order that was likely known only to their owner. The files and folders of papers were also laid out in small groups--a collection here, a collection there, but all were sorted methodically. A swathe of clean floor space marked a path wide enough for one person to pick a way through the mess. In all the room, nothing had been broken, nothing destroyed or shredded. What had at first looked like the aftermath of a violent rampage slowly fell into recognisable order.

"It's all right," he muttered to himself. "It's all right. There's nothing--"

His words stuck in his throat as a tall stack of hardbound, textbook- sized volumes very close to Will's desk suddenly came unbalanced and fell over with a crash, disappearing behind the desk.

There was a muffled exclamation, followed by a loud sneeze.

And then, from behind the desk, a hand appeared, clutching a few sheets of paper and a book. The hand set the papers on the desk blotter and placed the book beside them. There was a rustle of papers, and another hand appeared, adding more sheets to the growing pile on the desk. A second book joined the pile, then a third. Finally, the desk chair was shoved aside and Will stood up, emerging from behind his desk like a stage actor rising through a hidden trapdoor.

Harry didn't know whether to cry out or burst into laughter. He had never seen Will looking so dishevelled.

The Old One was in his shirtsleeves; his jacket hung on the back of his desk chair. His cuffs were unbuttoned, and he had rolled up the sleeves well over the elbow. His tie hung askew-- the knot loosened and off-centre, the wide end draped back over one shoulder and the thinner end dangling down. His hair was mussed and thickly coated with a layer of dust that gave it a greyish cast. Its normal brown colour could hardly be seen through streaks of light and dark grey.

He was rubbing the back of his head and muttering darkly to himself; the falling books must have come down right on top of him. He started to bend over to retrieve something at his feet, but he caught sight of Harry on the other side of the mirror and snapped upright, gripping his desk with both hands.

"What has happened?" he demanded. His entire body was rigid; he looked as near to being panicked as Harry had ever seen him. "Is it--"

"No, no, everything's fine!" Harry stumbled backward only to crash into a corner of the long table. The sharp edge gouged his hip, and he bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. "I...I just thought that--"

Remus and Sirius recovered from their shock at the magic mirror, the chaos in the room on the other side, and the unkempt state of its normally immaculate occupant at the same time. They added their own rushed apologies to Harry's, drowning out each other's words in their eagerness to be heard.

"I hope we're not--"

"If this isn't a good time, we completely--"

Will held up his hands. "No, please--" he began, just as another sneeze cut off his words. He dug in his pocket, took out a folded handkerchief, and dabbed at his nose. "It's quite all right."

"Are you certain?" Sirius said anxiously. He looked as ill at ease as a first year who had been caught sneaking down to the kitchens late at night. "I mean, we wouldn't want to--"

"We really should have let you know beforehand." Remus gave Harry his best disapproving teacher frown. Harry ducked his head to conceal his scowl.

"Really, it's fine. I'm only sorry that you have to see this." The Old One's smile was embarrassed, but good-natured. "I'd like to lie and assure you that my workplace normally doesn't look like this, but I think it's a bit late for excuses. It all started out as me looking for a book, but the search led to shelf dusting and the dusting led to reorganising and with one thing and another the search somehow turned into spring cleaning. And as you can see, it was needed badly."

In the time it had taken him to explain himself, he had rolled down his shirtsleeves, rebuttoned the cuffs, and reknotted his tie. He scooped up his suit jacket, which had been neatly draped over the desk chair, and picked his way through the books and papers, fingercombing the worst of the dust from his hair. By the time he had reached a conversational distance, his jacket was on and his tie was straight. The only thing out of place was the faintly greyish tint of the dust that was left in his hair.

"But if you'll kindly ignore the mess, Professor Lupin, Mr. Black, I'm glad to see you both. What brings you here this evening?" He sounded so unruffled that Harry half-expected him to offer them a cup of tea.

Sirius smoothed his hair back; Will's rapid neatening up had made him overly aware of his own scruffy appearance. "Harry offered to show us where you hold these sessions we've heard about."

"Indeed?" said Will. "I'd have thought that Mr. Potter would rather have you sit in on one of them. You're more than welcome to do so."

"He didn't give us that option," Remus said cautiously. "But it's not his doing. I asked him to stop by my office tonight and explain a few things."

"How interesting." The Old One's calm gaze flickered briefly in Harry's direction, long enough for him to fully understand that 'interesting' did not, in this case, mean 'nice'. "May I ask what?"

"He told us why you are working with the wizarding world."

Will nodded, as if he had expected as much. "And?"

"That was all," Sirius said. "He seemed to think you could provide a better explanation."

"I see." Something in the way those two words came out made Harry's stomach clench, but Will continued mildly, "Well, there's little else to explain. Without going into events prior to the start of this school year, we have been working together from the beginning of fall term. Apart from Albus Dumbledore, only Professor McGonagall and Professor Figg knew of this arrangement."

"Need-to-know basis only," Sirius stated. He didn't sound very happy.

"Exactly."

"That's about what Harry said." The Animagus tilted his head ever so slightly to one side, and a sharp, cunning glint crept into his eyes. "So tell us--just what are *you* getting out of this?"

"Sirius!" Harry was flabbergasted.

Will held up a hand for silence--it wasn't very necessary, as Remus hadn't spoken and Harry was all but beyond words.

"It's a fair question," he said, returning Sirius's gaze levelly. "More than fair, even."

He took a small step forward, closing the space between him and the mirror. At the same time, he folded his arms behind his back, assuming a solid, pedagogical-looking stance, as if he was about to deliver a lecture he had prepared some time before. His office, filled with distractions and disorder, seemed to recede into a very distant background. If he had wanted to command a large audience, he would have had no problem doing so. He had made himself the sole focus of their attention.

"My duty, in this time, is to eradicate traces of the Dark from the world of men." The professorial stance blended and fused with the crisp, certain speech of an Old One--a formidable combination. "I am not speaking of the ordinary darkness that can be found within all men, you understand. That is not something the Light can control. But I am here to keep the Watch regardless, should the Light's power be needed."

"Voldemort took the power of the Dark for a reason. He wanted immortality, and got it, after a fashion."

"In what way?" asked Remus.

"The type of bargain he made would ensure that he--his spirit, rather-- could not be killed." His voice slipped into a rhythmic cadence, the singing lilt of poetry and prophecy shot through with a call to action that would not be denied. "Both body and spirit must be

banished, cast out of this world and sent out of Time. But neither your type of magic nor mine can accomplish this task alone. Combining the power of the wizarding world with that of the Light is the only way to fully defeat Lord Voldemort, to drive him back once and for all."

"And you need Harry to do it," Sirius snarled.

"Padfoot," Remus murmured warningly, just low enough for Harry to hear.

"It's not a question of need, Mr. Black." The calm blue-grey of Will's eyes had darkened to the colour of gathering storm clouds at Sirius's belligerent tone. If anything he looked even more like a lecturing schoolmaster, about to take an unruly pupil to task. "It's nowhere near that simple."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Believe what you like. It is the truth."

"But you still need him," Sirius persisted staunchly, jabbing the air with a finger. "And the others."

"The Light needs them," the Old One replied. "I, on the other hand, would honestly be far more happy if this was something that could be accomplished without them."

Remus said, rather viciously, "And what is that supposed to mean?"

Will closed his eyes. "A small point that wizarding magic tends to overlook. You can take an ordinary man--a Muggle, if you like--and weave the most complicated of spells around him, make him part of a magic spanning the centuries. It can be done. But when the spell has run its course he will never be more than a man."

When he opened his eyes, their colour had deepened still further, to the dark grey of the sea in a thunderstorm. "In fact, that was the reason why I was reluctant to approach Mr. Potter and his colleagues in the first place."

"Re...reluctant?" Harry's voice rose to an incredulous, undignified squeak.

Will spared no more than a momentary glance at him. "The initial risks outweigh the benefits by a fair amount, Mr. Potter. Even a risk-taking Gryffindor such as yourself would not like the odds." He let his words sink in adding, "And I have seen what can happen when a man finds the Light to be a cold master."

The two older wizards said nothing, but from where he was standing Harry could feel two pairs of eyes boring holes into his back.

"And it can be cold," Will stated matter-of-factly, without apology. "The Light has nothing comparable to the seductive power that the Dark can wield. No delicately persuasive techniques, no hard and fast promise of gain. But the children--no, the young adults I have seen twice a week for almost a year now came willingly, knowing the risks and choosing to accept them. They are the greatest natural allies the Light has. And in the end it will be they who defeat the Dark Lord--with his own magic, no less. The Dark will destroy the Dark."

Harry felt a tingling, whispering thrill dance up his spine as the part of him that was connected to the Light silently affirmed the Old One's words. But Will wasn't quite finished.

"To answer your question, Mr. Black," he said, and Sirius stiffened, as if he was being called to attention, "what I will 'get' is peace of mind, and the knowledge that I have done my duty. What you and your kind will get is up to you."

In the beat of silence that followed, Harry felt that he had somehow been given leave to speak. He would not have spoken otherwise but for the fact that he had a role to play in this, a part to recite.

"Sirius, I **knew** that something would happen at King's Cross and St. Mungo's. I knew something was wrong the night Ron's mum died. And I couldn't do anything about it. Do you know how **helpless** that made me feel?" His voice trembled, and it wasn't an act.

His godfather looked pained. "Harry...."

"But when Ron and I drove off those Dementors, we weren't helpless. We saved everyone on the train." He would **not** think about Natalie McDonald, lying in a hospital bed somewhere in north London. "And it's not only about Voldemort. If you'd **seen** Neville...." He abandoned that idea--explaining it would take too long. "I can't make you understand. You have to trust me."

"It's not about trust!" Sirius snapped.

"Then what?" he snapped back.

"It's...it's...." The older man clenched and unclenched his hands, as if doing so could squeeze what he wanted to say out of his mouth.

Remus moved closer to his old friend, but did not touch him or even reach out a comforting hand. Even so, Sirius seemed to draw strength from the other man's presence.

"I can't lose you again," he said roughly, dragging each word out to its fullest length. The blaze of anger had faded from his eyes, leaving them dull and hollow looking. "I can't. I lost you fifteen years ago and I'd rather die than have it happen again. I'd do anything to keep you safe."

"Almost anything." The murmured correction came from so far away that at first Harry didn't realise he had spoken.

But Sirius did. His jaw dropped, then snapped shut with an audible click and a raw grating of teeth.

"You don't mean..." Remus's voice was a strangled whisper.

He had frightened them without even meaning to. "I don't want to lose you, either," he said quickly, looking from one to the other. "But this is something we have to do. And we can do it. I **know** we can."

His godfather looked away, unable to meet his earnest gaze.

Remus, however, turned to face the mirror.

"Harry made up his mind a long time ago," he said, subdued but firm. "There's nothing I can say or do that will change it. And if he says that he trusts you, Dr. Stanton, then I will...because Harry's trust isn't something easily given."

Will smiled broadly, pleased and obviously relieved. "Thank you, Professor."

"It's a pity we can't shake on it," Remus quipped lightly.

"You want me to come five hundred kilometres for a handshake?" The Old One made a mock-horrified face. "I know how fond you all are of formality, but isn't that a bit much?"

Remus grinned. "Us, fond of formality?" He pressed a hand to his heart, faking surprise. "Now I wonder what Arabella Figg would have to say about that."

"Oh, I can think of several things," said Will, dry as dust. "Nothing I haven't heard before, but certainly nothing I care to hear again."

The two men chuckled at the thought, and even Harry smiled, but their lightheartedness soon faded when Sirius did not laugh with them.

Harry glanced at his godfather. The dark-haired wizard had been silent for a long time, regarding Will with a strange half-smile, half-grimace on his lips.

"I think I liked it better when I thought you were just some Muggle," he said at last.

Will smiled faintly, though his eyes remained cautious. "I wasn't aware that I was so convincing."

"Oh, you were." Hesitantly, Sirius's lips curved up and out, altering the expression on his face to something that was looked more like a smile and less like a grimace. "You were. But you aren't, and I know that."

He clasped his hands in front of him in a very statesman-like manner, and cleared his throat. "I will trust you, Dr. Stanton," he proclaimed, unhesitatingly. "For who you are, and for what you are to Harry."

The coils of tension that had formed a massive tangle in the pit of Harry's stomach came undone. Relief made his knees wobble; he was glad he had the table at his back.

"I truly--" Will began to say, but a loud, insistent knocking broke through before he could get past the first two words.

All four of them froze.

The knocking came again. Three quick raps, a pause, and then another quick one-two-three.

In a flash, Remus and Sirius had their wands out. Sirius moved stealthily across the room, placing himself between Harry and the locked door. Remus did likewise.

"Ah...I think that's for me."

The three wizards whirled round to see Will calmly making his way through the maze of papers, back to his desk. He picked up the dustbin and set it right side up, then turned to survey his office, scowling at the mess.

"Are you sure?" Remus said in a hushed voice.

Will tipped his head to one side, listening. As if on cue, the three knocks came again.

"Yes, that's definitely on my side. Whoever it is must've seen my light on." He ran a hand through his hair, sending up a small puff of dust. "The undergraduates here *will* keep the oddest hours. Though for what it's worth, I'll take seven o'clock on a Tuesday night over two-thirty on a Monday morning. If you will pardon me, gentlemen?"

The change of personality could not have been more complete. There was no trace of the immortal servant of the Light, nothing to suggest that the man before them was anything more than a junior professor in a very cluttered office.

"Of course," said Sirius, though the response was not so much an actual granting of leave as a knee-jerk reaction to the sound of Will's voice.

Remus did a bit better. "Thank you, Dr. Stanton."

"Not at all." He nodded to Harry. "Until Thursday evening, then, Mr. Potter?"

Harry blinked. "Yes, sir."

"I'll be expecting you." Silvery mist, thick as early morning fog, rolled across the smooth surface of the mirror. "Mr. Black, Professor Lupin, it was a pleasure to see you both again."

The two men muttered hasty farewells, but by then the enchanted mirror had returned to its normal reflective state.

"He has an office," Sirius said unthinkingly. He was staring blankly at his reflection in the mirror, almost as if he was confused as to why it should be there in the first place.

"Well, he *is* a professor," said Harry, rather snottily. "Of Social Anthropology," he added as an afterthought, because it sounded very grand to say it.

"We *knew* that," the Animagus grumbled.

"You have to understand, Harry, that it's still a lot to take in," said Remus. "You've had all year to get used to this. We've had"-- he scratched his head, thinking quickly--"about twenty-four hours."

"He's *good*, Remus," Harry insisted. "If you'd seen what he did on the train, you'd know. Wormtail was terrified of him."

"I don't doubt that." Sirius ran his tongue across his lips, tasting the air with a malicious relish. "If I had as much to fear as that rat does, I would be, too."

"And if he's even half of what that book says he is...." Remus left the rest unspoken.

The three wizards were silent, looking at each other.

Just as Harry was about to ask if he could go back to Gryffindor Tower to see exactly what he'd missed that day, his stomach let out a loud, angry-sounding rumble. In all the excitement, he had forgotten that the last food he'd eaten was broth and bread in the infirmary, and that meagre meal had been consumed almost eight hours before.

He flushed bright red. Remus and Sirius laughed.

"Come on." Sirius threw an arm round Harry's shoulders. "Let's all go back to the office and have some dinner."

"Not sandwiches," Harry demanded. He didn't want to put himself off his food before he actually got any.

"Fine, then," his godfather agreed. "Not sandwiches."

* * *

"I still can't understand WHY we had to miss dinner. It's not like Hufflepuff has some secret weapon that'll make them invincible all of a sudden."

"Look, this was the only time I could get the pitch," Harry said brusquely. Ron understood perfectly well--he was simply being an ass about the whole thing. "Slytherin and Ravenclaw have it booked solid all week."

It was ten to seven on Thursday, and Harry, Ron, and Colin were walking as rapidly as they could through the corridors. Harry had rounded up the Gryffindor team for a Quidditch practice immediately after classes, and not fifteen minutes before they had still been swooping and diving above the pitch. Between the steady drizzle of rain outside and the lukewarm showers they had managed to snatch in the changing rooms, they all felt damp, sticky, and very overheated.

"So why wasn't Hufflepuff out there in that muck?" Ron retorted. He shook his head, sending out a fine spray of water droplets.

Scowling, Harry wiped the water off his face. "Just because we're not playing this week doesn't mean we shouldn't get practice time in."

"Tell that to my stomach."

"I *said* we were going to be practising through dinner."

"Harry, why can't we stop and grab something from downstairs?" Colin said pleadingly. A fast walk for the two older boys was a rapid jog-trot for him. "Just a quick run to the kitchens. I'm sure it'll only take a minute."

"You should've eaten more at lunch." Listening to Ron's griping and Colin's whining had eradicated whatever sympathy Harry might have felt for his teammates. "Or brought something with you."

"But I'm HUN-gry." Colin had a gift for making a simple complaint sound like a two-syllable death sentence.

"If you want to be late, go right ahead."

Colin blanched, and started to walk faster. "I'm not *that* hungry."

Ron rummaged through the pockets of his work robe. Suddenly, his eyes lit up, and he pulled out a small apple.

"Here," he said to Colin, holding the shiny red fruit aloft. "It's not much, but I'll split it with you."

Colin beamed. "Thanks, R--"

Ron snatched the apple away before the younger boy's fingers could close over it. "*If* you fold and put away my Quidditch gear for the rest of the year."

"A week," Colin countered.

"Two weeks."

"Starting Sunday."

"Done." Ron took out his wand and tapped the apple. "Diverbero."

The apple quivered, then split neatly into two equal parts.

"Where did you learn that?" Harry asked, astounded. He'd never heard that particular spell before.

Ron smiled, rather wistfully. "Mum used to use it when we were little. Saved us the trouble of having to fight about who ended up with the biggest piece of whatever."

He handed one of the apple halves to Colin, who began to munch on it delightedly.

By the time Ron and Colin had licked the last of the apple juice from their fingers, they had reached the door. Harry showed Colin how to cast the unlocking spell, though he opened the door himself.

Ginny and Neville were already inside, sitting at the long table. Ginny was reading a book. Neville was playing with Trevor, his pet toad. They looked up as the door opened, and nodded to the three new arrivals. Colin nodded shyly back.

Harry and Ron pulled up chairs and sank into them, letting the blissful warmth of the fire soak through their aching muscles. Harry took off his glasses and started to polish the lenses, rubbing away rain marks with the edge of his shirt. Colin wandered over to Ginny and peered

over her shoulder, curious as to what she was reading, but Ginny was so absorbed in the book that she didn't seem to notice him.

Neville scratched Trevor's forehead, gave him a fond pat, and slipped the toad back into his pocket. "Where's Hermione?" he asked.

"Wasn't she at dinner?" asked Ron.

"She ate and left really fast," Ginny said, not lifting her eyes from her book. "She said she had to talk to McGonagall."

Harry resettled his glasses on his nose. "What for?"

"Prefect stuff, probably," Neville said.

Colin piped up. "She caught a couple of Slytherin third years hexing each other in the halls after lunch today. Maybe that's it."

"She'd talk to Snape about that, not McGonagall," Ginny remarked idly.

Ron strode over and plucked the book from his sister's hands. "All right, Miss Knows-It-All, YOU think of something."

Ginny sprang to her feet and snatched the book back.

"All I'm saying," she said crossly, "is that there's no reason for her to see McGonagall over some Slytherins." She replaced the book on a nearby shelf and spun round, hands on her hips, to glare at her brother. "And furthermore--"

Just as she was about to really get going, the door opened. It was Hermione.

"Sorry I'm late," she said.

"You're not late," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "You're freakishly on time, as always."

Ginny made a disgusted noise and hurried forward. "I *told* him you were with McGonagall, but wo--"

Her voice died away as Hermione walked past her without a smile or a sideways glance.

"Hermione?" Neville said as she passed by him. "Is something...?"

Hermione set her schoolbag on the table. Her face was chalk-white and composed, calm with the fixed tranquillity of a marble statue. Her eyes were dry, but glassy-looking and red-rimmed, as if she had been crying for such a long time that no more tears would come. Faint tremors shook the hand that she held out to touch the mirror frame.

Will's office was back to normal. If anything, it looked cleaner than usual. The Old One was completing the rather mundane process of hanging up his coat, and he turned round as the last wisps of mist faded from view. He checked his watch.

"Right on time," he said.

Neville, Ron, and Harry stood, and joined Ginny and Colin in their places around the mirror.

"Enter, Watchman of the Light."

"Grant to us your inner sight."

"Enter, for the time draws near."

"Power will erase our fear."

"Enter, lest the darkness win."

"We the Six now call you in."

Their flat, almost mechanical recitation of the spell was not lost on Will. He paused for a full five seconds before he stepped through the mirror. Once he was on the other side, his gaze immediately fell upon Hermione.

"What news, Miss Granger?" Will said, very quietly.

It took several moments for Hermione's eyes to focus on him.

"I went to see Professor McGonagall after dinner," she said. "She asked me to stop by her office if I had time before tonight's session."

"And what did she want to talk to you about?" he asked.

"She wanted to talk to me about Natalie."

At the mention of Natalie's name, she seemed to sway slightly on her feet. Swiftly, Will guided her to the closest chair. Once she was seated he knelt beside the chair, placing his hands on the armrest. Harry and the others edged toward the two of them, forming a nervous little knot a few feet away.

"I-is she okay?" Ginny quavered.

Hermione nodded, but her reply was directed solely at Will, as if he had been the one to ask the question. "She's awake now. The head mediwizard at the Islington hospital contacted Madam Pomfrey, and she told McGonagall. Natalie woke up last night."

Ron let out the breath he had been holding.

"That's great!" Colin said, a little too loudly.

Relieved, Ginny and Neville smiled at each other, but Hermione's next words wiped the smiles from their faces.

"There's something else."

Without turning his head, Will motioned to them, ordering them all to be seated. They obeyed, but they did not take their eyes off Hermione.

"Was...was it the complications that Madam Pomfrey was talking about?" Neville said timidly as he lowered himself into his chair.

For the first time, Hermione seemed to realise that someone else had spoken. She turned on Neville, suddenly alive, blazing, and angry.

"'Complications'?" she repeated bitterly. "She'll never be normal again, if that's what you mean by 'complications'."

Ginny cried out weakly, and clapped a hand to her mouth. Ron grabbed his sister's other hand, squeezing it tightly. Neville looked as ill as Harry felt.

Will asked, "How so?"

"The mediwizard who talked to Madam Pomfrey said that the accident caused some bleeding in her brain." She spoke in a monotone, almost unaware of what she was saying. She might have been parroting what McGonagall had told her. "They treated her as best they could at the hospital, but they think that the injury affected her memory, and possibly her personality. It's too soon to tell. But she's not responding very well to the magical treatments."

A twinge of pain in Harry's thumb momentarily distracted him. He looked down to see a small pool of blood welling up from the ragged edge of the nail. He had chewed it past the quick without knowing.

"She...." Hermione coughed loudly. Her cough sounded suspiciously close to a swallowed sob. "They said she might have to stay in the Continuing Care Ward for a while, once they finish rebuilding St Mungo's. And she--"

Her voice failed her, but her lips clearly formed two words. *My fault.*

Will sighed. He took one of her hands and held it in both of his own. "You can't wish someone dead, child," he said, kindly but firmly. "If we could, you can be sure that there'd be no one left on this earth to do the wishing."

Hermione hiccupped, swallowing another sob.

"Hush, now," he told her, squeezing her hand. "You very nearly got your foulest wish granted. That would be enough to shake anyone."

He wasn't being metaphorical. She was shaking, literally. And when she found her voice a few seconds later, the tremors extended to it as well:

"I-I told her the t-truth."

For a moment Harry thought that 'her' referred to Natalie. "What?" he said, startled.

"After McGonagall finished telling me about Natalie, I told her the truth. About my promise, and everything." Her lower lip quivered. "And I....I asked her to accept my resignation as prefect."

Both Colin and Neville's mouths fell open.

Ginny hid her face in her hands.

"Hermione, she didn't--she didn't EXPEL you?" A strange mixture of disbelief and dread made Ron sound raspy, like he had been inhaling smoke and Potions fumes. "She couldn't...she *wouldn't*...."

"No," she said with a tiny shake of her head. "She didn't expel me. She wouldn't let me resign. She didn't even take points away."

Ron let out another ragged breath.

"Had me worried there," he said gruffly, trying to hide his emotions.

"But what did she do?" asked Colin.

Hermione stared down at her hands. "I'm still a prefect, but in name only. I'll keep doing the evening rounds and things like that. It wouldn't be fair to make one of the others cover my duties as well as theirs, not this close to the end of the year. But I'm not allowed to use the Prefect's Bathroom anymore, and I have to ask someone else for the new dormitory passwords, and...a few other things."

Harry gaped at her. Losing House points and getting detention was one thing, but this was quite another. He had never heard of anyone being stripped of their privileges as prefect, let alone being allowed to keep their responsibilities. It made sense, but it didn't make sense, and yet it still made sense in a crazy, mixed-up way.

"But you're here," Ginny insisted. "McGonagall *didn't* expel you."

"I almost wish she *had* expelled me," Hermione said softly. "I deserve it."

Ron winced. "Don't say that."

"You don't UNDERSTAND!" she cried. "She told me that I'd dishonoured Gryffindor House, and Hogwarts, too. She said..." Her voice cracked. She pressed her lips together so tightly that all that was left of her mouth was a thin white slit. "She said she was ashamed of me."

The wretchedness and despair in her tone stirred Harry's memories, calling up an unbidden image of a gravesite where the stubbly fringe of grass had not quite covered the recently turned earth. An image of rage, and grief, and hopelessness.

An image of failure.

He knew all too well what it was like to want to blame yourself for something beyond your control, to curse the part you had played, however small.

It had been bad, sometimes, during the summer with Mrs. Figg. He would awaken in the middle of the night with the moonlight shining cold and green through the bedroom windows, and the empty room would echo with Voldemort's command:

"Kill the spare."

And more often than not there would be another echo with it, Cedric's whispery plea:

"Harry, bring my body back, will you?"

He would plug his ears with his fingers and bury his head under the pillow, but he could not shut the voices out.

He would lie awake for a long time after that, too afraid to sleep. If he slept late on the mornings after, as he often did, Mrs. Figg would keep breakfast warm for him until he came down. And if he didn't want to eat, she would silently brew him a cup of tea, strong and scalding hot, and sit with him while he drank it. She had never once asked him if he wanted to talk about it. She hadn't needed to.

He wondered, for the first time, if there had been nights when Hermione dreamt of railway carriages filled with blood. There had been no cup of tea waiting for her when she awoke.

"Minerva McGonagall punishes harshly, but with fairness." Will's voice snapped Harry out of his reflections. "I think that she did the right thing...but more so, *you* did the right thing, Miss Granger."

Hermione smiled at him. Her smile was wavery and half-hearted, but it was genuine.

"I know." A single tear tricked down her nose. She used the back of her hand to wipe it away. "I only wish it didn't have to hurt so much."

"Here." From seemingly nowhere, Will produced a folded handkerchief and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said with a weak attempt at a grin, dabbing at her eyes. "This is the third one I've gone through so far today. Mine, Professor McGonagall's, and now yours."

"Keep it," Will replied when she tried to return it to him. "Give it back when you've done with tears."

"I'm done," Hermione said stubbornly. "It was the shock, that's all. I'm fine now." She refolded the handkerchief and put it in her lap.

The Old One frowned coldly, suddenly severe.

"If you're as 'fine' as you claim to be, Miss Granger, then why do I still sense indecision in this room?" he said sternly.

"Wh...what?" Hermione blinked, painfully. "B-but I've told you everything, honestly!"

"Have you?" Will sounded doubtful. "If you aren't going to be completely truthful with us, then how can you expect--"

"It's not Hermione, sir."

The flatness of his tone made all heads turn to Ron. It wasn't an indignant protest or an attempt to defend Hermione. He wasn't even looking in Hermione's direction. Instead, his gaze was riveted to the tabletop in front of him.

"Would you care to enlighten us, then, Mr. Weasley?" Will said, prompting.

Ron laughed casually. Actually, it would have been a casual laugh if nervousness hadn't pitched his voice an octave higher than normal.

"Well, I *was* going to wait until after the session," he said, "mostly 'cause it's not something anyone else would want to listen to me rabbit on and on about, so I--"

"Take your time," Will broke in, stopping him. "I'm in no hurry."

Ron gulped a lungful of air and tried again, more slowly this time. "When Ginny and I were talking with our father on Monday night, he told me something I should've remembered. I...I owe you a life debt, sir."

The Old One peered at him curiously. "A what?"

Convulsively, Ron's hands clutched the arms of his chair, but he pried his treacherous fingers loose and got to his feet. He walked around the table to stand in front of Will, next to Hermione's chair.

"Wormtail--I know he would have killed me, back on the train. You saved my life, and I owe you a life debt, sir." His voice held more confidence the second time he said it, as if admitting his obligation had somehow strengthened his resolve.

Will raised an eyebrow. "I was under the impression that that sort of concordat only applied to wizards, Mr. Weasley."

Ron returned Will's gaze steadily, matching it with a determined ferocity that silenced any improper comments his friends might have made. There was nothing of the gangly, self-conscious, hand-me-down-clad fifteen-year-old boy about him. There was only the scion of a very old wizarding family, the youngest son upholding the family honour with a man's word and a man's bond.

After a moment's consideration, he said softly, "If you'll pardon my saying so, sir, I think that it more than applies to you."

Will smiled, but there was no humour in his eyes--only sadness. "And you are absolutely set on this?"

Ron nodded. "You saved my life. I can't pretend it didn't happen. I won't always have these"--he pointed to his neck, lightly touching the dull golden-yellows and faint greens of the fast fading bruises-- "to remind me every time I look in the mirror." He let his hand fall to his side.

Incredibly, inexplicably, Harry found that he was afraid. He was afraid of this strange new Ron, who looked so much older than the Ron who he had played Quidditch with that

afternoon. He was afraid of Will, too, because Will was...he was *Will*, and he wasn't telling Ron to quit talking nonsense and say what the real problem was.

The ache of fear in his heart sharpened to a fine point of pain when Will bowed deeply, formally, to Ron, as he might have bowed to Dumbledore or any of the other adults they knew.

"Very well, Mr. Weasley," he said. "I acknowledge your debt."

Ron held out his hand. It was small and white, dotted with odd freckles. "Then please accept my services, for whatever small part they may play toward the repayment of my debt."

As Will took Ron's hand to seal their agreement, Harry felt a tiny electrical spark jolt all through him, burning away the fear. This was a part of the wizarding world he had never witnessed before, the forging of this sort of bond. He imagined that he and Wormtail had something similar between them, the life debt formed when Harry had kept Sirius and Remus from killing their former friend, but there was a vast difference between the forced obligation made on a night of madness and the willing commitment he had just seen.

From the looks on Hermione and Colin's faces, he could tell that they had felt something, too, and didn't know what to make of it. Nothing in the Muggle world could have ever prepared them for something like this. Hermione looked as though she was trying very hard not to cry; her shoulders were trembling, and her face was stony stiff. Colin was staring at Ron as if he couldn't decide whether to be scared of him or scared for him.

Neville and Ginny, however, had watched the little ceremony with solemn faces and an air of silent approval. Strangely enough, Ginny seemed to be quite comfortable with her brother's decision. Not even the gravity of her expression could completely conceal the pride bubbling in her eyes.

Will released Ron's hand, and the electricity was gone. The air hummed for a moment. Then everything was still.

"Curious," Will said abruptly, piercing the quiet. "Very curious."

"What is?" asked Ron.

"You, Mr. Weasley. And the reasoning behind what you have just done." He shook his head, studying the youngest Weasley boy pensively. "No matter how much I think I understand, there is a part of me that remains completely baffled."

"I'm glad I did it, sir." Ron's voice was calm, eerily adult in tone. "It was the right thing to do."

A lump of charred wood broke off from the largest log on the fire and fell to the hearth with a crackle and a dull thump.

The vague, haunted pensiveness vanished from Will's eyes like a candle flame being blown out.

"Are we quite finished with emotional scenes for tonight?" he asked coolly, gazing at each of them in turn. "There's a good deal of work to be done."

And just like that, the glass wall had fallen back into place.

"Yes, sir," the Six said, and meant it.

After all, there was a good deal of work to be done.

Chapter Thirty-One - The Gathering Storm

Who is the god that fashions enchantments - - the enchantment of battle and the winds of change?

-- The Song of Amairgen, Leabhar Gabhála (Book of Invasions)

The very first order of business that Will had planned was to properly bring Colin into the Six. Dumbledore's emergency meeting had taken priority on Monday evening, but now it was time for Colin to experience the more formal rituals that Harry and the others had already gone through.

Harry wished that he had had the foresight to talk to Colin beforehand, to tell him exactly what joining the Circle would entail. He knew the formalities wouldn't be painful, but Colin didn't know that. And Will Stanton was undeniably intimidating, despite his mild-mannered nature.

Small wonder, then, that at that moment Colin was sitting very stiffly on the edge of his chair, awaiting whatever would come with all the enjoyment of a second-year student sitting Professor Snape's first exam of the year.

From somewhere within his robes Will produced a small, battered leather pouch that was immediately familiar to the other Gryffindors. He undid the thin cord that held it closed and tipped the pouch upside-down over his hand. A single light-coloured stone, no larger than the ball of his thumb, dropped into his open palm.

"Keep this with you at all times," he ordered, placing the stone in Colin's hand and curling the young boy's fingers around it. "Your colleagues have them as well. In the immediate presence of the Dark this warestone will grow very cold, too cold to touch. A special spell will also cause it to vibrate slightly if it detects the residual magic of an Unforgivable Curse."

Colin glanced down at his closed fist with wary eyes, as he might have looked at the very first wand that Mr. Ollivander placed in his hand.

"It won't bite you," Will said. Gentle humour warmed his voice. "But do take care if you try using it for anything other than its intended purposes. We've had one too many unexpected reactions to risk another such incident."

Harry cringed at his carefully chosen words, sliding down a fraction of an inch in his seat. Hermione remained upright in her chair, but her face looked oddly pinched, as if she had eaten something that had turned out to be unexpectedly sour. Ron was scowling openly, not even bothering to look ashamed. Neville was pointedly avoiding all eye contact with his classmates. The only exception to their collective discomfort was Ginny, who was holding her hand in front of her mouth to conceal what was obviously a self-satisfied smirk.

"Thank you," Colin said, though he didn't sound at all thankful. He slipped the stone into his pocket.

Will tucked the empty bag back into his robes and held out a hand, a gesture of assistance that was both offer and command. "There is one thing left for you to do, if the Circle is to be completed tonight."

Colin took the outstretched hand and got to his feet--slowly. He allowed Will to lead him over to stand before the fire, but he moved as if he was wading through chest-high water. He seemed to be feeling for each footing, uncertain of his steps.

Hermione, seeing Colin's uneasiness, tentatively raised her hand and started to say, "Shouldn't we all--"

"The five of you have already forged the link," Will said, stopping her question in mid-sentence. With his free hand, he swept his cloak back and away from one shoulder, the midnight blue material falling in folds across his back. "Adding one more person to it requires less effort on my part than trying to synchronise five others at the same time. And Mr. Creevey will need a little time to adjust to the magic on his own."

Colin looked like he didn't want to adjust to anything. In fact, Harry wouldn't have been surprised if it was only Will's firm grip on Colin's hand that was keeping the younger boy from outright panic.

Before Hermione or anyone else could respond, Will had taken Colin's other hand, and in the same movement knelt down on one knee. With Will kneeling, the young wizard and the Old One were just eye to eye.

"Can you stand very still for me?" he asked in a low voice, holding Colin's gaze steadily.

Colin gave him the tiniest of nods in reply.

The Old One nodded back. "Very good. Keep quite still, then. Take some nice deep breaths and allow yourself to relax."

Harry smiled inwardly. Colin was small for his age, about the same height as Ginny and a good half a head shorter than Harry or Neville. Normally, Will would have towered over him, and it didn't take any great amount of perceptiveness to realise that the height difference only served to add to Colin's nervousness. But by meeting the younger boy at eye level, Will made the whole thing seem less like an ordeal and more like a secret that would pass between friends...and equals.

The token gesture seemed to be having an effect. Colin was visibly relaxing with every passing second. His hunched shoulders dropped, his breathing evened out, and his posture went from one of awkward rigidity to a more easy, natural stance.

"Yes, that's right," Will said softly, voice and face as tranquil as a still pool of water. "You're doing quite well. Just stand very still now and clear your mind, let go of any outside thoughts or distractions...."

As Will continued to speak in the same hushed tones, Harry found himself struggling to stay awake. He was sitting nearer the fire than the others, and the drowsy warmth radiating from the grate blended with Will's voice, wrapping him in a soothing blanket of dreamy peacefulness. His eyelids were twin lead weights, pulling him down into a warm darkness that was filled with feather-light, hypnotic echoes of words that had dissolved into the shadows.

Yet just as he was about to nod off, he felt something *click* inside him.

It wasn't the kind of click he felt when he suddenly understood or realised something important; it was too strong, too forceful for that. He felt the click in his body as well as his mind--a sensation as unmistakable as the feeling of a painfully dislocated joint sliding back into place, or a stray puzzle piece fitting neatly into its slot. It felt *good*, so good that Harry's heart gave a skip and began to pound faster.

He opened his eyes, his heartbeat singing in his ears, and his gaze went immediately to Colin and Will.

Will's tranquil expression had not altered by so much as a hair, but Colin had the look of a small boy who had woken up early on Christmas morning and discovered his overstuffed stocking draped neatly across the foot of his bed. A dazzled smile glowed on his face, but his gaze was strangely vacant, not focused on anything or anyone.

Harry was startled for a moment, but a moment later he understood the reason for Colin's unseeing eyes.

H...h...hello.

Breathy and hesitant, the younger boy's voice drifted shyly into his mind. Harry could feel him fumble a little as he adjusted to the newness of it all.

Are you all right there? he heard Will ask, directing the question to Colin but allowing all of them to hear.

Colin's response came a little more smoothly. *Fine, sir.*

Will made a muted noise of approval. *Good to hear it. And just to be absolutely certain...Miss Granger, could you hear him clearly when he answered my question?*

Perfectly, sir, Hermione replied immediately.

"Excellent," Will said grandly, speaking aloud once more. He patted Colin on the shoulder. "You may sit down now, Mr. Creevey."

Colin blinked once or twice, collecting himself, then obediently trotted the few steps back to his seat. His chair was directly opposite Harry's, and Harry grinned at him as he sat down. Colin returned the grin, a little unsteadily but no less brightly.

Will straightened up, wincing a little as he did so. Being down on one knee for so long could not have been comfortable. He looked glad to finally sit down in his chair, where he could stretch out his legs and feel the warmth of the fire at his back.

"Speaking with one another in that fashion works best when all of you are in the same room, or within sight of each other," he said to them, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair. "It's a very limited form of telepathy, but it is a means of communication that the Dark cannot break into. With enough practice it should come fairly easily to you. However, I don't recommend using it unless it is clearly an emergency."

"Because the Dark can detect us if we use it?" Neville guessed. A thin line of worry creased his forehead.

"Well, that," Will said, "and you'd likely end up with a headache if you kept it up for too long." His mouth twitched; he couldn't fully hide a smile. "It has its uses, though."

He paused long enough to marshal his thoughts, then tapped his fingers together lightly.

"Now that the Six are together at last, we can start to deepen your existing--"--and he used a long, strange-sounding word that flowed into and out of Harry's mind like water--"to make full use of your power."

He waited, expecting nods of confirmation and understanding, but all he saw were six equally blank stares.

"I...I'm sorry?" Neville stammered at last.

Will frowned at the bewilderment on their faces, but the frown quickly faded into an almost shamefaced expression.

"Ah," he said quietly, looking very ill at ease. "Forgive me. I'm so used to...the word doesn't really have a proper English equivalent. It doesn't have an equivalent in any modern language I can think of, either. I suppose the closest trans--"

"But it sounded like...." Ginny began, interrupting him.

"Yes?" he said.

"Like it was a...like you were...." Words failed her, and she ducked her head, embarrassed. "I don't know."

Hermione said impulsively, "It almost sounded like something from Charms class...but not really."

"Latin?" Now Will looked confused. "It sounded like Latin to you?"

"No!" she said hastily. She pressed her lips together, biting down on her thoughts. "Well, yes, sort of, but it wasn't...."

Ginny made another attempt. "It...it *sounded* like a normal word, like something I'd heard before, but it got all muddled up in my head. Like I wasn't hearing it right...."

She trailed off, suddenly self-conscious. "And that didn't come out right at all, did it."

Her response did sound strange when said aloud, but Harry knew what she was trying to say. Trying to describe what he had heard was like trying to answer a tricky question on a Charms exam--the proper spell was right there on the tip of his tongue, but the more he strained to recall it the farther the answer receded into the darker corners of his memory.

"She's right," he said. His voice sounded shrill in his ears. "I felt it, too. Like I wasn't hearing it right, I mean."

Ginny shot him a grateful look, smiling at him.

Harry tried to smile back, but what came out felt more like a grimace. What he **hadn't** said aloud was that the word Will had used had, in his own mind, sounded something like English, and something like Latin...and something like Parseltongue. There was a sibilant quality to it that had conjured up old, bad memories of the Chamber of Secrets and made returning Ginny's smile next to impossible.

Unable to look Ginny fully in the eye, he glanced at Will. The Old One had removed his glasses and was holding them up to the light, seemingly checking for spots. He seemed to be deep in contemplation, so the children remained silent, waiting patiently--and uncomfortably, as the moments dragged on.

"Come to think of it, that doesn't surprise me," he said after what felt like an unnaturally long silence. "Considering that you--well, to put it plainly, you're hearing something in between English and the older languages you use for casting spells. It's your mind's way of sorting things out, trying to change the word into something you could understand. Does that make any sense?"

The children nodded, cautiously. It sounded reasonable enough, if only because they couldn't explain it any better themselves.

Will slipped his glasses back on, resettling them on his nose. "Truthfully, I wouldn't read too much into it if I were you," he said. "All languages, in a sense, come from the Old Speech, though non-magical folk lost the ability to understand it long ago. Even most witches and wizards would hear only nonsense syllables. But the fact that you could understand it--even in part--is a great comfort to me. It proves beyond a doubt that the Light has marked you as one of its own."

He gave Harry a sidelong glance as he said the last sentence, and Harry felt a little better when he realised what the Old One was trying to tell him.

"As I was saying," he continued, "the nearest equivalent in modern English would be something along the lines of 'contact', or possibly 'connection'. But you could say that it goes past that, describing something far more complex than the simple mental link the six of you currently possess."

He pushed his chair back and stood, drawing his robes closer about him. "You'll understand it more in practice, I think."

He motioned to them to stand up. Once they were on their feet, he raised his right arm and made a peculiar gesture with his hand.

The long table and all seven chairs vanished in the blink of an eye.

The sudden change was rather disorienting. With all the furniture gone, the little room didn't look so little anymore. It felt much larger, and the children felt much smaller standing in it.

"The basics of your magical training will come in handy," Will said. "Concentrating on the spell, not allowing distractions to break your focus. But you need to practise together."

He stepped to one side. "If you would be so kind as to make a circle, facing inward, and join hands...except you, Mr. Potter," he said when Harry started to follow his friends. "Stand here for now, beside me."

Baffled, Harry hung back and watched as the others formed a circle in a manner that reminded him, oddly enough, of the Yule Ball two Christmases before. There was a pause where no one seemed to know how or where to move, but after a second of hanging back Ron grabbed his sister's hand and strode into the centre of the room, pulling her along after him.

Once Ron had taken the initiative, everyone else followed. Neville quickly moved to stand beside Ron. Hermione took the empty spot on Neville's other side, and Colin slipped in between Hermione and Ginny. The five of them joined hands, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, and craned their necks to look back at Will expectantly.

The Old One studied the arrangement with a critical eye. He pressed his index finger to his lips, tapping them gently as he thought.

"Hm," he said finally. "Not...quite. Mr. Creevey, if you would please switch places with Mr. Weasley? And do allow yourselves enough space to feel comfortable--two steps backward should do it."

Colin and Ron did as they were asked. Once they were in place, the five of them took the requested two steps backward, widening the circle.

"Better," Will said absently, as if he was approving a rearrangement of the now non-existent furniture, rather than that of the children. "Yes, that will do nicely."

Harry gazed hard at his friends, trying to look like he knew exactly what Will had in mind. Ron was now farthest away from the fire, facing him and Will. Ginny was to her brother's right. Then (following the circle anti-clockwise) came Colin, then Neville, and finally Hermione to Ron's left. He knew there was a pattern behind their positions-- Will never did anything without a reason--but try as he might he could not come up with one that seemed to fit.

He was sunk so deep in his search for the pattern that he only caught the end of Will's next statement--or rather, question:

"...to explain why I made that change?"

No one's hand went up, not even Hermione's.

"No ideas?" He raised an amused eyebrow. "Strange. Well, we'll try a little experiment, then. Mr. Creevey, Mr. Weasley, if you would be so good as to return to your original positions?"

Colin and Ron exchanged glances, then silently changed places again. Now Colin was the one facing the fire, standing between Hermione and Ginny, and Ron was on Ginny's other side.

Once they had rejoined hands, Will gave his next command.

"Close your eyes and concentrate on the hands of the person on either side of you," he said. "Just their hands, nothing else. See what happens."

Harry shut his eyes as well, wondering if he would feel anything. He listened intently, ears pricked for any sound, but there was only silence. For a second, he thought about activating the mental link to see what he was missing, but he quickly came to the conclusion that doing so would not be wise...certainly not with Will standing right next to him.

Ten seconds passed, then twenty. Half a minute had gone by and he had neither heard nor felt a thing.

If something was supposed to happen, it would have happened by now, he said to himself, and opened his eyes.

Will was leaning against the mantelpiece, his arms folded across his chest. His friends were still standing in their circle, still holding hands, their expressions a mixture of bewilderment and open confusion. Nothing had changed.

"Well?" Will said, prompting.

Colin was first to answer. "That was *weird*."

"It--*tickled*," added Ginny, taking great care to choose the right word. "Just a little bit."

Hermione, ever precise, tried to give a more specific description. "It felt rather like static electricity."

Neville blinked. "Static what?"

"Static electricity," Harry said, before Hermione could answer. He had been feeling left out of things; Neville's question had given him an excuse to leap back into the conversation. "Like when you touch a door handle and you get a shock."

"Oh," said Neville.

"And that was all you felt?" Will asked. He didn't sound disappointed or angry; he asked the question as if he already knew the answer.

Their reply came in a mixed chorus of "Yes" and "Yes, sir."

"Then Mr. Creevey and Mr. Weasley will switch places once more and you will try it again. This will be the last time, I promise."

Shoes shuffled across stone as Colin and Ron changed positions. Ron took his place between Hermione and Ginny and turned around, and in doing so met Harry's gaze. He glanced at

Will, then back at Harry, and tilted his head a fraction of an inch as if to ask, *What's he playing at?*

Harry lifted his shoulders just enough to indicate that he had no idea, either. He was starting to feel rather silly, standing around like an unwelcome party guest while Ron and Colin danced back and forth across the room. What was more, his back was to the fire, and his neck and shoulders had grown uncomfortably hot. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about it.

Will cleared his throat. "As I said before, I want you to concentrate on the hands--"

And all of a sudden, Harry's hands began to tingle.

"--of the person next to you."

A crackle--if it was possible for one to feel a crackle instead of hearing it--of energy shot through his hands from wrists to fingertips, and the tingle intensified.

"The way their fingers feel in yours--"

The tingle became a pressure, and from the feel of it he could have sworn that someone, a real someone, had grasped his hands. There was weight, and soft warmth, and an almost bony firmness between thumb and palm and around the side where the other person's fingers curled--would curl--over his own.

"--the shape of their palms, the texture of their skin--"

He wanted to open his eyes, but he was afraid to, because he knew his brain would never be able to come to terms with the fact that there was no one near him and nothing in his hands.

"--their hands, nothing else."

There *was* nothing else. The heat on his back, the tense neck muscles left over from Quidditch practice (could it really have been earlier that day?), the ache that had started to creep into the arches of his feet from standing for so long, all of that had dwindled down to nothing.

"...and now...let go."

The ghost hands disappeared.

Harry nearly cried out, startled by the loss. His hands clenched reflexively. He grabbed only air.

He opened his eyes at the same time that the others did. Still standing in their open circle with their hands at their sides, his friends looked as if they had just finished a lengthy round dance or a children's game. Their faces were flushed, and the colour was high in their cheeks.

"What WAS that?" Neville whispered, awe-struck.

"That', Mr. Longbottom," Will replied casually, "was a properly connected circuit. A far more effective use of your collective magical abilities than 'static electricity'."

He took Harry by the shoulder and walked him forward. "And if Mr. Potter were to join you in this particular arrangement...say, by standing here--"--and he guided Harry between Neville and Colin and gently pushed him into the centre of their circle--"--you might find that you've more magical ability at your command than you could have ever imagined. But I think you've done enough for tonight."

For the second time that night, all the children could do was stare blankly at him.

The Old One cocked his head to one side and gave them one of his more inscrutable smiles. "After all, you'll need a little time to adjust to the magic on your own."

Dazedly, the children drifted away from the centre of the room, wandering toward the door. Will waited until they had all reached the far side of the room, and then conjured the table and chairs back into place with a pass of his hand.

"Come Monday, we will work with this more intensely," he said. In three strides, he had left his place by the fire and was beside the mirror. "In preparation, I want all of you to eat properly for the next few days. No more skipping meals, do you hear?"

Next to Harry, Ron stiffened, and Colin drew a sharp breath. Harry was too preoccupied rubbing his hands together, trying to get rid of the clutching feeling that had lingered on his palms, to actually hear the reprimand.

Will nodded to the six children in their huddled group, pointed to the mirror and uttered a single word.

The flare of white light from the intricately carved pattern on the wooden frame seared their eyes. By the time they had blinked and rubbed the worst of the glare away, Will was gone, and the glass of the mirror was ordinary reflective glass once more.

* * *

Morning post was always something of an event at Hogwarts. Even students who weren't expecting letters or parcels from home looked forward to it, eagerly awaiting the flurry of wings and the shower of paper. The sleepy mumble of conversation would rise in pitch and volume as the owls rushed into the Great Hall, a steady din that would be punctuated with laughter and shouts once the post started to rain down. It was often hard to hear the voice of the person next to you over the thin rip of envelopes being opened, the crackling of brown paper wrapping being wadded up and tossed aside, and the rustle of fresh copies of the Daily Prophet being passed from hand to hand. But since most of the teachers took breakfast in their rooms in the morning, no one really cared about the noise. It was all part of the morning at Hogwarts.

At the Gryffindor table, six heads looked to the enchanted ceiling, watching the owls.

Hermione and Neville merely glanced up; they were first to go back to eating. Neither was expecting letters from home that day. Across from them, Ginny watched the owls in flight for a moment longer before she too returned to her meal. Harry never received owls, but he always liked watching the post come in. It was one of the most magical sights at Hogwarts, and no matter how many mornings went by it never failed to take his breath away. Most of the owls had departed by the time he dragged his gaze from the ceiling.

Fred and George, however, looked like they wanted nothing more than to chase after the owls, race after them on their brooms across the rich blueness of the cloud-dotted sky. Their heads stayed up longest, and only Harry, sitting across the table from them, heard the faint, wistful sighs they made when the last tawny owl disappeared.

Ron, sitting between Harry and Ginny, was the only one who had not looked up when the post arrived. Instead, he had been wrestling with an overflowing pot of honey and had come out the worse for it--his hands were liberally smeared with the sticky syrup. But just as he started to use the edge of his butter knife to scrape at his fingers, a plain brown post owl darted in through one of the high windows, swooped low over the Gryffindor table, and neatly dropped a letter beside his plate.

He looked down at the letter, then at his hands.

"It figures," he said grumpily.

Nibbling on her toast, Ginny leaned over to get a better look at the envelope.

"Hey, it's from Percy!" she exclaimed.

"Well, would you look at that." George reached across the table and picked up the letter. He turned it over, studying the scarlet wax seal on the flap. "Ministry paper and all."

Fred cautiously sipped his tea, then added another lump of sugar from the bowl in front of him. "I'm surprised he didn't mark it 'Official: Private and Confidential'."

"Why would he do that?" asked Harry.

"Well, let's put it this way," Fred said. "When he started at the Ministry, the first few times he owed a letter to say he'd be home late for dinner he stamped it 'Most Secret'."

Hermione nearly dropped a spoonful of marmalade into her tea. "You're joking."

"We only wish," George said with a snort. He tossed the letter back onto the table.

"We went through two weeks of it before Crouch finally found out and put a stop to it," Ron said. He abandoned the butter knife, and used the tips of his little fingers to gingerly pick up his napkin. "Said Perce was running the Ministry owls ragged."

Fred suddenly looked thoughtful. "Speaking of owls, that wasn't Hermes, was it?"

George tilted his head back, searching the vaulted ceilings of the Great Hall, but all the post owls had departed. He turned to his twin and shrugged. "Didn't look like it."

"That's odd," said Ron. "Why wouldn't he use Hermes?"

"Is anyone actually going to OPEN it?" Ginny said loudly.

Ron glanced at the letter, then back down at his honey-coated hands and the now honey-coated napkin he held in them.

"You do it, Gin," he said. "I'll be lucky if I can get this stuff off my hands in time for class."

Grinning, Ginny picked up the letter and opened it. She began to read.

While she read, the others went on with their breakfasts and their breakfast conversations. Using a motley collection of salt cellars and pepper pots that they had pilfered from neighbouring tables, Fred and George demonstrated to Harry their newest plan for outflanking an opposing team's Chaser. Neville helped himself to more bacon and went back to reading an essay that Hermione had written for Transfiguration. Every so often he paused to argue with her over the finer points of changing down pillows into Canada geese. Ron, having abandoned all pretence of table manners, was noisily sucking honey off his fingers, half-listening to the others talk.

Harry had just downed the last of his juice and was about to leave the table when he happened to glance over at Ginny. She was staring down at the letter, her eyes darting back and forth as if she was searching for a particular word or sentence and couldn't find it. She was also biting down on her lip hard enough to leave a white dent ringed with red where teeth met flesh.

"Ginny? What's wrong?" he asked.

The twins swivelled round, turning to face their sister. Hermione and Neville had by that time put aside the paper and were discussing the reading due that day for Charms, but the worry in Harry's voice made them break off their conversation and look across the table at Ginny. Ron paused in mid-lick, and grabbed Harry's relatively clean napkin to finish wiping his hands.

Silently, Ginny folded the letter. It took a few tries before she could return it to the envelope; her hands were trembling, and the paper was thick and stiff. Only then did she look up, and her gaze was troubled.

"You might want to read this, Ron," she said faintly, and held the envelope out for him to take.

Ron reached for it, but Fred was quicker. He leaned across the table and snatched it from her hand.

"Hey!" Ron shouted. "Give that here!"

Fred ignored him. Snarling, Ron made a grab for the letter, but Fred dodged the swipe and Ron only succeeded in tipping over his own brimming teacup. A cascade of tea spilled across the table and into his lap. Fred took advantage of the accident to pass the letter to George, and the two of them hurriedly bent over it, reading quickly.

"It NEVER ENDS!" Ron wailed. He tried to use Harry's napkin to dab at his dripping robes, but the napkin refused to unstick itself from his fingers long enough to be of use.

Hermione pushed her plate aside and took out her wand. "Look, just stop fiddling with it and hold still."

"Stupid sticky--"

Hermione gave an exasperated sigh. "Harry, would you mind--"

"I'm on it." Harry pulled out his wand and pointed it at Ron's hands. "Ablutio!"

A glittering blue light shot from the tip of his wand, and in the blink of an eye Ron's hands were clean and dry.

"There now," said Hermione, fixing Ron with a superior smile. "Did you completely fail the test on Cleansing Charms?"

"Could've done my robes while you were at it," Ron said sulkily. "You try getting your hand stuck in the honey pot and see how well *you*--"

"Damn it all!"

Harry's head shot up in time to see Fred crumple the letter in his fist. The crunch of parchment sounded like a gunshot.

"I knew it," he growled. His face was flushed scarlet, and his usually laughing eyes snapped with anger. He flung the wadded parchment onto the table. "I *knew* something wasn't right."

"Give me that!" Ron grabbed the letter, smoothing the wrinkles and pressing the parchment flat with his forearm as he scanned Percy's densely packed script.

"What does it say?" Harry demanded. The twins scowled but said nothing, and Ron was lost in reading, so he had no choice but to turn to Ginny. "Gin, what did Percy say?"

Ginny picked up her fork and twirled it in her fingers, but the absent look on her face made it plain that she wasn't entirely aware of what her hands were doing.

"He's worried about Dad," she said. "He said that Dad hasn't been well lately."

"Hasn't been well?" George repeated scornfully. "Try 'working himself to death'--that's what he really means."

Neville gasped. "Did...did your brother actually say that?"

"Not in so many words, but it's obvious enough, isn't it?"

Harry leaned over, pretending to sop up the tea that had spilled onto the bench, and whispered in his best friend's ear, "Your dad...he was okay when you saw him in Dumbledore's office, wasn't he?"

"He *said* he was fine," Ron whispered back, still staring at the letter. "He said it was one too many late hours at the Ministry, but he's worked late before and he'd *never* looked like that."

"Everyone at the Ministry is busy now," Hermione told the twins. "Your father's always worked hard...maybe he just needs rest. Maybe Percy's reading too much into things."

George shook his head. "If *Percy's* worried about Dad working too much, it has to be bad."

Fred picked up the empty envelope. "It's like, now that Mum's gone, all he ever does is work," he said. "Nights, weekends, everything. Percy says he's been taking every assignment that comes up, no matter what it is. Not just raids on people with Muggle stuff--he's doing other things, too."

"Like what?" asked Harry.

Fred crumpled the envelope. "That's just it. Percy wouldn't say."

"Wouldn't say...or doesn't know," George added.

"But why?" Harry pressed. "Why's he doing it?"

"Dumbledore's making him," Fred said darkly.

Anger flared in Harry's heart, and he half rose out of his seat. "Dumbledore wouldn't do that!"

"How do you know?" Fred countered, staring him full in the face.

"Because..." He sat down heavily. Having said it aloud, there was no way he could possibly begin to explain...especially because he wasn't entirely certain of it himself.

Ron shoved the letter away from him. It landed in a wet patch on the table, and the ink began to bleed, spreading in a rainbow-coloured blotch across the page.

"Because he wouldn't, that's all," he said defiantly. "Dumbledore's not like that."

"What about Percy?" Hermione said abruptly, cutting the budding argument dead.

Fred switched his flat, unfriendly stare from Harry to her. "What about him?"

"Couldn't he do something?" She was using her most sensible tone of voice, the kind that always made Harry feel like he had done something amazingly idiotic. "Talk to your father, find out what's really going on?"

Abruptly, Fred and George slid down the bench, away from her. They stared at her, eyes wide with fascinated horror, as if she had just revealed that she had contracted some terrifically contagious disease.

"This IS our brother Percy you're talking about, right?" George's voice was incredulous. "Not some other Percy?"

Fred pushed back the sleeve of his robe and pressed the back of his hand to Hermione's forehead. His brow was furrowed in a mock serious frown.

"No, no fever," he said briskly, puckering his lips in concentration. He took her wrist gingerly between thumb and forefinger. "And pulse reads normal."

"But clearly," George said, equally mock serious, "I believe we have a case of TBO here."

"Ah, TBO." Fred clucked his tongue. "Traumatic Brain Overload--of course."

"Poor girl," said George sympathetically. "Must've been all those books. Terrible shame."

Fred nodded, and used one finger to tilt Hermione's chin upward, examining her more closely. "Nothing to be done. We'd best notify her parents at once."

Angrily, Hermione slapped Fred's hand away. "Stop that!"

"Oh-oh, patient showing signs of violence." Fred made as if to jot down a note on a pad of paper. "Might need restraints."

"Leave OFF, Fred!" Ron shouted, pounding his fist on the table.

Fred drew back, alarmed by the fury of his younger brother's outburst. "What's gotten into you?"

"She told you to stop, you stupid prat!" Ginny yelled, so loudly that heads started to turn at other tables.

"Keep your hair on, Ginny," George protested, grinning nervously. People were staring openly at the seven of them now, and for perhaps the first time in his life he found that the attention of a curious crowd was not something he welcomed. "It was only a joke."

"You don't *ever* joke about something like that," Neville declared in a voice as thin and cold as an icy wind. His eyes were fixed on his half-full plate. "Ever."

The twins glanced at each other, then back at the younger Gryffindors. They took in Hermione's blotchy face, Ron's murderous glare, Neville's frozen silence, Ginny's death grip on her knife and fork.

And then there was Harry.

Neither Fred nor George had ever met Will Stanton. If they had, at that moment they might have seen an eerie similarity of expression in the set of Harry's jaw, in the deep lines that had formed around his mouth, and above all in the cold green fire of his eyes. It wasn't exactly the same, nowhere near identical, but anyone who had seen Will Stanton and knew of his powers would have shrunk back from the look on Harry Potter's face.

It was that look, more than anything else, that told the Weasley twins that they had crossed a line with their joking.

George spoke first. "Sorry, Hermione."

"Yeah," Fred said, with more sincerity than that particular word usually warranted. "Sorry about that. We didn't mean to...I mean, honestly, we never--"

Hermione made a weak attempt at a smile.

"No, it's all right," she said. "Don't worry about it."

"*Hermione*...." Ron hissed. His eyes had narrowed to furious slits.

"I'm FINE, Ron." There was an unspoken command to drop the subject that not even Ron Weasley could ignore.

An uneasy quiet came over their small group. No one had an appetite for breakfast any longer; the food had already shrivelled up and grown cold on their plates. Ron had calmed down, though judging by the quiver of tension in his shoulders there was a part of him that still seemed to be waiting for the command to leap over the table and take on both his brothers at once.

"What about Bill and Charlie?" Harry asked, anxious to turn Ron's attention elsewhere.

Ron said nothing, so Fred answered instead. "The only one who could ever make Dad do anything was Mum."

"Oh," he said in a small voice.

Suddenly, Ginny threw down her knife and fork, making them all jump.

"What if he goes to a raid really late one night, and he hasn't gotten enough sleep so he's tired, and someone lets off some really nasty hex or curse at him and he's so tired that he can't get out of the way in time, and--and--" Her voice caught in her throat.

Her brothers were saved from having to reply by an abnormally loud cough that came from direction of the raised dais at the front of the Hall.

Heads turned and plates clattered as the students looked round. Professor McGonagall had entered the Hall from the door behind the teachers' table. She coughed again, then cleared her throat, and hall rang with the noise.

"May I have your attention please?" she said. Her voice had been greatly amplified, most likely by a Sonorus Spell. She walked round the front of the table. "Students, may I have your attention please!"

A few first and second years stood on their seats, bouncing on tiptoe and elbowing each other out of the way to get a better view. Harry was too far away to see the expression on her face, but he could see that she was standing very stiffly, and that her hands were clasped in front of her.

McGonagall waited until most of the scuffling had died down before she spoke again.

"I regret to inform you that the Quidditch match between Ravenclaw and Slytherin, scheduled for tomorrow, has been indefinitely postponed. Will the captains of both teams please see me in my office?"

Cries of shock and indignation rose from the Slytherin and Ravenclaw tables, and everyone started talking at once. Not surprisingly, the loudest shouts came from the Quidditch teams of the affected houses.

McGonagall paid no attention to the uproar. She crossed the Great Hall with long, deliberate steps--students who were in her path scattered as she approached them--and did not pause in her stride until she had reached the double doors at the other end of the hall.

"NOW, gentlemen?" Her voice, sharp and ominous, boomed in the cavernous, high-ceilinged space.

Roger Davies bolted from the Ravenclaw breakfast table with all the speed and grace of a lamed rabbit. Twice, he trod on the hem of his robes and almost fell over his own feet, but managed to right himself in time to stumble up to McGonagall.

Draco, on the other hand, calmly finished the buttered, toasted crumpet he had been eating and dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. He folded the napkin neatly in half, then into fourths, and set it next to his plate. Only then did he get to his feet and head for the double doors, where McGonagall and Davies stood waiting for him.

Once the doors had closed behind both professor and students, dozens of conversations sprang up from the long tables, high-pitched and urgent like the rustle of long grasses in a strong wind.

"What was that all about?" Fred said to the table at large, scratching his head.

"Bet Malfoy's father pitches a fit when he finds out Slytherin's had their match cancelled," George said, rather snidely. "Good job we're not playing this week, right, Harry?"

But Harry wasn't listening. His eyes had followed Malfoy, Davies, and McGonagall as they left, and he had seen a dark blur slip through the doors just before they had closed completely. The blur soon resolved itself into the shape of large black dog, galloping toward the section near the middle of the Gryffindor table where he and his friends were sitting.

Snuffles was breathing hard by the time he reached them. Harry bent down to stroke the shaggy fur, but his hand stopped when he saw that Snuffles had something in his mouth. It was thin and flat and white-- an envelope.

"Is that for me?" he murmured.

The dog whined softly and nudged his hand with its nose.

Harry took the envelope, not caring that part of it was damp, and slit it open. Keeping it between his knees, he read it as best he could in the darkness under the table.

The letter wasn't long, but he had to read it through twice before the words finally sank in.

Harry,

Urgent message from Dumbledore--Lestranges escaped from Azkaban early this morning. Inform Dr. Stanton as soon as possible. Don't worry about class.

Remus

Lestranges. Azkaban.

Still staring at the paper, he reached out with his mind, searching for the link.

It was like gathering a handful of strings into his hand, individual threads that he could feel with his--well, he'd heard of people seeing things with their mind's eye before, but never *feeling* things with their mind's *hand*. He tugged on the strings gently, just enough to get their attention.

Can all of you hear me? he asked, though he knew it wasn't necessary.

He sensed their initial shock, the sudden quickening of heartbeats as they were caught off guard by his intrusion into their conscious thoughts.

H...Harry? Hermione's voice, breathy with fear, was the first to slide into his mind. *What are you--*

The Lestranges escaped last night, he replied, cutting her off. *They broke out of Azkaban.*

A sharp spike of fear--from Neville, a detached part of his mind silently registered--made Harry's scar pulse sympathetically. He winced, but ignored off the pain.

Ginny, what do you have first this morning? he asked.

Ancient Runes, today, Ginny replied. *I...I don't know what Colin has.*

Speaking of Colin, where is he?

Right behind you.

Harry jumped, but didn't turn around. Faintly, he heard either Fred or George say, "Oi, Colin! Bad luck for Slytherin, isn't it?"

Colin! Where were you? he asked silently.

Talking to Emma Fitzpatrick, Colin said. *She's in my Muggle Studies class. I got away as soon as I could--who are the Lestranges?*

I... he began, but stopped. It wasn't the time to explain. It wasn't his place to explain, either. *Something's come up, and we have to talk to Will. What do you have first today?*

Colin hesitated. *Care of Magical Creatures, but Hagrid's away again. My class is supposed to stay here for a study period with Professor Sinistra.*

Right. That settles it. He let go of the threads, and said aloud, "Hermione, can I borrow your quill?"

Wordlessly, she handed it to him. He flipped the piece of parchment over and, using his knee as a makeshift table, quickly scribbled on the back.

Remus,

Thanks. Have told others, going to let Will know right now.

Harry

Once the smudged scrawl of ink that was supposed to be his name had dried, he stuffed the parchment back into the envelope.

Snuffles had been watching the proceedings closely, and when Harry turned back to face him he leapt to his feet, whining urgently. He looked as frustrated as a dog could look--not being able to speak properly to his godson must have been driving him mad.

Harry held out the letter. "Take this to Rem...er, Professor Lupin, okay?"

Snuffles glanced at the envelope, then up at him.

"I'll be all right," Harry whispered. "Trust me."

The Animagus reluctantly took the letter from him, holding it carefully in his mouth.

Harry glanced round the Great Hall. It was as good a time as any to leave. Classes would be starting soon, and it was better to be out in the corridors when other students were around than to be caught sneaking off to the library when none of them had any reason to be in that part of the castle.

He got to his feet, and the others stood up as well.

"Let's go," he said firmly.

Hermione picked up her schoolbag, and Neville gathered his books. Ron and Ginny stacked their plates and brushed the crumbs from their robes. Colin stepped aside to let Harry by, and the six of them started for the doors as a group with Snuffles following, trotting in their wake.

"And where are you all off to?" George called after them.

"The library!" Ron shouted back, over his shoulder. "We've got to study!"

Fred's confused shout followed them out of the Great Hall. "You're all skiving off class--to STUDY?"

* * *

Once they were safely in the corridor, they broke into a run.

Dog and children kept pace with one another until they reached the shifting staircases. It was there that Snuffles disappeared up the staircase that led to the second floor corridor and the Defence Against the Dark Arts office, and the children took the one that led to the floors above, and the library.

Harry saw the Animagus vanish out of the corner of his eye, but didn't pay much attention to where he went. Sirius Black knew the secret passages of the castle better than almost anyone alive; Remus would probably get the note before they could contact Will.

Once they were in sight of the door to the room, Harry fired off the unlocking spell. A shower of sparkles sped ahead of them and struck the door. He, Ron, and Ginny were first to reach the door itself, and for a moment it was all elbows and feet as they fought to get inside.

Ginny, being smallest, was first to wiggle free. She headed directly for the mirror, and once she had touched it she flicked her wand at the cold grate, kindling a fire on the coals leftover from the night before.

The others staggered in after her, out of breath from their long run. Hermione and Neville looked more winded than Ron or Harry. Neville was quite grey in the face. Hermione clung to the edge of the long table to steady herself as she gulped lungfuls of air.

Will was waiting for them when the mist behind the glass had whirled away. He had changed his shirt, but other than that he looked exactly as he had the day before. He held a cup of coffee in one hand. In his other hand was an envelope.

Harry gasped out, "Remus just had a letter from Dumble--"

"As did I." He held up the envelope. "Arrived not five minutes ago. I was wondering if you'd show up."

"What happened? Remus only said they'd escaped."

Will's face was grim. He set his coffee cup on his desk, and tucked Dumbledore's letter into the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

"They escaped well enough," he said. "And killed an Auror in the process."

The words had scarcely left his lips before the barrage of questions began.

"Who did they kill?" Ron demanded to know.

"Did anyone else escape?" Hermione asked fearfully.

"How could they get out without a wand?" asked Ginny.

Harry had a chilling thought. "They weren't Animagi, were they?"

The Old One held up his hands for quiet. "We're wasting time. Activate the mirror, and I'll tell you what I know."

The Six crowded round the mirror, jostling for position.

"Enter, Watchman of the Light."

"Grant to us your inner sight."

"Enter, for the time draws near."

"Power will erase our fear."

"Enter, lest the darkness win."

"We the Six now call you in."

Whether it was the urgency in their request or the myriad of emotions surging through the room, the carved pattern on the frame seemed to glow brighter than normal as Will stepped through the mirror and into the room.

The children fanned out and took their places round the table. They stood beside their chairs, waiting for Will to sit down, but the Old One did not approach his seat by the fire. He stood in front of the mirror, surveying the room.

"We won't need these," he announced. He passed his hand through the air in the same peculiar gesture he had used the night before, and table and chairs disappeared.

Hermione's schoolbag had been lying on the table, and it fell to the floor with a heavy thump. Hurriedly, she scooped it up and whisked it out of the way, setting it in the far corner of the room, and rejoined the others in the centre.

Will strode over to the fire, and turned to face them. The firelight cast a long shadow of him into the room. Illuminated from behind as he was, it was hard to tell where his shadow stopped and the bottom of his robes began.

"The Minister was remarkably open when it came to details," he said tersely. "Some of the other prisoners created a distraction, and the Lestranges managed to get away in the confusion. They attacked an Auror who was trying to watch for the Dementors, stole his wand, and killed him with it. Presumably, they Apparated off the island--they'd need a wand for that. The Ministry has had squads of Aurors combing the coastline all through the night, but there's no trace of their whereabouts. It's my opinion that they had help, or at the very least had someone waiting for them on the mainland."

He ticked points off on his fingers. "As a result, the Ministry is on high alert. The number of guards at Azkaban has been tripled. The name of the Auror they killed will not be released until his family has been notified. And I've heard nothing about Animagi, so I won't speculate on that. Was that everything?"

The children were stunned speechless. Even if Will **had** left something out, they would not have been able to tell him so.

"Don't look so surprised," he said reproachfully. "I've been expecting something like this for some time now. If you think on it, Azkaban is a perfect place for the Dark to launch an attack-- for more reasons than you'd imagine."

Harry found his voice. "Because of the Dementors."

"Not even that. Traditionally, the Dark has attacked from the sea. Read your history closely enough and you'll see what I mean."

Hermione's hand went immediately to her schoolbag, but Will shook his head.

"No, not *that* sort of history," he said, rather dismissively. "Not the kind they'd teach you here. All you need know is that the Dark has time and again come to this island, riding on the wave of invasion, and the Light has time and again taken arms to drive it back. It is the way of things."

"So how do we drive them back to Azkaban?" Ron asked.

"We don't."

Neville's mouth fell open. "*What*?"

"So what are we supposed to do then?" Ron didn't bother to hide the bitterness in his voice. "Go back to class and pretend it didn't happen?"

Will fixed him with a stern look. "Chasing after escaped prisoners is not your job. Let the Aurors and the Ministry deal with Mr. and Mrs. Lestrangle. You have another task." He smiled a wintry smile. "I had hoped we would have more time to prepare, but the Dark always was one to spoil my best-laid plans."

Harry thought of Christmas with the Weasleys, and couldn't decide whether to be miserable or furious.

Best-laid plans, all right, he said to himself.

"I've given this matter a good deal of thought," Will went on. "As I see it, the Dark Lord's best chance of winning revolves around one main problem. He must eliminate you as a threat, but he cannot kill you outright if he wishes to wield the full power of the Dark. And as you have the resources of the Light at your disposal, his options are rather limited. But he does have options, and one in particular troubles me.

"There is an ancient magic that can be used by both Light and Dark, the same magic that the Light called upon to banish the Lords of the Dark for all time. Properly cast, it will blast its victim out of Time, into the void from which nothing can return. No power can deflect it, no protection can block it. Once it is cast, it does not miss."

"The Dark Lord will risk all on this spell. If he succeeds...." For the first time, he hesitated, and Harry could tell that it was not because he was searching for the right words. "Well, I have it on good authority that the consequences do not differ greatly from death."

"C-couldn't you cast it, then?" Colin asked hopefully. "Before he does?"

Will looked stunned by the question.

"Certainly not," he said coldly. By the sound of it, the young boy might very well have asked the impossible, as absurd a suggestion as ordering a Muggle to violate the law of gravity. "I would be breaking the law of the High Magic if I did. No, he must cast the spell first, and you, in turn, must capture its power and harness it for your own ends."

Hermione shoved her hair out of her face. "How can we do that? Wouldn't it--surely, we couldn't--"

"Like all magic of its kind, it can be wielded by the party with the greater strength," Will said. "To defeat him, you must use your strength to catch the spell, hold it, and send it back at him. And though I loathe to use such a meaningless word as 'destiny' in this case, it should not come as a shock to hear that the only one of you who can send the captured spell back at the Dark Lord is Mr. Potter."

Harry swallowed. A gigantic lump had formed in his throat, and he had to get rid of it before it choked him. He couldn't bring himself to look at Will or his friends, though he knew they all were looking at him.

"What would happen if I...if we failed?" he asked, his voice hardly above a whisper.

Will sighed. "I am telling you this now because you need to know all of the risks. Omitting anything would be worse than lying to you outright. But if you--all of you--fail to capture and contain the spell with your own magic, you will be blasted out of Time forever. And if you cannot send it back at him, the concentrated power of the Dark will poison you, swiftly and lethally." His tone had hardened; there was no sympathy or compassion in it. "Either way, none of you would survive."

The children were silent, but oddly enough they were not afraid. Something--the power of the Light, or some deeper, underlying Gryffindor trait--would not let them be afraid. It was too late for worries or regrets, if they had ever had any to begin with.

It was Harry who spoke for all of them when he said, resolutely, "What do we have to do?"

A spark flared in Will's eyes, making the depths glow with an eerie incandescence.

"Form the circle as you did last night, but face outwards this time." He addressed them harshly, a seasoned warrior instructing his front-line soldiers. "Mr. Potter, please stand inside the circle, in the centre. Have your wand at ready."

They did as he ordered. Will waited until they had joined hands, and then he started to pace back and forth before the fire, never taking his eyes off them.

"The circle must act as a shield until the Dark Lord casts the crucial spell," he stated. "And you will know when he casts it. All your instincts will tell you at the moment he releases the spell. But until that moment you must protect yourselves--and Mr. Potter--from the full force of his power." He paused in his pacing. "He will doubtless try everything short of the Killing Curse to break the circle, because he has one chance, and you have one chance, and you will not have another."

"As for you, Mr. Potter, you must not cast a single spell of your own. The absolute last thing you need is a *Priori Incantatem* duel." He raised an eyebrow at Harry's stricken expression. "Yes, I know all about it. And while having the same core material in both your wand and his does increase your chances for success, you also run the risk of having your wand rendered useless by its own magic."

Harry gripped his wand more tightly.

"Raise your shield," Will said. He pulled his cloak more closely about him.

As the magic crackled around them, Will took a step forward. His body shimmered, rippling, shifting, changing--

Suddenly, it was no longer Will, but a Dementor.

Cloaked and hooded in a dull black that seemed to suck all the light out of the room, the Dark creature reached out a slimy, scabbed hand, decaying fingers clawing the air. Its rattling breath, like the last desperate gurgle of a drowning man, submerged them all in icy cold horror. It started to glide forward, drawing nearer.

Harry reacted blindly, without thinking.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" he screamed, and lashed out with his wand.

CRACK!

A bolt of blinding white, bright as a streak of summer lightning, flared from the tip of his wand and struck the Dementor in the chest.

CRACK!

The world tilted upside-down, and just as quickly righted itself. Harry's legs gave out from under him, and he sank to his knees. His wand slipped from his fingers and clattered on the floor.

"Harry!" he heard Colin shout. There was a blurry movement on the edge of his field of vision, and Colin gave a sharp cry of pain, as if someone had twisted his wrist.

"Don't break the circle!" someone--it came from behind, so it must have been Ron--ordered.

"What happened?" Ginny cried. "What WAS that?"

Slowly, very slowly, Harry's senses returned to him, and he could sit up properly and look round. A circle of very worried faces surrounded him--his friends were still holding hands. There was a faint stench of Dark magic in the air, the odour of rotting leaves and graveyards. But the Dementor was gone, even if its presence lingered in the room.

Will, however, was nowhere to be seen.

"Dementor..." he breathed shakily. "Where...where did--"

"It's gone," Hermione said, shuddering at the memory. "Harry, what did you DO?"

He couldn't think clearly. "I didn't...it wasn't...where's Will?"

At the mention of the Old One's name, the air in front of the fire shimmered again, and Will materialised.

He was coughing, great hacking coughs that shook his entire body. One hand was pressed to his heart, and his breathing was an uneven, ragged wheeze. Staggering backward, he slumped against the bookshelf nearest the fire, and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Will!" Neville cried out, terrified. "Are you all right?"

The Old One coughed once more, weakly, but he gave them a rueful grin.

"If that had been a real Dementor, a creature wholly of the Dark, you would have vaporised it on the spot. As it stands...." He massaged his breastbone, wincing. "I'll be rather sore tomorrow morning, I can tell you that."

* * *

Will and Harry recovered rapidly from the experiment, and for a long time afterward the only voice heard in the little room was Will's occasional brusque "Again" as the five children practised the shielding spell they had used to guard Harry against the Dementor. They practised raising the shield as quickly as possible, holding it at full strength for the count of thirty, and lowering it again. They did this over and over under Will's watchful eye, and he was quick to admonish if he thought they weren't putting enough effort into it.

Harry, for his part, was told to stand in the centre and feel the magic as it swelled and faded around him. He had to know the precise moment when the magic reached its peak, and when he felt the peak he would extend his arm, pointing his wand at Will.

They worked on the shield for at least forty-five minutes before Will took their practice a step further. He told them that they would be testing the strength of their shield against the spells they had learned so far in their schooling. Even the most simple and harmless charms had to be deflected.

"You need to be prepared for every possibility," he said. "If you have to repel the Imperius Curse, then you should certainly practise repelling a Cheering Charm."

He started out slowly, casting simple spells that they could easily deflect and he could easily block on the return. At first, he seemed to be running through the first five volumes of "The Standard Book of Spells" chapter by chapter, perfectly duplicating many of the spells they had learned in Charms class and Defence Against the Dark Arts and even some from the long-gone duelling club that Gilderoy Lockhart had tried to establish. As the minutes ticked past, he made the spells more complex, often allowing a little of his own magic to seep in.

At first, Harry could tell when Will's magic was present in the spells--he would feel a burning prickle under his skin in the second before his friends could adjust their shield to compensate. But gradually, the prickle lessened and finally stopped altogether.

They were learning.

It was during one of their rest periods, where they were all sitting down with their backs against the bookshelves, that Colin brought up the question that Harry had hoped would slip his mind.

"Who're the Lestranges?" he asked, propping his chin on his knees. "They must've done something awful for Professor Lupin to send you that note, Harry."

The innocent way in which the question had been put was worse than the question itself. Colin was not the only one who did not know the full story of Neville's parents. Harry had

only told the others as much as he felt comfortable telling: Neville's parents had been in St. Mungo's for years, victims of the insanity that came with prolonged torture under the Cruciatus Curse. But only he knew who had been responsible for the torture. He had put two and two together in the graveyard the night of the last Triwizard Tournament task--the Lestranges, whom Voldemort had promised to honour 'beyond their wildest dreams', were in all likelihood two of the four persons sentenced to Azkaban for the torture of the Longbottoms.

It was Neville's story, really, and he was about to suggest that Neville tell it if he wanted to. But just as he was opening his mouth to say so, Neville dug in his pockets and took out something thin and greyish-looking. He stood, and walked across the room to where Colin sat.

"Here," he said flatly, holding out the greyish thing. "This'll tell you what you want to know."

Harry watched carefully as Colin took the object and held up to the light. It was yet another envelope, the same size as the others that had come their way so far that day, but unlike the others it wasn't crisp and new. It was grey with dirt, and battered and creased...and very familiar.

It was the envelope that had fallen from Neville's robes at the end of their testing before Dumbledore and McGonagall and Figg.

Harry had held the envelope in his hand, and would have opened it if Will hadn't taken from him. And now Colin was opening it, and pulling out a folded newspaper clipping that was worn so thin that it was nearly transparent.

He read through the clipping. His eyes grew wider and his face grew paler as he read, until he looked like he was going to be sick or faint on the spot. Will, leaning against the mantel, was watching Neville, who was standing over Colin. The others turned their gaze from Colin to Neville to Will, afraid to linger too long on any one of them.

Colin finally looked up, and stared at Neville. His hands were shaking, which made the clipping rustle noisily.

"They *did* this?" His voice shook as well.

"They were convicted of it," Neville said stonily. He took the clipping and the envelope from Colin's unresisting hands. "And now they're--"

There was a loud knock at the door.

They're /here/, Harry thought wildly.

"Mr. Potter," Will said, as graciously as if he had been expecting guests for tea, "would you please answer the door?"

Harry picked up his wand, and got to his feet. Some of Will's calm had rubbed off on him, because he did not feel nervous as he walked to the door. He opened it a crack, and peeped out.

He saw no one. The corridor was empty.

Just as he was about to close the door, a high, tinny voice chirruped, "Hello, Harry Potter!"

He looked down. It was Dobby the house elf.

"Dobby? What are you....what's that?" He pointed to the two silver domes that Dobby was balancing on his upturned hands.

"Headmistress told Dobby to bring lunch for Harry Potter and his friends," the house elf proclaimed proudly.

"Lunch?" Food was the farthest thing from his mind. The very notion of eating something...his mouth began to water, but only because a delicious smell was seeping from the trays and wafting upward to his nose.

Dobby tried to peer around Harry's leg to see into the room. "Shall Dobby bring the trays inside, sir?"

"NO!" he barked, but quickly regained his composure. "I mean, no, thank you, Dobby. I can carry it."

"Trays are very heavy, sir," Dobby said doubtfully.

"I'll be fine. Just set them down here and I'll take care of them." If Dobby was invited in, he'd never leave.

"As Harry Potter wishes." Dobby placed the trays on the floor of the corridor and sketched a small bow. "Dobby will return in one hour for the trays--if Harry Potter would be so kind as to leave them outside the door?"

"Yes, yes, fine." He was growing impatient.

"Should Dobby bring anything else?"

"No, thank you," he said, nicely but forcefully. "Goodbye, Dobby."

The house elf bowed again, then snapped his fingers and disappeared with a crack.

Harry let out a gusty sigh, and opened the door all the way.

"Sorry," he said to Will, who was regarding him with no small amount of curiosity. "Dobby--one of the house elves--brought lunch for all of us."

"It's lunchtime?" Hermione's eyebrows went up; apparently Harry wasn't the only one who had completely forgotten about food.

Ron, however, hadn't. "Smashing," he said gleefully, rubbing his hands together. It was the happiest he'd looked all morning.

Will took out his watch. "So it is. I'm terribly sorry--you must be famished. Let me just take care of the seating...."

He motioned to them to move aside, and they scattered, clearing space in the centre of the room. Will waved his hand and conjured the long table and the seven chairs back into place.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" With a swish and a flick, Hermione sent the two trays floating through the air and lowered them easily onto the table. With another flick of her wand she lifted the shining silver lids and left them suspended in mid-air, hovering over the trays.

A bowl piled high with fresh fruit, apples and bananas and pears, dominated one side of the first tray. Seven tall goblets and a massive pewter jug of something cold--it looked like pumpkin juice-- took up the rest of the space on the other side. The juice was so cold that a film of condensation had formed on the rounded sides of the jug, and it left a wet ring on the tray when Harry picked it up to fill the goblets.

In the middle of the second tray was an oval plate overflowing with still-warm bread rolls. Faint wisps of steam rose from their golden brown tops, carrying a delightful smell into the air. Surrounding the plate of rolls were other, smaller plates that held yellow bricks of Cheddar cheese and heaps of assorted biscuits.

The children ate for the next few minutes, taking whatever they wanted from the trays and not caring about crumbs. In the beginning, it felt like they couldn't eat quickly enough to satisfy the yowling demands of their stomachs. Only when the meal had taken the edge off their hunger did they start to talk amongst themselves.

"Sausage rolls," Colin mumbled happily around a mouthful of the same. "Fantastic."

"I wish there were regular ones, too," Hermione said, setting a half- eaten one aside. "I don't like sausage rolls."

"I'll take it," Neville offered. "Trade you for my biscuits."

"But I've already bitten it."

Neville shrugged. "So?"

Hermione made a face, but pushed the nibbled roll in his direction and accepted the biscuits he held out to her.

"Aren't you have anything else, sir?" Ginny asked Will politely, staring not-so-politely at the napkin in front of him. On it was a small chunk of cheese, an apple, and a handful of biscuits--barely half of what Ron and Harry had already devoured.

"I'm quite content, thank you," he replied. "I don't want to take food from your mouths."

Ginny pondered his reply for a moment, but she quickly turned her attention back to the plate of sausage rolls, grabbing the last one just before her brother could take it himself.

The simple noontime meal was a great comfort after the relative misery of the morning. The depressing letter from Percy, the unpleasantness at breakfast, the awful news of the Lestranges' escape, the hours of furious concentration on life-or-death magic--everything that had gone wrong that day had combined to cast a pall over the children's minds. The taste of

food helped dispel some of the pressure that had been building up all morning. With full bellies and rested bodies, the Six were prepared for an afternoon of hard work.

Will, however, seemed to be in no great hurry to return to work. He held up his goblet. "Mr. Longbottom, would you please pass the pitcher?"

Neville handed the pitcher to Ron, who passed it on to Will.

"Thank you." He refilled his goblet from the jug and took a careful sip. "And you say this is pumpkin?"

"Pumpkin juice," Ron said as he refilled his own goblet. "Do you like it?"

"It...intrigues me." He took another small sip, rolling the liquid in his mouth as if he was tasting a wine. "I never thought that a member of the squash family could produce a drinkable beverage."

"You should try hot butterbeer," Colin piped up. "It's the best thing when it's really cold out."

Will smiled. "Butterbeer, eh? I've had butterscotch before...it is in any way similar?"

Colin thought for a second. "Well, it's not as sweet, and sometimes the foam gets up your nose. But it doesn't leave your mouth all gummy afterward."

Will opened his mouth, then shut it.

Harry fought to suppress a grin. Trust Colin to give a perfectly straight answer to a tongue-in-cheek question.

He didn't dare look at any of the others. Eye contact would certainly set off the laughter that was threatening to bubble over inside of him. He concentrated fiercely on his apple for a few moments, biting and chewing and swallowing, until he wasn't feeling so hysterical and could look Will in the face once more.

When he finally did look up, he saw that the Old One's lapse of self-possession had been short-lived. In one deep draught, Will finished the last of his pumpkin juice and set the empty goblet aside.

"Let's see," he said, steepling his fingers in front of him. "If the fifth-year Gryffindors were supposed to have Defence Against the Dark Arts this morning, am I right in thinking that the four of you would be missing both Transfiguration and History of Magic this afternoon?"

Ron nodded. "But Professor McGonagall knows we're here, and Professor Binns wouldn't notice if half the class was missing."

"With the four of us gone, half the class *is* missing," Hermione observed sardonically.

Ron grinned. "True."

Will turned to Ginny. "And your schedule, Miss Weasley?"

"Colin and I both have Herbology after lunch, then Potions," she said.

"Ick." Neville pulled a face.

"Potions?" The Old One's gaze slid away into a vague middle distance, then refocused with an almost audible snap. "I don't want you missing that."

"We can get the assignments later," Ginny said, taking another pear.

"That's not what I meant. It would not be a good idea for you--for *any* of you--to miss Potions."

Something in his tone made them all stop eating. Neville and Harry paused in mid-chew, while Ginny set down the pear and Colin froze with a biscuit halfway to his mouth.

Harry swallowed hastily. "Is something...?"

Will's expression told them nothing, but his words were crisp with the briskness of officialdom. "One of the reasons why the meeting was held the Monday after classes resumed, rather than immediately after all the facts were known, was due to Professor Snape. For all of Easter week he was under strict Ministry quarantine, and the Minister's personal supervision."

Colin dropped his biscuit into his lap. "Wh...why?"

"Polyjuice," Hermione murmured.

"Amongst other things," Will said. "The Department of Magical Law Enforcement put him through a number of physical and magical tests to be certain that he hadn't been...well, tampered with."

The thought of Professor Snape being 'tampered with' turned the food to lead in Harry's stomach. He shifted uneasily in his chair.

"The tests generally require a minimum of three days, but the Ministry chose to stretch them out to five for greater security. That would take us through early Thursday. And when you factor in the day or so that he would need to recover from these tests--"

"Recover?" Hermione had gone very pale.

"Without going into details, I can assure you that he needed two full days to recover." His unemotional tone did nothing to lessen the chill of his words. "And even then, you saw how he was Monday evening."

No one spoke, and Will took their silence as leave to continue.

"I want you to keep a very close watch over him," he said. "I don't pretend to know his current state of mind, but when last I saw him he was a desperate man. You have seen how the Dark can use such desperation against a person's will and without his knowledge."

Wearily, he raked a hand through his hair. "I am very afraid that Professor Snape's most secret and terrible fear has come to pass. He has become a liability to us all."

* * *

The session continued all through that afternoon. Will did not comment on their progress, but he dismissed them at five o'clock with a simple "I will see you Monday evening".

Harry was glad to leave. He was exhausted from the hours of single-minded concentration. The magic that had buffeted his body had left him feeling like he had pummelled by Beaters' bats. He couldn't begin to imagine how tired his friends were; they looked even more worn out than he felt.

Dinner wouldn't start for a while yet, so they walked slowly, taking their time. They had just passed the staircase that led up to the Astronomy Tower when Ron turned to Hermione and said, out of the blue:

"I'm sorry about Fred and George."

She stopped dead. So did Harry and the others.

"L-look, it's all right," she said, doing her best to sound reassuring. "They didn't know--how could they have? They were only joking. I know they weren't trying to be hurtful."

Ron looked down at the floor, scuffing the toe of one shoe against the worn stones.

"They always go too far," he said sourly. "They should know better."

She tossed her head. "It's my own fault for not being able to take a joke. And it's not like they haven't done worse to you. *Much* worse, if half of what you and Ginny have told me is true." She gave him a searching look. "Why are you getting so worked up over this?"

Ron lifted his head. The sourness that had coloured his voice was not reflected in his face. There was sadness in his eyes, but his mouth was twisted in a wry half-smile.

"You know why, Hermione," he said gruffly.

"But I..." She stared at him. A bright red flush started to creep up her cheeks. The tip of her tongue darted out, moistening her lips.

"Th...thanks," she said shyly, and smiled timidly.

Ron returned her smile, the twist of his lips broadening into a full if shaky grin of his own.

Hermione opened her mouth, as if to say something more, but she suddenly shook her head. Her hair flew around her face. When the cloud of brown frizz settled, she turned to the other four, who had been pretending not to notice anything beyond the portraits on the walls and the statues on their pedestals.

"Let's get to dinner," she said. "We don't want to be late." She was her old bossy self once more.

Most of the smile faded from Ron's face, but the corners of his mouth stayed stubbornly turned up.

They started walking again, but this time Harry hung back, dawdling. Something didn't feel right. By the time he had realised what was bothering him, they had arrived at the first of the staircases that would take them down to the Great Hall.

The staircase they wanted was one that shifted positions depending on where you wanted to go, and when they arrived it was just settling into place with a grinding of stone. They hurried down flight after flight until only one set of stairs was left. Going down would take them directly to the hall, while going up the rickety stairs on the other side would lead to the Defence Against the Dark Arts office.

The others started down, but Harry took the up staircase.

"Harry, aren't you coming?" Ginny called up to him.

He glanced over his shoulder. "I don't think I want anything," he said airily, skipping a step to avoid one that tended to vanish without warning. "You go on without me."

Hermione protested, "But Will said--"

"I can get something later. Doesn't take much to sneak down to the kitchens, right?"

A pained expression crossed her face. She fingered her prefect's badge. "I didn't hear that."

"Course you didn't." He chuckled, and kept climbing. "See you back in the common room."

"Harry, wait!" Colin cried. "Where are you going?"

"To see Remus," he replied. "I think he ought to know what we worked on today."

Hermione's eyes lit up at the mention of their professor's name.

"Will you get the homework from him?" she said eagerly. "And could you ask him if he's finished grading the essays we turned in before Easter? Please?"

Ron stared at her, thunderstruck. "You never let up, do you? I mean, you never--"

"I never **what**, Ron?"

Hermione's retort and Ron's subsequent cutting remark touched off another round of squabbling. Trading sharp words for all they were worth, they were both oblivious to the fact that the staircase had started moving again--and was carrying them away from their intended destination.

Neville, Ginny, and Colin knew better than to interfere. They clung to the moving staircase and waited, patiently or impatiently, for Ron and Hermione to wear themselves out. The argument would have to run its course before they stood any chance of getting dinner.

Harry chuckled, this time to himself, and started the climb again. No matter what trials or problems the day seemed to bring, at the end of the day it was a great comfort to know that some things never changed.

Chapter Thirty-Two - Keep Your Friends Close....

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

-- William Shakespeare

Harry had more than one reason for visiting the Defence Against the Dark Arts office that evening. He did want to talk to Remus about what they had done that day, but he also wanted the latest news, news that the rest of the school would only hear in a highly sanitised version from McGonagall and the front page of the Daily Prophet. Remus (and Sirius too, he reminded himself) wouldn't spare him the details; certainly not after they had practically handed him over-- with their blessing--to Will Stanton's care that very morning.

However, having come from Will Stanton's care, he knew that he had to figure out some way to compress the work of twenty-four hours into an explanation that wouldn't send his professor and his godfather into fits of overprotective rage.

Twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours ago, he had been thinking only of Quidditch practice and the dinner he had missed to make it to the session on time. Twenty-four hours ago, Hermione had been a full prefect, able to partake of all the privileges that came with the shining badge. Twenty-four hours ago, the Lestranges had been under lock and key in Azkaban, little more than a name that many considered best forgotten.

Quite a lot had happened in twenty-four hours.

He turned a corner, and then another, and there was the office door.

There it was. Right there in front of him. Not going anywhere.

He realised that his palms were sweating.

Perhaps Remus would have left for dinner already. That would solve the problem, but--

No. Unless he had taken Snuffles with him, it wouldn't do at all. Sirius had a tendency to explode first *and* later, never mind the asking questions part.

In the end, he had two possible choices--three if he included running away and hiding under the bed all weekend as a possible choice. He could stand outside for as long as it would take to think things through. Or, he could knock on the door and hope for the best.

Hermione, had she been there with him, would have told him to wait. "Nothing good ever comes of barging into things without *thinking* first," she would say, and toss her head.

Hermione also took her sandwiches apart and ate the contents separately, piece by piece.

He knocked on the door.

"It's open," he heard Remus call out.

He opened the door, but did not step into the room. Remus was his guardian and friend, but he was still a teacher, and it felt a little odd to enter a teacher's office without being invited.

Remus was at his desk. He had his chin propped on one hand, and he was leafing through some papers.

"You're a bit early today," he said, not looking up. "I'll be done in a minute. You can leave it on the table there if you'd rather not wait." He waved a hand into the direction of the large window that looked out onto the lake. A small round table, littered with books and parchment, stood beneath it.

"Wait for what?" asked Harry, still hanging back.

Remus started, sitting bolt upright in his chair. When he saw Harry in the doorway, he relaxed, and a smile warmed his wan-looking face.

"Harry!" he exclaimed. "I didn't expect...just a moment." He pushed his chair back and leaned forward slightly, peering into the footwell of his desk.

"You can come on out," he murmured. "It's only Harry."

There was a scuffling noise and several loud thumps, and Snuffles poked his head round the side of Remus's desk. His ears perked up, and he barked once, joyfully. Two more thumps echoed from the interior of the desk.

"Control that tail of yours," Remus chided as he stood up. "You'll knock over my inkwell again. I'm running low enough as it is." He beckoned to Harry. "Come on in. You're not interrupting anything."

Harry closed the door just as Snuffles trotted into view, his tail held high. Remus pointed his wand at the door and muttered a word, and the bolt slid neatly into place.

There was a loud pop, and Sirius joined his godson and best friend in front of the latter's desk.

"Is ev--" he started to say at the same time that Remus asked, "Have you--?"

They stopped, and glanced at each other.

Sirius stepped back a pace, and quickly said, "You first."

Remus turned back to Harry. "Have you been with Dr Stanton all day?"

"And is everything all right?" Sirius asked before Harry could open his mouth to reply.

"Yes, and yes," he said. "Will says thanks for sending the note." That wasn't entirely true, but it was something Will *would* have said, had he been there. Though he probably would have used longer words and been more formal about it.

"Not at all," Remus demurred. "I thought he should know. In case you...and he...." His smile broadened into an apologetic grin. "But he probably knew already, didn't he?"

"Yeah. Dumbledore sent him a letter, too."

"You mean he *didn't* know?" Sirius looked very surprised, not all of it mock surprise.

Harry sighed. He'd forgotten how omnipotent Will could seem at times-- most of the time, in fact. "He doesn't know everything."

"Could've fooled me," his godfather mumbled.

"So, what did you work on?" Remus said hastily, changing the subject by putting Harry on the spot.

"Er, not much, really...just more of the usual drills and, um, what we always do... has there been any more news?" He hoped it wasn't too obvious that he was stalling for time. He threw in a hint of flattery, just to be safe. "Will told us what was in Dumbledore's letter, but I knew I had to come to you for the *whole* story."

Sirius smiled at him, but Remus's suddenly flinty stare made it plain that the flattery hadn't worked on both of them.

"Let's sit down," he said, and guided Harry (with a hand that was a little too firm) over to the fireplace.

In front of the roaring fire were three chairs, the same ones they had occupied the last time Harry had stopped by the office. Harry took the rickety wooden chair with its threadbare cushion, remembering just in time to tuck his hands under the cushion and sit on them. The two men settled into their armchairs opposite.

Remus started things off. "So we don't end up repeating ourselves, what exactly did Dr Stanton tell you had happened?"

"The Lestranges broke out of Azkaban," Harry said, feeling for all the world as if he was being graded on this. "They killed an Auror and stole his wand. There's squads of Aurors looking for them, but no one's been able to track them yet." He bit his lip, thinking. "Will thinks they probably had help, someone waiting for them when they got to the mainland. And he's surprised that something like this hasn't happened sooner."

Remus folded his hands in his lap, and Sirius propped one elbow on the arm of his chair and rested his chin on his clenched fist. When Harry didn't continue, they glanced at each other again.

Remus said, "That's all?"

"Well, he also said that he doesn't want us--the six of us--worrying about the Lestranges. He said that it's the Ministry's job to capture them, not ours."

"Exactly," Sirius said emphatically, giving Harry a meaningful look.

Harry returned the look, peering over the tops of his glasses for greater effect. "Yes. *Exactly*."

Sirius coughed, and averted his eyes. "Right. Anyway...was that everything?"

"Everything that Will said."

"And that's all you have to tell us?"

"Maybe." Harry dragged the word out to its fullest length.

"Maaaaaaybe'?" Sirius chuckled, but his grin was wistful. "Just listen to him. James to the core."

"James?" Remus shook his head. "It was Lily who was the hard-nosed one. Did you ever try to get anything out of *her*?"

"Didn't have to," Sirius sniffed. "She could never resist the full force of my charm--sheer animal magnetism, you might say." He turned soulful, imploring eyes on Harry, apparently demonstrating said magnetism.

"Oh, really?" Remus all but snickered. "She certainly couldn't resist dumping half a bowl of oatmeal over your head the one time I remember you trying it on her."

Stung, Sirius glowered at him. "And no thanks to you, I might--"

The soft chime of a clock interrupted him. Delicately, it struck the three quarters, leaving a lingering, vaguely discordant echo in the room.

The sound of the clock had an immediate sobering effect on the two men. The playfully reminiscent smiles left their faces, and they composed themselves, back to business once more.

"The murdered Auror's name was Philpot," Remus said. "Jonathan Philpot. He was at school with us, though quite a few years behind."

"First year when we were in sixth, I think," Sirius added absently. "Sorted into Slytherin."

"There were rumours that one or two members of his family were on the fringes of suspected Death Eater circles. An older cousin, an uncle, something like that. No one was able to prove anything, of course."

"Trouble is, there's no reason why he should have been singled out." Sirius heaved himself out of his chair and started to pace back and forth, fairly quivering with held-back nervous energy. One could almost see the tail of his Animagus form lashing from side to side. "The Lestranges were locked up years before he joined the Ministry, and his own record was clean as they come."

Remus nodded solemnly. "Arabella Figg swears up and down that he was chosen for a reason, but I think he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Aren't we always, Harry thought bitterly. Aloud, he said, "So they haven't found them yet."

"Not a trace," Remus said with a sigh.

"And it's not for lack of trying," Sirius said. "There must be at least twenty Aurors searching the coast and the nearby towns. They've added ten more at Azkaban alone."

"They're stretched to the limit." Remus turned his gaze to the fire. "I even offered to stand a spell at Azkaban--they need more people experienced in Patronus casting--but Arabella's in charge there now, and she rejected my offer."

Sirius grunted, and quickened his pace. "She told you to get knotted, and for once I'm in full agreement with the old bag. You're not going near that place."

Remus waved his old friend's remark aside. "There's something I'm forgetting...oh, yes." He rubbed his hands together, and held them out to the fire. "The faculty will be taking all the Care of Magical Creatures classes in turns, since Hagrid won't be back until Thursday at the earliest."

"Where did he go?" asked Harry, intrigued.

"The Continent," said Sirius. "More specifically, Romania."

"He's got contacts there, some people he wanted to talk to," Remus explained. "The Department of Magical Law Enforcement's been searching for replacements for the Dementors, as they've become more trouble than they're worth. Hagrid said that he knew of a few people who might be helpful."

"He's not going alone," Sirius added, seeing the doubtful look on Harry's face. "Alastor Moody's going with him as far as Bucharest, and Hagrid's promised to check in with Charlie Weasley every day by fireplace or owl."

"He sounded very confident that his friends would be able to help," Remus said.

"But what about the Lestranges?" Harry said fretfully. He didn't want Hagrid running around Europe--Moody or no Moody--when there were two convicted Death Eaters on the loose.

"Oh, he knows all right," Remus said, turning the backs of his hands to the blaze. "Of course Dumbledore tried to talk him out of going, but Hagrid wouldn't hear of it. He said something along the lines of"--his voice deepened, slipping into a very passable imitation of Hagrid's coarse tones--"I'm not about to let no tuppenny-ha'penny wizard worry ME."

"And he topped *that* off with a remark about Lestrangle's lady wife that isn't suitable for young ears." Sirius interlaced his fingers and rested his clasped hands on the back of his chair.

Harry glared at his godfather.

"And that's what WE know," Remus concluded. He leaned back in his chair, and his eye fell on a battered teakettle hanging from a hook near the fire. "Say, is there any water left in there?"

Sirius crossed to the fire, took up the kettle and lifted the lid. "Some. Not enough for tea." He shook it, listening to the splash of water against the sides. "Should I get some more?"

"Not yet," said Remus. "Save it for later. And sit down, for pity's sake. You're making me quite giddy with all that pacing."

"Sorry." He sat.

"Thank you." Remus half-turned in his chair and extended an arm, reaching for his desk. "Accio quill! Accio parchment!"

As the Summoned items flew across the room, Harry heard Sirius mutter "You could've *asked* me to get them for you, you know," under his breath.

Remus caught the quill and parchment. He shifted both items to his left hand and took out his wand. Lightly, he tapped the quill with his wand, and it floated out of his hand, hovering in the air between him and Harry. A tap on the parchment sent it drifting up to join the quill.

"*Antigrafo*," he commanded, pointing his wand at the floating quill.

The quill shivered, then lightly wrote the word 'Antigrafo' in neat, precise letters at the top of the parchment. Once it had dotted the 'i', it moved down a line, waiting.

"Remus Lupin. Harry Potter. Sirius Black."

The quill wrote the three names underneath the word 'Antigrafo', and Harry was astonished to see that each name was written in a distinct, different hand.

"So, Harry," Remus said casually, and the quill copied his words to the letter. "Tell us about your day."

Harry took a deep breath, and started to talk about the magic he and the others had worked on during the session. The enchanted quill raced across the page, taking dictation faster than the human hand could write. Every time he paused to think, the quill paused with him.

Remus and Sirius paid no attention to the quill and parchment. They were absorbed in Harry's tale, especially when he reached the details of Will's experiment with the Patronus Charm.

"Let me see if I have this straight. You actually knocked him DOWN?" Remus checked the quill and parchment to see if Harry's words were recording properly.

"Not exactly," he said, hedging. "He said he'd be sore tomorrow, though."

"Serves him right," Sirius said firmly, squaring his jaw. "What the hell did he think he was playing at? Transforming into a Dementor." He made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat.

"It wasn't *really* a Dementor."

Sirius gave him a withering look. "*You* thought it was real, didn't you?"

Harry chose to ignore the look. "He said I would have vaporised it, if it had been a real one."

Sirius gasped. "VAPORISED it?"

"How?" Remus demanded.

"It would've been like all of us casting the Patronus spell together. All six of us, at the same time."

Remus looked deeply sceptical. "But a Patronus can only drive back a Dementor. It shouldn't be able to kill it."

"I'm only telling you what Will said."

"What did it feel like, when you cast it?" asked Sirius.

Harry flushed bright red.

"I...I p-panicked," he stuttered. "I saw the Demen--saw *it*, and I must've panicked, and the next thing I knew it was gone and Will was there instead, and he was coughing and choking and gasping for air. Like I'd knocked the wind out of him."

"All right, so you vaporised a Dementor." Remus glanced at the quill long enough to be certain that the full roll of parchment had been magically replaced with a fresh one. "Tell me more."

The recital of the day's work continued, met with nods and affirmative noises from the two men. They kept their questions to a minimum, stopping him only when they wanted more details on the technical parts of the spell casting. Harry answered as best he could.

Surprisingly enough, the part he had been dreading most caused nowhere near the stir he had expected. Sirius and Remus made no comments at all when they heard what Will had said about the consequences of failure. His godfather lost a little colour, and Remus rubbed the frayed edge of his sleeve between thumb and forefinger, but neither spoke.

It was five minutes past the hour when he came to the end. "--and there wasn't much else afterwards, except...oh, I almost forgot. During lunch--'cause Dobby brought up food, and we didn't have to leave--we were talking and--"

There was a loud knock on the door. Two fast, impatient-sounding raps.

"One moment!" Remus shouted. He plucked the quill from the air, and said "*Finite Incantatum*" to the parchment. It rolled up with a snap and fell neatly into his waiting hand. He set the writing materials aside and walked to the door.

Harry started to stand. "Should I--"

"No, no, sit back down. This won't take a minute." Hand on the doorknob, he turned to Sirius, and said hesitantly, "I know you don't..."

"Never fear," Sirius said, standing as well. "He's the *last* person I want to deal with right now." He winked at Harry and crossed the room, transforming in mid-stride. With a wave of his tail, the great black dog vanished behind the desk.

Remus allowed a moment for Snuffles to curl up in the footwell, and then opened the door.

Professor Snape strode into the room as if he owned it. In his hands he carried a plain goblet. He held it at arm's length, keeping clear of the smoke billowing over the rim.

"Your potion, Lupin," he said, and held out the goblet, thrusting it almost under Remus's nose.

Remus took the goblet and set it on the edge of his desk.

"Thank you, Severus," he said woodenly. "Most kind of you. I'll have it in a moment--there's really no need for you to stay."

Watching the two professors gave Harry the odd feeling that he had front-row centre seats for--no, that he had *walked in on* a drama that had been running for many, many nights. There had been something fake, almost practised, in Snape's entrance, stalking into the room like an actor before the footlights. Remus's response, too, sounded practised, but oddly flat, as if the words had been said so many times that they had lost all meaning.

His right hand snaked into his pocket, feeling gingerly for the warestone. He could feel the bite of the cold through the fabric, but that was all; he couldn't detect anything more than the bitter chill that was numbing his fingertips. It was impossible to tell whether the stone was simply reacting to the Dark Mark, or whether the cold held a deeper meaning. The stone could not make that distinction.

Just as I make no distinction.

Will's voice, even colder than the stone, echoed in his mind. Harry shivered--

--and in the next moment, he wished he hadn't, because the small movement attracted the Potions Master's attention.

Their eyes met and locked. Snape's eyes widened, then narrowed, and a scowl curled his upper lip.

Clearly, Harry Potter wasn't in the script.

"Potter," he said curtly, more acknowledgement than greeting.

Harry jerked his head in what was meant to be a nod but which ended up looking--and feeling--more like a muscle spasm. "Good evening, Professor Snape."

Snape's unfriendly gaze lingered for exactly three seconds longer than necessary.

"Miss Weasley and Mr Creevey were not in my class this afternoon," he announced in a voice loud enough to be heard in the very last seat of the last row in the stalls. "Other professors at this school may turn a blind eye on lax attendance, but I do not. Accordingly, I have taken a total of forty points from Gryffindor."

"Yes, sir," Harry ground out through gritted teeth.

Snape continued in the same overly resonant voice. "The fourth-year classes covered the antidote for Pustule Potion today, which as you may or may not recall requires considerable preparation time. I have informed Professor McGonagall that both Miss Weasley and Mr.

Creevey will have extended detention with me on Mon...on this coming Tuesday to make up the work they have missed."

He had switched dates with barely a stammer, as if he had had to change his mind to take into account when his calendar was free. Nevertheless, Harry allowed himself a faintly knowing smile when he replied:

"I'll tell them, sir, if Professor McGonagall hasn't already."

Snape's eyes narrowed once more, and this time the look he gave Harry was positively hostile.

"Will you," he said frigidly. "Then I expect to see you and your little friends in my class Monday morning, Potter. No excuses."

"Yes, sir." He dropped the smile; provoking Snape was not as satisfying as he had hoped it would be. "We'll be there."

At long last, Snape's gaze left him and returned to the goblet that was sitting on Remus's desk. He glanced at Remus, then back at the goblet. His message could not have been plainer if he had affixed a note to the goblet with the words 'DRINK ME' printed on it.

Remus said, quite calmly, "I was just going to finish my talk with Harry about the work he missed today. I'll have it when I'm done."

"I would rather you drank it now, Lupin," Snape said in a low voice. "It will save me the trouble of returning to collect the goblet later."

"Then I'll stop by with it when I've finished here, Severus." The sheer *politeness* of Remus's voice made Harry want to scream and tear at his hair. "There's no need to trouble you."

"It should not be allowed to grow cold." Snape's voice, silky and equally polite, had dropped so low that it was almost a purr. "The Wolfsbane Potion has been known to lose some of its effectiveness if one consumes it when it falls below a certain temperature."

Remus let out a small breath, like a little sigh. He picked up the goblet, holding it carefully to keep the worst of the smoke out of his eyes, and raised it to his lips.

Remus drank. Snape watched Remus. Harry watched Snape watching Remus, and felt for the stone in his pocket.

Snape's face was expressionless. His posture was as casual as he ever allowed it to be, arms folded across his chest and one leg slightly forward. If it hadn't been for the fact that his cold eyes seemed to be riveted to every movement of the werewolf's throat, one might not have suspected that he cared one way or the other if the potion was consumed.

Remus tipped the goblet back, swallowing the last of the liquid. His face was twisted into a grimace as he licked his lips, trying to rid his mouth of the foul taste.

"Thank you, Severus," he said. He handed the goblet back to its owner.

Snape took the goblet, wheeled round in a flutter of robes, and made his exit without a glance at Harry. The door banged loudly, emphasising his departure.

In a flash, Snuffles reappeared from under the desk. He bounded forward, tongue lolling, but stopped short and sneezed once, then twice. He nosed the edge of the desk where the goblet had been, and sneezed a third time. He bared his teeth and growled deep in his chest.

"Hush, Padfoot," Remus scolded, though only half-heartedly.

Snuffles sneezed explosively once more before transforming into his human form and sitting down. Disdainfully, he rubbed at his nose with one hand, as if to get rid of a foul smell that had lingered in his nostrils.

Harry didn't blame him. His own nose was itchy, tickled by the dry, sour chemical-mildew-and-mushroom tang that was the residual scent of Wolfsbane Potion and Severus Snape.

He shifted his weight again and slipped both hands beneath the worn cushion. The warmth felt good on his right hand, still numbed by the chill of the warestone.

He looked up just as Remus sat down.

"I've lost you House points, haven't I," his professor said quietly, with a sad little smile.

"It's all right." Harry didn't like the defeated, deadened look that had come into Remus's eyes. "It's nothing Hermione won't earn back on Monday."

"Oh, will she?" The smile grew a little wider, but it was still sad. "That doesn't sound exactly fair to Herm--"

A sudden fit of coughs doubled him over, cutting off the rest of the word. He tried to draw a breath, but the coughing only worsened. Each gasp for air shook his thin frame.

Sirius was on his feet before Harry could even think to react. He dove for the battered kettle, yanking it off its hook, and at the same time grabbed one of the china mugs that Remus kept on top of the mantelpiece. Sloshing an overly generous amount of lukewarm water into it, he whirled round and thrust the mug into Remus's hands.

Still coughing, Remus drank greedily from the brimming mug. He pressed a hand to his chest as he drank, and within moments the coughing had stopped. Another gulp of water, and his face started to regain its normal colour. He was still wheezing, but his breathing had steadied.

"Are you all right?" Harry said worriedly as Remus drank the rest of the water.

"Wolfsbane's...not the nicest of tastes, that's all. Doesn't really sit well...in the stomach, either." He massaged his chest with his hand, and sat up straight again. "I'm much better now, thanks. Now, you were about to say something before we were interrupted?"

"Will said...." There was no way to put it that would make it sound anything but absurd. "Will's...he's worried about Snape."

Remus's hand clenched around the empty mug. "Worried? In what way?"

"He told us about the tests."

"That's not--" Sirius began angrily, but stopped short, as if he couldn't think of what he had wanted to say.

"It's standard Ministry procedure, Harry," said Remus. His speech sounded thick, and he cleared his throat. "Professor Snape agreed to all of the examinations beforehand. It wasn't against his will." He cleared his throat again.

"Besides," Sirius said, "anyone else would've gone through the same thing. I don't see why Dr Stanton would be so bothered by it."

Harry had no answer for that. He tried again. "He also said that Sna...that Professor Snape is a liability now."

Sirius laughed sourly. "And he's only just realised this?"

"Sirius!" Remus snapped.

"Face it, Moony. It was a mistake to send him crawling back to You- Know-Who in the first place. And don't look at me like I'm some species of blithering half-wit. I know Albus thought his position as Head of House would be useful to--"

"But that's just it!" Harry interjected. "He's *not* useful." Neither adult contradicted him, so he kept going. "The only real reason he has-- he *had*--for being a spy was because he thought he was doing something useful, and that he was good at it. It was something only he could do. And now that he's been found out, it meant that he wasn't good enough. And if he can't do it anymore, that means...or he thinks it means...that he's not useful anymore."

He took off his glasses and scrubbed at his eyes; the long speech had left him light-headed. When he put them back on, he saw Sirius looking at him with a curious sort of respect.

"Well," the older man breathed after a moment. "Never imagined anyone could make Snape sound almost...human."

"But he *is* useful!" He turned to Remus, pleading. "I mean, he makes your potion, and--"

Remus's face darkened. "He makes it because he'd rather have me half- drugged when I transform."

Harry was taken aback. Remus had never used that tone of voice with him. The last time he'd heard anything remotely approaching it had been on the Hogwarts Express back in third year, and then it had been enough to stop a Dementor in its tracks.

Remus, however, was not finished. "Frankly, I think he takes pleasure in the fact that *he's* the one who has to make it and give it to me. He comes at the same time every day. He won't let anyone else bring it. He won't let me stop by his rooms to collect it. And he stands there and watches me drink it, and he ENJOYS it. And why wouldn't he? He loves knowing that I'm dependent on him for it, that he has power over me...over the wolf."

His voice had dropped lower and lower as he spoke until the last few words were little more than a snarl.

Into the silence that followed, Sirius said in a strangely gentle voice:

"You'll break that, in a minute."

Slowly, Remus looked down at his hands. He stared at the old china mug caught in his crushing, white-knuckled grip as if he was seeing it for the first time.

"I..." he began, but fell silent.

Sirius held out a hand. "Give it here. I'll put it back."

"No, no, I can--" He started to stand, but as he got to his feet the mug slipped from his grasp. It bounced off his knee, fell to the floor, and broke.

Harry flinched, unconsciously pulling away from the shattered mug. He had cleared away all sorts of broken crockery in his life, and normally his first instinct would have been to get down on the floor and help clean things up, but he didn't move.

"Oh, damn," Remus whispered hoarsely. "I didn't...it slipped...." Sinking to his knees on the worn flagstones, he reached for the pieces.

"Leave it," Sirius said in the same gentle tone, but Remus didn't seem to hear him.

"Clumsy of me. I shouldn't have...I'm sorry." Mechanically, he began to collect the scattered shards of pottery, but his trembling fingers made him drop more pieces than he picked up.

It was Sirius who knelt down and with great care eased his friend's shaking hands away from the remains of the broken mug.

"Leave it for now," he said again. "It's not going anywhere."

At that moment, the clock chimed, striking the quarter-hour.

The sound of the chimes snapped Harry out of his frozen state. Hurriedly, he got to his feet, holding up the hem of his robes to keep it from any contact with the remains of the mug.

"I...I'd better go," he said. "Dinner'll be over soon."

Remus nodded, not moving from his kneeling position by the fire.

Helplessly, Harry cast about for something to say. "Should I get the house elves to send up something? Dobby brought us lunch earlier, he'd be only too happy to--"

"No!" Remus quickly tempered his outburst with a kindly--or weary-- shake of the head. "Thanks all the same, but I'm not feeling very hungry now. The potion usually kills my appetite for a time."

That was that. "A-all right. Good night, then."

He headed for the door. To his surprise, Sirius rose and made to follow, brushing the dust from his knees.

"Where are you going?" asked Remus sharply.

"The kitchens." Sirius tossed the words over his shoulder. "I need food, even if you don't."

"Oh." He gathered a few more shards into his hand; his fingers seemed steadier now. "I'll...be in my rooms. I'll leave the door unlocked. Good night, Harry."

"Good night," Harry said. He waited until Sirius had transformed, then opened the door and held it open until the great black dog had passed through.

Once they were outside, Snuffles took the edge of Harry's robe in his teeth and dragged him a little ways down the corridor, into the shadow of doorway. Harry dug in his heels at first, but a fierce growl from the dog was enough to make him comply with his godfather's wishes.

In the doorway, Snuffles let go of Harry's robe and resumed his human form. The pop rang out so loudly in the corridor that Harry winced and shrank further into the shadows, terrified that they would be discovered.

"What are you--" he hissed.

"Listen to me," Sirius whispered, breathing the words into Harry's ear. "He gets like that, sometimes. It's nothing you can help. It's nothing *he* can help, either, but heaven knows I'm sick of trying to tell him that. The Wolfsbane's all we've got for now, at least until something better comes along."

It took a few seconds for Harry to understand what his godfather was talking about. An image of Remus kneeling on the stones and scrabbling to clean up the broken mug appeared in his mind, and suddenly he felt ashamed.

"Does it...hurt him?" he asked, timidly.

A tiny spark of light from the nearest torch made Sirius's eyes glow in the darkness. "Not 'hurt', exactly," he said. "He'll be fine once the stuff's had a chance to get through his system."

"What do you mean?"

Sirius let out a breath. "It's like this. Before we came here he didn't have access to the Wolfsbane Potion. We couldn't brew it ourselves, and we couldn't have afforded the ingredients even if we'd known someone competent enough to brew it. So he needed me with him when he changed. I kept him sane, in a way. But now that he has the potion, he needs me with him...so he'll *stay* sane."

Harry's confused silence lasted long enough to prompt Sirius to continue. "He needs exercise, especially when he's in his wolf form. If he doesn't, the potion will build up in his body. He won't get addicted to it, but he'll build up a tolerance for it. And whoever makes the potion for him will have to keep increasing its strength from month to month, or it'll lose its effectiveness."

Harry inhaled sharply. "So *that's* why...."

"Outside the Shrieking Shack?" Irony made Sirius's voice as brittle as glass. "Of all days to forget the dose--but I didn't find all this out until later. Much later. And from Dumbledore, not Snape."

"Snape didn't *tell* him?" Once more Harry was glad of the darkness, though for an entirely different reason. If Sirius looked as angry as he himself felt, then he had no desire to see it.

"Damned if I know. But I *do* know that the dosage hasn't increased once since I've been here. I'd be able to tell, in dog-form."

"How do you know so much about it?"

Sirius grunted. "I've spent enough time around him to know what's what. He never had these 'mood swings' or whatever they are before we came here. He even smells different when he's been taking the potion."

"I wish I could help." Anything to erase the sound of Remus's voice, thick and raw and dripping with anger gone sour. "Somehow."

"Just let me look after him," Sirius whispered. "I'm a good enough excuse to keep him active, most of the time. It wouldn't look right if he didn't walk his dog every day, and he has his share of the nightly rounds. But the full moon's not far away."

Harry nodded, forgetting that Sirius couldn't see him in the dark. "Just under a fortnight."

"Stick close to Snape, Harry. I'll keep both eyes and ears open, but you're in class with him. You'll know if he's up to something."

Harry felt a hand squeeze his shoulder. A second later, Snuffles was running down the corridor, nails clicking busily on the stones.

There was nothing for him to do but return to Gryffindor Tower, alone.

Ron, Colin, and Hermione were waiting for him, standing in a huddle beneath the Fat Lady's portrait. Colin was first to see him.

"Harry, guess what, guess what!" he said excitedly, bouncing up and down on his toes. "We were all sitting at dinner, and everyone was talking and we'd just started eating when McGonagall came in and she said--"

"The Quidditch match is back on," Ron cut in.

"When?" Harry asked.

Colin bounced a few more times, but stopped when Ron laid a hand on his shoulder. "It's not tomorrow or next Saturday, but the Saturday after," he said when he had calmed down. "First Saturday in May."

Hermione scowled. "Well, *I* think it's a stupid idea," she said irritably. "If you three masterminds are anything to go by, no-one on the team--on ANY of the teams--will get any decent revising done. And since everyone else seems to be just as Quidditch mad as you are, I highly doubt that...."

Ron took the opportunity to murmur in Harry's ear, "Fred told me Dennison's re-opened the pools, so it's dead certain this time."

"Mm." Maureen Dennison, a sharp-faced Slytherin sixth-year, ran the highly secret and highly illicit underground betting on the Quidditch matches. If she was taking bets again, the match would certainly go on as scheduled.

"Are you listening to me?" Hermione was getting rather red in the face. "N.E.W.T.s and O.W.L.s are going to go right out the window, and none of you could care less."

"Hermione, O.W.L.s aren't until June," Harry said patiently. "We're not going to forget how to hold a wand if we don't live in the library day and night for a month. Did McGonagall say anything else at dinner?"

Hermione's mouth snapped shut.

Colin said diffidently, "She mentioned the Lestranges, but said that it'll be in the Prophet tomorrow morning, and we should read about it there."

"Oh, and Hagrid's gone until Friday, but we've still got class next week," added Ron.

"Friday?" Remus had said Thursday at the latest. Did McGonagall know something that he didn't?

"What did Professor Lupin say?" Colin asked.

"It'll take awhile. Let's find the others and talk about it upstairs."

Hermione spun around and faced the Fat Lady. "Quodpot Chasers," she declared, spitting the words out as if they were poison.

The portrait door opened, and the four of them went inside.

* * *

The weekend came and went uneventfully. McGonagall and Madam Hooch had pacified the Slytherin and Ravenclaw Quidditch teams with extra practice time and full control over the pitch on both Saturday and Sunday, so Harry's plans for a nice long team workout on Sunday afternoon had to be shelved.

Needless to say, he wasn't very happy about that. With all the games moved forward by two weeks, Gryffindor's next match would have to take place the Sunday after the Slytherin-Ravenclaw game. If Slytherin were to beat Ravenclaw on Saturday, there was every possible risk that the Gryffindor and Slytherin teams would have to schedule a special match to decide that year's Quidditch Cup champion. On the other hand, if Ravenclaw won then Gryffindor's victory was assured, but that was no reason to slack off. They had a game against Hufflepuff

and one more against Ravenclaw, and it would be a sour winnings indeed if they won the Cup but lost their last matches of the year.

Without Quidditch to fall back upon, he spent the weekend alternating fits of productive work with stretches of bone idleness. He read through Dean's vast collection of Quidditch magazines on Saturday, with two breaks for afternoon and after-dinner naps. At Hermione's insistence, Sunday was a homework day, but after he had finished his work he stayed up late playing gobstones with Ron and Neville. The three of them went to bed long after their housemates had turned in.

Early Monday morning, right before he woke up, he had a very vivid and altogether disturbing dream.

In it, he was standing in the middle of the Great Hall. He was wearing his pyjamas, though everyone else was fully dressed. Ron and Hermione were there, and Sirius and Remus and Professor McGonagall, and near to them were a half-dozen other people whose faces he couldn't see, though he knew they were all looking at him.

Ron and Hermione were talking to McGonagall as Sirius and Remus and the other people listened. It was difficult to understand what his friends were saying--their speech sounded garbled and fuzzy--but after a few minutes he realised that they were talking about defeating Voldemort, and how all their plans had to be changed at once. He understood Hermione the most, for some reason, and as he listened he heard her inform Ron and McGonagall that she had read in "Hogwarts: A History" that the only way to defeat the Dark Lord was to Transfigure him into a teakettle and boil water in him.

Ron, from what Harry could understand of his garbled speech, seemed to be saying that it was Harry's job to cast the spell, and that they ought to discuss the matter with Harry before they did anything else. But both he and McGonagall seemed to think it was a grand idea, and the other people in the hall nodded agreement.

In the dream, he ran up to them and tried to protest, swearing that he wasn't THAT good at Transfiguration, and he'd had a lot of trouble turning a tortoise into a teapot when they'd been tested on it, and they would never be able to defeat Voldemort that way. But just then Will appeared in the hall, and he wasn't dressed in the midnight blue robes he always wore. Instead, he was wearing his black academical gown. It wasn't the same gown he had worn before; this one had a wide vertical scarlet stripe down the centre front, the colour so bright that it hurt Harry's eyes.

Before Harry could ask Will why he was dressed that way--the black and scarlet gown made him look rather like a Auror, though not exactly the same--the Old One pressed something cold and metallic into his hand and disappeared without a word. Baffled, Harry glanced down to see what it was.

It was a tin of tea.

The tin was the last thing he saw before he jerked awake, sweating and gasping for air. His pyjama top was almost around his neck, and his feet were tangled in the bedclothes.

Potions was first that morning, but the lesson for the day was so challenging that all of Harry's concentration went into the bubbling mixture in the cauldron. Snape had paired him with Draco, which made it doubly difficult to focus.

His friends had no better luck in their class partners. Ron had Millicent Bulstrode, and Hermione was stuck with Pansy. Neville had a bout of clumsiness and spilled a flask of fresh cobra's blood all over himself, his worktable, Blaise Zabini, and Snape's shoes. Gryffindor lost forty more points that morning, and the only sign that Snape was acting strangely was that he didn't deduct more from their House.

"It won't do, you know," Hermione said when Potions had ended and they were making their way to the greenhouses for Herbology. "We're too obvious. Snape's suspicious enough of us as it is. We can't spy on him in class without giving ourselves away, and we can't pay attention if we spend the entire time watching and waiting for him to sneeze funny."

They were forced to agree with her. In the end, it was decided that any Snape-watching would have to take place outside of class.

Monday evening's session was not what they had expected. There was no physical activity involved. Will merely asked them to sit around the long table and use the mental link to practise their telepathic communication.

"What should we say?" Colin asked.

"Anything," the Old One replied. "It doesn't have to be complicated. It doesn't even have to be interesting. This is an exercise in stamina as much as concentration."

When his turn came, Harry chose the first thing he could think of, which happened to be the multiplication tables. He had reached eight- sevens-are-fifty-six and developed a hot, funny feeling behind his eyelids by the time Will told him to stop. Fortunately, all he had to do after that was sit quietly and listen to Hermione recite from the twelve uses of dragon's blood, Colin describe the full process by which film negatives are developed into photographic prints, and Ron recount the final scores of every single Chudley Cannons game from the last five years.

Other exercises in telepathy followed. Will set them word games and puzzles, quizzed them on magical theory, forced them to concentrate. When their energy flagged he let them rest, but he always pushed them to work harder. They were never gladder to end a session than they were that night.

Colin and Ginny served their detention with Snape the next evening. Ever the believer in equal opportunity punishment, he put Ginny to work carrying grimy crates filled with vials of unidentifiable liquids from the farthest, dustiest storeroom to his classroom, and gave Colin a bucket and brush and set him the task of scrubbing the storeroom's floor the old-fashioned way, with lye soap and water.

It was a nasty, grubby task, and since it was an extended detention it dragged for hours. By the time Snape decided that they had suffered enough for one night, they were filthy, sore, and barely able to stagger up the long flights of stairs to Gryffindor Tower.

Hermione took one look at the two of them as they stumbled through the portrait hole and shooed them upstairs. She followed them, leaving Harry and Neville to listen to Ron muttering imprecations about what he would do to Snape the next time he saw the vicious bastard.

Wednesday brought rain. Morning drizzle led to afternoon showers and evening downpour. Thursday's dawn was grey and cold and wet. The rain continued, and there was no sign of it stopping. There was also no sign of Hagrid.

Will listened patiently as they poured out their worries to him before that evening's session began. He agreed that Hagrid's failure to return on time was distressing, but reminded them that there were any number of reasons for it, and only a handful were cause for concern.

"Travelling through Europe is easier than it used to be, but delays are unavoidable. For all we know, they've caught the last cross-Channel ferry and are setting foot in England at this moment." He tapped his fingers on the edge of his desk. "Come now. We should have started five minutes ago."

"I wish the rain would stop," Harry said. His tone was dangerously close to a whine, but he didn't care.

Will raised a disapproving eyebrow. "It's been raining here in Cambridge, too, you know. You can't blame the Dark for everything."

Harry mumbled something that might have been an apology (but more likely wasn't) and joined his friends around the mirror. Later that evening, when he was safely in bed, he strongly suspected that his near-whining might have been directly responsible for the events that followed, but at the time he didn't think anything of it.

The children visibly relaxed when Will's first action upon entering the room was to remove the table and chairs. Another long stretch of telepathy would have drained them.

Once the floor space had been cleared, he asked Harry, Ron, and Hermione to step forward. "It is time to make use of the power you demonstrated so forcefully last Friday. Mr Potter, you and Miss Granger will stand at either end of the room. Miss Granger will cast a spell, and you in turn will block it using Mr Weasley's magic."

Harry scratched his head. "But I don't remember what I did," he said.

"You have to reach through the mental link, drawing his magic into you. As for Mr Weasley's part, he will have to allow the magic to pass into you. Think of it as if he were handing something to you-- as simple as passing the salt at dinner."

"What sort of blocking spell should I use?" Ron asked.

"That depends on the type of spell you think Miss Granger would cast."

Ron gulped. "But...but...that could be ANYTHING!"

"Then cast a Shielding spell that can block anything," Will said, rather unsympathetically.

They faced each other on opposite sides of the room: Hermione by the fire, Harry near the door. Ron stood at Harry's right, within arm's length. Ginny, Neville, and Colin kept to one side, flat against the bookshelves. Will stood in the far corner, surveying them all.

Since it wasn't really a duel, he and Hermione dispensed with the formal bowing and pacing rituals they had learned at duelling club. They held out their wands. The link was there, waiting to be tapped.

Hermione's face tightened, and her wand flashed through the air.

"Rictusempra!"

He felt the sharp pull of magic as Ron cast a Shielding Charm, but Hermione's spell hit him squarely in the stomach before he could reach through the mental link. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he clutched his stomach and hunched over, laughing uncontrollably.

Hermione hastily cast a counter-spell and ran toward him.

"Are you all right?" she said, helping him to straighten up. "I didn't think you'd--"

"That will do, Miss Granger."

Through streaming eyes, Harry saw Will walking toward the fire. He paused in front of the fire irons, and his hand hovered over them for a brief moment before selecting the poker. He stirred the coals and pulled the largest log forward, sending up a spurt of sparks.

His question, when it came, completely surprised them. "Which of you has the slowest reflexes?"

Shocked, they stared at him.

"In your collective opinion, that is," he said. "I'm not singling you out. Well, perhaps I am, but not with the intention of shaming you. I'm merely curious."

Slowly, Neville held up his hand. "P-probably me, sir."

"Then would you be good enough to cast a basic defensive spell?" Feathery grey ashes drifted onto the hearth, and he brushed them toward the fire with the toe of his shoe.

Neville stepped away from the bookshelves, took out his wand, and held it before his face. "*Defendo Lux!*"

Will nodded appreciatively as the bluish-white light coalesced around Neville's sturdy form.

"I see you've learned not to take chances with me, Mr Longbottom," he said. "I'll consider that a compliment."

Neville said nothing. Will stooped forward to reach with the poker. He brought a small log to the heart of the fire, allowing it to burn more evenly.

"The way I see it," he said reflectively, "capturing a spell is mostly a matter of reflex. It's a kind of self-defence, just as if you were being physically threatened. Your hand comes up to block a blow, you duck if a ball comes flying toward you. Instinct tells you to flinch if you see someone being hit, even if you are in no immediate danger."

Chunks and flakes of charred wood fell away from the logs as the poker scraped through the flames. "However, that saving reflex doesn't work nearly as well if you happen to be thinking too deeply about what you are doing. I suggest, therefore, that the best way to tap the necessary magic is to set your mind--to something ELSE!"

And he struck.

Faster than their eyes could follow the Old One lunged forward, three great strides that closed the distance and not a moment's pause as the poker whirled over his head, a blur of iron singing through the air, and a twist of his wrist was all he needed to bring it down on Harry's head.

There was no time for Harry to cry out, let alone back away. He watched the poker come down, and then the whole world went white.

When his vision returned, he noticed three things.

The first thing he noticed was the sharp end of the poker. It was frozen in the air, the point not three inches from the centre of his forehead. Bits of blackened wood still clung to the hooked tip.

The second thing he noticed, as his stunned gaze slid down the length of the fire-iron, was that no one was holding the end of it.

The third thing he noticed was that he was glowing. Faintly, but glowing. The bluish-white light that had surrounded Neville was now surrounding him.

He looked past the poker and saw Will.

Will was smiling at him.

"I'd have to disagree with your self-analysis, Mr Longbottom," he said, looking directly at Harry. "I don't think one could ask for a better reaction time than that." The smile widened. "Wouldn't you agree, Mr Potter?"

* * *

It rained all of Friday, and the thunder and lightning that began on Friday night effectively dampened Harry's plans for Quidditch practice that weekend.

The rain also dampened his spirits, feeding the bad mood that had been creeping up on him all week. Ever since the strange dream he had had the Sunday before, he hadn't been sleeping very deeply. Even if he went to bed at a reasonable time each night he never felt rested in the morning.

Between lack of restful sleep and the growing worry about Hagrid, his temper was shorter than normal. Even petty irritants were liable to send him storming about with a seemingly permanent scowl on his face. He snapped at Colin on Saturday afternoon when the younger boy woke him from a pre-dinner nap. He swore profusely when his second-best quill broke in the middle of writing out his Divination homework. He tore the bedroom apart searching for an overdue library book, and very nearly hexed Dean for complaining about the mess he had left in their room. By Sunday, it was no surprise that his housemates had started to hurry in the other direction whenever they saw him coming.

He grouched his way through Monday's classes. History of Magic was his last one that day, and he didn't even bother to take out his notes or his quill. He put his head down on the desk and closed his eyes, burying his face in his sleeve. Hermione, sitting next to him, nudged him with her foot once or twice. He ignored her.

Professor Binns' voice was better than any knockout drug. The reedy drone of the lecture and the scraping of quill nibs on parchment put him to sleep almost immediately. When he woke to the sound of chairs being pushed back and papers rustling, he felt more refreshed than he had felt in days.

After his nap, dinner was a more cheery affair--savory steak and kidney pies were on the table that night, along with rich fluffy mountains of potatoes and plenty of freshly baked bread. He chewed away happily, much to the relief of his friends.

"We were starting to wonder about you," Ginny told him.

"Yeah," Ron said dryly. "Fred and George wanted to know when you'd started taking git lessons from Snape."

After dinner, the six of them split up. Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Colin headed in the direction of the library while Harry and Hermione went back to Gryffindor Tower: Harry to drop off a book, Hermione to brush her teeth. She managed to nag Harry into brushing his teeth, too.

On their way out of the portrait hole, they ran into Remus. Harry was walking in front, and he literally ran into him, which made Hermione back-pedal to avoid a further collision.

"Hello, you two," he said once he had regained his balance. "Off somewhere?"

Harry, caught off guard, could only stammer. "Oh, hello, Rem--er, I mean...."

"Good evening, Professor Lupin," said Hermione. She smiled demurely and smoothed the front of her robes, the picture of a model student. "We were heading to our revising session."

"We're just leaving now," Harry said uneasily. Remus looked haggard, his face pinched and pained. The mushroom-like smell of Wolfsbane Potion was strong in the air; it had seeped into his clothing.

"Would you mind if I walked with you?" Remus held up a small book. "I'm on my way to the library myself."

Harry opened his mouth, ready to offer to take the book and spare him the journey, but before he could get a word out Hermione grabbed the professor's arm and put on her brightest smile.

"Not at all," she said, steering him away from the common room door. "I've been meaning to ask you some questions about the origins of the legend of the Japanese fox-spirits that we covered in class...."

She kept up a steady flow of school-related chatter until they were out of sight of the common room, walking briskly. Only when they had arrived at the long stretch of empty corridor leading to the library did she break off and whisper, "What's going on?"

"I'll explain when we get there," Remus murmured without moving his lips.

"What is it?" Harry said.

"Not yet," came the murmured reply. "Not here."

The three of them passed the library door and continued down the corridor. Remus tucked the book under his arm. He noticed Harry and Hermione's puzzled faces, and offered a terse explanation.

"It's mine," he said. "It happened to be a good excuse."

The fire was lit when they opened the door to the little room. One of the others had already activated the mirror, and Will was waiting for them on the other side.

To say that the Old One was alarmed by the sight of Remus would have been overstating his reaction, but he did set down the newspaper he had been holding and moved forward, approaching the mirror.

"Good evening, Dr Stanton," Remus said, nodding respectfully.

"Why, hello, Professor Lupin." Will nodded as well, the gesture equally respectful. "I wasn't aware that you would be--"

"Forgive my intrusion, Dr. Stanton, but the Headmistress asked me to speak with you as soon as possible." Remus's speech was clipped, shorn of its usual calm. "She's just received word that Rubeus Hagrid's gone missing."

Harry's heart leapt into his throat. It lodged itself firmly between his vocal cords and the base of his tongue. His dinner, meanwhile, dove for the pit of his stomach, forming a churning mass in his gut.

"MISSING?" Ron exclaimed. "He's not--"

"I don't know," Remus said, setting his book on the table. "We had a letter from--"

"One moment, Professor," Will interrupted. "This will be easier on us all if I join you."

The children performed the ritual smoothly, with less sense of ceremony than was their usual. Remus gaped at first, dumbstruck, but the light had not quite faded from the carved pattern around the frame before he had recovered from his initial shock and was ready to continue.

"Three hours ago, Albus Dumbledore received an owl from Alastor Moody, sent from the office of our Magical Attaché at the British Embassy in Warsaw. It was a very short message, only two lines." He took a breath. "It said: 'Hagrid missing. Don't trust Braithwaite.'"

Will tilted his head slightly. "Braithwaite being...."

"Geoffrey Braithwaite, our man at the embassy in Bucharest. He's only been there a month. Took over from--oh, I can't remember." He picked up his book and rubbed his finger along the worn binding. If he was trying to distract himself from his agitation, it wasn't working very well.

Will saw this, and his voice held more compassion than normal when he said, "Please, continue."

"Albus immediately contacted Warsaw, but Moody had already left. We've no idea where he is now. He could be in Europe still, or somewhere in England, or halfway around the world. We honestly don't know."

"And this happened three hours ago, you said?"

"The owl came three hours ago," Remus replied. "Hagrid was supposed to meet Moody in Bucharest this morning. They'd planned to return together."

"Bucharest." Will's frown turned pensive. "The six o'clock newscast this evening mentioned riots in Bucharest earlier today. A political demonstration that got out of hand, something along those lines. They might have needed to leave the city in a hurry."

Remus thought this over. "Hagrid can't Apparate, and Moody doesn't trust Portkeys. If they wanted to leave fast and still remain unseen they'd have to Floo, and outside Britain the only fireplaces that are registered on the Floo Network are...."

"...in the office of the Magical Attaché in the British embassy," Will finished grimly.

Remus said nothing, but the expression on his face was confirmation enough.

For the first time that evening Will looked troubled. His gaze slid into the vague middle-distance, staring at the opposite wall.

"Too fast," he murmured. "This is all moving too fast. And with a political situation complicating matters...." His eyes refocused, and he turned back to Remus. "That owl from Warsaw. I suppose it was--"

"Authentic," Remus said, anticipating the question. "It took three curse-breakers to disable all of the protective wards cast on the envelope. The seal itself was Moody's personal one. I'd pity anyone who tried to tamper with it."

"Indeed," Will mused. He pressed his fingertips together lightly. "What of the wizarding population in Romania itself? Would they be cooperative if the Ministry were to launch a search?"

"Hard to say, especially outside the cities. Witches and wizards there had a thin time of it for years, at least until the last decade or so. They don't trust authority: wizard or Muggle."

Will hissed lightly through his teeth, a dangerous sound. "I can't say that I blame them, all things considered. But Ceausescu is one thing, and Voldemort is another."

"The Dark Arts hold sway in that part of the world," Remus said quietly. "They always have. And if we can't trust our own embassy liaison, I wouldn't think much of our chances with their government."

"If Alastor Moody felt he had to cross three countries to send an emergency owl to you, then it seems we have his opinion on the overall situation as well," Will said. "I suppose we can only hope that he returns soon." He half-turned, and looked to the children. "Unless any of you are aware of something we've overlooked?"

Harry blinked. He and the others had been standing near the fire, huddled in a tight cluster for reassurance as much as for warmth. They had been listening for so long that they'd almost forgotten what it was like to be spoken to directly.

"Uh..." he said at first, then coughed once or twice to stall long enough to think of something more intelligent-sounding. "Where's Sirius?"

"With Professor McGonagall," Remus said. "Talking to Albus and trying to come up with a plan."

"A plan?"

"Well, anything that will help us find Moody or Hagrid. Preferably both."

"Exactly how much does Hagrid know?" Will asked.

Remus scratched his chin. "Not as much as they'd like to imagine. I doubt if Albus would have let him leave the country at all if he knew enough to compromise any possible plans."

"What about the Locus Spell?" Hermione said eagerly. "You'd only need one person for that, and something of Hagrid's. We could get a scarf or something from his hut for that."

Remus shook his head. "Too dangerous. It can reveal the location of the caster as well as the person being looked for. We can't risk losing anyone else over there. Plus, it would only work if he was still..." He paused, and said huskily, "If he's still alive."

Hermione's face fell.

"Why are you here, Professor Lupin?" Will said suddenly.

Remus's eyes widened. He looked embarrassed, so embarrassed that Harry found his own face growing warm in response. "I...well, that is...I thought that perhaps...."

Will bowed his head.

"I'm sorry," he said in a low voice. "I cannot help you in this."

"You can't do anything?" Colin said plaintively.

"If I could have done anything to remedy the situation, or better still prevent it, wouldn't I have done so by now?" There was no anger or resentment in his words, only sorrow and regret. "I cannot interfere. Not by my own choice, but because it is forbidden me."

It took all of Harry's self-control to keep from biting through his own lip. Hagrid was missing, possibly dead, and Will couldn't help. For a tension-filled second he almost wished that Will was lying, that he *could* help and wouldn't, because then he could fly into a blazing rage instead of having to stand around feeling empty inside.

Remus exhaled slowly, then drew himself up until he was standing very straight with his head held high. His shabby clothing only made him appear that much more dignified as he bowed formally, from the waist.

"Please forgive the intrusion, Dr Stanton," he said, and began to move toward the door. "If you'll excuse me--"

Will moved faster, and blocked his path. "No, please stay for now. You're here, you may as well participate."

"But surely--"

"No, I insist." He guided Remus away from the door. "There's something that I've been meaning to try, but truthfully a full-grown wizard would be better suited for it. If you have the time to spare, we'd be happy to have your help."

The polite language masked the true command, and Remus knew it. "If you think I can help," he said simply.

"I'm certain you can," Will replied. "What I would like you to do is to think of a truly nasty spell. Hex or jinx or curse, anything short of an Unforgivable will do. But I'd like you to come up with one that these children would not know. Something not in the usual textbooks. Something that would stump your most advanced students."

"L...let me think for a moment," Remus said weakly. He beckoned to Will, drawing him closer. "Er, may I...?"

"By all means." He bent forward. Remus murmured something into his ear.

"Mm," he said when the other man had finished. "Yes, that would work. Can it be blocked?"

"Well, yes, but--"

Distant blue-grey eyes bored into nervous hazel ones. "Could *you* block it?"

"Of course," Remus declared. Pride raised his chin a few inches, and confidence set his eyes glittering with a determined light.

Will passed a hand over the table, and it and the chairs on either side vanished in the blink of an eye. He then glanced at the Six, and without a word they formed their circle of joined hands, Harry standing in the centre.

"Whenever you're ready, Professor," Will said, stepping back a pace.

Remus set his book on the floor at his feet, wiped his hand on his robes, and took out his wand. He held it up, before his eyes, and made a curious swirling motion with it that made him look like he was conducting a symphony orchestra. Then, he flicked the wand and shouted:

"Infervesco!"

Remus's tenure as Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor had given him a good deal of first-hand experience with various blocking and shielding charms. Before he even cast the spell, he expected that the Old One's coaching would have taught the children how to create some kind of special defensive shield that would neatly encompass all six of them, and would provide more protection than a normal shielding charm. When his spell struck their circle with a flare of reddish light, he had been fully prepared to counter the spell as it rebounded.

What he was NOT prepared for was Harry, raising his own wand and saying, in a hollow and strangely adult voice--

"Infervesco!"

--and recasting the exact same spell, with the exact same strength.

True to his word, Remus blocked the spell with a hoarsely shouted word and a slash of his wand. The flare of reddish light hit his outstretched hand and dissolved into colourful sparkles, like a handful of fireworks.

Harry lowered his wand. He was tired, but it was a happy sort of tired. He had seen the spell coming, and the second it had struck the circle he opened the mental link and the magic flowed into him like sand through a sieve. Spread out around the circle, it hadn't hit him all at once, as it had with Neville's blocking spell. It had worked the first time, and nothing had gone wrong, and they had done it together, all six of them. He wanted to go to bed then and there, just lie down on the stone floor and relish the good feeling as he slipped into sleep.

The others dropped their hands. Colin's off-kilter grin brought to mind the second round of Quidditch tryouts, and Neville was beaming all over his face. They all looked as wonderfully exhausted as he felt.

"What would that have done?" he heard Ginny ask. She sounded positively cheerful.

It wasn't Remus who answered, but Will, and his words were like a bucket of ice water down their backs:

"It would have made your blood boil."

Harry's head shot up. Even if the tone of Will's voice had not said it all, the fearful awe he saw in Remus's eyes was enough to make him realise that it wasn't a figure of speech.

* * *

"Aren't you coming?"

The session was over. It was earlier than normal, since Hermione had to do rounds that night. Remus had already left, saying that he would speak with Sirius and McGonagall and find out if anything had been decided upon. The mirror was reflective glass once more, the table and chairs were back in their places, and children were about to return to common room. Ginny, however, was still standing by the fire, not moving.

"We'll be right there, Hermione," Ginny said. "You go on ahead."

"I can wait out here until you're done," Harry said gallantly.

She smiled at him. "No, honestly. Go back to the common room."

"Go on," Ron said. He holding the door open, and he was not smiling. "I'm staying with her."

Hermione hesitated. "Is everything--"

"It's fine." The door banged shut, leaving Harry, Colin, Neville, and Hermione out in the empty corridor.

"Well!" she huffed. "Of all the...I never heard such...."

Harry had been piecing things together all evening. Ron and Ginny had been silent for much of the session, sitting close to one another and not participating in the discussion that had followed their demonstration. The others had offered all sorts of ideas for finding Hagrid and getting in touch with Moody, but the Weasleys had not spoken more than a dozen words between them. Considering the news that Remus had brought, it did not require a stretch of the imagination to figure out what was troubling them. And now they were in an empty, secluded room with a fire burning, and the fire was large enough for one person's head to fit in the flames.

"It's Charlie," he said. "He works in Romania. I'd bet anything they're going to try and get hold of him tonight."

"But it'd be almost midnight there!" Hermione exclaimed. "Why now?"

"And what about the riots?" Colin asked. He was gnawing on the knuckle of one hand.

"He wouldn't be near the cities," Neville said. "One of my mum's cousins used to work with the dragons there, too, and he used to say that where he worked you could sometimes go for months and months without seeing another wizard. Charlie might not even know anything's wrong."

"But Hagrid was supposed to check with him every day," Harry countered. "He might've been the last person to see Hagrid before...before...."

"Don't," Hermione said forcefully. "Stop it right now."

"What?" said Harry.

"You've got that *look* again."

He was thoroughly confused. "What look?"

"The one that says 'it's all my fault', even when it's not," Hermione said crossly, without breaking her stride. "Honestly, what could you have done? You didn't make Hagrid go to Romania. You didn't even know about it until last week. What makes you think it's your fault?"

"I..." He couldn't tell her the truth. He didn't even *know* the truth. The only truthful thing he could say was, "I don't know."

"I thought so," she grumbled.

Colin spoke up. "And besides, if anything was *really* wrong, you'd know it, wouldn't you, Harry? With your scar?"

His hand drifted up to his forehead, tracing the thin raised ridge with his fingertips.

"I didn't know about the Lestranges," he said. They had killed someone then, that Philpot or whatever his name was. He hadn't known that time.

"That's different," Hermione said automatically.

His hand fell to his side. "How?"

"It just *is*, that's all." With that unconvincing reasoning, she spun on her heel and began to walk down the corridor. "Now come on, I've got to get back. I promised Lavender I'd look over her Charms homework when I finished my rounds tonight, and I don't want to hear her grouching if I come in late again."

"Don't worry, Harry," Neville whispered to him as they broke into a trot. "If anyone knows how to find Hagrid, it'll be Charlie. There's an old wizarding saying: giants are a lot like dragons-- the easiest way to find one is to keep walking until you trip over it. It's only then that you start running."

Chapter 33

I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor-edge of danger and must be fought for....

-- Thornton Wilder

As he was falling asleep that night, Harry drowsily wondered what McGonagall would say at breakfast the next morning.

McGonagall would have to say *something*--he was certain of that. There was no way that she or any of the other professors could continue to pretend that nothing was wrong. Hagrid's absence had started whispers that were threatening to develop into full-blown rumours, and the odd behaviour of Harry Potter and his small circle of friends had not gone unnoticed, either. Whatever she chose to say would have to be honest, forceful and truthful enough to quash the rumours, but phrased in such a way as to avoid causing a panic.

Harry didn't envy her the task. If Remus's news had been the most recent information, there wasn't a lot for her to work with.

As it turned out, it didn't much matter what was kept back or given out. Little things, things that would likely have gone unnoticed at almost any other time, told the real story.

It was the slump of McGonagall's shoulders when she tapped a butter knife against her goblet at breakfast the next morning. The awful news that Rubeus Hagrid had vanished somewhere in Eastern Europe was made worse by the fact that McGonagall appeared to be perfectly composed. Not a hair on her head was out of place; not a wrinkle marred her clothing. Only her shoulders betrayed her, and somehow that told the students more about her state of mind than reddened eyes or rumpled robes would have.

After McGonagall's short, almost brusque speech, it was Ron and Ginny nodding off over their food. Both had spent the better part of the previous night in McGonagall's office tracking down their brother's whereabouts. Ron quietly informed the others that they had finally managed to reach Charlie just after three-thirty that morning--he had been up all night caring for a sick dragon, and had not returned to the main encampment until nearly five o'clock, Romanian time. He was fine, if exhausted, but he had no news of either Moody or Hagrid.

("He didn't even know they were missing," Ron said with a sigh, and nudged Ginny awake just before she dozed off and ended up face-first in her bowl of now-soggy cornflakes.)

When the owls arrived with the post, it was Neville's reaction when he sliced his thumb opening a letter from his grandmother. The paper cut wasn't deep, but he sprang from the table and fled the Great Hall, running for the infirmary as if he was in danger of bleeding to death. The half-opened letter fluttered to the floor, forgotten. Hermione picked it up as they were leaving and put it in her pocket to give to Neville later.

Near the end of breakfast, it was the way that *everyone*, from the most highly-strung first year to McGonagall herself, nearly leapt out of their seats when a loud crack of thunder shook the Great Hall. The murky clouds shrouding the enchanted ceiling darkened still further as rain began to fall.

A handful of the youngest students started to cry, and were quickly comforted by the older members of their Houses. At any other time their friends would have gleefully teased them afterward--it was silly to cry over a little thunder, after all--but this time no one made fun.

The little things were adding up.

Later that day, it was the sudden outbursts of hysterical giggling that seemed to infect the younger students at odd times of day. The giggling fits had actually begun over the weekend--Harry vaguely remembered seeing Phillipa Jordan nearly giggle herself sick on Saturday night, though he had been too busy being grouchy and miserable to think much of it at the time. By Tuesday evening, however, it had spread with a strangely epidemic speed until all the Houses were affected.

On Wednesday morning, it was the faint tremor in Remus's hand as he passed out 'precautionary' Chocolate Frogs to the fifth-year students entering the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. It was also the way that every single person stared at the sweet in his or her hand with something akin to nausea. After a long moment, the chocolates were slipped into pockets and dropped into bags. Not one Frog was eaten--and yet not one was given away, either.

On Wednesday afternoon, it was the speed with which professors took to sending giggling first, second, and third years out of their classrooms, as if they were afraid of contagion.

Little things.

One of the worst came on Thursday morning, when a dark-coloured owl swooped into the Great Hall and deposited a large paper-wrapped parcel beside Draco Malfoy's plate. The paper was ordinary, but the length

and size of the parcel made the contents absolutely unmistakable. It was a brand-new broom.

Draco gleefully tore off the paper wrapping, revealing a long black box with a large gold crest stamped on the top. He lifted the lid and unveiled his gift, holding the broom aloft to the great delight of his housemates. Word quickly circulated through the tables that the broom was a Roman Rocket, imported from Italy, the newest, most sophisticated, and most expensive broom on the market.

Fred and George looked positively sick with envy at the sight, and even Harry found himself casting a few longing looks at the broom's sleek twigs and silver-tipped shaft in between bites of toast. At the Ravenclaw table, Roger Davies looked as if he wanted to break every breakable thing in sight, and Cho Chang's normally sweet and sunny expression was as stormy as the weather outside. The rest of the Ravenclaw team looked as if they were wondering whether they ought to forfeit Saturday's match then and there and save themselves the trouble.

The Potions class that followed was an exercise in self-control. Snape devoted almost the entire class to lamenting the overall lack of intelligence in fifth year students, as demonstrated by the last round of homework he had assigned. Mistakes and omissions were pointed out in detail, and when he couldn't find fault with the content he went after grammatical errors, and then spelling, and then handwriting, and finally punctuation. By the end of class, Harry's jaw hurt from keeping his teeth clenched for so long.

Just before lunch on that same day, a fist fight broke out in the corridor. A Ravenclaw fourth-year was set upon by two Hufflepuffs, one in fourth year and one in third. Ginny had seen it just at the end, when Justin Finch-Fletchey and a Ravenclaw seventh-year prefect had managed to break it up, and at lunch she told the others what she had heard from others who had seen more. Someone had bumped into someone and knocked an armful of books to the floor, and then someone else had said something rather uncomplimentary, and the word 'Mudblood' had been involved somehow, and that had led to blows. Less than three minutes later, House points had been deducted and Heads of Houses notified, and the knot of curious students had gone their separate ways.

"But I *felt* something when I was walking away," Ginny said softly, glancing round to ensure that no one was listening in. "I can't really describe it, but I think...I think it felt like the Dark."

Thursday evening's session provided little comfort. Will had no news of Hagrid, and during the session itself he seemed distracted, as if part of his attention was directed elsewhere. It almost seemed as if the Old One was carrying on an entirely separate conversation with someone else, or as if some part of him was operating on a different

level that they simply could not detect. When the children emerged from the little room off the library two hours later, the level of frustration in the air made it difficult to breathe.

The next day, Defence Against the Dark Arts was cancelled. McGonagall assigned them a chapter from their textbooks and set them an essay, then dismissed the class and directed them to the library to start outside research. The chapter focused on poison and curse antidotes that required animal blood, and the essay she had set was to research the history and uses of an antidote that featured the blood of an animal of their choice.

Harry dutifully wandered up and down the stacks. He picked three books that had promising titles and brought them back to the small table that he and Ron were sharing. His mind wasn't fully on what he was doing, and it was only when he set the books down and took out some paper for note-taking that he saw the full titles of the volumes he had chosen.

"Dissecting Dark Creatures", by Lilith d'Angevin.

"Bleeding the Wolf", by A. J. C. Naylor.

And finally, "Wolfsbane, Wolf's Blood", translated from Russian by Grigorii Stepanovich Gerasimov.

He fought back a bitter, mirthless laugh. It could not be coincidence that he had selected these particular books on the very day of the full moon.

A minute later, Madam Pince looked up from her ledger to find that three volumes had been deposited unceremoniously on her desk. Harry was already back among the shelves, searching for books on the myriad uses of cobra blood.

The rain that had been falling without a break since Monday stopped mid-afternoon on Friday, and though the sky still had a greyish and uniformly dismal cast Madam Hooch announced at dinner that Saturday's game was still on.

The underground pools remained open until eight o'clock that night, although Draco's new broom had forced Maureen Dennison to recalculate her original odds. A Ravenclaw victory was now twenty-to-one, and even these odds were favourable compared to the odds on Cho Chang catching the Snitch. Harry didn't hear what those were, but judging from the faces of some of the punters he had an idea that Maureen would do quite well off of this particular match.

Neither Remus nor Snuffles was at dinner on Friday. Neither had been at breakfast or lunch, either.

As they were walking back to the common room after dinner, Neville tripped over his own feet and crashed into a suit of armour. Both tumbled to the floor in a heap. Nearly half of Gryffindor tried unsuccessfully to reassemble the clanking bits of metal, but before long Filch materialised, seemingly out of nowhere, and shooed them away to deal with the mess himself. The sound of muffled cursing followed them up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower.

Again, most of the incidents that week had been little things. There had been no nightmares, no vague premonitions of doom. Even Professor Trelawney had been oddly restrained when it came to dire predictions, a subject she normally approached with ghoulish relish. It would have been quite easy to put everything down to the normal stresses of the school year. O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s were less than two months away, and everyone was feeling the pressure.

Harry could have convinced himself that he was fretting over nothing. He could have convinced himself that he was doing what he could, and that it wouldn't do any good to worry about situations that were out of his control.

But he could not convince himself that the pain that woke him from a sound and dreamless sleep early Saturday morning was the product of an overactive imagination.

It was a sharp burning sensation, a thin and razor-edged ribbon of pressure that went all the way around his head and centred itself in a knife of pain in his scar. The pain had catapulted him out of sleep, encircling and squeezing his head like a vise.

He had felt worse...but this was bad.

He groped for his glasses; his lips and mouth felt as dry as a desert, and a trip to the bathroom for a glass--or twelve--of water would give him a chance to sort out his thoughts. He sat up slowly, noting how the pain had made him a little giddy, and swung his legs out of bed.

He was halfway to the door when he heard a soft sound, like a whimper, coming from the other side of the room.

He paused on tiptoe, and turned his head to listen more carefully. He heard nothing but Dean's snoring, and even that was muffled by pillows.

He was about to turn back to the door and continue on his way when the whimper came again. It was a little louder this time, and more like a stifled moan than a whimper.

"Who is it?" he whispered. He couldn't tell who was making the noise; it could have come from any one of the four crimson-draped beds still occupied. "What's wrong?"

"H...Harry...?"

There was a faint rustling of sheets, and a pale hand twitched feebly from behind the curtains of one of the beds. The curtain parted just enough to reveal Ron's face, white and scared beneath a mess of red hair.

His own pain forgotten, Harry hurried over to Ron's bed. He shoved aside the curtain and knelt beside the bed, peering anxiously at his best friend.

"What's the matter?" he whispered, all sorts of nameless fears rushing through his mind.

The cold light of the full moon fell across Ron's bed, allowing Harry to see without the aid of a lamp. Ron's skin was clammy-looking, and his breathing was laboured. He held one hand pressed against his forehead, and he squinted up at Harry, his face twisted in confused pain.

"Harry....what's going on?" His voice sounded slurred, still thick with sleep. "Why does it...?"

"Ron, tell me what's wrong," Harry said, more urgently. Madam Pomfrey wouldn't be awake, and he couldn't get Ron to the infirmary on his own. He would have to wake Neville, someone else--

Ron groaned softly. "Everything. Head hurts...nnggh....can't you shut off that light?"

"I don't have a...." His words trailed off, his train of thought broken by the idea that had popped into his mind. If Ron's head was hurting, and he was pressing his forehead in that particular spot--

Without thinking, his hand drifted up to delicately trace the jagged outline of his scar, throbbing with a pain that he was doing his best to ignore.

"You feel it," he murmured. It was not a question. "You feel it, too."

Ron stared at him for a moment, puzzled, but his eyes widened with sudden understanding. He blinked, and rubbed his forehead gingerly.

"Does your scar..." he started to say, then hesitated. Ever since their first meeting on the Hogwarts Express, an unspoken rule had developed that the topic of Harry's scar was--not off-limits, exactly, but so obviously personal that it may as well have been. "Does it always...is it always like this?"

"Most of the time," Harry replied grimly.

Ron winced, partly in sympathy and partly in very real pain. "Oh. I didn't know...I didn't--"

He gasped suddenly, eyes squeezing shut. His back arched almost off the bed as a spasm shot through him.

"Ron!" Harry had felt the sudden stabbing pain as well, but he was more accustomed to it than Ron was. He looked wildly about the room, searching for something to ease the pain. There was nothing in reach, nothing in--

His eye fell on Ron's robe, slung carelessly over the chair nearest to the bed. He grabbed for the robe and dug in the pockets, pulling out the small box that Ron still had not touched. Opening the flap, he shook the wriggling Chocolate Frog into his hand, then pulled it apart.

"Here," he said, holding a bit of chocolate to Ron's lips. "Try this."

The spasm had passed, but Ron still looked sickened. At the smell of chocolate, he turned his head away. "No...can't...."

"It's chocolate, Ron. It'll help." He managed to coax a bit past Ron's lips, and a stupid, relieved grin spread across his face as Ron's chalky skin regained some of its colour.

Ron licked his lips, and gingerly pushed himself to a semi-sitting position. He scowled at the sight of Harry's broad grin. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing." He hid the smile as best he could. "Just that you're yelling at me. I think Hermione would say that means you're feeling better."

"I'm *not* yelling." Ron sat up further, and took another piece of chocolate. "It just came over me all suddenly, that's all. I wasn't expecting it."

Harry sobered, all traces of the smile leaving his face. "That's usually how it happens. But why should you...." He shook his head. "I don't really understand."

"I think I can guess." Ron swallowed the second bit of chocolate, and called out in a stage whisper. "Oi, Neville? Are you all right?"

"No." Neville's voice, flat and oddly disembodied, floated back across the room.

Harry picked up one of the remaining bits of the Chocolate Frog, and got to his feet. "Let me get some--"

"It wouldn't help," Neville said in the same flat, strained tone.
"It'll pass if I lie still."

Harry and Ron exchanged glances.

"Does your head hurt?" Harry asked cautiously.

There was a long pause before Neville answered, so long that Harry wondered if he could possibly have gone back to sleep. "Probably not in the same way yours does."

Ron's brow furrowed. "But it hurts, doesn't it?"

Neville took a deep, shaky breath. "Half a minute. Give me half a minute."

Ron and Harry used the opportunity to change their clothes. At first Ron reached for the dressing-gown that he had wadded into a ball and tossed on the foot of his bed, but Harry stopped him.

"No," he mouthed silently. "Get dressed."

As they were putting on their socks and shoes, they heard the sullen creak of bedsprings. Turning round, they saw Neville getting to his feet. His face was ashen, but determined.

"It's like Potions class," he said faintly. "If I concentrate, I can get nearly all the echoes to stop. I just need a little...a little...." Without warning, his body sagged, and he clung to the bedpost for support.

Harry hurried forward, clumping across the room with one shoe on and one off, and Ron hopped behind him, struggling to get one foot into his shoe.

Neville recovered just as they reached him, and waved their helping hands away. "I'm all right, I'm all right," he mumbled irritably as he steadied himself. "It's nothing."

There was a grunting cough from one of the two beds still occupied, followed by the noise of pillows being punched and sheets being rustled.

"Mmrph...whazzat? Whozzat?" It was Dean, and he sounded sleepy, and annoyed.

"Sorry, Dean," Harry said in a loud whisper. "Go back to sleep."

"Mmph." Dean rolled over. Judging by the sound of his breathing he was asleep again in seconds.

Ron and Harry drew closer to Neville's bed, so close that their foreheads were almost touching.

"Should we find out if the others are awake?" Neville asked.

"We'?" Ron's eyes went wide, and he backed away, waving his hands. "I'll get Ginny, but I'm not wandering into Hermione's room in the middle of the bloody night," he whispered vehemently. "I'd end up with a pillow in the face--or worse."

"We don't need to go anywhere," Harry said. As he spoke, he closed his eyes and reached out with his mind, picking up the mental threads of the link between the six of them. Once he felt that he had a solid enough grip, he spoke silently, into their minds.

Are all of you awake? he asked.

It took a moment for the first reply to drift into his thoughts. *H...Harry?* It sounded like Hermione's voice, although it was rather thin with strain.

Yeah, he said, not quite knowing how to respond. *Ginny? Colin? Are you all right?*

My head hurts. Ginny sounded as if she was trying to hold back tears. *It woke me up.*

Mine, too, Colin said, almost whimpering.

I just took some aspirin, Hermione said. *I've got some more in my trunk if you need it.*

That won't do you any good, Ron grunted. *Not for **this** headache.*

Let's meet in the common room in five minutes, Harry said. He wanted to end this discussion before the strain of maintaining the link worsened their headaches. *Get dressed first, whatever you have to do beforehand. We need to plan.*

He waited until they had all made some sort of assenting noise before he broke off the link. He felt a little dizzy, but no worse than he had been a few minutes ago. Ron looked all right as well, if a little more pale, but Neville seemed to be having more difficulty. He was taking deep breaths, and his eyes were closed.

Harry held out the last bits of the Chocolate Frog, now partially melted by the warmth of his hand. "Neville, please," he said. "Have some. It really does help."

Neville opened his eyes. He patted his pillow, feeling under and around it, and picked up a familiar-looking grubby envelope that had been half-hidden beneath the bedclothes.

"I've got this," he said firmly, holding the envelope up. The folded piece of newsprint inside crackled under the pressure of his fingers. "It's better than chocolate."

* * *

Five minutes later, the six children were seated in a circle on the floor of the common room. No one had bothered to start a proper fire, so the only illumination came from the glowing tips of their wands. The little circle of light cast crazy shadows on the walls of the room, flitting across the stones of the floor and sharpening the expressions on the faces of the Six. Worry deepened into anxiety, nervousness into near-fright, scared determination into hardened resolve.

However, there was no sign of pain in anyone's eyes. Colin, in a remarkable display of foresight, had brought a large bar of Muggle chocolate downstairs with him. They had broken the bar into squares and had all eaten some, and now all that was left of the bar was three or four pieces of chocolate on the floor in the centre of their circle.

Harry pushed his glasses up on his nose, blinking a little as the world slid back into focus.

"It'll be today," he said bluntly. There was no need to explain it further. "At the Quidditch match."

Five heads nodded. It made sense, in a coldly logical sort of way. The entire school would be in one place, outside the castle but still on the grounds. If the Death Eaters were to do anything at that time, they would have--the idea was awful to consider, but nonetheless true--a captive audience.

"When does it start?" Hermione asked, shifting her wand to her other hand.

"Eleven or so," Ron said. "Hooch pushed it back on account of all the rain."

"Eleven o'clock," Ginny repeated dully. "And it's nearly..."

She glanced up, and five pairs of eyes followed her gaze to the common room clock. The minute hand was less than two minutes from the hour.

"...nearly five now," Harry finished for her. "So we've less than six hours to..." He trailed off.

"To what?" Neville asked.

"To...." He tried again, but got no further. "I don't know," he said, honestly if not happily.

"Let's think about this," Hermione said, slipping into the problem-solving tone she used when tackling their homework assignments. "What exactly can we do?"

"We could try to get the match cancelled," Colin said.

Ron coughed. "That won't stop You-Know--" He hastily corrected himself when he saw Harry's eyes narrow. "That wouldn't stop Voldemort."

"It...it wouldn't," Colin agreed hesitantly. "But at least everyone else would be safe."

"We don't know that," Neville murmured. "We can't know that anywhere is 'safe' now."

"So what *is* there?" Ron said, his voice rising above the stifled half-whispers they had been speaking in.

"We have to get hold of Will," Hermione said firmly.

"But it's Saturday," Ron protested. "He won't be in his office."

Harry snapped his fingers as an idea hit him. "Hedwig. I'll send Hedwig."

"Could she get there in time?" Colin asked, biting down on his lower lip.

"Of cour...er...." Harry realised too late that he had absolutely no idea how long it would take for an owl to fly from Hogwarts to Cambridge. "Er, that is...."

Ginny stepped in and rescued him. "It's worth trying, at any rate," she said lightly. "If you send it now it'll be well on its way."

"So, we send an owl to Will that says...." He looked at the others, questioningly. "That says what?"

"You're the one who always has the weird feelings," Ron said, rubbing his forehead as if the weird feeling had just reminded him that it wasn't going anywhere soon. "Just tell him you've got one right now, and would he kindly stop by and do something about it before we all crack up."

Harry bit back a sour reply. He knew it that ignoring the pain was not as easy as it looked, but it was aggravating to hear Ron being so difficult. After all, Ron had only had to deal with it for half an hour. The Boy Who Lived had lived with it for years.

"Ron..." Ginny said warningly, giving her brother a pointed look.

"Sorry," Ron muttered. He popped another bit of chocolate into his mouth.

"When you go to send the letter to Will, I'll come with you," Hermione said. "Someone should tell Professor McGonagall."

"What about Professor Lupin?" Colin said.

Harry fiddled with his wand. "Last night was the full moon," he said quietly.

The younger boy's face fell. "Oh," he said.

"You can still try, though," Ginny said. "He might be awake now."

Harry nodded at this. "Sirius might be, if he's not."

"And if you go, then I'll go with you," Neville offered. "I know the way, if you don't mind taking it a bit slow. I don't really trust myself to make it up and down stairs too quickly on my own."

Colin looked happier at the thought of having company. The halls of Hogwarts were hard to navigate during the day; it was doubly difficult in the dark. "Thanks."

"Will, Professor McGonagall, Professor Lupin." Hermione ticked names off on her fingers. "That's three. Who else?"

"What about Dumbledore?" Colin piped up. "Maybe we can get some hit wizards or Aurors here, someone from the Ministry."

"Good idea," Harry said. He turned to the Weasley siblings. "Ron, Ginny, could you--"

"One step ahead of you." Ron switched his wand to his left hand and slipped his right hand into his pocket. He pulled out a tiny green cube, like a little box, and held it up to the light.

"What is that?" Hermione said, leaning forward to have a closer look.

Neville leaned forward as well. "Is that a Floo Flash Box?"

Ron nodded. "Dad gave it to us, last time we saw him," he said, pinching the box between his thumb and forefinger.

"What does it do?" Hermione asked.

"There's a bit of paper inside," Ron said. "If you write a message on the paper, put it in a Flash Box and chuck the whole thing into a Floo fire, it'll be delivered right to the fireplace in Dumbledore's office in the Ministry building."

Harry was intrigued. "Really? Will it really do that?"

"That's how Dad said it works. It's all set up and everything."

"But we're only supposed to use it if it's an emergency," Ginny added, a little nervously.

Ron gave her a look. "Gin, I think this is enough of an emergency, don't you?"

"Right, then," Harry said, cutting off a possible sibling argument before it could start. "Where's the nearest Floo fire?"

"Most of the fireplaces will only work inside Hogwarts itself," Hermione said. "Hogwarts has its own internal Floo network, and I know that there are only a few fires that can go in or out."

"Dad used the one in Dumbledore's office," said Ginny, remembering.

"We'd never be able to get in there," Ron countered.

"What about the Great Hall?" Colin said.

Harry turned to Hermione. "Is that on the Floo Network?"

"I...I don't know," she said after a moment's thought. "It might be."

"We can always try," Ginny said. The idea had become something of a chorus for her, though it sounded less confident and more desperate with each repetition.

"I don't want you to waste it," Harry said quickly.

Ron sighed. "Look, if it doesn't work, there's always Pig. When you send Hedwig, use Pig to send a message to Dad." A wry smile twisted his lips at the thought of his hyperactive post owl. "Daft bird's good for that much, at least."

"No, don't send it to Dad," Ginny said suddenly. "Send it to Percy."

Harry frowned. "Why Percy?"

"He always works Saturdays, the mornings at least. He'll be able to get hold of Dad, or Dumbledore, or someone." She made an impatient gesture with the hand that wasn't holding her wand.

Hermione pushed her hair out of her face. "So all told there's Will, McGonagall, Remus, Dumbledore, and Percy. Is that enough?"

"No," Harry said softly. Deep inside, a terrified and cowering part of him didn't *want* to face Voldemort, not even with the entire Ministry at his back and his friends at his side and the power of the Light within him. He didn't feel nearly as strong as he thought he ought to feel. But there was also a part of him that wanted to face Voldemort and end the matter, one way or the other--and it was this part that he was listening to right now.

"No," he said again, more forcefully this time. "But it'll have to be."

* * *

When the others headed out the portrait hole, Harry ran back up to his room and tiptoed inside.

Easing open the trunk at the foot of his bed, he rooted through it, shoving old clothing and other junk aside. His hand closed around something small and hard, and a quick smile flashed across his face. He slipped the object into his pocket, then took out an old quill, some scrap paper and an inkbottle, and a good-sized blob of red sealing wax and pocketed those as well. With the Invisibility Cloak thrown over his shoulders, he was ready to go.

He walked quickly and quietly through the corridors, composing possible messages in his head as he walked. He didn't want to waste any time when he arrived.

The Owlery at the top of the West Tower was not a place that the inhabitants of Hogwarts cared to linger for very long. Argus Filch had scrubbed the walls and floors and perches countless times (or so he informed anyone who dared comment on the odour), but the pungent smell of owl and owl pellets could never be completely eradicated. Only someone with a truly urgent or exceptionally private message would brave the Owlery itself. Otherwise, students and teachers would deposit letters and parcels into one of the three sturdy wooden drop-boxes just outside the Owlery door.

The largest box, on the right-hand side of the door, was marked 'Students'. Scuffmarks and flaking paint on its sides showed the wear of years, and Harry paused for a moment to run his fingers over a few deep scratches around the slit, signs that more than one person had tried to stop a letter being sent. The other two boxes, on the left side of the door, were labelled 'Faculty - Hogwarts Business'

and 'Faculty - Personal Correspondence'. The latter was the smaller of the two. All three boxes sported ugly-looking wizard padlocks; Filch and McGonagall were the only ones with keys that would open the boxes and disarm the hexes that were specific to each lock.

The lock on the Owlery door, though, was a simple latch. A whispered '*Alohomora!*' was all Harry needed to spring the catch.

The Owlery itself was a cavernous, circular room, all high ceilings and unadorned stone that turned every cough into an echo. Filch had been there recently; the wooden floor was grey and grimy, but it had been swept free of debris. The windows through which the owls entered and exited were charmed to keep most of the wind and rain out, but they were otherwise open. Anyone foolish enough to lean out one of them would have no protection from the staggering drop.

There was room for hundreds of owls in the Owlery, but at this early hour Harry counted less than forty, scattered along the perches that covered the large chilly room. On a normal day the perches would be filled with owls of all shapes, sizes, and colours. Owls in various stages of moulting had their own set of perches toward the back of the room, separated from their fellows. He caught sight of Draco's eagle owl on one of the separate perches, sulking as it carefully groomed its bedraggled wing feathers.

Hedwig was dozing peacefully on a lower perch near the main exit window. Pigwidgeon was on a perch directly above her. He let out an excited squawk when he saw Harry approaching.

"Quiet, you," Harry snapped, pulling off the Invisibility Cloak and hanging it on the cleaner end of the perch.

Pigwidgeon squawked again, flapping his wings. Hedwig opened one eye and swivelled her head partway round. She peered at the smaller bird disdainfully, and closed her eye again.

Squinting against the murky early morning light, Harry squatted and spread out the scraps of parchment on a relatively clean space of floor. He took out his old quill and inkbottle, paused for a moment, and began the letter to Will. There was no time for formalities, no time even to clean up the ink that dripped from the cracking nib and blotted the parchment.

Will,

*Something's going to happen today.
I don't know what it is, but it has
to be Voldemort. Please come as
fast as you can--we'll be waiting
for you.*

Harry Potter

Before the ink on the first letter had dried, he refilled his quill and began the letter to Percy.

Percy,

This is Harry Potter. I need your help--I think [he immediately crossed out the word 'think'] *KNOW that something awful is going to happen at the Quidditch match at Hogwarts today--and You-Know-Who* [he grunted in disgust as he crossed out the hyphenated word] *Voldemort will be behind it. Ron told me to tell you to get hold of your dad, or someone else at the Ministry, and have them come to Hogwarts as soon as possible.*

Harry

P. S.: Don't show this to anyone but your dad, not even if they ask.

It was the roughest of rough drafts, but there was no time to recopy it. It would have to do.

He waved the parchment scraps in the air to dry the still-wet ink, and hurriedly folded them. Setting the parchment on the floor, he dug in one pocket and pulled out his wand and the stump of scarlet sealing-wax.

From his other pocket, he took out a small polished brass cylinder, no thicker around than his thumb.

The fifth-year Charms curriculum was primarily preparation for the O.W.L.s. In addition to the usual wand work, Professor Flitwick had the task of explaining some of the special preparations that ensured fair marking for all students who sat the exams. Part of the preparations involved the making of individual seals for each student, seals that acted as a guarantee that the documents being sealed were authentic. In the case of the O.W.L.s, each exam paper would be folded and sealed with the test-taker's personal seal. Only the examiner would be able to break the seal.

The fifth-years in all four Houses had spent a full week making their seals. They had carved their initials into special cakes of a wax-like substance and pressed a flat brass disc into the wax. A tap of the wand and the words '*Signum Ipsum*' set the design into the brass disc, which was then attached to a brass cylinder.

Harry had not expected to need his personal seal before the exams, but it was the only way he could think of to ensure that no one but Will and Percy read the letters.

He touched the tip of his wand to the blob of sealing wax and dripped a few drops onto the fold of each letter. He pressed his seal into the liquid wax, murmuring the recipient's name as Professor Flitwick had demonstrated. The wax hardened quickly, revealing the raised 'H', 'J', and 'P' he had scratched into the cake of wax.

The seals were set, and the letters were ready to be sent.

He sent Pig first. He had to tie the letter to the bird's leg, since the little owl would not stay still long enough to grasp it properly. It took longer than he had expected, and he was sweating by the time Pig flew out the nearest window, headed south.

Hedwig opened her eyes when he touched her feathery head, and she took the letter when he held it out to her.

"Find Will, Hedwig," he said. He ran his fingers over the soft down on the top of her head, stroking it gently. "You found him before-- take this to him, please."

The snowy owl stared back at him. Her piercing tawny eyes reflected his worried face, and she tried to nibble on his finger.

"Go on, girl," he whispered, feeling his throat start to close up. The back of his eyes felt hot and funny. "It's...not safe here."

Hedwig blinked at him, slowly, and grasped the letter more tightly in her talons. She flapped her wings once, twice, and took to the air, gliding out of the window in the same direction Pig had taken.

Silently, Harry watched her fly away. Only when his owl was nothing more than a dark dot against a sky that was struggling vainly to grow lighter did he turn away from the open window.

* * *

The Fat Lady was dozing when he arrived outside the portrait hole, and he had to repeat the password twice before the portrait swung open and he could pass through, into the common room.

It was pitch dark inside. The heavy curtains were still drawn over the windows, and the fire hadn't been laid yet. It took a minute for Harry's eyes to adjust from being out in the better-lit corridor. Once he could see well enough to find his way across the room, he headed for the staircase, hoping to sneak into the bathroom and have a wash. He smelled too much like owl for his own liking.

Just as he had one foot on the staircase, a voice spoke from the inky darkness at his back--and made him nearly jump out of his skin.

"Welcome back, Harry."

He whirled around in time to see Fred Weasley stand up, pulling his dressing gown more tightly around his sturdy frame. He had been sitting in one of the armchairs before the cold common room fire, hidden by its high back and sides. Harry hadn't seen him at all.

"Fred!" he exclaimed, the name coming out as a frightened squeak. "I didn't see you...I mean, I was just...." He couldn't think of what he might have 'just' been doing, sneaking back into the common room before dawn on a Saturday morning, so he said, "What are you doing up?"

Harry's already-pounding heart gave another painful leap as George materialised, cat-like, from the blackness at the far side of the room.

"Well, we might ask you the same thing," George said as he joined his brother, his voice as brittle and humourless as crackling twigs.

The dry-as-dust feeling had returned to Harry's mouth. He was speechless, completely unable to respond. The twins were standing side by side, with identical scowls that might have been more amusing if they hadn't been directed at him. Judging from their faces, this would be much, much more than a simple confrontation.

"D'you mind if we light a fire?" Fred asked, gesturing over his shoulder to the cold hearth. "Much as it's fun to sit in the dark, I'd like some light in here."

Harry nodded, mutely, and followed them over to the fire. Once the flames were leaping, slowly consuming the carefully-stacked logs, Fred and George turned back to face him.

Fred was the first to speak.

"You see, Harry," he said casually, "I was a bit peckish earlier--my stomach woke me up, actually--and I was on my way out to get a nice handful of biscuits from the kitchen when I see you running out the common room door. And I say to myself: 'Self, why would Harry Potter be up so early, and fully dressed to boot?'"

"And the response must not have been what he wanted, because he comes and wakes me up to ask me this," George said with a snort.

Fred rolled his eyes. "So after my dear brother has left off hexing me for getting him up at the crack of dawn, we come down here to wait for you to get back."

"To ask you why you're up so early," said George.

"After all, we're not the ones playing today."

"And yet here you are."

"Precisely."

"So we'd like to ask you exactly *what* is going on."

"And we'd like the truth."

"Because no one seems to be able to tell it, recently," George finished bitterly.

"George, I--" Harry began, but stopped short. He had heard a faint creak over the noise of the fire, the sound of the portrait swinging free. He held his breath until the common room door opened.

Neville and Colin emerged from the portrait hole, treading as quietly as they could. They froze when they saw Fred and George and Harry standing by the fire.

Fred was on them in a flash. "I suppose the two of you have absolutely no idea why you're out so early?"

The two boys hung back in embarrassed silence, reluctant to take another step forward.

"It'd take too long to explain," Harry said swiftly. He had taken advantage of the twins' distraction to check the time, and the discovery that it was now quarter to six had quickened his pulse. They were running out of time. "You have to trust me."

"*Trust you?*" Fred said angrily. "With what? How can we trust you if you don't trust us enough to say when something's quite obviously wrong?"

"Do you think we'd sneak on you?" George asked, almost laughing at the strangeness of the idea. "Is that it? That we'd tell McGonagall or something?"

Fred attempted his usual cheeky grin. "Whatever you've been up to, we've probably done it, been caught doing it, or bragged about planning to do it already."

Harry had to look away.

"It's Voldemort." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw them stiffen, flinching at the name. "Something bad's going to happen today, at

the Quidditch match. I don't know what it is, but I...." He turned back to them, hoping that he didn't look as helpless as he felt.

The twins stood perfectly still for a long moment, not saying anything, just looking at Harry with unfathomable expressions.

"Well, what do you want us to do?" George said at last.

Harry gaped at them. "You...you don't--"

"Harry, listen," Fred interrupted. "If you say something awful's going to happen, we believe you."

"We'd be bloody fools not to," George said.

Fred nodded agreement. "So tell us what to do, and we'll do it."

"I..." Once again, Harry was speechless, but this time for an entirely different reason. A full minute went by before he could collect himself enough to say anything properly. When he finally spoke, he hardly knew what he was saying, but would have been startled to know that his voice had unconsciously slipped into the same brisk pace he used when giving orders on the Quidditch pitch.

"How about this," he said. "Tell everyone you can trust in fifth year on up to stay alert at the match today. Stay alert, and be ready for--for whatever happens." That was really all they *could* do, in any case.

Fred opened his mouth to reply, but before he could speak a gruff voice from behind him broke into the conversation:

"No heroics, nothing like that."

Harry blinked, surprised, as Ron, Ginny, and Hermione walked forward, into the flickering firelight. He had not heard the portrait door open.

"No heroics," Ron said again, fixing his brothers with a challenging stare.

"We've got the heroics covered," Ginny said coolly. She rested a hand on Ron's shoulder, as if to add emphasis to his words.

"Ginny?" Fred rubbed his eyes tiredly, glancing from her to Ron and back again, then to Hermione, and finally to Neville and Colin, who had moved forward to join their friends. All of a sudden, he looked terribly weary. "What're you two--"

"Fred, just tell everyone." Ron didn't want to wait for a question that couldn't be answered. "Keep it quiet, but tell them."

"You *can* keep it quiet, can't you?" Ginny said.

Fred's chest puffed out. "Of course we can," he said indignantly.

"You want the other Houses in on this, too?"

"Of course," Ron said.

"Even Slytherin," Hermione added decisively.

Fred took a step back. "Are you MAD?"

"Not Malfoy and his lot," Harry said impatiently. The pain in his head was starting to come back, and talking wasn't helping matters.

"Get hold of anyone you think you can trust."

"In *Slytherin*?" George said, incredulously.

"What about Maureen Dennison?" Neville suggested. "In her line of work, she'd have to be good at spreading word quietly."

"Maureen doesn't trust anyone." Fred's voice was flat. "Certainly not us."

"Well, there has to be *someone* you can talk to," Hermione said exasperatedly. When Fred and George merely shrugged, she glared at them. "Fine. *I'll* tell the Slytherins, the prefects at least. They have a right to know."

"Don't see why you'd bother," Fred mumbled, more to himself than to her. "Half of 'em are Death Eaters, anyway."

Ginny gasped, and her mouth dropped open.

"WHAT?!" Hermione shouted.

"How c-can you s-s-say that?" Colin spluttered, horrified.

Fred's mouth turned up in an ugly sneer. "Have you *seen* them, Colin? Spent seven years in classes with them? There's one or two who'd sell their own grandmothers."

"If they haven't killed them off already," added George, folding his arms across his chest.

Hermione took a sudden step forward, her hands clenched into fists.

"Of all the repulsive--"

"Stop it," Harry snapped, rubbing his forehead. "This isn't getting us anywhere."

Hermione unclenched her hands, though her eyes were still flashing fire at the twins. They stared back at her, immovable and entirely uncompromising.

"Drop it, all right?" Harry ordered, more sharply, fighting the ache that was knocking around inside his skull.

"Harry, sit down," Neville said worriedly. "You'll do yourself an injury."

"I'm fine," he growled out, and would have said more, but without warning Ginny pushed past her brothers and with one hand shoved him down into the closest chair.

"Oof!" He landed awkwardly, arms and legs splayed out.

"You're NOT fine," Ginny said stubbornly. "Sit, and don't move."

The impact had knocked the wind out of him, and all he could do was stare at her and take deep breaths, forcing air back into his lungs. Ginny, meanwhile, spun round with hands on her hips to face the others.

"And *you* ought to be ashamed of yourselves," she scolded. "*All* of you. We can't be standing round yelling at each other like this-- it's almost dawn, and we don't have time for it." Then she wheeled on Fred and George, who were staring at their younger sister as if she had grown not one, but two extra heads. "You want to help, do you? Well, are you going to help us, or not?"

"A...." Fred began, at the same time that George said, "We...."

Ginny's eyebrow went up, an intimidating arch. "*Well?*"

The twins swallowed nervously.

"We'll do it," they said together.

She nodded brusquely. "Fine, then. Now get some clothes on, and meet us down here before breakfast."

As the twins hurried for the stairs, she turned back to Harry and the others. Calmly, she took in their various expressions of shock and surprise and utter disbelief.

"What's the matter?" she said with a slight shrug. "It's not so difficult to get them to do what you want, if you really want to." She smiled broadly. "After all...I learned from the very best."

And she burst into tears.

* * *

By the time they had calmed Ginny down, it was well after six o'clock. Breakfast wasn't for several hours, so they decided that it would be best to all lie down and rest for a while before it was time to eat. However, no one seemed to want to go upstairs again. They ended up settling onto couches and curling up in armchairs, wrapping their robes around themselves to take the edge off the chill of the early morning. They dozed, sleeping and waking in fits and starts, until their housemates began to trickle downstairs for the meal.

Breakfast came and went, a mechanical process of forcing tasteless food past reluctant mouths and into unwilling stomachs. Harry had to check more than once to be certain that he wasn't trying to chew his napkin along with whatever he happened to be eating at the time. He ate what was on his fork, and drank what was in his glass, and spent much of the time trying to pick up breadcrumbs by dabbing at his plate with bits of toast.

For the most part, the six Gryffindors kept their heads down, not wanting to make eye contact with anyone. If they had looked up, they might have seen glances being darted in their direction, or an occasional pointing of a finger that would be quickly covered up by a more careful neighbour. If they had listened closely, they might have heard whispers circulating through the tables, passed from ear to ear.

Something's coming.

Be ready.

What is it?

Stay alert.

I don't know, but watch your back.

Of course, if anyone had been able to hear the conversation that was going on at the same time...a silent, stilted, and disjointed one....

Couldn't find Professor Lupin.

Dumbledore wasn't in. McGonagall tried to Floo him, but he wasn't there.

There was no answer when we knocked.

Oh. Hedwig and Pig are on their way.

Sent the message--we used the fire in here.

She promised me she'll try again before the match.

Did it work?

Did you notice that he's not at breakfast?

Snuffles isn't here, either.

I hope so.

Think so. Don't know.

Does your head still hurt, Harry?

A sigh. ...what do you think, Colin?

When breakfast was over, the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs filed back to their dormitories, as did the Ravenclaws and Slytherins who weren't on their House Quidditch teams. Harry was one of the first to get back to the dormitory, and he immediately went upstairs and got into the bath. He soaked in the tub until his fingers looked like old shrivelfigs, scrubbed his hair twice, and even changed his clothing afterwards--anything to get rid of the stale smell of the Owlery.

He spent a long time in the bathroom, longer than he normally did. But one can only brush one's teeth, or comb one's hair, or go to the toilet so many times. He had to leave eventually, and when he did he was certain that everyone who came within ten feet could hear--or maybe even *see*--his heart beating.

* * *

"And that's a lovely catch by Ravenclaw, as neat a pass as one could ask for, I think. I'm reminded of a pass just like that, the pass that helped clinch the victory for Gryffindor in the record smashing match against Hufflepuff in nineteen-seventy--"

"JORDAN!"

The Quidditch match was well underway, the score closer than Harry had anticipated it would be after a half-hour of hard play. Ravenclaw was holding its own, making up in stamina what it could not beat in sheer aggressiveness. Above the main play, Draco and Cho were in the middle of a complicated and dangerous-looking dance of their own.

The Six had entered the Quidditch stands together at the start of the match, two neat rows of three with Harry, Ron, and Hermione in the front and the other three directly behind. But once inside, they had separated.

Harry, Ron, and Ginny went to the Gryffindor side to sit with the Weasley twins and the rest of their House's team. Hermione muttered a half-heard excuse and darted off to the area where the teachers normally sat--and two or three of the prefects who had seen her leave followed her, silently. Neville melted into the crowd; they hadn't seen exactly where he had gone. And Colin--

A flashbulb went off, down on the pitch near the Ravenclaw sidelines. Colin had somehow--Harry didn't know how, and was a little afraid to question such a perfect situation--managed to get permission from Madam Hooch to photograph the match for Ravenclaw. It was easy to picture him scanning the sky from the sidelines, camera in hand, although anyone who bothered to pay attention would see that Colin's attention was not truly on the game.

A Ravenclaw Chaser bungled a direct shot on goal, forcing Harry to wait until the crowd noise had died down before he activated the mental link.

Is everyone all right? he asked. Where are you?

Well, I'd raise my hand and show you, but I don't think you'd like to find my fingers up your nose, Ginny chirruped.

That got a laugh from Ron. *Good one, Gin.*

Do you have your Omnioculars? Hermione asked. I'm toward the bottom in the teacher's stands. Justin's behind me--or he was, last I saw.

Harry picked up the Omnioculars and twirled the knobs, adjusting and focusing them with practised skill. He scanned the crowd slowly, and came to a stop on Hermione.

Right, he said. I see you now...and Colin's down on the pitch. As if on cue, the flashbulb went off again. Neville, what about you?

You won't be able to see me, Neville replied. I'm standing just below the teacher's stands, right where the door leading up is. I can just see out past the big banner, the one that's got an end a bit loose.

Harry focused, refocused, and slid his gaze downward. Sure enough, one end of the brightly-coloured banner beneath the main part of the stands where the teachers sat was flapping, stirred by the changing breezes of the players flying by. He couldn't see anything but the banner, so he twirled the Omnioculars again and returned to scanning the teachers' area.

Is everything all right there, Hermione? he asked.

So far, she said, though her voice was almost drowned out by a loud shout of joy as one of the players narrowly avoided a Bludger. McGonagall let us stay here, and none of the other professors have said anything. She must have told them something.

Mm. He was about to put the Omnioculars away when he saw a familiar figure near the back of the stands, and was so startled that he forgot to use the silent speech. "Hey, it's Remus!"

"Where? Where?" Ron demanded, craning his neck to see.

"Just there," Harry said, trying to point and hold the glasses still at the same time. "On the end, next to Sinistra." He passed the Omnioculars to Ron, who focused on the spot that Harry had been pointing to.

After a moment, Ron slowly lowered the glasses and shot a glance at his friend. "Harry...he looks..."

"I know," Harry said quietly. Ron had once remarked that Remus often looked as if one good hex would finish him off, but the Remus he had seen through the Omnioculars looked as if a first-year's Wingardium Leviosa would do the job just as well. Though the day was not overly cold, he was wrapped in a thick winter cloak, and he seemed barely interested in the game. Snuffles was with him, resting his chin on Remus's knees and clearly paying more attention to his friend's state of health than whoever was in possession of the Quaffle at the moment.

"Let me see!" Ginny said, swiping the glasses. She found Remus quickly, and Harry heard her draw a ragged breath. She didn't say a word as she passed the glasses back to her brother, who handed them to Harry.

Harry turned his attention back to the game. Draco's new broom was clearly living up to the advertisements--he could start near the goalpost and be halfway across the pitch before Cho was out of the Keeper's range. And the way Draco was handling the broom made it look like watching an expert demonstration of the Roman Rocket's abilities.

Watching Draco, Harry soon found that he was mentally reciting the list of the Rocket's special features that he had read about in the latest Quidditch magazine. *Adjustable Cushioning Charm for a closer seat, smooth deceleration from high speeds....*

Lee Jordan's commentary wove its way into his mind. "Oh! It looks like Chang has spotted the Snitch! She's...yes, she's heading up, just as Ravenclaw recovers from Slytherin's double goal...."

....precision-adjusted twigs for a tighter turning radius, which helped Draco turn the broom almost one-hundred eighty degrees in less than a second....

"And Malfoy's after her! Ravenclaw tries a Bludger shot...."

....tests have shown a possible acceleration from near-stop to 200 kilometres per hour in less than seven seconds....

"Oh, a miss! Chang goes in for a dive--looks like she's trying to double back, going toward her own goal, but Malfoy's already caught up to her...."

....fully aerodynamic broomshaft, ensuring complete and trouble-free ease in handling for two-handed, one-handed, or entirely hands-free flying....

"And he's got an arm out--THERE'S the Snitch, he's almost got it--!"

The crowd cried out, screaming wildly as Slytherin's Seeker closed his fingers over the glitter of the Golden Snitch.

Harry cried out as a flare of pain lanced through his head.

Draco would have cried out, but the bolt of lightning that flashed through the overcast sky struck him between the shoulders before he even saw it coming.

Chapter 34

When there is no enemy within, the enemies outside cannot hurt you.

-- African proverb

Draco did not fall immediately.

He had gone rigid when the lightning struck him, but once the immediate shock had passed through his body he went bonelessly limp. His outstretched arm, no longer reaching for the Golden Snitch, dropped, and pulled most of his weight to one side. It seemed impossible that he should be able to stay on, but since his left hand was still clutching the shaft of the broom he held fast. With one arm and one leg hooked over the broom--which was still moving forward, toward the Slytherin goalposts--he dangled for a half-second at a crazy angle before his hand and leg slipped loose.

The Roman Rocket, suddenly bereft of its rider, spiralled downward like a seedpod falling from a tree. It hit the ground on an angle and flipped up into the air to bounce once, then twice, and finally land in a soggy patch of ground.

Draco did not bounce when he hit the ground. He landed on his back, halfway down the pitch, and lay very still.

For two full heartbeats, an eerie silence fell over the pitch. No one moved. Even the player on their brooms were stationary, hovering nearly motionless in mid-air.

From somewhere behind him, Harry heard someone say, in a voice that sounded far too loud:

"Well, *there's* twenty Galleons I'll never see again."

Then, a belated crash of thunder, long and fierce and angry-sounding, split the sky with a noise like an entire library of books being ripped in half.

That was when the screaming began.

And suddenly, everyone was moving at once.

Madam Pomfrey was on the move long before the echoes of thunder had faded. Robes kilted to the knee, she ran, slipping and sprinting

across the sodden grass with a speed of a woman half her age. Colin followed her, almost at her heels. The camera around his neck swung wildly on its strap, bouncing against his chest as he ran.

The Slytherin and Ravenclaw players lost no time tipping their brooms into dives, leaving Madam Hooch to take off after the loose Bludgers to keep anyone else from being accidentally hurt. One by one the players landed, and the second their feet touched the ground they were running toward Draco and Madam Pomfrey.

The initially horrified cries of the students in the stands took on a higher, more frantic note as the crowd surged forward. Everyone wanted to see what was happening below, but Quidditch stands had not been designed to give an unobstructed view of the pitch itself. Those toward the front screamed that they couldn't breathe, that they were being crushed. Those behind yelled back that people were pushing, that they couldn't see a bloody thing.

Harry, Ron, and Ginny were closer to the front than the back, and the weight of the crowd pressing forward from behind them squeezed the air out of their lungs. A flying elbow knocked Harry's glasses askew, and he staggered sideways, trying to keep them on his face. He had barely shoved them back onto the bridge of his nose when he heard a scream, almost in his ear:

"Ron! Harry! Help me!"

He swivelled round in time to grab Ginny's left hand and keep her from being sucked backward and down, beneath the jostling crowd. Ron flung out an arm, too, but his fingers merely brushed hers before someone's shoulder hit him in the chest and threw him off-balance. He nearly lost his footing, and by the time he was steady on his feet again Ginny was beyond his reach.

"Ginny!" he yelled, struggling against the press of bodies pulling them apart.

"Ron..." Ginny wheezed, unable to draw a full breath.

"Ginny, I can't...Harry, don't let her go!" He fought for a moment more before the crowd closed over him, and he was out of sight.

Ginny's shoulders were bowed by the pressure from all sides, and her entire arm shook with the strain of clinging to Harry's hand. Her eyes bulged in her reddened face. "Can't...breathe...."

"Ginny, hang on!" Harry shouted desperately. His palm was slick with sweat, and Ginny's hand was going slack, slipping out of his grip. She would be trampled if he let go. She would be trampled, crushed and broken, tossed aside just like Dennis--

"STUDENTS!"

Heads turned as all attention momentarily diverted from the pitch. Over in the teachers' stand, Professor McGonagall was on her feet, her wand in her right hand. With her left hand she wrested the microphone from a very startled Lee Jordan, and bellowed into it.

"STUDENTS!" Her voice rose over the crazed din of the crowd and the shrieking crackle of microphone feedback. The shrill amplification, combined with the Sonorus Charm she had cast, was enough to make one's ears throb. "RETURN TO YOUR SEATS! RETURN TO YOUR SEATS IMMEDIATELY!"

In reality, there weren't any seats in the students' sections, but that didn't seem to matter. The voice of authority was enough to quell the worst of the panic. Students stopped pushing, though those toward the back continued to hop up and down to see over the heads of those in front.

McGonagall continued, her voice booming as loud as the thunder that had shaken the pitch. "THE HEADS OF YOUR HOUSES WILL ESCORT YOU BACK TO THE CASTLE. GRYFFINDOR HOUSE WILL FOLLOW PROFESSOR SINISTRA. PREFECTS, PLEASE GUIDE YOUR HOUSES TO THE STAIRS AND WAIT FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS."

The crowd began to move again, this time without the mindless panic of before.

The Gryffindors turned their heads for one of the two doors on either side of their section. The doors opened onto the stairs leading down to the wide catwalk around the interior of the stands. All around the stands people were heading for the doors, queuing up behind the prefects.

The movement of people cleared a small space around Harry, enough for him to pull Ginny closer to him and out of the worst of the crush. She collapsed against him, almost fainting, and Harry was beyond glad when he caught sight of Ron shoving his way through the milling crowd. Ron soon reached his sister's side, and took her other arm. Ginny slumped between them, breathing raggedly.

The three of them were about to join the tail end of the nearest queue and figure out some way to get down onto the pitch when Neville's voice popped into their heads.

H-H-Harry! he gasped out, breathlessly. *It's blocked!*

Harry and Ron froze. Ginny lifted her head slightly, and looked a little more aware of where she was.

'Blocked'? Harry repeated dumbfoundedly, as if Neville had started speaking in a different language.

We can't get down! Neville cried. The stairs down to the ground-- they're blocked--they're all blocked!

Harry felt his blood run ice-cold. From the catwalk, there were separate sets of stairs that led down to the main exits and out onto the castle grounds. If these stairs were blocked--

How are they blocked? he heard Hermione ask.

And where are you? Can you get up here? Ron said. He tightened his grip on Ginny. She was starting to regain the use of her legs, but neither he nor Harry trusted the people around them enough to let her stand on her own.

The reply took a moment to drift into their minds. *I can't see a thing--hang on--*

There was another pause, longer this time, and a faint tingling sensation skittered up their spines as Neville cast a small spell-- Lumos, from the feel of it.

There's some light, he said at last. *It's....* Without warning, he fell silent again.

Neville? This time, Harry couldn't stand to wait for him to continue. *Neville! What is it?*

It's...wood. The confusion bled out of Neville's voice as he spoke, his words turning into a disbelieving ramble. *It's all broken bits, all over the stairs and it looks like they tore up a whole tree for it and there's some kind of cloth and it looks like a--*

The disjointed reply faded out as abruptly as a radio losing reception.

Harry's stomach dropped into his shoes. *Neville?*

There was no reply.

"Neville!" It was pointless to shout out loud, but some irrational part of his mind hoped that Neville would hear him. "Ne--"

"Harry...."

Distracted, he glanced down to see Ginny's nose wrinkle, her eyes squeezing shut in sudden strong disgust.

"Harry..." she mumbled, grasping weakly at his arm. "Tell them to turn off the oven."

There were too many things going on at once for her question to sink in right away. "What? Tell who?"

"Don't you smell it?" She coughed, grimacing. "Whatever they're trying to bake...ugh, it'll be all burnt up, whatever it is."

"Burnt?" Harry sniffed the air. There was no smell, certainly not the smell of cooking. The Hogwarts kitchens were too far away, and in any case it was nowhere near mealtime. "Ginny, I don't..."

He trailed off abruptly, because his gaze had fallen on a thin, twisting line, darker grey against the grey sky, that was coiling up and into the air on the opposite side of the stands, behind the Slytherin section. It looked like a long finger trying to touch the clouds.

It was at that moment that he smelled something burning. Not the acrid smell of burning food, but the damp, nose-tickling scent of a campfire...like someone trying to start a fire with wet wood.

Beside him, he heard Ron murmur, wonderingly, "Where there's smoke, there's--"

Harry didn't wait for him to finish the thought. "FIRE!"

He immediately clapped a hand over his mouth, but it was too late. All around them people were shifting uneasily, looking up and down and at their neighbours.

"What?"

"What was that?"

"Who said that?"

"Did someone say...?"

Harry drew a deep breath. He had to let the teachers know, but the pain in his scar had sharpened all at once, boring into his brain and making it next to impossible to think.

He closed his eyes, concentrating. If he spoke only to Hermione, then perhaps he could focus long enough to make himself heard.

Hermione, get McGonagall! he shouted silently. The stands are on fire! THEY'RE GOING TO SET THE STANDS ON FIRE!

The moment the message was sent he stepped back, reeling a little from the crashing wave of dizziness that swept over him as soon as he had closed the mental link. His foot hit something hard, and he glanced down to see his Omnioculars lying at his feet.

Though his head was still a little giddy, he handed Ginny to Ron and bent to scoop up the magical binoculars. He turned them over in his hands, checking for damage. One of the lenses had been smashed to powder, broken beyond repair, but the other appeared to be intact. With a twirl of the dials and some quick adjustments, he was able to come to a blurry focus on the teachers' stands.

From the look of things, Hermione was causing no small amount of commotion. All he could see was the familiar bush of brown hair pushing its way up, swimming through the crowd to reach Professor McGonagall. It took seconds for Hermione to convey the message, and he saw McGonagall's head snap up, alarm and surprise racing across her face.

A sudden uproar from the Hufflepuff stands made him turn his attention away from Hermione and the professors. Someone on the Hufflepuff side had opened the door that led down to the catwalk, and Harry didn't need the Omnioculars to see the column of thick, black smoke belching out of the open door. He could hear the yells and screams as the Hufflepuffs fought to get away from the choking smoke.

The panic spread, and a fresh wave of hysteria hit the Gryffindors. A fourth-year girl, a friend of Ginny's whose name Harry couldn't remember, was moaning "ohmygodohmygodohmygod" over and over in a steady drone, her voice rising with every repetition. One of the second-year boys had gone completely off his head, screaming for his mother and father. Pockets of students were clinging to each other and sobbing. One or two were on the point of hyperventilating. Everywhere, cries of "I don't want to die!" and "Let me out of here!" added to the chaos. The prefects were trying to restore some semblance of order, but there were too many people to calm all at once.

"It's not going to work," Harry said suddenly. His mind felt soggy from the pain, and he had no control over the words that were coming out of his mouth. "So if everything leading out is blocked off, and with all the smoke and everything we can't get down--"

"What d'you MEAN, we can't get down?" Ron hissed at him. "We HAVE to get down!"

"We can't--" Harry started to say dumbly.

Ron grabbed his arm, shaking him. "Look, we can't all just *stand* here and *wait* to be burned up!"

The shaking cleared some of the pain from his head, restoring Harry's concentration. He stopped short, thinking furiously.

They couldn't use the stairs; that much was certain. With the stairs blocked off, the only other way he could think of to get the students

and teachers out of the stands would be to ferry them, one by one, on the brooms of the Quidditch teams.

He dismissed that idea almost as soon as it came. The Slytherins had fairly new Nimbus Two Thousand Ones, but Cho's Comet 260 and the Ravenclaw Cleansweep Sevens were much older and far less reliable. And even if they could carry passengers, a broom could hold perhaps two safely, and there were only a dozen brooms to use. The whole process would take too long.

Movement on the edge of his vision brought his attention back to the teachers' stand. He squinted through the broken Omnioculars, and saw that this time it was the teachers' stand that was in an uproar.

Professor McGonagall was fighting her way down to the edge of the stand, trailing Hermione and Professor Snape and a string of other teachers and prefects in her wake. She stopped when she had reached the bottom, and looked over the edge.

For a crazy moment Harry thought she was going to jump, but in the next moment McGonagall had her wand out, pointing down and over the side.

"SCINDO!" she shouted, her voice still amplified by the Sonorus Charm.

A jet of bright light shot from the tip of her wand. It struck the lower left hand corner of the bright cloth banner, blazoned with the full Hogwarts crest, which hung from the edge of the teachers' stand. The corner of the banner flapped free as the ropes holding it at the bottom snapped apart.

McGonagall did the same to the other corner, and in the downstroke of the second Severing Spell she gave her wand a peculiar twist, and brought it sharply up. "VEXILLIAVEXI!"

With a loud crack!, the edges of the banner snapped perfectly straight, as stiff as if they had been starched into place.

McGonagall waved her wand, and the length of stiff heavy cloth began to grow longer, the school crest stretching and distorting as the fabric seemed to stretch. In seconds, the loose end had come to rest on the grass of the pitch, and the entire banner was at an angle to the ground.

Quick as a flash, McGonagall swung her legs over the edge of the stands, and before anyone could move to stop her she was sliding down the charmed banner, riding the steep incline until she landed on the grass. She got to her feet, brushing splatters of mud from her skirts, and called out:

"DAVIES! WARRINGTON!"

A twist of the Omnicular dials brought the Ravenclaw captain and the Slytherin Chaser into focus. The two boys could only stare at McGonagall, completely overawed by the display of magic they had just witnessed. Their teammates had the blank, perplexed look of startled cattle.

"YOU AND YOUR TEAMS GET THE ENDS OF THOSE LARGE BANNERS FREE!" McGonagall pointed with her wand at the one nearest to her, the vivid black and yellow of Hufflepuff House. "AS MANY AS YOU CAN!"

The direct command shocked the members of the Ravenclaw and Slytherin Quidditch teams out of their stupor. They sprang into action at once, pulling out their wands and kicking off from the ground.

To Harry's great surprise, Colin sprang into action as well. He had been with Madam Pomfrey, watching her as she bent over Draco, but when McGonagall ordered the teams to take to the air he went for the only broom left on the pitch--Draco's battered Roman Rocket. He yanked it clear of the mud it had landed in and hopped on, though the sleek, imported racing broom accelerated so quickly that he nearly fell off twice before he could properly control it.

While the teams zigzagged around the pitch, firing off spells to break the ropes holding the banners to the stands, Colin headed straight for Professor McGonagall. He came to a screeching halt in front of her and tumbled off the broom. With barely a pause McGonagall had picked it up and was airborne, zooming toward the fluttering ends of the nearest loosened banner.

Harry couldn't believe his eyes. His prim-and-proper Headmistress was not merely flying, but flying with a Chaser's speed, a Beater's nerve, and a Keeper's quick handling. She wove in and out amongst the players like a Seeker who had sighted the Snitch, casting over and over again the charm that transformed each banner into an escape route for the trapped students. Her hair had come loose from its usual upknot and was tangled around her shoulders, blowing wildly in the slipstream as she flew.

As the end of each banner hit the ground, the students surged forward, forming ragged, bulging queues against the sides of the stands. The House prefects ended up with the unenviable job of trying to manage the unwieldy queues, helping students clamber over the side to slide to the ground.

Controlling the crowd wasn't the only dangerous part of evacuation. The press of students was taking a toll on the stands themselves. The old wood, waterlogged from the week of rain, protested loudly as all the weight shifted toward the inner rim. Even with the many spells and charms used to reinforce the structure, it would be only a matter of time before the pressure was too great. Every creak,

every groan made the students fight all the more to get to the front of the queues.

Once a student was on the banner, all he or she had to do was slide to the bottom and hurry away from the edge after landing. Most of the students remained upright on the way down, but quite a few had problems. With all the people trying to get down at once, it was easy to lose one's balance. Some students found themselves rolling head over heels, and others ended up on their stomachs--both of which meant a face-first landing in the muddy grass. Before long, however, the stands were halfway empty, and students were streaming onto the pitch.

Harry and Ron took Ginny under the arms and helped her forward, reaching the edge of the Gryffindor stands in time to see Cho flash past and sever the ropes at the bottom of the banner with a quick twist of her wand. McGonagall flew by seconds later, and the cry of "VEXILLIAVEXI!" was Harry's cue to throw a leg over and brave the drop himself.

The incline felt terrifically steep. As Harry slid to the ground, he had the bizarre feeling that he was flying down the giant slide that he had once ridden at a fun fair many years ago. Professor McGonagall's spell had not merely stiffened the edges of the banner, it had transformed the heavy weave of tapestry into a silky-smooth and slippery cloth. There was little he had to do but keep his legs in front of him and watch the ground draw closer. The second his feet hit the grass he was up and moving away from the bottom of the slide, as he had been taught.

Ron and Ginny weren't so fortunate. Ron had tried to keep hold of Ginny on the way down, and had only succeeded in turning them both around so that they were facing backwards. They landed in a heap of arms and legs at the bottom.

The students and teachers who had already slid down the banners were running toward the centre of the pitch, away from the burning stands. Harry, Ron, and Ginny went with the rush of the crowd, though not entirely by choice. Ginny was finally able to walk by herself, but Ron nevertheless held fast to her arm. His long strides forced her to jog to keep up with him.

Being on the ground made it both easier and more difficult to see what was going on. Students were running to and fro, seeking and just as easily losing track of their friends and housemates. Gryffindors stayed close to Gryffindors--though it was impossible to tell whether this was loyalty to their own House or suspicions of the others--and the other three Houses did likewise. Teachers who did not have specific House duties circled the students like dogs herding sheep, shouting commands of "This way!" and "Hurry, over here!" as everyone moved toward the centre of the pitch.

The Quidditch teams were touching down, tucking their wands back into their robes as they dismounted. McGonagall was already on the ground, broom still in hand as she hastened toward Madam Pomfrey and Draco. The mediwitch had been working on him the entire time, and the warm pink glow of a Stabilising Spell surrounded both of them. Harry couldn't see what else she was doing, but the Stabilising Spell was enough to tell him that--incredibly--Draco was still alive.

Looking back, he saw several columns of smoke billowing from the tops of the stands. More smoke spewed from the exits that led onto the pitch, preventing anyone from trying to escape through the team changing rooms or the other doors that offered a way out. The eye-searing smell of burning and wet wood and smoke was overpowering, but there was no sign of actual flame.

There was smoke, but no fire.

"Harry! Over here!"

It was Hermione's voice, and he turned around to see her, Remus, and Snuffles hurrying--or rather, trying to hurry--toward him.

Remus's human side had not entirely recovered from his transformation the night before. His skin was pale and sweat-streaked, but he was hobbling forward with a look of fierce determination on his face, leaning heavily on Hermione's arm and holding fast to Snuffles's collar with one hand. Snuffles was straining against Remus's hand, pawing the air as he urged his friend to go faster. By the time he and the two humans had reached Harry, Ron, and Ginny, the black dog's tongue was lolling from his open mouth. He was panting from the exertion.

Hermione looked from Harry to Ron to Ginny and back to Harry again. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Harry nodded, quickly. "We're fine, but--"

"--we don't know what happened to Neville," Ron finished for him.

"Wasn't he with you?" asked Remus.

"He was down on the catwalks, and then he--" Shame spread through Harry's gut like the beginning pangs of nausea. In the noise and confusion of getting to the ground, he had forgotten about Neville. "Remus, what if something's happened to him?" he said anxiously. "What if he's--"

"Right here, Harry!"

It was Colin's voice, and it made all of them jump a foot in the air. Harry whirled round to see Neville and Colin limping toward their little group.

Colin looked to be all right, if badly frightened, but Neville was in rather worse shape. He had an arm over Colin's shoulder, and was allowing the younger boy to help him along. His robes were filthy with soot and grime, and he seemed to be favouring his right leg. Otherwise, though, he seemed alright.

"Neville!" Hermione sounded close to tears. "Thank god!"

"How did you get out?" Ron demanded to know at the same time that Ginny asked, "What happened to you?"

Neville coughed. "Went up," he gasped. "Tried the first door, and Hufflepuff was closest...couldn't see...turned my ankle...."

"Don't talk," Hermione said as Neville's broken explanation dissolved into coughing. She knelt and pulled out her wand, muttering a Binding Spell to steady Neville's wrenched ankle enough for it to hold his weight.

Harry, meanwhile, was having difficulties with Snuffles. The black dog had taken the end of Harry's robe in his teeth, and was blocking Harry's attempts to move more than a foot in any direction. Any movement on Harry's part was met with fierce resistance and an angry growl.

"Quiet," Harry scolded. He wanted to see what was happening to Draco, but Snuffles would not let go. Exasperated, he half-turned to Remus, trying to talk to his professor and get his robes free at the same time.

"Remus, we have--will you let *go* of me?--to get everyone out of here," he said, yanking at the bit of fabric that Snuffles would not release.

Remus said nothing. Harry grunted and turned around all the way, wrapping his robes around his legs in the process. "Remus, are you listening to me?"

Remus, however, wasn't looking at him. His attention was fixed on something over Harry's shoulder.

"Yes," he said. There was an odd tone in his voice that made the skin on the back of Harry's neck crawl. "But Harry...I don't think we can."

"What do you...?" he began, but the words died on his lips as he and the others looked back and saw what Remus had seen.

Something was moving in the smoke that was pouring out of the exits. Just as the smoke had seemed dark against the sky, the shadows--for there were more than one--were darker blotches in the midst of the smoke. As more smoke rolled onto the pitch, the shadows seemed to multiply. Two became four, four became a dozen, and a dozen became two dozen...and then the shapes were no longer shadows, but figures in jet-black robes and bone-white face masks emerging one by one from the wreathing grey of the smoke that ringed the pitch.

Death Eaters.

"Oh, *no*," Ginny moaned.

Harry's stomach twisted in on itself. The back of his throat felt raw and dry.

At first, only he, Remus, Snuffles, and the five children noticed the Death Eaters' arrival. Most of the other students were too worried about themselves and their friends to see much of anything beyond the few faces in front of them. Most of the teachers were too busy counting heads and trying to account for every pupil to think of other dangers.

All of a sudden, though, there was a great whoosh of flame, as if the piles of wood that Neville had spoken of had caught fire at last. The teachers' stands were the first to go up, ignited in a great blaze of red-orange as crackling flames chased smoke into the sky. The fire spread quickly, so quickly that Harry knew it was not natural. Only a magical fire could set soaking wet wood alight.

Those who turned round to watch the burning saw for the first time that they were by no means alone on the pitch. Before anyone had a chance to react, there was a shout from one of the Death Eaters, a woman's voice calling out:

"MORSMORDRE!"

A flare of light shot from the tip of one of the Death Eaters' wands, sending a spray of green sparks over the heads of the crowd. The sparks coalesced into a massive, glowing green skull, floating in the air directly over the pitch. The sinuous figure of a snake slithered out of the skull's open mouth.

Harry saw McGonagall set the Roman Rocket down on the ground and push her hair out of her face, which had turned a sickly, bilious colour in the light of the glittering green death's head. Her wand was out, but she held it limply at her side, unthreatening.

With the Death Eaters were blocking all the exits, the situation was precarious. It was obvious that anyone who moved so much as a toe out of line would end up on the wrong end of a curse. The teachers

and older students could try to defend the younger ones, but in such an exposed position there was a great risk that someone would be hit by a spell meant for the other side.

McGonagall drew herself up to her full height, but before she could step forward Draco stirred.

"Ungh..." he groaned, the first noise he had made since he had fallen out of the sky. He appeared to be trying to roll over, but he could not move his shoulders enough to get leverage. "Gngh...*hold*...."

"Don't move, Draco," Madam Pomfrey said firmly. The glow of the Stabilising Spell had dimmed. It was now a pale pink, the colour of a wilting rose.

"Poppy, what is it?" McGonagall asked, keeping one eye on the Death Eaters.

Madam Pomfrey shook her head. "The spell's wearing off," she said grimly. With her wand, she traced a slow series of circles in the air over Draco's body, trying to recreate the spell. "It shouldn't be, but it is."

"You can't keep him stable?" McGonagall said, alarmed.

"He's fighting me. If he keeps on like this, I won't be able to hold the spell..." The mediwitch glanced up, though her wand never stopped moving. "Minerva, I need to get him inside. I can't do anything for him out here."

Professor McGonagall's jaw tightened. She inhaled sharply, and threw her head back.

"Lucius!" she called out. "Lucius Malfoy!"

There was a low, uncomfortable murmur from the crowd of students, starting with the Slytherins and rippling outwards. The Death Eaters kept their wands trained on the tight knot of people in the centre of the pitch, and did not move.

"Oh, yes. I know that you're out there, Lucius." She spoke slowly and carefully, each syllable distinct and as sharp as a knife's blade. "Your son--Draco is very badly injured. He may die if we can't take him to the infirmary immediately. Madam Pomfrey needs to contact St Mungo's before we can--"

"Aah!"

Draco screeched suddenly, setting off a wave of terrified cries from the other students. His head rolled from side to side, shoulders pitching as his neck twisted into a painful-looking position.

"No!" he moaned. "More...mmngh...."

"Lucius, for god's sake!" McGonagall's eyes darted between Draco and the black-robed figures, as if she could see through the emotionless masks to find Draco's father and force him to care for his son.

Between Draco's moaning and undercurrent of frightened whispers from those nearby, Harry almost didn't hear the whisper closest to him. It was by pure chance that he happened to look at Ginny and see her lips moving, forming words that he knew without even having to her trembling voice.

"Enter, lest the darkness win...enter, lest the darkness win..." She was repeating her line over and over to herself, clinging to it like a prayer. "Enter, lest the darkness win...."

Watching her gave Harry an idea. Dumbledore had once told him that help would be given at Hogwarts to those who asked for it--so he would ask for it in the only way he knew how. And though he didn't know if it would bring the help they needed, if nothing came of it they would be no worse off than they were now.

Gently, he opened the mental link and spoke to his friends. *Enter, Watchman of the Light....*

Hermione responded immediately. *Grant to us your inner sight.*

Enter, for the time draws near.... Ron picked up the chant, pushing it forward at a slightly faster pace.

Neville went still faster. *Power will erase our fear....*

Enter...lest the darkness win.... Ginny's voice nearly broke on the word 'darkness'.

Colin, caught up in the excitement of the moment, spoke the last line aloud. "We the Six now call you in!"

The words rang out, clear and strong, hanging in the air like the remnant of a cast spell.

The world seemed to blink, a flicker-flash of a disorienting sensation where everything was there and then not-there and then there again in the space of a heartbeat.

And when Harry's vision returned to normal, he saw that Will was standing less than twenty feet away, at a short distance from the crowd of students and teachers.

The Old One's arrival caused no small amount of surprise, but the surprise did not turn immediately to panic. Even though Will had appeared out of nowhere, the other students seemed to sense that

this new arrival was not an enemy. Those who knew him, like Remus and Professor McGonagall, looked as if they had seen the light at the end of a long, dark tunnel.

Harry, of course, was beyond overjoyed.

"Will!" he cried out, as the relief that swept through him turned his insides to liquid. It was fortunate that he had his friends with him, because if he had been on his own he would have surely collapsed, dissolving into water like winter snow in sunlight. Ron and Hermione and the others had cried out as well, shouts of joy and hope that maybe, maybe, things were not so bleak as they had been moments before.

But if Will heard them, he showed no sign of it. His strangely cold eyes scanned the huddled mass of students and teachers.

His gaze fell at once upon Professor Snape.

Snape had not noticed Will's unexpected appearance, being far more preoccupied trying to detach two first-year Slytherins from his legs. They had attached themselves at the first sight of the Death Eaters, and it seemed that unless he had concealed a prybar somewhere on his person he was fighting a losing battle. At the sound of Harry's glad cry, however, his head snapped up, and the tense frustration on his face gave way to a sudden smouldering anger. He shook the children off his legs as if they were toys and strode forward, mouth twisting into a feral snarl.

Will's expression did not change. Never taking his eyes off Snape, he slid back the left sleeve of his robe, baring his forearm to reveal the cross-quartered circle of the scar that Harry had only ever seen once before.

Snape stopped short, arrested in mid-stride.

Will extended his left arm, palm up, as if he was holding something out...but his hand was empty.

"What are you--" Snape exclaimed, but got no further.

In one swift motion, the Old One passed his right hand over the scar on his arm, and at the same time his lips moved, forming a single quiet word that no one could hear.

Snape's eyes went wide, filling with sudden, intense agony. A hoarse, wordless cry tore from his throat, and he sank to his knees on the muddy ground, clutching his left forearm.

"How--you *can't*--" Both his breath and his words came in short, pained gasps.

"Professor!" Two of the older Slytherins, one with a prefect's badge attached to her robes, ran toward him.

"Get back!" Snape barked at them. "Stay...stay where you are!"

The Slytherins fell back, staring at their Head of House with horrified eyes.

Snape was bent double, left arm held pressed against his abdomen. His fingers scrabbled at the thick cloth of his robe, clawing at the fabric as if he could tear through it and rip the Dark Lord's mark out of his skin. His limp, greasy hair was falling in his face, and the pained twist of his lips made him look even more like some mad dog prepared to bite anyone who came too close.

Through all of this, not one of the Death Eaters had moved. Whatever Will had done to the mark on Snape's arm had not affected them.

Will let his arm fall to his side, and began to cross the pitch.

Anyone looking down on the pitch from above would have seen a roughly diamond-like formation. Madam Pomfrey, McGonagall, and the half-conscious Draco were at the northernmost point, farthest from where Will had appeared. The main body of students and teachers were separated from Harry, Remus, and the rest of the Six by only a small space, but as Will drew nearer to them they scattered, regrouping in frightened little knots of no more than a dozen students clustered around each teacher.

The Slytherins were staring at the man who had attacked their House master with fear and the beginnings of hatred in their eyes. Many of the students, and not a few of the teachers, watched his every move as if they expected him to turn and attack *them* at any moment. Professor McGonagall was trying to keep up a strong, brave face, but there was no disguising the betrayal deep in her eyes.

Will, for his part, gave all of them a wide berth. The path he took brought him closer to where Harry and his friends were standing.

Without thinking, Harry twisted out of Remus's grip and ran toward Will. Remus shouted at him to stop, and Snuffles barked furiously at him, but his legs kept going. They carried him toward Will as fast as they could move.

Will did not break his stride, but the look in his eyes was enough to make Harry skid to a stop, slipping a little on the wet grass.

Harry took a deep breath. He wanted to say something useful, to give a warning or ask what he and the others should do. He wanted to know why Will had brought Snape to his knees, and why he hadn't done the same to the Death Eaters. But when he opened his mouth,

the only thing that came out was a plaintive, petulant, and entirely undignified:

"Where *were* you?"

He cringed at the sound of his own voice. He might have been five years old again, complaining of a skinned knee or a pinched finger. He was embarrassed to hear himself, so embarrassed that he half-wished for a bolt of lightning to strike him where he stood, just as it had for Draco.

Will, however, kept walking, sparing him no more than a momentary glance. Harry might not have said a thing. But as the Old One strode past Harry heard in his mind, as clearly as if it had been spoken aloud:

Cornwall.

And then Will was standing alone, almost in the exact centre of the pitch.

Harry retreated. There was little else he could do.

The second he was within arm's length of Remus, the older man's hand shot out and pulled him close, gripping the sleeve of Harry's robe with a strength he certainly hadn't had a few minutes ago.

"Do you realise what a *foolish* thing you just did?" he said into Harry's ear. His voice was breathy and shaking with anger.

"I didn't mean to," Harry said wretchedly. "It was only--"

"One spell," Remus whispered, more furious than Harry had ever heard him sound before. "Only one spell. That's all it would have taken."

His point made, he let go of Harry's sleeve. Snuffles whuffed disgustedly, echoing Remus's rage in the only way his Animagus form would allow.

Unshed tears and blowing cinders made Harry's eyes sting. He kept his gaze fixed on Will, watching and waiting to see what the Old One would do.

Will regarded the circle of Death Eaters with flat dismissal, as if they were nothing more than a cluster of naughty children caught misbehaving on a playground. The air around him seemed to ripple, a blurred shimmer like that of rising heat that was gone as quickly as it had come. The children knew that it wasn't a defensive spell, even though it looked like one. The magic surrounding him was far more ancient than wizarding magic; the briefest display of a power beyond that of mere wand work. It had lasted only long enough to reinforce the message that this was not a person to be trifled with.

Then, he lifted his head, looking up to the slate grey sky.

"You will not enter!" he called out, the challenge ringing in the air and reverberating across the pitch.

There was a great flash of lightning, followed immediately by a long, ripping peal of thunder. All of the younger children screamed, clinging to each other out of sheer terror. Even many of the older ones could not help crying out.

Will paid no attention to the terrified cries. There might not have been anyone else around for all he seemed to care. There was only the great mass of cloud overhead--and whatever it held.

"Am I to have the favour of a reply?" he demanded of the sky.

A greenish, bilious light flickered through the clouds, creating shadows like those cast by guttering candles.

"So." The reply, thin and high and deathly cold, seemed to come from the sky itself. "It would seem that you've decided to put in an appearance, Stanton."

Will's eyes narrowed. "So it would seem...*Riddle*."

The Old One's contemptuous, dismissive use of the Dark Lord's true name chilled Harry to the bone. He shuddered.

"Only you, then?" Voldemort said mockingly. His sibilant, disembodied words seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. "A far cry from the armies of the Light I had expected."

"If there must be a battle, it will be elsewhere," Will said, ignoring the taunt. "I and the Six will face you there on such terms as you may deem appropriate. But the Light bars you from this place." He held out his arm, displaying the burned-in sign of the Light. "You *will not enter*."

The Dark Lord laughed, a low, gurgling rumble like an undercurrent of thunder. "I will not enter, you say. How frightfully simple you make it sound."

"Begone, Riddle," Will said. "Begone, before your arrogance destroys you."

"I would not speak so lightly of arrogance, Stanton," Voldemort sneered.

It took a great effort for Harry to tear his eyes away from the stand-off going on before him. He looked round, squinting to see through the burning in his head.

Ron and Hermione were white as sheets, their faces masks of horror. Ginny was shaking so badly that Ron's arm around her waist seemed to be the only thing keeping her on her feet. Neville was whimpering very softly, and holding his head in his hands. Colin appeared to be on the point of dropping dead from sheer fright. And Draco--

Draco was trembling all over, emitting a series of whining moans. Madam Pomfrey circled her wand over his body, trying to recast the Stabilising Spell. She was fighting to keep her patient under control.

"Ungh..." Draco groaned. "...rat...nrrgh..."

"Rat?" Ron whispered fearfully. "Does he mean Wormtail?"

"He wouldn't..." Harry broke off, wincing. The pain in his head had swelled to unbearable levels. He couldn't think properly, not even to answer Ron's question.

Gingerly, so as not to attract the attention of the onlooking Death Eaters, he fumbled through his pocket in search of his Chocolate Frog. The bit of chocolate would help, surely, if he could only get it out of his pocket.

He pulled it free, but it slipped through his fumbling fingers and dropped to the ground.

Slowly, very slowly, he knelt down and reached for the colourful package. He picked up the Chocolate Frog and was about to open it when he felt a hand grab his arm.

"Harry!" Neville hissed. "Look...look at the stone!"

He let his eyes follow Neville's pointing finger, and bit down on a startled cry.

The pocket that had held his Chocolate Frog was the same pocket where he kept his warestone. When he had pulled out the Frog the little quartz-like pebble had fallen out as well, though he hadn't seen it fall at the time. The stone had landed on the pitch, but it had not lain where it had fallen.

Instead, it was *bouncing*, chittering along the ground as if it was caught in the throes of an earthquake. Where it touched the ground, the grass withered as if hit by a heavy frost, and the liquid mud of the pitch froze solid.

Someone--someone VERY close by--was under an Unforgivable Curse.

"Cruciatu?" whispered Neville, seeing the question in Harry's eyes.

Harry shook his head. "Whoever it was would have to be right on top of us...look at it!"

Neville looked, watching the stone as it vibrated so rapidly that it barely seemed to touch the ground.

"Imperius, then..." he mumbled. "But where?"

Keeping his head down, Harry looked around. Snape was still on the ground, clutching at his arm as if he would gladly rip it out of its socket, given half a chance. The other teachers were shielding or attempting to shield the students, and McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey were bending over Draco as the latter doggedly worked to recast the Stabilising Spell, because his moans had grown louder and he seemed to be trying to *move--*

Harry leapt to his feet, all thought of caution driven clear out of his mind.

"Will, it's Malfoy!" he yelled. "He's--"

"DON'T TOUCH HIM!" Will barked.

Madam Pomfrey recoiled, startled by the force of his command. The distraction made her lose concentration, long enough for the warm glow of Shielding Spell to flicker and vanish completely.

Draco screamed. His back arched so violently that only his head and heels touched the ground, and there was a horrible grinding noise of bone on bone that could be heard even over his horrible cry.

McGonagall's mouth dropped open. "Dr. Stanton!"

"Don't go any closer!" Will ordered, noticing that Ron and Hermione had started to move toward Draco. "Keep clear of him, all of you!"

"But I have to...I have to stabilise him!" Madam Pomfrey pleaded. Her wand hand trembled as she looked to Will, as if she was afraid that she would anger him irrevocably by recasting the charm without his permission.

Will turned back to the sky without so much as a glance in her direction.

"You would doom this child's mind?" he said angrily. "I warn you, Riddle--you tread on dangerous ground."

"What is this talk of doom, Old One?" Voldemort replied. "What right does an Old One have to command the Dark?"

"As much right as a slave of the Dark has to control the mind of a man," Will countered.

Voldemort laughed at that, and streaks of lightning flashed through the sky. It was impossible to tell whether the Dark Lord's laughter brought the lightning, or whether the crash of lightning sounded like the cackle of hideous laughter.

Draco screamed again, shuddering uncontrollably, as if the bolts of lightning tearing through the sky were coursing through him at the same time.

"Stop him!" Harry begged. Draco's screams were mingling with the clamour in his mind, cries that sounded like his mother and his friends and the terrified people at St Mungo's and King's Cross. He would go mad if it lasted a moment longer. "You have to stop him!"

"He can do nothing!" Voldemort declared, his laughter sending crackles of lightning racing from cloud to cloud. "The Light's champion, the last of the Old Ones, and he can do nothing!"

"I warn you, Riddle!" Will had to raise his voice to be heard over the noise of the onrushing storm and the roar of the fire that was now raging out of control. "You court your own destruction!"

"You think I have need of your warnings, Old One?" Voldemort said scornfully, still laughing. "The only destruction here *shall be your own.*"

And with those words, Draco's entire body convulsed and he cried out, the words cracking into a high-pitched, terrible shriek:

"Master--I INVITE YOU IN!"

Chapter Thirty-Five - Fighting Fire With Fire

And when man faces destiny, destiny ends and man comes into his own.

--André Malraux, "The Voices of Silence"

Even before the last echoes of Draco's cry had faded into the smoke-choked air, the Dark's power was at work.

It was simple and sudden, a gasp of raw magic that sucked the air out of one's lungs, a gaping silence like a thunderclap turned inside out. All across the pitch, people coughed and struggled to breathe--even the Death Eaters were not immune to the cruel blast of Dark magic.

And then, with the same abruptness that had made Will's appearance so startling, Lord Voldemort materialised on the Quidditch pitch.

The students were too scared to move, too terrified to run. Some hid their faces in their hands, squeezing their eyes shut in the childish hope that whatever they could not see would not be able to see them. Others fainted dead away, passing out where they stood and knocking down their classmates as they fell. Those who had been screaming before simply kept going--though their cries sounded louder now that there truly was something to scream about.

The teachers somehow managed to hold firm, although many looked as if they wanted nothing more than to start screaming, too. Poor Professor Flitwick looked absolutely petrified. Madam Pomfrey's wand hung limp in her hand, all concern for her patient forgotten. The beading of sweat on Snape's forehead had nothing to do with the pain in his arm. Professor McGonagall, with her hair tumbling into her face and her eyes wide and dark and fretful, looked like nothing more than a frightened little girl.

Behind Harry, Remus's breathing was irregular, fast and whistling. Snuffles's growling sounded positively rabid.

Will was closest to the Dark Lord, standing not more than ten feet away--well within spell-casting distance. His face was set, but he seemed to be more frustrated than furious, more irritated than angry, as if he had been caught off-guard by a particularly clever practical joke.

Voldemort coolly surveyed the pitch. His red eyes burned with the same fire that was consuming the Quidditch stands, and they missed nothing. The huddled knots of fearful schoolchildren. The anxious

band of teachers. Draco Malfoy's twitching body. The defiant glares of Harry Potter and his circle of protectors.

Will Stanton.

His gaze lingered longest on Will. "No words of welcome, Old One?" he said at last.

Will's jaw tightened. Icily, he said:

"None that spring immediately to mind, Riddle."

"But I have been invited." The Dark Lord spread one arm wide with a highly exaggerated formality. "Surely you are not surprised to see me?"

The Old One's expression was stony. "No. But though you may have been invited onto these grounds, your...*entourage*...was not."

"Ah, but they were." The paper-thin layer of skin on the Dark Lord's skull-like face stretched as he smiled. "They were personally escorted onto the grounds by none other than the Keeper of Keys himself."

"*HAGRID*?" McGonagall gasped.

Voldemort turned his head slightly, raising his voice to speak to the wide circle of Death Eaters. "I trust there were no problems with his conduct?"

"Such a gentleman he was, my lord." The meek, subservient reply came in a woman's voice, the same penetrating one that had conjured the Dark Mark. "He led us through the Forest as neatly as you please--after a little persuading on our part."

"Where is he?" McGonagall demanded. This time, her voice shook with rage. "What have you done with him?"

"Why, still in the Forest." The same woman spoke again, though her submissiveness now held an overtone of mockery. "You should be able to locate him quite easily. It's only a short walk, and he won't be leaving anytime soon."

Harry didn't know which was worse: finally knowing what had happened to Hagrid...or *not* knowing what had happened to Hagrid.

Voldemort turned back to Will.

"What could be more legitimate than that?" he declared, daring anyone to challenge him. "You see? A most satisfactory solution all around."

"If your concept of a 'satisfactory solution' happens to require *children* to play out your little games," Will said scornfully.

Voldemort's eyes flickered in Harry's direction. The Six shivered in mixed fear and revulsion as the burning eyes passed over them.

"I see you've chosen to add hypocrisy to failure, then?" the Dark Lord sneered. "What has the Light come to in these dark days?"

Ron started forward suddenly, impulsively, and would probably have gone farther than was wise if Remus (with Snuffles's help) had not collared him in time and hauled him back.

"At least we had a *choice*!" he shouted, struggling vainly to break Remus's grip on his shoulder.

"Ron, stop it!" Ginny's sharp hiss was panic-stricken.

Will, however, continued where Ron's angry words had broken off. "And that choice freely given...as others will testify."

"The fact remains--" Voldemort began haughtily, but stopped short as a high, keening cry pierced the air.

All eyes looked up and around and everywhere, searching for the source of the cry. Even Voldemort's gaze flickered up, and he involuntarily raised an arm in a gesture of self-defence as if he expected an attack to come from the sky.

"Look!" someone shouted, rather inanely, because there was only one thing that anyone could be looking at.

Fawkes was circling overhead, a splash of glorious colour against the dismal sky and the black pillars of smoke.

The phoenix's plumage blazed as brightly as if he had dipped his feathers into the flames consuming the stands. Gracefully, he dipped low and swooped up, completing two wide, sweeping circles over the pitch. Then, he flew off in the direction of the castle, gliding on the warm air currents. Another mournful cry floated back to them, carried on the soot-filled wind.

Harry wrenched his attention from Fawkes and back to Will and Lord Voldemort. The Dark Lord had opened his mouth, about to speak, but before he could get a word out the air *shivered* like a person trying to shake off a chill, and suddenly--

There was no telltale pop of Apparition, or the vicious choking gasp of magic that had signalled Voldemort's entrance. Will had neither moved nor spoken a word. But all at once, there were far more people on the Quidditch pitch than there had been a second before.

Over a dozen people had appeared out of nowhere.

Arabella Figg and Alastor Moody stood a few feet apart. Their faces were grimly fierce with smiles as victorious as if they had stormed a fortress. There was Arthur Weasley, pale but determined, with Charlie and Percy standing strong and proud on either side of him. Mundungus Fletcher was there, and Edward Linchley, and perhaps five or six others that Harry didn't know--they were witches and wizards, Aurors and Ministry officials, friends from all places. They were all there, and they all had their wands levelled at the Death Eaters--

And Albus Dumbledore was in the middle of all of them, looking calm and collected and entirely in control of the situation.

Harry blinked, wanting desperately to believe what he was seeing. All around him his friends and classmates were cheering. Faces that had been tearful and frightened moments before were all smiles at a sight that could have come straight out of a film--the perfect eleventh-hour rescue. The Slytherin and Ravenclaw Beaters brandished their bats with newfound courage, and their teammates gripped their brooms, prepared to use them as weapons if called to do battle.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Hermione's mouth had dropped open. He could all but see her brain struggling to process a sight that *Hogwarts: A History* had told her wasn't possible.

It was the dumbfounded look in her eyes, more than anything that told Harry that he wasn't imagining things. This was real.

"Hold your fire!" Voldemort choked out the order in a voice that had lost much of its confidence. "Stay where you are!"

The command was unnecessary. The Death Eaters were as flummoxed as their master. Not a single one so much as raised a wand, though this in itself was hardly surprising. With a squadron of Aurors fully prepared to hex anyone who dared to look at them in the wrong way, the most sensible thing would be to hold one's fire--and stay where one was.

Dumbledore waved his hand, and the adults fanned out to form a tight defensive ring to surround the students. The noise was dying down, most of the cheering having been shushed by the teachers. Once the rescuers were in place the elderly wizard moved forward, away from the ring of Aurors.

At the same time, Will dropped back a few paces, and Dumbledore nodded to him as the two men passed each other.

"Terribly sorry for the delay, Dr. Stanton," he said genially.

The Old One inclined his head, though he did not take his eyes off of Lord Voldemort.

"Quite all right, Minister," he replied, taking up a position behind and slightly to Dumbledore's right.

"And we are all here?" Dumbledore asked. "None left behind?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

Harry felt Snuffles tense suddenly beside.

"Padfoot, don't!" Remus murmured, holding fast to the dog's collar and giving it a good shake. "Don't risk it!"

Colin glanced at the Aurors. "They...they wouldn't *kill* him, would they?" he said fearfully.

"No, but *they* might." Remus gave a slight nod, indicating the teachers who had joined the ring of Aurors that were shielding the students. "Only McGonagall knows who Snuffles really is."

Harry dropped to one knee. "Did you hear that?" he whispered into his godfather's ear. "Stay put."

The black dog's muscles trembled with the exertion of keeping himself under control, but he did not move. His collar tags made tinny, jingling sounds as they clinked and clacked against each other.

"Everything appears to be in order, Minister," Will was saying.

Dumbledore nodded slowly, gazing at Will over the tops of his half-moon spectacles.

"I think we may need everyone for this," he said quietly.

The Old One blinked, startled, but quickly regained his composure. "Of course."

He raised his right arm, the five fingers of his hand spread wide, and pointed to Professor Snape. His lips moved in inaudible, rapid speech.

Snape gasped, throwing his head back like a drowning man breaking the water's surface. He gulped great lungfuls of air, still cradling his left arm.

The spell completed, Will lowered his arm, letting it fall naturally to his side.

Hastily, Snape scrambled to his feet, shaking out his left arm. He whipped out his wand, curling his fingers around it in a death-grip.

For a horrible second, Harry thought that Snape was about to hurl some sort of awful curse in Will's direction. But the Potions Master only gripped his wand more tightly, and in a show of almost superhuman self-control, he strode purposefully over to the group of Aurors.

Dumbledore waited, patiently, until Snape had joined the other adults. Then he turned to Voldemort, tilted his head to one side, and said cheerfully:

"Hello, Tom."

Voldemort stared at the older man with a slow-burning hatred--and, just perhaps, a hint of fear--in the depths in his eyes. He said nothing.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, the picture of concerned adulthood. "Why, whatever's the matter, Tom? Isn't this what you wanted?"

The Dark Lord let out a harsh laugh.

"Do you really imagine that I want to kill you?" he said. "If I know you, Albus Dumbledore, that would be giving you exactly what you want."

Dumbledore asked, "And why is that?"

"Because I know exactly what will happen." One skeletal hand waved languidly, and for the briefest of moments one could see the young, charismatic Head Boy that still lurked within the monster's frame.

"Maddened by the prospect of victory, I make the impulsive decision to extract my revenge by killing you--no, by having one of my servants kill you. You, of course, will have done your research and managed to unearth or devise some obscure but foolproof incantation that no one living has ever heard of." His hands twitched, curving into claws at the thought of such a spell. "My spell will backfire, thereby giving you and your minions ample time to act."

Dumbledore pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Very clever."

But the Dark Lord was not finished. "Or better still, it *won't* backfire, and your nauseatingly noble and self-sacrificing death will spark the chain reaction that ultimately defeats me."

"You've thought of everything," Will observed coldly.

Voldemort smiled, equally cold. "But you haven't, I'm afraid."

Pain spiked through Harry's scar, but before he could yell out a warning Voldemort struck.

Faster than a cobra, the bony hand came down, and at the same time the Dark Lord uttered a long, guttural word in a language that no one could comprehend.

Instinctively, Harry threw up an arm to shield himself, but something heavy and hard slammed into his chest and knocked him off balance. He landed on his left arm, and mud splattered across his face, and the heavy thing had fallen on top of him and wasn't going away.

"Neville?" he mumbled dazedly, trying to get an arm free to wipe the mud from his lenses.

"Harry! Are you all right?"

Then the pressure on his chest and stomach was gone, and he was looking up through mud-smearred glasses at Sirius's panicked face.

The heavy thing had been his godfather, who had thrown himself on top of Harry and had turned back into a human at the same time. Harry didn't know if the transformation had been accidental, or done on purpose, but Sirius was a good deal heavier than Snuffles was.

"I don't know what happened," Sirius was babbling, his weight still pinning Harry to the ground. "I jumped, and then something HIT me and next thing I knew I was human but I don't know HOW it--"

"Sirius...." His ribs ached with every breath, but he attempted a weak grin. "I'm fi--"

"ALBUS!"

Professor McGonagall's scream made both Harry and Sirius sit bolt upright, twisting round to see what had happened.

When Harry saw Dumbledore, he almost screamed as well.

Dumbledore had been frozen, his body as unnaturally motionless as the victim of a Full-Body Bind. His mouth hung partway open, leaving him with a rather foolish-looking expression.

From Dumbledore, Harry looked to Will, and saw the Old One lowering his arm--an arm that had been pointing at Harry.

"It was for YOU," Hermione said suddenly, her eyes widening in instant comprehension. "Harry, it was a protection spell for YOU."

"But I'm--" His head spun. Will's spell had hit both him and Sirius, and had somehow forced Sirius to change from Animagus to human form. But Voldemort had not been aiming at him, but at Dumbledore, and now Dumbledore was--

Voldemort laughed, pleased with the newest turn of events.

"If you try to bring him back, Stanton, he dies." He spoke very clearly and precisely, emphasising his threat with a ghastly relish. "My Death Eaters will ensure that."

Then he turned, and pointed to Draco. "Bring him here."

Draco whimpered loudly, but his body was already moving. Having been struck by lightning and fallen a over hundred feet to the ground, he was in no condition to fight. A series of muscle spasms forced him to roll over and onto his side.

"Draco!" Madam Pomfrey reached out, prepared to grab the boy's shoulders and hold him down.

McGonagall flung out an arm and held her back. "Poppy, don't touch him!"

"But I can't--" The mediwitch was torn. There was no medical text that could have prepared her for the situation, no instructions on how to treat a critically injured patient who happened to be under the Imperius curse. She could only watch, horrified, as Draco somehow managed to push himself upright and into a sitting position.

Draco's bones grated with every movement, and to keep from hearing the awful sounds Harry tried to figure out exactly which bones were broken. The upper part of the right arm looked badly damaged where the arm met the shoulder. One ankle was swollen, hanging at an odd angle. The harsh breathing probably meant a number of cracked, if not broken, ribs, and possibly a collarbone fracture.

But as Draco clambered to his feet--and here Harry could no longer think of things as 'the injured leg' or 'the broken finger'--there was a sharp grinding noise that set one's teeth on edge.

Draco let out a high, gobbling screech as the Imperius Curse forced him to stand on a fractured pelvis.

"Draco, no!" A girl's wail, ragged-edged and helpless, came from within the group of students. "Stop him, someone! PLEASE!"

That's Pansy, Harry thought dully.

Unhearing, Draco took a teetering step, and then another. He wobbled forward on legs as unsteady as a newborn foal's, stumbling away from his teachers and classmates and toward the Dark Lord.

"No..." Harry heard Ginny moan, close by. "Make it stop....oh, make him *stop*...."

As Draco hobbled toward him, Voldemort extended a hand and beckoned to someone behind him. One of the Death Eaters, his face

hidden by the voluminous black cowl and white mask, approached his lord.

The Death Eater stopped at his master's side, and Draco stopped as well. His body was hunched over and twisted, his limbs trembling like those of a palsied old man.

In a single smooth motion, the Death Eater pushed back his cowl and removed his mask, revealing the fine, aristocratic features of Lucius Malfoy.

"Come to me, Draco," Lucius said as he waved his wand--as if the Imperius Curse would not be sufficient impetus in and of itself.

Draco tottered forward another step.

"Yes, that's right." Lucius was smiling, and his eyes shone with a light that was entirely devoid of sanity.

Another step, and a wet, rusty croak pushed its way out of Draco's mouth. "Fa...."

Voldemort glanced at Lucius.

"Is he salvageable?" he asked curtly, without even looking at Draco.

Lucius bowed his head. "I would not presume to judge, my lord," he said modestly.

Draco was still trying to draw a full breath. "Aaa...aath...."

Voldemort turned his gaze back to the crippled boy in front of him. He studied Draco for all of three seconds, then averted his eyes. "Make it quick, Lucius."

"NO!" Pansy sobbed. "DRACO!"

Draco's head jerked up, and he blinked. His face seemed to clear, as if Pansy's cry had shaken him out of his stupor. He squinted at Lucius without really seeing him.

He tried to move his right arm, but it failed to move, and after two long breaths he finally managed to raise his left arm a fraction--reaching for his father.

"Fah..." he gurgled, and took another deep breath, and tried one more time. "Ff...*Father*...."

Lucius's smile widened ever so slightly, as if he was genuinely pleased that Draco should still be able to speak. He raised his own arm in a

gesture that was a mirror of his son's, but his wand was in his hand, and it was pointed at Draco.

"Avada Kedavra."

The green light flashed.

Draco crumpled to the ground, as if an invisible pair of scissors had severed the string holding him up.

"DRACOOOOOOO!" Pansy's scream was a knife in Harry's heart. He knew with chilling certainty that it would ring in his ears all his life.

Lord Voldemort made a curt gesture of dismissal. Lucius, still smiling, bowed deeply and backed away.

The Dark Lord drew his robes closer about him and leisurely strode forward, putting a disdainful distance between himself and the huddled heap of green and black that was all that remained of Draco Malfoy.

"When will you cease this tiresome charade, Stanton?" he sighed loudly. He drew to a halt, and folded his arms across his chest.

Will gazed at Draco's body for a long moment, his expression unreadable.

"That was a very foolish thing to do, Riddle," he said, softly. "Very foolish...and remarkably unimaginative."

"Brave words, Stanton," Voldemort trumpeted. "Very brave words, from the losing party."

The Old One glanced up, and raised an eyebrow in a manner that would not have been out of place in a classroom. "Do you honestly not understand what you have done?"

Voldemort glared at him. "The spell has run its course, and I am still here. The tried and true methods are always best"--and he favoured Will with a superior smile--"particularly if one learns from a predecessor's past mistakes."

"Oh, I can see that," Will said matter-of-factly. "You are still here. But you won't be able to leave."

The Dark Lord's eyes narrowed, suspiciously. "*What?*"

Will continued in the same straightforward, unemotional tone. "No one can leave this field until the wards that protect it have been deactivated."

His announcement set an uneasy murmur rumbling through the circle of adults as teachers and Aurors looked to each other, wondering what it meant.

"I don't pretend to be an expert on the properties of wizarding magic, but from what I gather countering charms as strong as the ones surrounding these grounds would not be an easy task. It would be quite dangerous, or so I've been told." He glanced at Professor McGonagall. "Am I right, Headmistress?"

McGonagall started, and shook herself. "Q-uite right, Dr. Stanton."

Will nodded. "The only person who knows the proper sequence of counterspells is Albus Dumbledore...and if you try to bring him back, *I* will kill him."

"WHAT!?" Sirius's exclamation was not the only one, but it was by far the loudest.

"Or rather, the Light will." Will continued as if no one had spoken. "As you said--it is wise to learn from a predecessor's mistakes."

Voldemort pointed a menacing finger at him, though he was not able to stop his hand from shaking. "And what is there to prevent me from killing every living thing in this place before then?" he shouted.

"M-Master!" one of the Death Eaters stuttered. "W-w-we...we c-can't *possibly*--"

"SILENCE!" Voldemort boomed.

The sudden, painful discovery that his leg had gone to sleep distracted Harry from the unfolding scene. He started to stand up, but he stumbled when he heard Will's voice ring out in his mind:

Come closer, all of you. Form your circle around me.

Taken aback, he looked to his friends. It was clear from their blank, stunned expressions that they had also heard the Old One's command.

"Harry?" Sirius's alarmed voice penetrated the fuzziness that was making it difficult to think. "What's the matter?"

Harry looked down at his godfather, and felt a rapid fluttering in his stomach. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

Just then, he was aware of movement close by. He half-turned to see Ron at his side. A second later, Hermione had joined them.

Ginny and Neville and Colin moved to stand behind the three of them, silent and waiting.

With his friends close around him, the ability to speak came back to him. He got to his feet, standing on legs that were no longer unsteady.

"I have to go," he said to Sirius, keeping his voice as even and neutral as Will's. "He's calling me...calling *us*."

Sirius inhaled sharply, pressing his lips together so tightly that his mouth was nothing but a dark slit edged with bloodless white.

Remus's voice was a tremulous half-whisper. "What...what are you going to do?"

At that moment, Harry realised--deeply and truly realised--that they believed that he if left now, he wouldn't come back. Oddly enough, the stark realisation didn't frighten him. If anything it made him all the more determined to come back--if only to prove them wrong.

"Whatever we have to," he said lightly, and smiled at them.

Then, he turned and walked away, across the pitch.

No one tried to stop them. The six children walked steady, almost marching, their feet acting of their own accord. Wordlessly, and with military precision, they formed the circle around Will.

Harry took Hermione's left hand, and felt Ron grasp his firmly. His friends' palms were clammy, but the grip of their fingers was strong as ever. Ginny was so pale that her freckles stood out like livid pox marks, but she resolutely took the hand that her older brother held out to her. Neville reached for Hermione, and a jolt of electricity raced through them as Colin stepped forward and completed the circle. The last of the Six looked small and vulnerable between Neville's solid presence and Ginny's bright corona of hair, but he held himself as straight and tall as the rest.

Will, now in the centre of their circle, once again turned his gaze to Voldemort.

"If you insist on ending this now, Riddle," he said mildly, "there's nothing to stop you."

"Stop me?" Voldemort repeated, incredulous. "End this now?"

There was a pause, and then Will smiled.

His smile could have cracked ice.

"Oh, yes," the Old One said. "We shall end it now--on *OUR* terms."

And the world rocked beneath Harry's feet.

* * *

He was falling backward, the wild peal of bells ringing loud as alarms in his head. It took all of his willpower to stop himself from letting go and jamming his fingers into his ears. He couldn't see. He couldn't think. It was all he could do to cling to Ron and Hermione's hands as they spun out of control, falling...falling....

There was a sudden jarring thud, and he found himself on solid ground.

They were surrounded on all sides by a thick vapour, wreathing and swirling and oppressive, like the densest of fogs. The mist was impenetrable; they could barely see each other, let alone anything farther away.

"What's happened?" Colin asked. His voice thudded heavily in the silence.

Will's reply was silent and terse, wasting no words. *We are not properly in Time now. All times are here and now, in this place. It will prevent any of our actions from directly affecting the battle.*

B...battle? Ginny squeaked.

Look into the fog, Will said. Not at it, but into it, as if you were looking through it.

Harry looked, squinting. If he focused on the patch of grey mist swirling in his face, he could see...he could see....

It was a little like a grainy black-and-white film, without sound and blurred around the edges. Brief glimpses of battles flickered in the mist, each glimpse lasting just long enough to give a sense of what was happening.

Voldemort was nowhere in sight, but the Death Eaters were everywhere. It looked as if they had tried to charge, and their first attempt at open assault had been broken by the defenders. The battle was one-on-one, even hand-to-hand where wands had been broken and the combatants scuffled with each other, exchanging blows. The deadly green light flashed here and there, though there was no way to know if it had hit its mark or not. If they could have heard voices, they would have heard hoarsely shouted curses and countercurses, bursts of Dark magic and deflecting spells of all kinds.

Hear me, all of you, the Old One said, breaking the unnaturally empty stillness. You have some idea of what awaits; keep your wits about you. You will be able to see much of what is happening in your own time, but you cannot let it distract you.

But-- Ron protested.

You cannot let it distract you. Is that clear?

It was a question, but Will's tone did not allow for questions of any kind. The children kept silent and still, waiting and watching the battle that was raging in their own time.

Despite being outnumbered, the resisting fighters had summoned every ounce of strength at their disposal and were giving back as good as they got. They saw Mad-Eye Moody and Mrs. Figg fighting back to back, throwing hexes right and left as they expertly parried strikes from all directions. One particularly clear flash showed Arthur Weasley, perhaps hearkening back to ancient Muggle fighting methods, using his splintered wand as a makeshift sword to pin a struggling Death Eater to the ground.

Harry nearly cheered aloud as he saw a sudden image of Professor Snape, though bleeding heavily, throw a hard right hook that sent Lucius Malfoy sprawling in the dirt. The surge of elation made his heart beat faster, but it nearly leap out of his mouth when he felt a pair of hands close over his own.

It was Will, and he was guiding Harry's hands, bringing them closer together, every inch bringing Hermione's left hand nearer to Ron's right.

Then, before they knew it, Ron and Hermione were holding hands and Harry was standing behind them, inside the circle. Will released his hands and laid a hand on Harry's shoulder, drawing him backward and into the very centre of the circle.

He could still look past them and into the mist, where the glimpses of battle were coming more quickly and lasting for longer. He saw Sirius, in Animagus form, tackle and worry a fair-haired woman who had raised her wand to strike Percy down. Bile rose in his throat at the sight of Lavender Brown lying on the ground, face-up, though it was impossible to tell for certain whether she was alive or dead. And there was Madam Pomfrey working frantically over the body of a fallen wizard--until a bright green light struck her in the back of the neck, and she fell forward.

Mr. Potter. Will's voice came into his mind, pushing emotion aside. *Draw your wand, and point it to the sky.*

Harry did as he was told, raising his arm straight up and holding it as steady as he could.

Good. Now keep it that way.

Harry gulped, and nodded.

Will spread his arms wide, and his cloak flew backward, billowing out as it was whipped by a gust of wind that had sprung up out of nowhere. The air around him began to glow, faintly at first, then stronger and stronger. The light spread outward until it engulfed the Circle.

Once the five children were within the circle of light, Will raised his arms over his head and the shimmering glow spiralled up into the air, coalescing into a column of brilliant light that sliced through the murky darkness.

He will come, Will said. Stay alert.

As if confirming the Old One's terse statement, Harry felt a burst of pain in his scar. He knew that Voldemort was near.

Then, he saw him.

The Dark Lord, gliding toward the circle, as terrible and unhurried as a walking nightmare. Tall and terribly thin, a skeleton picked clean of flesh. The power of the Dark that Tom Marvolo Riddle had accepted so long ago now drew Lord Voldemort toward the burning pillar in search of a final confrontation with the Light.

Voldemort stopped short, not ten paces away. His inhuman face regarded them coolly, impassively.

"You think you can stop me with this little conjurer's trick?"
The hiss in his words was light and deadly.

"It will be more than sufficient against a common garter snake who thought he could become a viper." Though Will's voice showed the intense strain of maintaining the shield of light, he nonetheless managed to sound disdainful, almost patronising.

The Dark Lord was quick to respond to the insult. "You are as good as alone, Old One. And without your Circle and the Light to come to your rescue, you can be no match for me."

"You see before you a new Circle, one which will see you destroyed. And as for the Light...." He paused, and Harry heard him chuckle quietly to himself. "You always were one to underestimate your enemies, Riddle."

"Children," Voldemort said, the single word dripping venom. "Children, all of you. And naughty children must be punished severely."

He pointed a long finger at Will, and called out two words in a language Harry couldn't understand but which sent sharp needles of fear racing through him.

There was an ear-splitting crash of thunder, and an immense force blasted the column of light, inches from Colin's face.

Colin let out a terrified wail, but did not let go of Neville and Ginny's hands.

Harry glanced behind him in time to see Will drop to one knee, his face contorted in pain and concentration. The shield of light wavered briefly, then steadied itself.

"Will!" He started to lower his wand and turn round, but the Old One was too quick for him.

"Stay back!" he ordered in a voice that made Harry's blood run cold. "For the love of God, STAY WHERE YOU ARE!"

Harry tried not to flinch as another blast, much stronger than the first, struck the barrier. There was nothing he could do--he had to stand like a statue and keep his wand pointed toward the menacing sky.

He kept glancing back. A thin rivulet of crimson was trickling down Will's chin, blood dripping to the ground from where he had bitten through his lip. The Old One's arms shook with strain, and struggle was etched in every line of his face as he pushed himself out of his half-crouch and back to his feet.

Voldemort had prepared a third blast, but before he could release it, Hermione suddenly looked to her left and shouted:

"Ron, NOW!"

And as Harry watched, first with astonishment and then with wonder, a small golden spark leapt from Ron and Hermione's joined hands.

All around the circle similar sparks exploded, too bright to look at. The flashes of golden light solidified to five thin golden beams that radiated outward from the five pairs of tightly held hands.

Slowly and deliberately, the Circle took a collective step forward, directly into the column of light. The barrier that Will had created crackled as the magic the Circle had summoned struck it and fused with it, adding to the protection that shielded Harry from the full force of the Dark Lord's power.

Voldemort, however, began to laugh, a wild, merciless cackle.

"Ah, so you've changed tactics, then?" he said gleefully. "I suppose it was high time I adjusted my own--*CRUCIO!*"

The screams of Harry's friends drowned out Harry's own cry as the Dark-infused magic blasted the circle.

Will gasped, absorbing what he could of the curse in an attempt to keep the barrier up and shield the children at the same time.

Only Harry was unaffected by the Dark Lord's curse--though all he wanted to do at that moment was bend over and be violently sick.

And Time, in its funny way of responding to crisis situations, decided to make matters worse by slowing to a near-halt.

.....

Harry Potter had seen many strange, peculiar, and downright bizarre things in his life, but for sheer shock value this one topped them all.

He knew that horrible things were happening all around him. People he knew were being cursed, tortured, murdered. The fire in the Quidditch stands was out of control. His closest friends were in unimaginable agony. But he couldn't see any of it.

Instead, he was standing in the centre of the circle, and directly before of him was the full-length mirror, the same one he had last seen in the little room off the library.

He gazed into its smooth polished surface, but it didn't show his reflection, or the interior of a university office, or even the battle being fought outside his bubble of sluggish Time. He was looking through his own eyes, witnessing for a second time events he had hoped he would never see again.

Will Stanton, turning round, the firelight dim in comparison to the fanatical light in his eyes--

'None but the Dark can defeat the Dark, Harry. That is the law, and Voldemort knows it.'

--and the image rippled and faded, blending into the lines of weary resignation and exhaustion on Bill Weasley's face--

'Mum's dead, Harry. They used the Killing Curse on her.'

--which resolved itself into Ron Weasley's seething glare--

'Get away from my sister.'

--and Hermione Granger, flinging a heavy leather-bound book at him--

'Damn you, you cold-hearted bastard. Get out of my sight.'

--and Neville Longbottom, a puddle of dark blood soaking his robes as he knelt inside a cage of blue-white light--

'Anything that comes in here'll have to deal with me.'

--the tremor of Colin Creevey's lower lip--

'Sometimes I don't know what was a dream and what wasn't.'

--Draco Malfoy, staring uncomprehendingly at an outstretched wand--

'Father?'

--and last of all Remus Lupin, his sad brown eyes wide and desperate as he pleaded--

'Harry...what are you going to do?'

"Finish what I started, Remus." Harry replied aloud, even though the image in the mirror had already vanished. "And fight fire with fire."

The mirror shattered, hundreds and thousands of tiny shards disintegrating as they exploded outward, crumbling into sparkling dust that whirled away on the wind, out of sight.

.....

Time gathered speed with a sickening rush until the world was moving properly once more. He was back in the thick of battle.

Flexing his fingers, he tightened his grip on his wand and called to his friends.

"Find your grief!" he shouted. "Find your strength! Summon it, call it to you!"

He knew they were fighting through the pain to keep the barrier up, and he was afraid they wouldn't hear him. He was afraid that the torture would have brought them to the breaking point, that they were beyond thinking of anything besides the awful pain.

But one by one, he saw their backs straighten. Something warm and impossibly strong swelled inside him, and he knew that he was feeling their resolve. Their hearts were filled with understanding, and acceptance, and desperation, and their desire to end this *now*, come what may.

Neville lifted his chin, throwing his head back to look the Dark Lord straight in the eye.

"For my parents!" he shouted, and the column of light pulsed in response as it absorbed his inner strength.

"For my baby brother!" Colin shrieked, his normally gentle face twisted beyond all recognition in fury.

"For our mother!" Ron and Ginny screamed with one voice.

The brilliant column of light made the tears running down Hermione's face shine silver. "For...for Natalie MacDonald!"

Harry locked eyes with Lord Voldemort, as if he could create a *Priori Incantatem* with his gaze alone. Just before he opened the link, he called out with a voice so forceful that it sounded nothing like his own:

"For ALL your victims!"

And with all the subtlety of being doused in petrol and set afire, the raw power of the Light's magic coursed through his body.

It was as if all the spells the six of them had ever and would ever cast were pouring into him, fuelled by grief and anger and fear and a thousand other emotions he couldn't and didn't want to name. He had called the magic to him, and now it whispered to him, burned within him, caressed him with a lover's touch, sang and screeched and shouted and sobbed in every cell of his body.

He screamed without hearing himself, his senses too overwhelmed to react to anything but the power. It was the power of the Six, and the power of the Light, and more, more, so much--

Too much.

Pain, so much pain that he couldn't remember there ever *not* being pain. It had always been there, just as he had always been standing in the centre of this circle, had always had his wand in his hand and his arm raised over his head. Always, since the beginning of Time, forever and ev--

He couldn't see, but visions flared at the back of his mind like ghost-images left by a camera's flashbulb. He saw Colin collapse, taking Ginny with him. Ron, Hermione, and Neville tried to hold on, but soon they too fell to the ground and lay still.

The column of light flickered as their magic left it.

And then--he didn't know *how* he knew this, but he did--the barrier of Light was gone, completely gone, and there was a great clamour in his head like the cheering at a Quidditch match (the stands were still on fire) the second before his fingers closed around the Snitch.

He couldn't hear, but the quiet voice that drifted into his mind was the calm, dry one he had first heard in a Hogwarts lecture hall so long ago.

Mr. Potter...if you're quite ready....

His ears cleared long enough for him to hear a shout, a victorious shout that was more like a long sibilant (but not Parseltongue) string of meaningless, nonsense (definitely not Parseltongue) words.

His eyes cleared long enough to see a flare of something black (not green?) blazing toward him, and the hand that was holding his wand was blazing, like fire (Fawkes on a Burning Day) but dazzlingly blue and blinding white and *then--*

The explosion blasted him off his feet.

He flew through the air like a cushion caught by a fourth-year's overly strong Banishing Charm.

He landed with what must have been a sickening thud, though he didn't feel it at all. He didn't feel anything--not arms or legs or hands or feet.

He hadn't heard a crunch, either (there should have been a crunch) but he did hear screaming.

Someone out there was screaming.

Was it him? He couldn't tell. He didn't think it was him.

It didn't sound like his mother's voice, either--that was the only other person it could have been. But then again, his mother was dead. Very, very dead.

And so were a whole lot of other people. Very, very dead.

Logically, he should have been very, very dead, too, but there you have it.

He didn't think it mattered.

He heard a heart beat once...twice...yes, and there it was for a third time. It sounded faint, feathery. If he listened too hard it wasn't there anymore. Better to stop listening for it.

He wished that whoever was doing the screaming would stop. It wasn't as loud as it had been, but they were still at it, and he was growing tired of listening to it. Someone was doing a rather poor job of imitating Lily Potter's (formerly Lily Evans's) voice.

Silly bastard, whoever it was. But then again, originality had never been one of Their strong points.

There was that heartbeat again. He had nearly missed it, thinking about the screaming.

There seemed to be quite a long time between heartbeats. Maybe it had forgotten to beat all together. Or maybe he had missed one, or two. It was quite possible.

But the screams had stopped now, so whoever it was had given up.

He couldn't hear the heartbeat anymore, either.

In its place there was a great rushing noise, like a high wind travelling through a tunnel in the wake of a fast train.

Then the rushing noise was gone, leaving a hollow of silence where it had been.

The train was gone, and he had missed it. He didn't know when the next one was, and he oddly enough, he didn't really care. Everything around him was shrinking, dwindling, collapsing inwards like (Draco) a house of playing cards.

Then the world went dark and silent, and he knew nothing more.

Chapter Thirty-Six - Postbellum, Postmortem

We have it in our power to begin the world over again.

-- Thomas Paine, "Common Sense"

When Harry awoke, he immediately wished he hadn't.

It wasn't because of the pain, though there was quite a lot of it. Pain was something he knew, and even though it was more than he had felt in a long time it always felt familiar. Like an old shirt that he could put on and take off...only he couldn't take it off when he wanted to, and he never really remembered putting it on in the first place.

No. It wasn't the pain.

He was tired--so terribly tired. Tired of fighting. Tired of thinking. He would have given anything, *anything*, to go back to the blissful darkness that was hovering just beyond his reach.

Even if kept his eyes closed, he could still *feel* things. He was lying down, on his side, and there was something cool against his cheek, and something warm at his back, and something hard all along his side. He could feel all those things--and the pain, because it hurt--and as long as he could feel them he couldn't go back to the darkness. It wouldn't take him back.

He wanted to cry. He would have, if he could have made tears come.

But he couldn't even do that.

His head felt soggy, as if it had been stuffed with dripping wet cotton-wool. He knew that something had happened, and that the something that had happened was something terribly important, but everything was fuzzy in his mind. Trying to remember only made his thoughts grow dimmer, as though he had read about the Something-Terribly-Important in a book long ago and mostly forgotten it.

In a way, he was glad. He didn't want to think. Better to delay the memories for a time...they would return soon enough, and then he would have to think about them for quite a long while after. Better to lie very still and think about nothing until the darkness claimed him again.

And yet the darkness didn't come for him, and after a time he came to realise that his back was very warm, and growing warmer with each

passing breath. At first the warmth had been nice, comforting, but now it was decidedly uncomfortable. Soon, it would be intolerable.

He wanted to roll over onto his back or his stomach, whichever would move him away from the heat, but he didn't know if he could trust his body to do what he wanted. Even shallow breaths made his ribs protest. He would have to start off slowly...

...perhaps by opening his eyes.

The awkward position of his body made the edge of his glasses dig into the side of his nose, but at least he could see. He closed his eyes and opened them again (it couldn't really be called 'blinking') and tried to make sense of what he could see.

A shadow--his shadow--was stretched out before him across the dark rough grey of a stone floor. There was a flesh-coloured blur inches from his face. It turned out to be his left hand. He attempted to wiggle--no, no, no, that HURT, he couldn't move his fingers at all. There was nothing else in front of him except a carved and polished bit of wood that looked like the bottom part of the leg of a chair, and next to the chair--

He looked up, and his heart almost stopped.

Someone was there.

His breath came faster, little whimpering gasps that he couldn't stop. Panic seized hold of his chest and made the blood thunder in his ears.

Standing beside the chair--*looming* over him--was a dark shape, a towering figure with two terrifying points of light where eyes should be and flames rising from its head, like a crown of fire.

But then, the figure took a step forward, and Harry saw that it wasn't fire at all.

It was firelight, caught and reflected in a great tangle of wild white hair, individual strands turned to vibrant oranges and reds and golds by the warming fire that he could feel beating down on his back. And the two points of light were the glitter of dark eyes that shone with the same firelight, the flickering reflection set deeply in a craggy, weatherworn face.

It was a tall man, returning Harry's stare with the same intense scrutiny, gazing down at him over a beaked nose. There was a strong, stern set to the man's jaw that made Harry's stomach threaten to turn over...but not from fear.

"So," the man said abruptly. "You're the one who's been looking after my Watchman all this time."

Deep and resonant, the man's voice clawed at Harry's memory. A strangled sort of sound escaped his throat as he struggled to think, to remember if--*where*--he had heard that voice before--

"Lie still," the man commanded severely. "Don't try to speak."

Harry lay still, and did not try to speak. His body went limp of its own accord.

The white-haired man regarded him for another long moment with a gaze that made him feel cold and hot at the same time. But then the man glanced away, off to the right, and said:

"He was wise to bring you here."

Puzzled, Harry followed the direction the man was looking in. Since he could not turn his head for more than a fraction of an inch it was difficult to see clearly, but by straining around the edges of his vision he was able to look to the right.

There was another carved piece of wood close to his head, the bottom part of the leg of another chair. Will was slumped in that chair, his head buried in his hands and his face hidden from Harry's sight. His breathing was uneven--not the breath of a man fast asleep.

Worry churned in Harry's stomach. He had never seen the Old One look so drained, so completely and utterly exhausted. It was as if every last bit of his energy had been spent.

"He is very tired."

Harry started--the old man might have been reading his thoughts. But the man was not looking at him, but at Will.

"Very tired," he repeated, more softly this time, and there was a quiet concern in his tone that belied his otherwise severe expression. But then he looked back at Harry, and with his next words his voice shifted back to its brisk, business-like rhythms.

"Though I think you would do better to worry about yourself than to fret over Will Stanton, young man." One bristly eyebrow arched at the startled noise Harry made, and the corners of the man's mouth twitched faintly upwards. "So rest now, and let the Light finish its healing."

A wave of tingling warmth swept through Harry's body, starting at the tips of his toes and spreading through his veins. The fire at his back felt far less hot in comparison. At the same time, a darkness began

to creep over his vision as slowly as if a lamp was being turned down. Yet this darkness was not the cold, still oblivion that had held him before, but rather the peace of a natural sleep, a drowsiness that came on as easily as if he was back in his warm bed in the Hogwarts dormitory. He could almost hear Ron's snoring, and the sound of a chilly rain lashing against the windows.

He was floating away from the pain, away from the warm fire and the stone floor and the carved wooden chairs and the tall old man. The last thing he heard before the darkness bore him away was the voice that his memory couldn't quite place, but which he would always be able to hear for ever afterward...if the day was still, or the night was clear, or the dream was right:

"You did well, Harry Potter."

* * *

When he next opened his eyes--even before he'd found his glasses and put them on--he knew both where he was and what time it was.

With regular Quidditch games and long practices, assorted accidents during class, and any number of other adventures that had ended in unconsciousness, he'd become intimately familiar with the Hogwarts infirmary. After enough time in bed, one soon learned the way the shafts of sunlight created patterns on the floor and walls. Since the window-shaped bars of light stretched halfway up the far wall, he knew it was well into late afternoon, close to dinnertime.

He knew where he was, and who he was. The usual practice was to determine how and when he had gotten there...but first, he had to take care of more routine matters.

He did a quick general inventory of body parts, and as far as he could tell he still had all of them. The skin of his forehead was itchy, the well-known itch of a bandage wrapped a little too tightly round his head. He tried to raise a hand to scratch it, but his shoulders felt as if they were being pinned down with weights, and any movement but the shallowest rise and fall of his chest made his muscles tingle and ache. His right hand, resting on top of the blanket, was a blob of white from wrist to fingertips.

Nothing hurt too badly, though. He was terrifically sore, but nothing was missing, nothing broken beyond repair.

He would have been grateful, but he was too tired to be properly thankful. That would have to come later, too.

A shadow crossed one of the bars of light, and Harry looked up, his entire body tensing.

He relaxed at the sight--blurred, but still recognisable--of Remus Lupin's gentle smile.

He raised his non-bandaged hand, waving it in a silent greeting.

Deftly, Remus caught his hand in mid-wave and felt for his wrist, checking the pulse. Seemingly satisfied with what he felt, he switched hands, lifting Harry's bandaged right hand from the blankets and prodding it delicately.

Remus was being extremely careful, but even the slight pressure was enough to make Harry wince.

"Sorry," Remus murmured. "Does it hurt much?"

"Only when you touch it." He hadn't meant it to sound like a bad joke, but when Remus chuckled, it brought a smile to his face, too. "Hello, Remus."

"Hello yourself," Remus replied. "Good to see you're awake."

"How long have I been out?"

Remus carefully returned the bandaged hand to the top of the blanket. "Almost three days. It's Tuesday evening."

"Oh." He hadn't thought that much time had passed, but then again that sort of thing was always difficult to tell. Now that he had an idea of *when* it was-- "Can I have my glasses?"

He used the opportunity to have a better look at Remus. There was a gash on his chin that was just finishing its healing, and the knuckles of his left hand were bound tightly with a thin strip of cloth, but other than that he looked fine--if a little tired.

"Are you hungry?" Remus asked. "Do you need anything?"

"No, thanks. I don't think I could eat even if I wanted to."

Remus's smile faded, but quickly brightened again. "All right, then. I'll fetch a bell for you to use if you want to ring for me, and I'll let the others know that you're awake."

Harry smiled a sleepy smile.

"I always seem to end up in hospital, don't I?" He ran a hand over the cool white sheets. "You'd think Madam Pomfrey would be tired of seeing me in here."

Remus looked away suddenly, staring fixedly at a painting on the far wall that depicted a nurse in starched white robes and cap attending to a bed-ridden patient.

"I...I don't think she has to worry about that anymore, Harry," he said awkwardly.

"What do you--" Unbidden, the image of Madam Pomfrey falling face down in the dirt of the battlefield flashed into his mind--and with that image the dam on his memory broke, releasing a flood of other, more horrible memories. "Oh...I...oh, *no*...."

"Harry!" Momentarily forgetting the boy's injuries, Remus grabbed him by the shoulder, eyes wide with alarm as he tried to think of something comforting to say. "Listen to me, please. It's...there was nothing...it isn't your fault--"

"Who else is dead, Remus?"

"Harry--"

"No." His face was stony, without a hint of sadness. "I have to know. Who else was killed?"

"Ron and Hermione are all right," Remus said quickly, soothingly. "Neville, Ginny, and Colin, too. And so is Sirius. They're fine, they're all fine, Harry, don't worry. Now, please, you need to--"

"Tell me." It was not a plea. It was an order. "*Who else did they kill?*"

Remus took a deep breath. He let it out slowly.

"Alastor Moody, and Mundungus Fletcher." He kept his voice low, as if speaking too loudly would be physically painful for him. "The Killing Curse...we didn't find them until it was all over. Arabella's badly hurt--it's been touch and go for the last few days. And there were two others...I don't think you'd know their names, but they're Ministry folk." He sighed. "That's all I know."

Harry glared at him, and ground out through fiercely gritted teeth:

"*Tell me.*"

Remus closed his eyes, and lowered his voice even further. "We lost one of the Slytherin sixth-years last night. There are one or two others at St Mungo's that may not last the night. Lee Jordan took a nasty blow to the head--he's at St Mungo's now, too. Several of the older students were injured as well, but none of the--"

He glanced at Harry, and broke off in mid-sentence when he saw that the young man's face had turned a sickening greenish-grey. Harry was shaking violently, his thin frame wracked with spasms as angry, helpless tears poured down his face.

"Harry--" He reached for his best friend's son, but Harry jerked away, feebly slapping at Remus's hand.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!"

"Harry, listen...."

"They're DEAD!" His shrill scream rattled the paintings on the walls, and the nurse looked up from her patient in alarm. "They're dead, they're dead, they're *all* dead, just like my parents, just like Ron's mum, just like Cedric and Dennis and Draco, because of me, because I couldn't--"

"You arrogant little ass."

The sharp, incisive voice cut through the air of the sickroom like the crack of a whip. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, ringing in the stillness.

Remus leapt up with a low growl, wand poised for defence.

Too weak to move, Harry could only shrink back into the bedclothes as the figure of Will Stanton shimmered into existence right at the foot of his bed.

He thought for certain that his heart would stop beating. He had seen the Old One angry before, and had even been subjected to that anger, but this was far worse. Cold, impersonal rage, all the more terrible for the fact that it was barely held in check, radiated from the older man in icy waves.

"Died because of me?" The mockery was deliberate, calculated. "I have never heard such idiocy in my life."

"You *dare* to--" Remus snarled, raising his wand, but Will cut him off with a sharp word and a strange twist of his hand. The former Defence Against the Dark Arts professor fell back onto Harry's bed, eyes glazed over, wand hanging limp in his hand.

Harry, cowering beneath the blankets, stared in unblinking terror as the Old One's hand shot out and pointed a menacing finger at him, right between his eyes.

"Get it out of your swollen head that the people lying dead at this moment gave up their lives 'because of you' or 'for you', or whatever other nonsense you have thought up." Will's voice was soft and ominous,

seething with anger. "They would all have fought Voldemort and his minions, whether you had been there or not. They, and perhaps more, would likely have suffered with or without the gracious honour of your presence."

He lowered his hand, very slowly. The awful presence of wrath in the sickroom lessened slightly, only to be replaced by a frigid indifference.

"You trivialise their deaths with your snivelling," he said coldly. "You may be the Boy Who Lived, Mr. Potter, but you're still a boy. Now that all this is over, you can start by remembering that."

Turning to Remus, he extended his right arm with his fingers spread out and pointing, and said a single word.

The frozen man blinked, and shook his head like a man coming out of a daze. He regained his grip on the wand in his hand, and stared at Will with the stark desperation of an animal caught in a trap.

Scornfully, Will returned his stare.

"And you," he said to the other man. "Do not indulge him in his self-pity. He has been indulged for far too long, and this is what has come of it."

He pulled his cloak closer about him.

"Good day, Mr. Potter," he said, without turning to look at Harry.

And he vanished.

The white-robed nurse in the painting glared indignantly at Remus and Harry, deeply shocked that they would disturb the tranquillity of the sickroom. But before she could return to caring for her patient, there was a rapid pounding on the door.

"Professor Lupin?" Hermione's worried voice called out, muffled by the thick wood. "Professor? Is everything all right?"

Remus, still too dazed to stand, pointed his wand at the door and muttered quietly.

The door swung open, and Hermione half-stumbled, half-fell into the room. Colin and Ginny, who had been with her outside in the corridor, both lost their balance and landed on top of her. The three of them hit the floor with a heavy thud.

Hermione squirmed, attempting to extricate herself from the jumble of arms and legs. "Ow, Ginny, my hair...Colin, will you get OFF...oh, *Harry!*"

She scrambled to her feet and ran over to the bed, leaving the two fourth-years to untangle themselves on their own.

"Are you all right?" She grabbed Harry's unbandaged hand, holding it in both of her own. "I was just about to knock, and thought I heard--"

"Hermione," Remus chided in an unsteady voice, "we should let Harry rest. The three of you"--he glanced back at Colin and Ginny in the doorway--"can come back tomorrow."

"No!" Harry blurted out, clinging to Hermione's hands. "Wait, please...I don't...."

He saw Colin and Ginny hurry toward him, skidding to a stop at the foot of his bed. With Remus to his right and Hermione to his left, and all four of them staring at him, he felt not a little like a fish in a bowl. For all that he hated that feeling, he couldn't bear the thought of them going away and leaving him in an empty room--with nothing but memories and shadows for company--until the next morning.

"I...I'll have to know everything sooner or later." he said softly, staring down at his bandaged hand. "It might as well be now."

Stay with me, please. I don't want to be alone. Don't leave me alone...not now...not tonight.

Remus started to shake his head, but with Hermione, Colin, and Ginny's pleading eyes fixed on him, his resistance soon crumbled.

"Pull up some chairs," he said, reluctant but resigned to the inevitable. "Have a seat."

There were a number of chairs and stools at the far end of the room, kept for visitors to use. Hermione and Colin and Ginny wasted no time in dragging a motley collection of chairs over to Harry's bed. At first they all tried to squeeze round the same side of the bed, but when they discovered that there wasn't enough room for all of them Colin moved to the other side, next to Remus.

"Where's Sirius?" Harry asked when they had all settled down. "And Ron and Neville?"

"Your godfather's asleep, and he's going to stay that way," Remus declared firmly. "I put him in one of the smaller rooms. It's the first time he's slept since you were brought in here, and he can be as furious as he likes when he wakes up, but I don't care." A steely glint had come into his eyes, banishing the dazedness and hesitation of a few moments before.

"Ron's with Dad," Ginny said. "They've been helping to look after Fred and George."

Harry's distress must have shown on his face, because she quickly added, "But they're all right, don't worry."

Colin, ever helpful, piped up. "They're fine, really they are. They just got a bit...." He gnawed on his lip, trying to think of the right word to use. "A bit roughed up. That's all."

"What happened to them?" Harry asked.

Hermione's brow furrowed as her worried frown deepened into a scowl. "Look, they're probably charming the bedpans to sing the Hogwarts school song in perfect four-part harmony right now. THEY'LL be all right."

Ginny couldn't contain a giggle at the thought, but she stifled her laughter and ducked her head guiltily.

"And last I saw Neville," Remus said, "he was helping some of the students move back to their dorms. We still have a few people in the infirmary here, but everyone else has either been released or was taken to St Mungo's."

"But what about Dumbledore? And McGonagall?" The reassurances hadn't helped. There were still so many questions, so many people to consider. "And Snape, and Hagrid, and...."

"Easy, easy now." Remus laid a hand on his shoulder, easing him back down into bed. "They're all safe, and there will be plenty of time to talk about them later." He turned to Hermione, and asked, "How are you feeling, now?"

"Much better, thank you, Professor," she said eagerly. "Much better than yesterday."

"Hermione and the others only woke up on Monday morning," Remus explained to Harry. "They were unconscious as well. All of you were, when you were first brought in."

"Brought in?" Harry said.

"From the Quidditch pitch," Remus said. "We put all six of you in here, and you were the last to wake. But you're awake now, and I was about to spread the good news when your visitors burst in." He gave the children a rather stern look.

Hermione tossed her head. "I *thought* I heard someone else's voice," she said stoutly. "I thought it sounded like Will."

"Will--you mean Dr. Stanton?" Remus's eyebrows almost disappeared into his hairline. "Whatever makes you think that? There's been no one else in here but myself this evening, until the three of you came along."

"But Remus--" Harry began.

The professor looked at him questioningly. "Yes?"

Harry felt a sudden chill. Either Remus was frighteningly adept at lying--*or he didn't remember a thing.*

"N...nothing," he said, plucking at the worn satin edging on the blanket. "Never mind."

Remus frowned slightly, but seemed to let it pass. He turned back to the others. "Would you mind finding Ron and Neville, Hermione? I think they ought to know that Harry's woken up."

Hermione held Harry's hand more tightly. "But Professor--"

"And you can take Ginny and Colin with you. I'll be along in a moment."

"Yes, Professor." There was no prudent way for her to refuse a teacher's direct request, but the tone of her voice made it plain that he knew she wasn't at all happy to oblige. Sighing, she squeezed Harry's hand, and smiled at him as she stood up.

"I...I'm glad you're all right, Harry," she said.

He smiled back. "You too, Hermione."

Colin got to his feet. "Feel better, Harry."

"I will."

Ginny stood as well, but did not look at him. Her eyes were downcast.

Harry tried to catch her eye. "Sorry, Ginny," he said lightly, trying to make a joke. "I didn't mean to do anything brave."

Her head snapped up, and to his surprise he saw that her eyes were filled with tears. Her mouth worked, but whatever she wanted to say wouldn't come out.

"Go on, all of you," Remus said, ushering them away from the bed. He shooed them outside and closed the door firmly behind them, and made his way over to the long table where Madam Pomfrey had kept the medicines she dispensed most often. He selected a bulbous bottle half-filled with clear liquid and splashed some into a clean glass, then brought it back to the bed and handed it to Harry.

Suspicious, Harry sniffed at the liquid. It had no smell--or none that he could detect. "What's this?"

"A glass of water." Remus couldn't hide a smile. "No potions, no charms, no Muggle medicine. Now drink."

Gingerly, Harry sipped the liquid. It was tepid, but it tasted like water and nothing but water. He drained the glass.

Remus took the empty glass from him and set it aside. "And now," he proclaimed roundly, "you need sleep. I know Madam Pomfrey would never forgive me if I disrespected her memory and let you stay up all night."

"Sleep?" Harry was flabbergasted. "But I just woke up!"

"And now you're going to sleep again," Remus said, reminding Harry of Madam Pomfrey at her most irritatingly cheerful.

"I'm not going to sleep," he said stubbornly.

Remus gave him an appraising stare. "Then you won't mind if I read to you?"

"*Read to me?*"

"Seeing as how you're not going to sleep anytime soon...unless you'd rather I wouldn't."

"No, no." If Remus had it in his head to treat him like a five-year-old, there was little sense in acting any other way. "You can read to me, if you want."

"Mm-hm." The professor opened the drawer of the bedside table and drew out a slim leather-bound book. He flipped through the pages. "Let's see...ah, here we are. Sirius stopped at Chapter Seven--I do wish he wouldn't bend the corners like that--but since you're actually awake and listening now, I think that I'll start from the beginning."

Harry stared at the book. He knew that cover: scarred red leather worn from years of rough handling, cracking spine, faded and barely legible gold lettering on the cover....

"That's..." he started to say. "That isn't--"

Remus calmly turned the pages until he was back at the beginning of the book.

"*Chapter One: The Evolution of the Flying Broomstick.*" He paused long enough to grin at Harry, then continued. "*No spell yet devised enables wizards to fly unaided in human form. Those few Animagi*

who transform into winged creatures may enjoy flight, but they are a rarity...."

Harry had read the opening paragraph of *Quidditch Through the Ages* at least hundred times. He could recite entire stretches of the book by heart. But there was something different about having it read *to* him, hearing the familiar words spoken aloud in Remus's easy, gentle voice.

"...our ancestors were not content with hovering five feet from the ground. They wanted more...."

He was being read to. It was an odd feeling, but a good one. It was like...it felt like....

His eyes had closed by the time Remus reached the middle of the second paragraph.

He was asleep before Remus turned the page.

* * *

A tinny clatter and a muffled curse woke him from the jumbled depths of a cloudy dream. He started awake, and his eyes flew open, blinking against the light streaming through the windows.

A blurry figure was standing beside his bed, fumbling with a blob of silver. Squinting, Harry was able to tell that the blob was a tray covered with a dome, and that the blurry figure had the unmistakable facial features of Sirius Black.

Sirius finally managed to set the tray down without spilling it, and glanced in Harry's direction. He grunted apologetically when he noticed that Harry had awoken and was staring myopically at him.

"Sorry," he murmured. "Lost my grip."

"s all right." Harry tried to sit up in bed, but the weakened muscles in his arms refused to support him. He wriggled futilely for a moment, twisting against the sheets, before giving up with an aggrieved cough.

"Let me," Sirius said quietly. He lifted the cover off the tray, then slipped an arm behind Harry shoulders and helped him sit up in bed.

"Fancy something to eat?" he said as he handed Harry's glasses to him.

Harry took them, and looked up at Sirius.

The skin around his godfather's right eye was swollen, ringed with colourful bruising that ranged from sickly yellows and greens to a circle of purple close around the eye. There were several scratches on his face; none too deep, but all were red and angry-looking. In

addition to the cuts and the black eye, the upper part of his chin was scabbed over, encrusted with dried blood from a split lip.

"It's nothing," he said, seeing Harry's concerned expression. "And I gave back better than I got, at any rate."

Harry's gaze drifted from Sirius's face to the tray he was holding. On it was a shallow, steaming bowl of what looked like greasy brown water, and a toast rack with several slices of plain toast. No butter, no marmalade, no jam.

He stared at the tray, then back at Sirius. "What's this?"

"Breakfast." Sirius slid the tray onto Harry's lap, and draped a napkin across his godson's chest with a waiter's grandiose flourish. "Eat up."

Harry wrinkled his nose. "*This* is breakfast?"

"Eat up," Sirius said again, his tone brooking no argument. He sat down in the chair that Remus had used the night before, and settled in to watch Harry eat.

Breakfast, as it was, consisted of hot beef tea and cold dry toast. Harry choked on the first spoonful, spluttering at the unexpected taste and dribbling a little of the broth out of the corner of his mouth. Sirius swooped in to dab at the drips with the edge of the napkin, but Harry swatted his hand away with the spoon.

"Stop that," he snapped. "I'm not an invalid."

Sirius looked round, taking in the rows of white-sheeted beds, the scrubbed stone floor, the tables and shelves with their phials of potions, the locked poison cupboard. He raised a mocking eyebrow at his godson.

Harry grumbled, and resumed his meal in silence.

Sirius watched him like a hawk as he scraped the bowl clean and ate every crumb of the toast. Harry, for his part, was thankful when the toast rack was empty and the last bit of broth was gone. Eating with his left hand was an awkward task, and in order to keep from spilling the broth everywhere he had to go very slowly. Raising and lowering his arm was tiring. But he had eaten, and his stomach was full, and he wanted to go back to sleep.

Sirius whisked the napkin away and replaced the cover on the tray. "Do you want anything else?"

"No, thanks," Harry mumbled.

His godfather nodded and left the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

Harry slid down in bed, burrowing under the bedclothes, and stared at the wall. The nurse in the painting had just finished giving her grateful patient a sponge bath. Drowsily, he wondered if Remus or Sirius would be in to give him a sponge bath. He probably needed it.

He was asleep within minutes, and it seemed as if next to no time had passed before he felt a hand gently shaking him.

It was Remus, and he had a tray balanced on one hand. "Time for lunch, Harry. Can you sit up?"

This time, Harry was determined to do it on his own. Wedging his elbows under his pillow, he used his legs and feet to inch himself backward, toward the headboard. Remus stood by and watched the process, but did not move to help.

It took longer than he thought it would, and his stomach and arm muscles were screaming from the exertion by the time he was done, but finally he was able to work himself into an upright position. He beamed at Remus, grinning wearily.

"Eat up," Remus said, smiling as he set the tray in Harry's lap.

Lunch, it seemed, was a heartfelt apology for breakfast. The bowl in the centre of the tray held a hearty stew, brimming with chunks of meat and vegetable. Beside the bowl was a basket of small loaves of fresh, crusty bread, and beside that was a jug of milk and a plate covered with a napkin. Remus lifted the napkin, revealing three gooey jam tarts.

Harry's eyes could barely take in the sight of so much food. With a happy grunt, he grabbed his spoon.

He ate ravenously, shovelling the food into his mouth and washing all of it down with great gulps of milk. It was the best meal he had eaten in his life.

"Slow down, slow down," Remus scolded, eyeing Harry as the food disappeared from the plates with alarming speed. "You'll be sick if you keep that up."

When everything that could be eaten had been eaten, and Harry was looking longingly at the empty plates, Remus took the tray and set it on the floor.

"Where are the others?" Harry asked, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his pyjamas.

Remus wrinkled his nose, and handed him another napkin. "Hermione, last I saw, was writing to her parents. And I think Colin's having a nap. Ron and Ginny are probably with their brothers right now--the twins have been asking after you."

"I wish I could go see them," Harry said wistfully.

Remus's face took on a thoughtful expression. "Hagrid's in the same room with them. I don't think he'll be much for talking right now, but...would you feel up to going for a little walk, Harry?"

"*Would I!*" In a flash, he had swung his legs out from beneath the sheets. But the moment his bare feet touched the floor, a jolt of cold prickled up his legs, and his head swum with sudden dizziness. "Nggh...."

Remus caught him before he could topple out of bed. "Perhaps I should have put that differently," he said. "You're not *walking* anywhere, not yet."

Once he was sure that Harry had regained his balance, Remus ducked behind one of the privacy screens that had been drawn around the now-empty beds at the far end of the ward. He emerged moments later, pushing a wheeled chair that looked nothing like the smart Muggle wheelchairs Harry had seen. It was more like a leather armchair attached to a child's wagon, with two large wheels in back and a single smaller wheel in front that could be steered with a long handle.

"Hop in," Remus said.

He fetched a dressing gown from the foot of the bed, and helped Harry into the chair. He tucked a blanket over Harry's knees, and they set off.

They didn't have far to go. The Hogwarts hospital wing had several wards: two large ones that held two rows of thirty beds each, and four smaller, more private rooms with only two beds each. Harry had been the last remaining occupant of one of the large wards; the other was across the corridor. The door opened soundlessly on well-oiled hinges, and Remus wheeled Harry inside.

Fred and George were in the two beds closest to the door. They were sitting up in bed, well-wrapped in red flannel dressing gowns and resting on a sea of pillows. George's left leg and Fred's right leg were encased in white plaster casts and propped up on more mounds of pillows.

The twins had chosen to pass the time by flicking Exploding Snap cards through the air and into a bedpan placed a few feet away.

Cards were scattered all across the floor; only a handful had actually hit the target.

Their faces lit up when they saw who had come to visit. They waved their arms wildly and opened and shut their mouths, but all without making a sound. Harry couldn't understand what they were doing, but as Remus pushed his chair down the ward he soon saw the reason for their silent greeting.

Hagrid was lying on a makeshift bed at the far end of the ward. Four normal-sized beds had been charmed together for him, but his feet still stuck out over the edge. The top sheet was drawn up to his chin, and his head was wrapped in wet towels so that only his nose and part of his mouth were visible.

Remus wheeled Harry's chair close to the bed.

"He can hear you," he said as he unwrapped a few of the towels from around Hagrid's head, uncovering ears and eyes. "He may not be able to respond, but you can still talk to him and let him know you're here."

Harry was only half paying attention; he had been fighting to control his shock on seeing Hagrid's face fully for the first time. The cold, wet towels had covered a massive, swollen haematoma in the middle of Hagrid's forehead, the result of a blow that in all likelihood would have crushed a normal man's skull. The half-giant's face was red and puffy, suffused with blood. His eyes were swollen shut, but they opened a crack when Remus lifted the towel, and with an uncanny awareness Hagrid looked right at Harry.

"Hello, Hagrid," Harry said, smiling what he hoped was a cheerful, healthy smile.

The bedsprings creaked and groaned as Hagrid stirred.

"Harry...." he breathed, his voice rusty from lack of use.

"Yes." Harry reached out, pushing a few strands of thick, coarse beard out of the way of Hagrid's mouth. "It's just Harry."

Hagrid breathed out again, a relieved sigh. "Yer...a'right, Harry?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

"Mm," Hagrid grunted. "'Twas worryin' me a bit. But yer a'right."

Harry's smile wobbled; he pressed his lips together tightly. "I'm glad you're safe. I was worried about you, too."

"No need for yeh t'worry 'bout me." Something like concern flitted across Hagrid's swollen face. "Is Fang a'right?"

Harry was about to reply that he didn't know, but a voice spoke over his shoulder:

"Charlie's looking after him for now. You remember my brother, don't you, Hagrid?"

Harry twisted round. "Ron!"

Ron grinned down at him. "Hey, Harry." He turned back to Hagrid and said brightly, "And Charlie says you've got to get well soon, Hagrid, because he's tired of having to feed Fang a hundred times a day. He says that dog eats more than five of his dragons."

"Heh heh heh." Hagrid wheezed with laughter. "Good lad, your brother. Always was. Fang liked him."

The laughter seemed to have tired him out, because his voice grew faint, and his eyelids drooped. "Good lad...good lad..."

Remus replaced the towels over Hagrid's forehead, smoothing them down with his hand.

"Where was he?" Harry asked as Remus bent over the sleeping half-giant. "I mean, where did you find him? Was he really in the Forbidden Forest?"

Remus pressed a finger to his lips, and wheeled Harry away from the bed before he answered.

"Tied to a tree and Stunned unconscious," he said grimly. "They had posted a guard, but...well, it doesn't matter. We cut the ropes and brought him here. It took three men to levitate him up the stairs."

"Will he be okay?"

"The worst is over. It'll take some time before he's back on his feet, but he'll be better and better each day." Remus patted him on the shoulder, and turned to Ron. "Here to see your brothers again?"

"Actually, I came to see Harry," Ron replied. "Ginny told us he'd woken up."

"Oi, Ron!" George called out in a loud stage whisper. "Bring our rugged hero over here so we can thank him properly!"

Remus stepped aside to let Ron take control of the wheelchair. Ron kicked the bedpan out of the way and pushed Harry between the beds.

"Well!" Fred exclaimed, fanning himself with a get-well card as he gave Harry a once-over. "Don't you look a treat."

"We're just glad to see you're alive and kicking, mate," George said. "We'd bought a gift for you and everything--it would have been a shame to waste it."

He pointed to the bed table on his left. Displayed in a position of prominence was a new toilet-seat, white porcelain festooned with red and gold ribbons and a gigantic red bow.

Harry plastered a smile on his face. "Thanks. I hope Sirius will let me keep it."

Fred and George's eyes widened at the mention of Sirius's name.

"Sirius Black...is he really your godfather?" George said in hushed tones. "I mean, Dad told us the whole story, but still...."

"You have to admit, Harry," Fred said, "it's a bit much to swallow. All we heard about year before last was how he was trying to sneak in and slit your throat, when all along it was really--"

"*Fred*," Ron said warningly.

"Sorry."

"Yes, he's really my godfather," Harry told them. "He and Remus-- Professor Lupin--were my dad's best friends at school, and now they're my guardians."

Fred shook his head. "Wicked."

Ron looked suddenly thoughtful. "Hey, Harry? Exactly what did you say to Ginny last night?"

"What d'you mean?" Harry said.

"Well, she and Hermione and Colin came back from the hospital wing last night, and a bunch of us were sitting around downstairs. So Dean asked how you were, and all she said was 'Harry's awake' before she started bawling her head off."

George puckered his lips and batted his eyelashes. "Ooh, ooh...she was so *relieved* to have her precious Harry safe."

Ron rolled his eyes. "So Hermione tries to calm her down, and before you know it *she's* crying all over the place, too. And then Angelina and Katie--"

("--Alicia's at St Mungo's," Fred interrupted unnecessarily. "Got hit with a Jaw-Breaker Hex.")

--Angelina and Katie started getting all weepy, and that's why I happened to be wondering just WHAT you might have said to my sister last night."

"I didn't say *anything* to her," Harry protested. "I just told her that I didn't mean to--" His words were drowned out by the wet, slobbery kissing noises that Fred and George were making at him. "Stop that!"

"Oh, how touching! The fair maiden weeps to see her own true love safe!" George declaimed, pressing his hand to his heart. Fred flopped over, pretending to swoon.

"Come on," Ron said disgustedly, pulling the chair backwards. "Let's go someplace a little less moronic."

He pushed the chair away from the twins, who had started to act out their version of Harry and Ginny's touching reunion in alternately high-pitched and deep growling voices ("Oh, Harry! My heart doth leap within my virgin breast to see thee safe and sound!" "Lo, my dearest darling Ginny, let us away to yon empty cupboard near yon Charms classroom so that we may profess our undying love and have a right good snog!"), and out into the corridor.

"Harry, there's something I've got to tell you," he said as soon as the door was shut.

"Me, too, Ron--"

"No, wait, let me go first." Ron took a deep breath. "I was talking with the twins the other day, and I mentioned something--I don't even know what I said now, and this is going to sound weird, but...I don't think they remember all of it."

At times, Harry had to remind himself to be patient with Ron. This was one of those times. "All of what?"

"The battle. They don't remember Will being there at all."

"What?" All thoughts of patience flew out the window. "Are you sure?"

Ron nodded his head. "I asked Dad about it before he left last night. The thing is, *he* remembers that Will was there, and he said--"

Without warning, the door opened, and Remus poked his head out into the corridor.

"There you two are," he said when he saw Harry and Ron. "I was wondering where you'd gone to."

"Oh, I was just leaving," Ron said loudly. "I promised Seamus I'd help him do...do something. Bye, Harry! Bye, Professor!"

He mumbled a hasty "Tell you later," to Harry as he passed by, hurrying down the corridor and out of sight.

Remus watched him go, then took the handles of Harry's chair.

"You wouldn't mind a short detour, would you?" he said. "Only I've one more thing left to do." He wheeled the chair over to the door to one of the private rooms. "It's a little dark in here, but we won't be staying long."

The room was indeed dark, and the sickroom smell of sterile dressings and carbolic acid was cloyingly strong. Heavy draperies had been drawn over the windows, blocking all natural light. The only illumination in the room came from a dark lantern that hung on a hook near the door. One of the two beds was occupied; Harry could see a shape in it, a person reclining on a pillow.

Remus took the lantern off its hook and opened the metal flaps, raising the light level enough for Harry to get a better look at the man in the bed.

His gut twisted when he saw that the man in the bed was Professor Snape.

"Good afternoon, Severus," Remus said genially.

Snape said nothing. His eyes were closed. There was a tray beside his bed, laid out with the same hearty lunch Harry had enjoyed--but none of the food had been eaten.

"I've brought you a visitor. I hope you don't mind." Remus set the drew up a chair. "I know you said you weren't hungry, but are you sure that you don't want something else?"

Snape did not move. He made no reply, or gave any indication that he was aware of their presence.

Harry thought that he ought to say something. "Hello, Professor Snape."

Snape's reply was immediate, but the delivery lacked its customary sharpness:

"What is he doing here?"

"He's been to the other ward to see the Weasley twins and Hagrid. I just thought I'd stop by on the way back and...." Remus seemed to realise that Snape's question hadn't demanded an answer, and he stopped. "I have to change the bandages, Severus. Could you please sit up?"

Without a word, Snape pushed himself a little more upright.

Harry's eyes had finally become used to the weak lamplight, and he was sitting close enough to notice that Snape's hands were formless white shapes of gauze resting on the bedclothes.

Remus took one of Snape's hands and, painstakingly, began to unwind the long white strips.

Harry watched the procedure: first with an odd curiosity, then with alarm, and finally with nauseated horror as the last of the bandages fell away.

Severus Snape's hands were a wreck. The long, slender fingers that had once brewed the most complex of potions were horribly blistered, disfigured beyond all recognition. A thick, yellowish, foul-smelling substance was oozing from countless open sores. Remus was taking the utmost care as he removed the layers of dressings, but large pieces of skin sloughed off and peeled away even at his cautious touch. Glimpses of stringy tendon could be seen where the skin had been entirely destroyed, and in places the stark whiteness of bone gleamed through. Tough scar tissue had formed where the sores had granulated and started to heal, crisscrossing the backs of his hands with a network of raised, puffy marks. Not an inch of his skin had escaped damage.

"What...what *happened*?" he heard himself say.

"A parting gift from Lucius Malfoy," Snape said in a voice like desert dust. "I never thought that the great champion of pure-blooded wizardry would resort to such a crude, *Muggle* device as vitriol."

Vitriol. Harry was appalled. "He threw it at you?"

"He threw it at me." Slowly, very slowly, Snape opened his eyes. "And whilst my hands were otherwise occupied, he took advantage of the opportunity to cast the Caecus Curse," Snape said.

Harry couldn't stop himself from flinching, but what he saw was not what he had expected to see. He had expected to see a ravaged ruin staring accusingly at him, but Snape's eyes looked fine. There was nothing wrong with them, no signs of injuries or damage. But the longer he looked, the more he felt that something wasn't right.

It might have been the low light in the room, but Snape's gaze seemed to lack its usual fire. The glare that had the ability to reduce the average first-year to floods of tears at twenty paces and turn Neville Longbottom into a mass of quivering jelly was noticeably absent. In fact, Snape's eyes looked blank. Vacant. Empty.

Blind.

"*Caecus*," Snape declared with exaggerated slowness, as if spelling out a word for a slow-witted child. "From the Latin, meaning 'not seeing' or 'sightless.'"

"Severus, Albus cast the counter-curse as soon as we found you," Remus sounded as if his patience had been worn to bare threads by countless repetition. "It will take a few weeks, a month at the longest, for your sight to return, but it *will* return." He lifted Snape's hands, checking to see that the new dressings he had applied were securely in place, and gathered the strips of used gauze. "The blindness isn't permanent."

A sneer curled Snape's upper lip, but the blankness of his eyes made it look grotesque, not intimidating.

His eyelids snapped shut, and he sank back into the pillow and turned his face away from the light.

Deeply shaken, Harry sat like a stone in the chair, waiting for Remus to finish tidying the room and wheel him outside, into the daylight and away from the man who had been his Potions professor.

* * *

He had a difficult time falling asleep that night, and he woke early the next morning to the sound of a conversation taking place just outside the door that led to the corridor.

The first voice he recognised was Remus's, though the professor was speaking in an oddly high-pitched whisper that was not nearly as soft as he seemed to think it was.

"Look," Remus was saying, "I know it's important, but it's not the best time for--"

"She's gone, Moony." That was Sirius, his voice rough and gravelly as if he hadn't slept all night. "And I'm bound to give this to him."

"But you can't do it now." The urgent whisper carried through the door. "Let him sleep--let him rest, he shouldn't have to face this just yet--"

"Remus...."

--let him have *breakfast*, for pity's sake!"

"And then what?" Sirius forgot to keep his voice down. "Tell him after breakfast, after lunch, after dinner? Fill him up with food and then take him down the hall to see her sodding cor--"

"Quiet! He'll hear you!"

Sirius snapped, "Let him hear! He'll have to hear it sooner or later, and we're not doing him any favours by putting it off!"

Harry willed himself to lie still when he heard the doorknob rattle. *You're asleep*, he told himself. *You're asleep, you don't hear anything. You're asleep. You're asleep.* He repeated the words like a mantra as the door was flung open, and the click of rapid footsteps--Sirius, with Remus at his heels--approached his bed.

"Harry?" Sirius was shaking him, none too gently. "Harry, wake up."

"Wh...wha?" *You were asleep. It's early...they've woken you up.* He groaned loudly and rolled over, groping for his glasses. He blinked his eyes with pretended sleepiness, and held up a hand to shield his eyes from a non-existent bright light. "Sirius? What is it?"

"Harry, I..." The springs creaked as Sirius sat down on the edge of the bed. "There's something I have to tell you."

He pressed something into Harry's hand. Harry felt the stiff crackle of paper, the sealed flap of an envelope.

Sirius didn't wait for him to ask what it was. "It's from Arabella. From Mrs. Figg. She...wants you to read it."

Harry didn't quite like the hitch he had heard in Sirius's voice, but he opened the flap and pulled out a folded sheet of parchment covered in a precise script.

"I had to use an Antigrafo Spell," Sirius said, by way of explanation. "She couldn't hold a quill well enough to write it out on her own."

Dear Harry [the parchment read],

*So they tell me that you've woken up, and
all I've got to say is that it took you
bloody long enough. Lazy little brat,
making others wait on you.*

I'm having your godfather take this down for me for two good reasons: one, because he's standing right here gawping at me (and since I'm in my nightie it's bloody indecent of him), and two, because I know he'll bring this straight to you like a sensible mutt. The only reason I'm writing this in the first place is because I don't want you tearing all your hair out over what's become of me. I'd rather have it all out now, in my own words.

Before I forget, in the bottom drawer of my old desk in the Defence classroom there should be a brass box. It's protected with a Lock-Blocking Hex (and I taught you the countercurse for that one, so you'd better damn well remember it), and once you've dealt with that you'll find a key inside. That key, and only that key, will open Vault 352 at Gringotts. My vault.

It's not been properly checked in ages, but the Ministry should have been putting my wages in there every month for the last fifteen years. Albus probably has stacks of papers for you to look at and for your guardians to sign off on, but it's all just a bunch of legal folderol to let you know that everything in there is yours, and that when you turn twenty-one you can do whatever you like with it. It's yours, Harry--every last Knut.

Next time you see Will Stanton (because you WILL see him again, you know--he's not through with you yet) you tell him that Arabella Figg didn't give in without a fight, and you tell him I said so. You tell him that, you hear me? Not that I care what he thinks of me, you understand. It's the principle of the thing.

Goodbye, brat. I'll say hello to your mum and dad when I see them, and I'll be sure to tell them they should be damned proud to have had a son like you. Of course, they know that already, but it never hurts to hear it from someone older and wiser.

The signature was an illegible smear of ink.

Harry let the letter fall onto the blanket. He didn't know whether to laugh out loud or start sobbing his eyes out. He felt like he could do both at once.

"After she signed it, she told me that she was going to close her eyes and rest for a little while." Sirius laid a hand on his arm.

"She went peacefully, Harry. There was no pain."

"When...when she showed me the papers that said I could go and live with you, I told her..." His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat angrily. "I told her she was like a fairy godmother." He laughed tearfully, helplessly. "And this proves it."

Sirius pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. Remus bowed his head.

They sat in silence for a time before Harry said, "You never told me what happened, Remus."

Remus looked up, startled out of private contemplation. "What?"

"On the Quidditch pitch. You never told me what happened. You never told me what happened to you and Sirius, and you said you'd tell me later." He fixed both of the adults with a compelling stare. "What happened?"

Sirius and Remus glanced at each other.

"Do you want to tell it?" Remus asked. "You remember more than I do."

Sirius shrugged, and turned to Harry. "Well, you know most of it. The real fighting didn't start until after all six--*seven*--of you vanished."

"And Lord Voldemort vanished, too," Remus added. "At the same time."

Sirius gave him a look as if to ask, 'Who's telling the story here?'. "It was like blinking, and you were gone."

"Which came as a great surprise to the Death Eaters."

Sirius rounded on his old friend. "Look, do you want to tell this?" he growled. "Cause you can go right ahead."

"One more thing, and then I'm finished."

Sirius folded his arms across his chest, and waited.

"I don't really know what happened after that," Remus said. "The Death Eaters came at us all at once, and I know that I was able to

fire off precisely two spells before someone blindsided me--and, well, that was the end of my glorious turn on the battlefield."

"It wasn't funny," Sirius snapped.

"I know it wasn't," Remus replied. "Go on--you were there for the rest of it."

"Are you done?"

Remus glanced up at the ceiling with a most innocent expression. "I am now."

Sirius snorted, and turned back to Harry.

"Well," he said. "It was a madhouse. Mud everywhere, and you couldn't hear a thing for the shouting. You couldn't even hear yourself cast a spell. And add a lot of screaming kids...it was like being in Hell. I thought that Azkaban had given me a good idea of what Hell should sound like--that was nothing compared to this.

"So everyone was fighting. It didn't matter who you were hexing, only that you fired your spell off before he did and you got out of the way of the one coming at you from the other direction.

"Minerva was brilliant, though. The only one of us who kept her head through all of it. She got all the teachers together--anyone who hadn't been hexed by that time, at least--and had them shielding the students while the rest of us were blundering about, trying to do everything at once and generally succeeding in making complete asses of ourselves. It was chaos for I-don't-know-how-long, and--"

"And what?" Harry said anxiously. "What happened?"

Sirius passed a hand across his forehead.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "All I saw was this *flash*, so bright it burnt your eyes and made you see stars dancing in your head, and I thought that someone had finally gotten me. I must've passed out. When I came to, everyone was on the ground. Death Eaters, students, *everyone*. Like we'd all been knocked flat.

"It didn't look like anyone would be coming after me with a wand anytime soon, so I got to my feet. It took a while. I couldn't see very well out of my right eye, and there was blood dripping down my face and running into my left one, so I was staggering around like a drunken Hippogriff, half-blind, until I tripped over Remus here."

"That woke me up, I can tell you," Remus said with a faint smile. "There's nothing like a good kick in the ribs to get you moving."

Sirius ignored him. "So I was trying to help him stand up without falling over myself, and that was when I saw a light in the middle of the pitch."

His eyes went bright, remembering. "It was more like a glow, really. Like a Lumos spell, but not as bright, and a little larger. It was small at first, but then it started growing, spreading out into a circle. And then it stopped growing all of a sudden, but the light grew brighter, brighter, and...."

He trailed off, and his face darkened suddenly. "No. I'm not doing this right. No matter how I say it, I'll sound completely mental."

"It's all right so far," Harry said helpfully. "You don't sound mental to me."

His godfather gave him a black look. "Thanks ever so much."

"I mean it!" he persisted. Sirius couldn't stop now. "So the light in the middle of the pitch was brighter, and then what?"

Remus leapt out of his chair. "Just a moment," he said, and hurried from the room, leaving the door wide open.

Sirius scratched his head. "What was that all about?"

Harry shook his head. He had no idea.

It seemed like hours before Remus returned, though it was probably closer to five minutes. He was staggering slightly under the weight of a wide but shallow basin made of smooth stone. Light shone from the basin onto his face, streaking his greying hair with even more strands of silver.

"Maybe it would help if you used this," he said, setting the basin on Harry's bedside table.

"A *Pensieve*?" Harry said.

Sirius stared at the basin as if it would bite him. "Where did you--"

Remus waved a dismissive hand. "Albus gave it to me, weeks ago. He bought a new one for himself, and--look, that isn't important now. Use this, Sirius. Let Harry see it for himself."

All the colour drained out of Sirius's face. "No. I can't do that."

"Please, Sirius," Harry begged.

"It only has a few memories of mine in it," Remus said, holding out the basin. "They're quite mundane in comparison--they shouldn't interfere with yours at all."

Sirius gave him a doubtful look, but with both his best friend's and his godson's eyes upon him he took out his wand. Pressing the tip to his temple, he screwed up his face in concentration, and slowly pulled the wand away from his head. A long, silver strand, like one of Dumbledore's grey hairs, came away with it. Remus lifted the basin, and Sirius dropped the thread into the basin.

Remus set the Pensieve on Harry's lap. The shining silvery liquid within swelled and ebbed. Coiling, cloudy patterns like oil on water swirled lazily. Sirius prodded the liquid with the tip of his wand, and instantly an image began to ripple into view, blurs of brown and black on a wet, grassy green.

"There it is," Harry murmured. Cautiously, he touched the glistening liquid with a fingertip.

He knew what it would feel like, and he had braced himself for the shock, but nevertheless the rocking jolt threw him off-balance as he hurtled headfirst into the basin, into Sirius's memory. He landed hard, on solid ground.

Sirius had not been exaggerating when he had said that everyone looked as if they had been knocked flat. Bodies lay on the ground, in large groups and small groups, separately and together. Some were bleeding. There was no way of knowing who was friend and who was foe--or who was alive and who was dead.

Only one person had remained standing, and that was the frozen figure of Albus Dumbledore.

A flutter of cloth caught his eye. He half-turned to see Remus and Sirius limping past him. Their clothing was torn, their hands and faces bruised and bloodied. Unthinking, Harry called out to them, but the memory of his guardians could neither see nor hear him.

All of a sudden, he saw the glow that Sirius had mentioned. It did look like a Lumos spell, but it was so large and so bright that it might have been a Lumos cast by a hundred wands.

Then, with a rush of wind that felt like a breath of magic, the glow was gone.

In the place where it had been were five huddled heaps of black cloth.

It was all he could do to not look away. Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny, Colin--he knew that they were all right, he had seen them, spoken to them, he *knew* that they they were unharmed--but they looked worse than dead to him.

The glow had disappeared, but now the air itself was shimmering in a way that was immediately familiar to him.

A fierce, almost solemn joy leapt inside his heart as two massive wooden doors, larger than life, materialised at the other end of the Quidditch pitch.

The doors opened outward, and a man emerged from the darkness within. He walked steadily, but slowly; there was a distinct fatigue in his tread, as if he had come to the end of a very long journey. He seemed to be carrying something in its arms, something large and bulky and strangely shaped.

As it drew nearer, Harry realised that the man was Will, and that the burden Will was carrying...was *him*.

He glanced back at Remus and Sirius, but he had to look away at once. The look of utter anguish on his godfather's face broke his heart.

Instead, he watched Will walking toward the two men. The Old One's face was drawn and weary, his eyes deadened and emotionless. Yet for all his weariness, there was a certain dignity in his bearing--in the way he held the unconscious Harry--that was not the walk of a man carrying a child. Rather, it was the stride of a soldier bearing a fallen comrade.

Will kept walking, stepping around the place where the five collapsed children lay, avoiding the bodies of those still out cold.

Sirius stumbled forward, his arms outstretched. Will drew to a halt, letting Sirius close the distance, and with the greatest care he laid Harry in his godfather's arms.

Sirius fell to his knees in the dirt, cradling his godson. A choked and bitter sob, like a burst of mocking laughter, tore from his throat as he buried his face in Harry's chest. Remus knelt beside his friend, trying to comfort and grieve at the same time.

But Will was already moving away, across the pitch. Harry desperately wanted to follow, to get away from Sirius's overwhelming grief, but even in the dream-like state of the Pensieve he was too weak to walk. He was so frustrated at his inability to stand on his own two feet that he very nearly didn't pay attention to where Will was going--until he saw that Will had stopped, and was standing in front of Dumbledore.

Will circled the elderly wizard, studying him from all sides. Then he held out his right arm, fingers spread wide, and pointed at Dumbledore.

Nothing happened. The only sounds on the pitch were the muffled sobs of Sirius, and a scattering of groans and whimperings as people began to stir, regaining consciousness and feeling their wounds. The air hung heavy, thick and still.

Will raised his left hand, pointing it in the same exact same manner as his right. As Harry watched, the Old One's hands began to glow with a dazzling white light.

What happened next he could never describe. He tried many times to explain it, but every attempt failed to capture exactly what he had seen and felt. The closest he could ever come to it was saying, "It was like watching frost melt off a windowpane. And yet it wasn't like frost at all, and it didn't really melt...but that's what it looked like." He would always stop there, and say nothing more about it.

(Later, he would sometimes wonder how he could have seen everything that happened, if it had really been Sirius's memory. He never asked Sirius about it, and Sirius never asked him what he had seen in the Pensieve. But he did wonder.)

Whatever it was, whatever Will did, it happened.

Dumbledore blinked, stretched his arms, and shook his head. His beard waggled to and fro.

At the same time, Harry heard Sirius shout:

"Harry! Don't move, Harry--oh, god, Remus, he's..."

And Remus's startled cry:

"What in heaven--"

And then he felt himself being snatched up, rising into the air and the Quidditch pitch was fading from sight, and he found himself back in his bed with Sirius's hand on his arm.

Still half in shock, he began to babble. "I'm sorry," he said to Sirius, "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I didn't want you to think I was...because I wasn't...but it must've looked like I was...."

Sirius reeled back as if he had been punched in the stomach.

"That's not it," he said harshly. "It was the way he was holding you--and you weren't moving--"

The words caught in his throat. He had to look away to collect himself.

Harry leaned forward, reaching out to him.

"Careful, careful!" Remus dove for the Pensieve before it could spill over.

The three of them were saved from an uncomfortably emotional scene by the need to scramble to save the Pensieve, and before he knew it Harry was explaining what had happened in his battle with Voldemort. He told the story as best he could, but when he reached the part where he had been blasted off his feet, he found himself struggling with the details.

"Don't worry about it," Remus said kindly when he voiced his frustrations. "You've been through a lot."

"But I *do* know it," he insisted. "I remember all of it, and I know there's something that comes after it, too. It's just that--" A huge yawn cracked his jaw, silencing him before he could finish.

"Go back to sleep," Sirius said, getting up. "We can take care of this later."

Harry would have protested, but he *was* tired. Too much had happened in too short a space of time. He let Remus tuck him in--something he would have never allowed if he had been more alert--and nodded off in minutes.

The piece of parchment slipped off the bed and landed on the floor, beside the Pensieve.

* * *

Despite the promise, they never did finish their conversation. Harry spent most of the day dozing, slept fitfully that night, and when he woke on Thursday morning he was shivering with cold, huddled in the blankets. The quaking of his body made the old metal bed frame rattle, a ghoulish sound in the silence of the sickroom.

When Remus came in a few minutes later, he took one look at Harry and heaved him out of bed and into a high-backed chair close to the fire. He wrapped quilts and blankets around Harry's shaking shoulders and hurried from the room, returning in moments with more blankets, a teakettle, and a shallow footbath.

He knelt in front of Harry, and set the kettle and footbath aside. He piled the blankets onto Harry's knees and deftly rolled the legs of his pyjamas to a point halfway up his shins. Then, he picked up

the kettle and tapped it with his wand. A whistling puff of steam spurted from the spout.

Harry watched with some curiosity as Remus poured the steaming water into the footbath, testing the temperature with a fingertip. Remus then reached into a pocket in his robes and produced a white paper packet. He tore the packet open and dumped the contents, a dusty yellowish powder, into the water.

The strong odour of mustard assailed Harry's nostrils, making him cough and rub at his eyes. Before he could see enough to know what was happening, Remus had taken hold of his ankles and thrust his feet into the murky yellow bath.

"Yeowch!" He jerked back, and if the muscles in his legs had been stronger he would very likely have kicked Remus in the teeth. As it was, he could only thrash about. "That's HOT!"

"And you're feverish," said Remus, unsympathetically. "We've run out of Pepper-Up Potion, and I don't want to risk giving you anything stronger. Want some tea?"

Harry grimaced. His feet and ankles felt as if they were going up in flames. Nevertheless, he leaned over the footbath, and held his hands out to feel the warmth of the fire.

He spent the morning in the chair, bundled in blankets and soaking his feet in the mustard bath until the sweat was running down his face. Remus was in and out of the room all morning. Every time he returned he poured more hot water into the footbath. Shortly before lunch, he strode into the ward carrying a clean pair of pyjamas and trailing two chattering house elves in his wake.

"Mimsy here is going to change the sheets on your bed, and Wimsy will help you have a wash and change clothes," he said to Harry.

Harry reluctantly submitted to the house elf's ministrations. By the time he was clean and dressed in new pyjamas and two pairs of thick wool socks, Mimsy had made his bed with the new sheets and she and Wimsy had disappeared with the old ones. Remus brought a light lunch of toasted cheese and tomato soup, and asked Harry if he wanted anything more.

"No, thanks." He had no appetite, but ate anyway. He didn't want another round of mustard baths.

The hot bath had taken away the feverish chills, but there was ice deep inside him that medicines and mustard powder couldn't melt. It stayed with him all the rest of the day, even when Ron, Hermione, and Neville came to see him. Ron did his best to entertain by regaling the twins' first fumbling attempts to walk on their crutches. Neville brought

a five-pound box of chocolate mints that his grandmother had bought specially for Harry to 'build up the dear boy's strength'. Hermione talked for what seemed like hours about her plans to finish revising for the O.W.L.s.

"They've cancelled classes for two weeks, but they haven't said anything about not having exams, not Professor McGonagall or anyone, and anyway it's better than *resting* all the time," she informed them.

Harry nodded every so often, and laughed where he thought it was appropriate to laugh, but his mind was elsewhere.

Truthfully, saying that his mind was 'elsewhere' would be a gross understatement. It was a million places at once, full of unanswered questions that buzzed about in his head like a bucketful of Snitches. Voldemort was gone, but what about the Death Eaters? Would there be trials? Would he have to go to them, or testify at them? Would the people in St Mungo's all recover? What would happen to Professor Snape?

The more he sat and thought, the more unanswerable the questions became. Why didn't Fred and George remember what had happened before the battle, but Remus and Sirius did? Would Mrs. Figg have a wizarding funeral, and would he had to attend it? If she had been his guardian, did that make him her next-of-kin, and if he *was* her next-of-kin, did that mean that he would have to--

He always stopped when he reached that part.

Fortunately, as time passed he had less and less time to sit around and think. Now that he was able to get out of bed, the days went by in a whirl of activity. Ron and Hermione came every day and spent most of the long hours with him, playing games and swapping stories and helping him to build up his strength. At first, he could only walk if they were both supporting him, but soon he could do it with only a hand to steady him, and by late Saturday evening he was able to walk the whole length of the ward and back on his own.

Remus had warned him that it might be some time before he would feel strong enough to ride a broom again, but he was determined to be back in the air as soon as possible. Fred and George had already promised to go flying with him once their casts were off, and he couldn't wait.

Walking practice wasn't the only thing that occupied his time. Now that everyone knew he was up and about, there always seemed to be a steady stream of people into and out of his room. Students dropped in at all hours, professors who taught subjects he had never studied before came by to enquire after his health, and McGonagall asked for daily reports on every twinge and toothache.

Sirius had appointed himself the task of screening all the visitors, taking great care to allow only those people he knew into the hospital wing. At first Harry chafed at what seemed to be nothing more than irritating overprotectiveness, but when Sirius intercepted and forcibly ejected an obnoxious, frumpy woman reporter from Witch Weekly who had somehow talked her way into the school in search of an 'exclusive, one-on-one interview with the Boy Who Lived', a little overprotectiveness didn't seem like such a bad thing.

The trouble was, there was no shortage of reporters seeking exclusive, one-on-one interviews with the Boy Who Lived. Rumour had it that Hogsmeade was swarming with people from the Daily Prophet. Every day, letters poured in from wizarding newspapers and radio stations all over the world, begging Harry for an interview, a story, or even a sentence or two in reply. The Hogwarts Owlery had trouble coping with all the post that came for him. Bags and bags of unread and unsorted letters were piling up at the far end of the hospital ward, and there was no end in sight.

The situation became critical on Friday, when Sirius stormed into the room just after lunch with Colin (who had his camera clutched protectively in his hands and a very uncomfortable expression on his face) in tow.

"They're impossible," Sirius snarled, all but dragging poor Colin over to Harry's bed. "Some cheap little rag has threatened to write a story saying that the Ministry is trying to hide the fact that you're DYING in filth and squalor if we don't give them *something* to print."

He shoved Colin forward, sending the younger boy crashing into the bed frame. "So we'll give the bastards something to show you're alive and well and not bloody dead." He poked Colin in the back. "Now get it over with so we can all get on with our lives."

Colin swallowed nervously, holding his camera in front of his chest like a shield.

"C...can I take your p-picture, Harry?" he stammered, blushing seven different shades of crimson.

Harry let Colin take a dozen pictures of him sitting up in bed, looking as healthy and not dead as he possibly could, while Sirius stomped around the room and glowered at both of them. Colin clicked and snapped with lightning speed, keeping one eye on Sirius all the while, and the second he was finished he scuttled off to develop the prints. Sirius followed him out, muttering horrible imprecations on all journalists under his breath.

The press may have been the most persistent correspondents, but they were by no means the only ones. It seemed as if every single witch

and wizard in the British Isles had decided to send flowers to Harry Potter. After two nights of sleeping in a room that smelled as if a florist's had exploded, Harry pleaded with Professor McGonagall to take the flowers to the other ward, to the Great Hall, to St Mungo's, to Muggle hospitals--ANYWHERE but his room.

So the flowers were taken away. Harry kept only three bouquets for himself: one from the Grangers, a smaller one from Colin's parents, and a green glass vase full of opera-singing purple plastic daisies that Bill, Charlie, and the twins had ordered from Gambol and Japes. But before the house elves could move all the flowers out of the room, he selected a particularly riotous arrangement of Chinese snapdragons to give to Hagrid, and a simple bouquet of sweet-smelling roses and carnations for Professor Snape.

Hagrid sent him a scrawled thank-you note in return. He received nothing from Professor Snape.

By Sunday night the bandage on his right hand was ready to come off. His fingers were stiff, but the hand was otherwise sound. After breakfast the next morning, he plucked up his courage and declared his intention to go for a walk on his own. Remus hemmed and hawed, but agreed on the condition that he dress warmly (it was a beautiful balmy May morning), be back before noon (it was quarter to eleven), and that he stop and sit down, no matter where he was, if he felt at all dizzy or tired. Harry promised that he would follow the instructions to the letter...if Remus agreed to let him go on the walk alone, without a four-legged shadow.

All the conditions were agreed to by both sides, and by eleven o'clock Harry was heading down the back stairs that led to the ground floor.

He stuck to the little-used corridors, avoiding the main staircases and the well-travelled paths that led to the common rooms and the large classrooms. It wasn't that he didn't want to see anyone, but he only had an hour to get where he wanted to go, and he didn't want to waste even a minute of it bogged down in conversation.

Taking the back way took more time, though, and there were more stairs to climb. The exercise took its toll, and by the time he arrived at the entrance to the library corridor he had to lean against a wall and catch his breath. His heart was beating in his ears as he walked along--and not only from the exertion.

He reached the end of the corridor, and stopped dead.

The door to the little room off the library was gone. There was nothing but the blank stone wall.

Stunned, he ran his hand over the stones, half-hoping he would feel something give under his touch. No matter where he touched them, or how hard he pressed, the stone was as solid as if the wall had always been there. As if there had never been a door at all.

"Looking for something, Harry?"

Harry spun around, back flat against the wall--and found himself face to face with Albus Dumbledore.

"Where is it?" The question came out more like an accusation, as if Dumbledore had hidden the door as part of some elaborate trick.

"What happened to it? Why isn't it here?"

Dumbledore shook his head.

"Doors have a habit of disappearing in this school," he said lightly.

"A door may be there for days, or months, or even years, and then one day it will have vanished without warning."

Harry felt his lower lip starting to tremble like the traitor it was. He bit down on it hard enough to bring tears to his eyes.

Dumbledore studied him for a long moment. There was something unreadable in his gaze.

"Will you walk with me?" he asked. "I'm on my way to my office, but if there is somewhere else you need to be...."

"I have to be back in the hospital wing by noon." He couldn't keep the disgust out of his voice.

The elderly wizard chuckled. "You can use the Floo fire in my office, then. It will save you the walk."

The walk was a pleasant, if silent one. Most of the school was at lunch, and the only person they met in the corridors was Professor McGonagall. She smiled and nodded to them, but she continued on her way without a word.

Once they reached the office, Dumbledore ushered Harry to a chair with wonderfully overstuffed cushions. Fawkes had been perched on the back of the chair, but when he saw Harry enter he rose into the air and flapped over to his normal resting-place by the fire. As Harry sank into the plush luxury, he saw Dumbledore reach into a jewelled snuffbox that sat on the mantle, take a pinch of powder, and throw it onto the fire.

"Remus?" he called out. "Are you there?"

There was a whoosh of flame, and Remus's head appeared in the centre of the fire.

"Right here, Albus," Remus replied. "What can I--why, Harry! What are you--"

"I wanted to let you know that I have asked Mr. Potter to dine with me in my office," Dumbledore said calmly, before Remus could finish. "But he thoughtfully requested that I ask your permission first, since he thought you would worry if he did not return in time for lunch."

"I...I see." Remus paused. "Well, I don't see why not."

"Excellent." Dumbledore beamed. "And I'll escort him back to the hospital wing afterward. Goodbye, Remus."

"Er, yes, good--" The last part of the word was cut off as Dumbledore tossed another pinch of powder on the fire.

"Dobby, would you bring two meals to my office, please?" he said into the flames. "Whatever you've made for the lunch in the Hall would be lovely...oh, and a pot of cocoa, if you please. Two mugs."

He turned away as the flames subsided and returned to their normal colour.

"So, Harry," he said as he walked over to his desk. "A number of interesting things have happened since last Saturday. Has anyone spoken to you about them?"

"No...no, sir." It was true. He hadn't seen a newspaper in over a week, and he had a feeling that the news he received from his friends was carefully filtered.

Dumbledore sat in his chair, and folded his hands in his lap. "Well, to begin with, the Dementors have vanished."

Harry leapt out of the chair as if someone had lit a fire beneath it. "*VANISHED?*"

"Without a trace." He tapped his fingertips together, and waited for Harry to sit down again before he continued. "The Aurors assigned to guard Azkaban have no explanation for it. According to their reports, one moment the Dementors were there, and the next...." He waved a hand through the air in a vague, elusive gesture. "And somehow, I don't think it will surprise you to learn that they disappeared on Saturday afternoon."

Harry felt the room spin, even though he was sitting down. His head was reeling. "You mean--"

There was a knock on the door.

"One moment!" Dumbledore called out. He stood up and walked to the door, humming a little tune under his breath.

Harry was so distracted by the shocking news that he only partially heard Dumbledore and Dobby talking to each other. The next thing he was truly aware of was that a covered tray had somehow ended up on his lap.

Dumbledore was already back at his desk, lifting the lid of his own tray and inhaling the rich aroma. "Chicken and asparagus pie, delicious. And sponge and custard, too. Amazing how the house elves always seem to outdo themselves every time, don't you think?"

It did look delicious, and it smelled heavenly, but Harry did not know how he would be able to get it down. Dumbledore, on the other hand, was already tucking into the flaky crust, and showed no sign of continuing their conversation before the meal was over.

Harry exhaled loudly--his entire life seemed to be revolving around mealtimes, recently--and speared a piece of chicken with his fork.

They ate and drank, savouring the fluffy sponge and custard with the last of the cocoa. Dumbledore wiped his mouth with his napkin, brushed a few stray pie crust crumbs from his beard, and leaned back in his chair with a contented sigh.

"The Dementors were Dark creatures," he said, out of nowhere. "And after the attack on the Hogwarts Express, I was forced to consider that they might be creatures of the Dark as well."

Harry choked, and gulped some cocoa. "So when Voldemort was....when Voldemort was destroyed, the Dementors were destroyed with him?"

"Not only the Dementors," Dumbledore replied. "There were two reasons that you and many of the others hurt on the Quidditch pitch were not taken to St Mungo's. The first reason, and the more obvious one, was the severity of your injuries. The other was the fact that the staff at St Mungo's, skilled and talented though they are, could not have coped with such a great influx of the injured and the insane at the same time."

Again, Harry felt that all he could do was stare. "Did you say *insane*?"

"By defeating Voldemort, you defeated the power of the Dark that he had accepted." His face grew solemn, a sorrowful cloud shading his features. "But men have fragile minds. They cannot wholly accept the Dark and retain their humanity at the same time. With the merciful exception of Professor Snape, every person who bore the Dark Mark has gone mad."

He gazed at Harry over the tops of his spectacles. "Completely--and incurably--mad."

This was too much to take in at once. Harry felt giddy, sick to his stomach.

"Lucius Malfoy nearly broke the neck of the mediwizard who had the unenviable task of restraining him for transport to St Mungo's." Dumbledore continued talking, answering questions that Harry hadn't even thought to ask aloud. "Peter Pettigrew was discovered a little ways into the Forbidden Forest. He had apparently been set to watch over Hagrid...but when we found him, he was gnawing on the bloody stump of his arm."

Harry shuddered with revulsion.

"And these reactions were not confined to those in the immediate vicinity. Throughout Britain, and all around the world, there have been reports of sudden, inexplicable madness...all of which began at the same moment as the destruction of Lord Voldemort."

"But why didn't Snape--" He stopped himself. He already knew the answer. "It was Wi...Professor Stanton, wasn't it."

"From the little information I could draw out of Severus, it seems that Dr. Stanton was able to create some kind of interference, a buffer against the immediate effects," Dumbledore said reflectively. "It caused him great pain, but it prevented the Dark from affecting him through the Mark."

"But if he could do that," Harry said abruptly, putting words to a question that had been bothering him ever since he had awoken, "why didn't he stop Voldemort from freezing you with that spell?"

"Because I asked him not to."

"You *what*?"

"I asked Dr. Stanton not to do anything to protect or defend me," Dumbledore said. "We had agreed upon it before we left: neither of us would interfere with the other's magic. It would have been too dangerous."

"And that's why he didn't help...." No, that wasn't it. He had known, deep inside, at the moment the lightning had struck, that Draco Malfoy would die. No one could have saved him. He could have been killed by the fall as easily as he could have died by his father's hand, and in the end there was no one to blame for Draco's death but Lucius Malfoy--and Voldemort.

"Precisely." Dumbledore's response, for all its eerie timing, fell flat on Harry's ears.

"Oh."

The elderly wizard raised an eyebrow at his tone. "You don't believe that?"

"I...." He was supposed to believe it, but after hearing it so many times it had all but lost its meaning.

"I don't know." he said hopelessly. "It's just like Ron said--*At least we had a choice*. But Draco didn't. He didn't get to choose."

"And that troubles you?"

"He didn't have to be like his father. He didn't...but they made him. They USED him. And then...and they threw him away. His own son--how *could* he?" He was genuinely angry now: rage boiling in his chest, clenching his hands into fists and turning his face scarlet. "And no one's ever going to know why he died, because they *don't remember it!*"

"Is that so important?"

"Of COURSE it is!" A calmer and definitely more reasonable part of him vaguely registered that he was screaming at Albus Dumbledore, his former Headmaster and the current Minister for Magic, but the part that was doing the screaming was not about to listen to reason. "Of COURSE it's important!"

Dumbledore's bright eyes bored into his own. "Why?"

"Because...because...." For some reason, the simple question had taken the wind out of his sails. "Because it doesn't mean anything if no one else remembers it. You can tell yourself it's important, but if you're the only one--"

He broke off when he heard what he was saying, and his hand flew to his cheek. He felt as if someone had hit him in the face.

"You make a very good point, Harry," Dumbledore said, quite calmly. "Have you spoken with Dr. Stanton about it?"

Before Harry could say a word, there was a loud crackle of sparks from the fireplace, and Professor McGonagall's head appeared in the flames.

"Albus, I've just had an owl from Edward Linchley," she said.

"He would like to speak with you immediately about a very urgent matter."

Dumbledore ran a hand over his beard. "With Linchley, everything's a very urgent matter."

McGonagall bit back an unamused laugh. "And your private secretary contacted me five minutes ago to ask me to remind you that you have a meeting with the Department Heads in half an hour in your London office, and would I please tell you that she doesn't know where the file on the"--and there was a noise as if she was rustling through a pile of papers--"African Horned Toad Importation Licences is, and she wonders if you might have it with you?"

"Very well, Minerva, I'm leaving now."

McGonagall's head faded away, and Dumbledore began to rummage through the piles of papers on his desk.

"Well, Harry," he said sadly, "I'm afraid we'll have to cut our visit short. You can use Floo Powder--in the red wooden box, not the little blue enamel one--to return to the hospital wing. Dobby will come back for the trays." He pulled on his travelling cloak and reached into the red box. Just before he threw the powder onto the fire, he looked over his shoulder. "Oh, and Harry?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Your O.W.L.s are still on, as are the N.E.W.T.s. The Committee On Wizarding Education Results--'C.O.W.E.R.', for short--has agreed to modify the exam content somewhat, but the general format will be the same. Although Professor McGonagall will mention this at dinner tonight, I thought you might appreciate an early warning."

Harry felt a headache stirring behind his temples.

"Thank you, sir," he said listlessly.

"Take care, Harry." The flames blazed high as the powder hit them. "My office, the Ministry of Magic!"

Once Dumbledore had stepped through and disappeared, Harry wandered over to the fire and took some of the powder from the red box. However, he did not throw it onto the flames. He opened his hand and let it slide through his fingers, back into the box. Then he took some more powder, and let it run out of his hand again.

Fawkes was watching him keenly. When Harry released his handful of powder for a third time the phoenix uttered a single piercing note, and bumped his head against the young man's shoulder.

Harry closed the box with a snap. He reached up and rubbed a finger across the delicate vermilion crest of feathers on the top of the bird's head.

"It's over, Fawkes," he said softly, stroking the ruffled plumage.
"Voldemort's gone, the Death Eaters won't hurt anyone anymore, even the Dementors have all been destroyed. Everyone says it's over...so why doesn't it feel any different? Why doesn't it feel like we've won?"

The phoenix let out a throbbing, mournful trill, and tilted its head to allow Harry to scratch its neck.

Epilogue - Memories of the Future

And the ancient one waits
For the young one to knock upon the door
And both of them are me.

-- The Essene Book of Days

It had all seemed so simple at first. He had had a plan, or some semblance of one. This wasn't the kind of thing one could do without a plan. And naturally, his plan had included very specific written directions that wouldn't have confused a house elf.

However, when he looked up and saw that he was walking past the Oxfam bookshop for the fifth time, Harry realised how lost he truly was.

He hadn't intended to become lost. It isn't something that one ever intends, it simply *happens*. And of course, by the time he knew that he was lost, he didn't know how to set about becoming un-lost.

It wasn't the first piece of bad luck he had had that day. Repairs had shut down part of the Underground, forcing him to take a twenty-minute detour on two other lines to reach the train station. Work on a faulty signal somewhere outside Royden had created an hour and a half delay on his train, so that by the time the train pulled into the station it was already one o'clock. And then, the very *second* he had stepped off the train, it had started to rain.

The rain. Yes, that was it--he could blame it all on the rain. The skies had been grey when he set out, but now there were fat wet drops splashing everywhere, even onto the piece of parchment he had tried to keep covered. Three of those fat wet drops had set the ink to running, blurring some of the words together and completely obliterating others. And now the rain was coming down harder, water soaking his shoes and wicking up the legs of his jeans and plastering his hair to his head.

He ran for the nearest telephone box and pulled the door shut. His glasses fogged up almost immediately.

"When you get off at the rail sta...oh, *hell*..." He yanked his glasses off his face and used the edge of his shirt to wipe away the condensation that had collected on the lenses. "From rail station, follow Station Road onto Regent Street." He nodded to himself; he had done that already. "Regent Street will become St Andrews Street--did that, too. From St Andrews Street, turn something-left...at the first left? Or the second left...?"

He stared at the piece of parchment that was wilting in his hand, then let out a long breath and slumped against the grimy, scratched window.

He had to face facts. He was lost--and entirely alone--in Cambridge.

* * *

"Cambridge?" Ron's voice was nearly a shriek.

"What's so wrong about me going to Cambridge?" Harry plucked a long stem of grass and twirled it between thumb and forefinger. "You make it sound like Azkaban."

"Why do you want to go there?" asked Ginny, chewing on a thumbnail.

"Because."

Ginny's eyes narrowed. "That's not an answer."

Harry sighed, and lay back on the grass.

It was a beautifully warm summer's day, and the three children were lazing about in the mid-morning sunshine and keeping one eye out for Muggle backpackers. If they saw no one before lunchtime, it usually meant that they could grab brooms after lunch and practice Quidditch without too much fear of being seen.

However, Harry, Ron, and Ginny weren't at the Burrow, and it wasn't the last two weeks of August. It was early July, only a few weeks after school had let out, and they were over fifty miles away from the village of Ottery St Catchpole. They were at Harry's house, an old bungalow tucked away in the Mendip Hills in the heart of Somerset. It was the same house that Sirius and Remus had shared the summer and winter before, and now it was Harry's as well.

The house was very remote: fifteen miles south of Bristol, with the nearest town a good half-hour's walk over hilly country. When Remus had first found the house it had had the singularly inappropriate name of The Larches (there wasn't a larch in sight), but in a moment of wit Sirius had christened it Wookey Went, after an old Muggle folktale about a 'Witch of Wookey' who was supposed to have lived in the area hundreds of years ago. It had been good for a laugh at the time, but the name had stuck, and now Harry couldn't imagine calling the house anything but Wookey Went.

He hadn't expected to end up at Wookey Went. He hadn't expected to end up anywhere, if the truth be told. Once his exams were over and the agonising week of waiting for O.W.L.s results had arrived, it had dawned on him that he hadn't given a moment's thought as to where he would be spending the summer. He had known that he wouldn't be going back to

Little Whinging, and he supposed that Sirius would take full advantage of his newly-won freedom to live wherever he fancied. However, the idea of actually being able to live with his godfather had only existed as a lovely dream at the very back of his mind.

But now, he *was* living with his godfather *and* his favourite professor, his father's oldest friends. And after an awkward week of '*please pardon me's* and '*I hope you don't mind if I come in's*, he and Sirius and Remus had settled in to an almost domestic sort of life.

The bungalow was smaller than the other houses he had lived in, all on one floor with only six rooms and rather low ceilings, but Harry loved it. There was a garden out back, and a well, and a wood with trees to climb and old limestone caves to explore, and a low grassy field that was perfect for flying over very fast on a broom. What was more, he had his own bedroom. Not a hand-me-down second bedroom, or a spare room with a lumpy bed, or a room that had to be shared with four other boys--*his own bedroom*.

What was even better, in Harry's opinion, was the fact that Ron and Ginny were close enough to visit everyday. A handful of Floo powder and a shout of "The Burrow!" was all that he needed to spend the whole day at the Weasley house, without having to feel that he was being a burden on them. After all, he could leave at the end of the day and go home, to *his home*. It was a state of near perpetual bliss that he was certain he could get used to.

He had spent almost every waking moment at the Burrow the first week, but gradually he came to feel that something wasn't quite right. Something was missing--and that something was Mrs. Weasley.

Her presence had made the Burrow the first warm and welcoming home that Harry had ever known, and without her the house felt painfully empty. There were no sounds of knitting needles working busily at a jumper or plates washing themselves in the kitchen sink, no mouth-watering smells wafting from the kitchen, no cheerfully plump figure bustling to and fro, alternately scolding and smiling. She was gone, and without her it felt as if the best part of the Burrow had gone, too.

Harry could see how it was affecting the remaining members of her brood. Ron often fell silent for long periods of time, staring at nothing. Twice, Ginny ran all through the house looking to show something to her mother, only to burst into tears and run to her room when she realised that her mother was no longer there. Fred and George mostly kept to themselves, the rattles and bangs and experimental noises from their room sounding three times as loud in the silence of the house. They were planning to move out on their own as soon as they could find a flat in Diagon Alley. Mr. Weasley had received his long overdue promotion to the Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, but his work schedule was still erratic--the final total of restricted or

prohibited objects confiscated from the Malfoy estate alone was said to number in the high thousands--so Bill had taken a leave of absence from Gringotts in Egypt to lend a hand at home. Even with him around, the Burrow was still too quiet.

By the second week of the summer holidays, Harry decided to invite Ron and Ginny over to Wookey Went 'for a change'. The three of them never spent the whole day in the Burrow again.

It had taken him until the Monday of their third week off school to pluck up his courage and mention, quite casually, that he was thinking of going to Cambridge by himself for a day. Ron and Ginny's reactions to this news had not encouraged him.

"You didn't answer Gin's question, Harry," Ron was saying, and the tone of his voice implied that Harry's answer had better be a truly magnificent one. "Why do you want to go to Cambridge?"

In as few words as possible, he told them what had happened in the hospital wing the night he had woken up. Ron and Ginny were both staring at him, open-mouthed and with chalk-white faces, by the time he was finished.

"And then he was gone," he said, plucking another blade of grass and tearing it into little pieces. "He disappeared. And that was it."

Ginny was the first to recover. "He said that to YOU?"

"And now you want to go to Cambridge?" Ron threw up his hands and flopped back, sprawling on the grass. "*There's* a wonderful idea. Professor Will Stanton is ticked off at me, so I think I'll just pop over to his place and have a chat."

"It's not going to be like that, Ron."

Ron kept going, declaiming to the sky and the world at large. "Harry Potter hasn't had enough danger and excitement in his life yet, so he wants to go halfway across the country to get his head blasted off!"

"Ron, I *have* to go!" Harry said exasperatedly. "D'you think I *want* to get my head blasted off?"

"It certainly sounds like it," Ron retorted.

"But you don't have to go by yourself," Ginny said pleadingly. "At least have one of us go with you."

Ron seemed to blanch at the thought. "Er...look, Harry, why don't you ask Hermione if she wants to go?"

"Ron!" Ginny exclaimed.

"I'm not saying that I wouldn't go if he wanted me to," Ron said hastily. "I only mean that Hermione would probably know how to help you get around on trains and things better than either of us would."

"I *have* been on trains before," Harry said with a snort. "By myself. Many times."

"*How* many times?"

"More than you," Harry shot back.

"Stop it, both of you." Ginny turned to Harry. "Have you mentioned this to Hermione at all?"

"No," he said. "Not yet."

Ron rolled onto his stomach. "I'll bet she has a fit when you tell her." His voice was muffled by the grass.

"How do you know if Will would even be there?" Ginny asked. "Muggle schools let out for the summer, don't they?"

"I don't know if he'll be there," Harry said. "That's why I have to go there and find out."

"Why couldn't you just write him a letter?" Ron said hopefully. "A nice long letter saying how dreadfully sorry you are."

Harry glared at him. "If you're going to be an ass about this--"

"All I'm saying is that it sounds daft. But if you've got it into your head to go, there's nothing any of us could do to stop you." His mouth quirked in a not-quite-smile. "We all know what happened to the last person who tried to get in your way."

"It's something I have to do, Ron. I have to go by myself."

"Then go right ahead." Ron lifted his head and glanced at him. "But I still think you've got a death wish, mate."

"So I've been told." Harry sighed again. "Come on, it's almost lunchtime."

They stood up, brushing the grass from their clothes, and trooped across the field to the little cottage.

Harry thought long and hard before he composed his letter to Hermione that night. He wanted--he *needed*--to strike just the right chord, a mixture of friendly chatter and summertime laziness with a single offhanded question thrown in. When he finished writing, he read the letter aloud to hear what it sounded like.

Hermione,

How are you? I hope your summer is going well so far. I'm having a great time--it's lovely here. Ron and Ginny come over almost every day now. Remus and Sirius keep asking me if you're going to visit us sometime this summer. I told them I'd ask and see if you could come.

Have you had a chance to visit Natalie yet? I know you said you were going to in your last letter, but I didn't know if you meant this week or next week. If you see her, tell her that I hope she's feeling well. Remus said that he isn't sure if she'll be allowed to come back to school next year, but he's promised to keep talking to McGonagall about it.

Oh, I almost forgot--if you have the time, could you see how much a train ticket would cost between London and Cambridge? I was thinking about going there for a day, just to have a look around. I've got all this free time and nothing to do with it except my summer homework. (And while that might be enough for YOU, it's driving me batty.) Let me know if you find anything.

Tell your parents I say hello, and thank them again for the flowers they sent.

*Yours,
Harry*

The letter was posted, and not two days later Hedwig swooped through his bedroom window clutching a large envelope addressed in Hermione's precise hand. Inside the envelope was a sealed and folded piece of parchment, a fold-out map of the Cambridge city centre, a pocket-sized railway timetable--trains from London to Cambridge--and a map of the Underground. Written on the back of the folded parchment was a message:

Harry,

Consider this an early birthday present.

Hermione

Breaking the seal, he unfolded the sheet of parchment. Written on it, in Hermione's best note-taking script, were directions to the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge.

* * *

Now, damp and chilled and huddled in a dingy public telephone box, he almost wished that he had brought someone with him.

It wasn't difficult to imagine what things would be like if Ron and Hermione had come along. Ron would be wringing out his clothes and roundly cursing the downpour, and Hermione would be poring over a guidebook to the town, carefully keeping the rain off the list of bookshops she was using as a 'bookmark' and at the same time telling them both to stop grousing, she'd be able to find the information booth if they'd only be quiet and let her think.

He almost wished they were with him. Almost.

The rain was starting to let up at last. It had settled into a steady drizzle, which was as near as he supposed he would get to a complete stoppage. He pulled the hood of his raincoat over his head, pushed open the door, and set off.

He waded through a few streets, looking for something he could use as a landmark that wasn't the Oxfam bookshop. He passed an Indian restaurant and women's clothing store, then turned down a side street that he thought would take him back to the road he had come down.

The side street only seemed to be taking him further from where he thought he was supposed to go, and before he had gone two hundred yards the drizzle decided to switch back to rain again. Harry ran for the shelter of a nearby doorframe and waited for it to let up.

Looking up through rain-streaked glasses, he saw a pub sign dangling crookedly overhead. At first he read it as "The Crosswinds", but a step or two nearer to it and a change of angle proved that it really read "The Crosswands".

With that sort of name, it had to be a wizarding pub.

He turned round, and stared at the worm-eaten wooden door that he had been leaning against. He hesitated, torn between wanting to get out of the wet and not wanting to wander into a wizarding establishment by himself.

A lashing gust of wet wind made up his mind for him. He turned the handle and went inside.

The pub was small, barely half the size of the Leaky Cauldron. The bar, a slab of chipped wood awash in a sea of empty glasses, took up

most of the space. Crammed into the space left over were four or five tables with mismatched chairs and a row of stools at the bar itself, and that was all the space there was for the patrons. A group of grizzled older men sat round two of the tables, playing some sort of dice game and tossing back pints of a tar-black, sudsy-looking brew. They paid no notice to the newcomer.

On the other hand, the middle-aged witch behind the bar did notice Harry's arrival. She sat up, and the magazine she had been flipping through was quickly pushed aside.

"Why, hello there, love," she drawled in a husky voice. Her greying hair had gone frizzy from the humidity, but she nevertheless patted and smoothed it down as best she could as Harry approached her. She leaned on the bar and smiled at him with what she obviously thought was a youthful, fun-loving grin. "What'll it be?"

Harry slid onto a stool. He pushed back the hood of his raincoat, but kept his eyes down, and hoped that the rain had made his hair stick to his forehead.

"Hot butterbeer, please," he mumbled.

The witch selected the nearest empty glass and rinsed it out, then turned to the taps to draw a pint. Harry rummaged in his pockets and found a handful of Sickles and Knuts, enough to pay for his drink. He counted out change as the witch at the bar tapped the glass with her wand, sending butterbeer froth bubbling over the rim.

Harry gratefully took the pint from her and sipped the foaming brew. The hot drink warmed him all the way down to his toes, casting out the chill of damp clothing and wet weather. He took another sip, then drained half the pint at a swallow.

The witch chuckled as she watched him down the contents of his glass in a matter of minutes. "Another one?" she asked.

Harry wiped the foam from his upper lip.

"No, thanks," he said, a little breathlessly.

The witch set the glass at the far end of the bar, replacing it amongst its equally dirty fellows.

"Don't see many ones your age round here," she said as she wandered back to Harry's end of the bar. "You lost, then?"

Harry's first thought was to say no, but something in the quirk of her crooked smile reminded him of Mrs. Figg. The words stuck in his throat. "Y-yeah. Sort of."

"D'you have a map?"

Digging in the back pocket of his jeans, he pulled out the map that Hermione had sent. It was dog-eared and grubby from being folded and unfolded, and the glossy paper was wrinkled from where the rain had soaked it. He handed it to the woman.

"Let's see that." She peered at it, turning it round and round in her hands. "Heh. This one confuses enough Muggles...you'd think they'd've changed it by now."

She set Harry's map down on the grease-spotted bar and pulled out her wand. With a neat flick of her wrist, she waved her wand over the map. "*Cartaglypha!*"

Harry stared at the map. The lettering seemed to be dissolving, the printed words running together just as the ink of his directions had run together. But all of a sudden, the letters snapped back into focus, clear and sharp.

With a tiny pop, a small white box appeared in the bottom right hand corner of the map, and as Harry watched a string of words swam into focus inside the box. They read, 'WHERE DO YOU WANT TO GO?'

"There now, duck," the middle-aged witch said brightly, wiping her wand on the sleeve of her tatty robes. "That ought to help you. If you tell it where you want to go--and speak nice and clearly, now--it'll show you the best way to get there. See that little box just there? It'll give you the directions you need."

Harry took the map, and pushed his last two Sickles across the bar for a tip. "Thank you."

"No trouble." She took the money, but caught hold of his hand just before he could pull it away.

"Say..." she began, staring at him shrewdly. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"No!" Harry gasped, then took a quick breath and formed his features into a thinly polite smile. "I mean, no. I don't think so."

The middle-aged witch gazed at him, frowning as if she *knew* she had seen him before but couldn't quite place where and when. Then, she said loudly:

"You were at Hogwarts, weren't you."

The old men in the corner looked up from their pipes and their dice game, staring at Harry and the witch at the bar. The silence thudded in the damp, smoky room.

Harry cringed. This was it. "Y...yes."

To his astonishment, the woman let go of his hand and clucked her tongue sadly. The crow's-feet around her eyes wrinkled, her mouth puckering as her face drooped in a tender, almost motherly sympathy.

"You poor dear boy," she cooed. "It must have been so terrible. Fair gave me shivers, reading all about it in the *Prophet* and thinking that it was just like the bad old days all over again." She shivered for effect, but then her eyes lit up. "Did you get to see Harry Potter when you were there?"

"He...was in some of my classes," Harry croaked.

"Fancy that now!" A pleased little smile played across her lips, as if she and Harry were old pals and she had finally made him confess one of his deepest, darkest secrets. "What was he like?" she whispered.

Harry found that he was stammering worse than Neville on a bad day in Potions. "I-I-I d-don't r-really know."

"At school with Harry Potter..." All of a sudden, she seemed to have forgotten about him entirely. She propped her chin on her hands, bony elbows resting on the bar, and gazed dreamily into the distance. "Oh, if I were only ten years younger...."

"Yeh'd be twenty years too late!" came a boozy shout.

"Shut it, you old sot!" the woman barked at the cluster of old men. The joker and his companions roared with intoxicated laughter.

Harry took advantage of the opportunity to escape to the street.

* * *

"Cambridge?"

"I need to talk to Professor Stanton."

"And I suppose you're not going to tell us why."

"I...you wouldn't understand."

"Cambridge?"

"Not this again. Harry, *why* wouldn't we understand?"

"It's something I have to do alone, Remus."

"*Cambridge?*"

"Yes, Sirius, we've established that already."

"Shut up, Remus. Harry, do you have *any* idea how you're going to get there?"

"That's what I was hoping you could tell me."

Harry had also hoped that raising the subject over dinner would make things easier, but it was plain that this would not be the case.

Sirius shoved his plate away and leaned back in his chair. "Well, you could try to get there the Muggle way, but it would take days."

"Days?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Well, the better part of a day. In case you haven't noticed, we're not exactly on the beaten path."

He was prepared for that argument. "Hermione says it'd take maybe half an hour to get to Weston-super-Mare from here by car--"

"Oh, that's what she says?" Remus remarked.

"--and it's a two and a half hour journey from there to London," Harry finished. "There are trains from Liverpool Street and King's Cross that only take an hour. I could be there in--"

"Five hours," Sirius interrupted. "So that's five hours there and five hours back. Plus car hire, plus rail tickets...." He ticked off the points on his fingers. "And you want to do all this by yourself."

I don't want to. I have to. Harry thought this, but he didn't dare say it aloud.

"Do you have a better idea?" was what he said.

"Well, we *are* on the Floo," said Remus sensibly. "That could at least get you to Diagon Alley, and probably further than that."

Harry stared down at his plate. "I'd rather not go to Diagon Alley, if that's all right."

Sirius and Remus exchanged concerned looks.

Harry had visited Diagon Alley the Friday before classes had resumed; he needed to buy a new wand. His old one had been destroyed in the fight against Voldemort--all that was left of it were a few splinters of wood that Remus had dug out of the palm of his hand--and he had had to go to Ollivander's to select a new one. Professor McGonagall and Remus had accompanied him, but even then Harry had not been able to avoid the screaming, cheering, sobbing crowd of witches and

wizards that had flocked to him the moment he had stepped outside the Leaky Cauldron. There were hundreds of people, pushing and shoving and jostling one another out of the way to catch a glimpse of Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the child who had defeated the Dark Lord for good and all.

The Boy Who Lived had taken one look at the crowd and immediately fled inside.

The next morning, Mr. Ollivander quietly hung a *Closed For The Day* sign on his shop door and travelled to Hogwarts, bringing a small legion of wands for Harry to choose from. Fortunately, one of the wands was a slim twelve-inch holly and phoenix feather that had worked perfectly at the first swish and flick. Harry had not been back to Diagon Alley since.

"You'll have to go back there sometime, Harry," Sirius said gently.

"I know," Harry replied, still staring at his plate. "But if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not go there right now."

"You don't have to travel by yourself the whole way, you know," said Remus. "We could come with you to London. See you on the train."

"I have to...." He was tired of repeating himself. "It wouldn't work."

Sirius shoved his chair away from the table and started to collect the empty plates. "We'll work something out."

In the end, what they worked out was a compromise. That Friday, Harry would get up early in the morning, eat a quick breakfast, and Floo to the Leaky Cauldron. Remus paid a visit to the Diagon Alley pub on Wednesday to arrange for the use of the landlord's private fireplace for the Floo journey--a simple arrangement, as the old proprietor was only too eager to accommodate the wishes of young Harry Potter. Harry was assured that he could then slip out a side entrance and into the bustle of Charing Cross Road, and from there he could make his way by bus and Tube to the Liverpool Street station and onto the next train to Cambridge.

"Why Liverpool Street?" Sirius asked when Harry showed him the timetable. "It says here that the trains run out of King's Cross as well."

Harry had a reason for picking Liverpool Street over King's Cross, but he didn't want to say it to Remus. It was the same reason why he had stopped visiting the Burrow, and the same reason why, in the darkest part of his heart, he was secretly dreading going back to Hogwarts in the fall.

In order to pay for his Muggle transportation, he needed Muggle money. Remus had also stopped at Gringotts on Wednesday, and

had changed some of the money in Harry's vault to pounds and pence. It had been a while since Harry had had to think in terms of decimals, and seeing the little pile of notes and the bag of coins on the kitchen table made a flutter of nervousness run through his stomach.

It was settled. That Friday, he would be going to Cambridge.

* * *

It was far easier to get where you were going when you had someone telling you exactly where to go. Harry silently thanked the witch from the Crosswands as he stared up at a cobbled archway. Through this archway, the map told him, would be a number of University departments, including the Department of Social Anthropology.

The rain had slowed once more, this time to a sullen mist that was more annoying than drenching. Harry rubbed at his glasses to clear away the fog and checked the map again.

TURN RIGHT, the words in the box said, AND GO DOWN THE SLOPE.

Harry turned right and walked through the archway. He found himself in an open space surrounded by tall buildings on all sides, and using the map and the directions in the box he wove his way through a maze of alleys and back entrances.

"Third door on the right...third door on the right in the corner...."
He muttered to himself, counting steps and counting doors. He was very glad that there were no Muggles around to see him talking to a map as if he expected it to answer him.

The third door on the right had the same coat of flaking white paint as the first and second doors he had passed. A small plaque on the lower part of the door read 'Department of Social Anthropology'.

He tried the handle, and the door opened into a small atrium with a rickety-looking staircase.

THE DEPARTMENT OFFICE IS ON THE FIRST FLOOR, the map said.

Harry folded the map and put it away, then started to climb the stairs.

The building was silent, without a soul in sight, and that made Harry distinctly uneasy. It was a Friday, in the summer, and a quick glance at his new-old watch--it had belonged to his father and grandfather, and was a *very* belated birthday present from Sirius--told him that it was nearly four-thirty in the afternoon. What would he do if he arrived at the department office and no one was there?

He climbed faster.

He found the department office more quickly than he had thought he would, but his heart sank when he saw that there was no one inside. No one was at the secretary's desk, and the door that presumably led to an inner office was closed. The room was empty.

So that was that. He had come all the way to Cambridge to end up in a deserted, windowless outer office in a mouldering academic building.

He leaned heavily against the doorframe, trying to gather up the strength to go back out into the rain and start his twenty-minute walk to the rail station. He would be on the train by a little after five, if the signal was fixed, and it would take--

A sharp noise from behind made him jump and whirl around. A short, sour-faced woman was standing behind him, staring at him with beady-bright and deeply suspicious eyes.

The woman cleared her throat again--it had the alarming staccato sound of gunfire--and Harry realised that she was staring at him because he was blocking her path into the office. He quickly moved aside to let her pass.

The woman strode past him, trailing a miasma of synthetic violet scent so strong that Harry had to choke back a sneeze. She went straight to the desk near the closed office door and began to open and shut drawers very loudly. She pointedly ignored Harry.

Harry felt that he had to speak up. "Er, excuse me? Miss?"

Annoyed, the woman glanced up, and her hard face took on a look of pinched disapproval when she saw that Harry was still standing in the doorway.

"Yes?" she snapped, flinging the word at him like a grenade.

Harry hung back. The look the woman was giving him reminded him very strongly of his Aunt Petunia, so strongly that he half-expected her to order him outside and tell him not to come back until he had repainted the chipped white door outside.

"I...I don't mean to bother you," he said in his most polite voice, "but could you please tell me where Professor Stanton's office is?"

The woman's jaw twitched. She gave him a scathing glare, and picked up a raincoat that hung on a hook behind her desk.

"*Doctor* Stanton isn't in," she said crisply, putting extra emphasis on the correct title. She shrugged on her coat. "He's not here today."

"Oh." Harry's spirits, which had been flagging ever since he had stepped off the train and into a rainstorm, sank even further. "Do...do you know where I could find him?"

The woman collected a battered plastic shopping bag and a flowery-patterned umbrella. "Try his College."

At Harry's blank and uncomprehending look, she lifted her gaze to the heavens, and said in a voice meant for the profoundly deaf:

"*Christ's* College."

Harry thanked her, humbly and profusely, and hurried out the way he had come.

* * *

"Young man!"

For the third time that day, Harry snapped to attention. He turned on his heel to see an older man walking toward him.

The man's dark grey three-piece suit was perfectly pressed, his salt-and-pepper moustache neatly trimmed. He walked with the controlled swagger of one who holds an official position. Everything about him shouted Person In Authority.

As the man approached, Harry wondered what he had done wrong this time. He had found Christ's College in five minutes with the aid of his map, and no sooner had he poked his head through the gate than someone was chasing after him.

"I'm sorry?" he said, trying to look innocent of any wrongdoing.

The man drew to a halt and gazed down at him imperiously.

"The College is closed to visitors," he said, biting off the ends of his words. "You'll have to come back when we open tomorrow. Nine o'clock."

He was already guiding Harry back to the main entrance, back to the small wooden door in the larger wooden gates of the College. Harry jerked back just in time, pulling himself straight and tall.

"I'm here to see Dr Stanton," he said, trying to sound as though he was on an urgent, life-or-death mission. "Dr Will Stanton. Could you tell me where his office is, please?"

The man's bushy eyebrows went up, and he looked at Harry with a greater interest.

"Dr Stanton never mentioned a visitor." Leaving Harry just inside the entrance, he turned left and headed through a doorway marked 'Porter's Lodge'. He returned moments later, holding a sheet of paper. "What's your name, lad?"

Harry froze. For a blinding second, he couldn't remember his name, and before he knew it he was blurting out the first thing that came into his head:

"He's my uncle."

The porter stared at him, looking as surprised as Harry felt. "Your uncle?"

"Well, he's not *really* my uncle. He's a friend of my dad's, or something like that, or anyway I've known him for ages and ages." To his astonishment, the story bubbled from his mouth as freely as if he was speaking the absolute truth. "And I've always called him my uncle, even though he's not, not really."

The porter hadn't thrown him out on his ear yet, so he kept going, the words flowing more and more naturally as he wittered on. "I know it sounds silly, but it saves me the trouble of having to explain the whole thing properly like I'm doing now, and it's not as if--"

"All right, all right." The porter pointed across the open courtyard. "Go through that archway on the right. There'll be a big building straight ahead of you: that's Second Court. You'll be wanting 'B' Staircase, that's the door on the right. Up the stairs to the second floor, and make a right, and it'll be the second door."

Harry's head spun with directions. "Thank you," he managed to say, and started walking.

The rain had stopped, but the clouds overhead hung heavy and thick. No one was about. No tourists, no students, no professors. The stately buildings of the College looked wan and colourless in the weak sunlight, a sharp contrast to the lush, vibrant green of the manicured lawns. Harry trod carefully on the path around the centre circular lawn in the first courtyard. He was afraid that he would be hunted down if he were to accidentally trod on so much as a blade of the close-cut grass.

He walked through the archway, a small tunnel of cut stone and the dark rich warmth of old wood, and stepped onto another path. Ahead of him, the imposing, mansion-like structure that the porter had called 'Second Court' was shrouded in wisps of fog. The building's blank windows seemed to be staring at him through the mist, like rows of eyes hidden behind spectacles.

He veered right and found the staircase the porter had described, and went up the flights of stairs. When he reached the top--a little winded from the climb--he stopped dead.

There was the door that the porter had mentioned, but it was closed, and two people were standing in front of it. A short dark-haired girl and a taller blond boy, both of them several years older than himself. Harry guessed that they were Percy's age, or a little older.

They were kissing.

Harry felt a sudden strong desire to scream.

He opened his mouth, but before he could get a word out the girl saw him. She reluctantly broke the kiss, and she and the boy half-turned, giving Harry impatient and distinctly unfriendly stares.

"Is...is Dr Stanton in?" Harry asked, trying to look as if he wasn't the slightest bit uncomfortable at having interrupted them.

The boy answered first. "No," he said curtly.

"Oh." At almost any other time Harry would have excused himself and left, but he had had enough of being treated like nothing more than an annoyance. "Do you know if he'll be back today?"

The boy wrapped one arm more tightly around his girlfriend's waist, making her giggle and squirm. "Yes," he said.

"Do you know *when* he'll be back today?" Harry said, keeping his voice level with some difficulty.

Casually, the boy raked his free hand through his short, spiky hair. "What's it to you?"

Harry very nearly reached for his wand, but the dark-haired girl scowled at her boyfriend and pushed him away.

"Ian, leave the poor kid alone," she scolded. She gave Harry the first kind smile he had seen that day. "There's some reception he's at, some farewell party-thing for one of the research fellows. He's supposed to be back by five."

"Is there somewhere I can wait for him?" Harry asked eagerly.

"Depends on what you're here for," the boyfriend said with a snort.

"He's my uncle," Harry declared.

"Uncle?" The boy looked him up and down, then shrugged. "Well, you look normal enough."

"Ian!" the girl said, horrified.

Harry put on an affronted expression.

"He's not *really* my uncle," he said, with a haughtiness that came as much from exhaustion and ill-temper as any attempt at play-acting.

"He's a old friend of my dad's, or something like that, or anyway--"

The boy made a face. "Spare us the family tree."

The girl ignored her boyfriend's comment. "I'd tell you to go in and wait in his office, but it's--oh!"

She gave a little cry, because Harry had suddenly stepped forward and put his hand on the doorknob. He had been seized by an odd compulsion to try the door for himself. At his touch the handle had turned. The door opened a crack.

"Would you look at that!" the girl exclaimed, looking from Harry to her boyfriend. "Ian, I thought you said it was lock--"

Harry didn't waste another moment. He darted between them and through the open door, shutting it quickly behind him--though not too quickly to miss the words "little brat" being tossed over his head.

He was plunged into pitch darkness. He reached out, fumbling, and after two tentative steps forward his questing fingers struck wood and the cold, slightly damp metal of another doorknob. He turned it, and found that the inner door was open as well. Once he was safely inside, he turned around, his back against the door.

He was in Professor Stanton's office.

Having only seen the office from the vantage allowed by the magical mirror, he found that being in the room itself was more than a little disorienting. It wasn't as large as he had thought it was. Smaller than Dumbledore's office in Hogwarts, certainly. Yet there was the large wooden desk with the two chairs in front and the one behind. There was the grate--cold now, and free of ashes, the fire unneeded in the summer days. And there were the crowded shelves filled to overflowing with all kinds of books: several worn leather folios; a good amount of newer, hardcover editions with colourful dustjackets; a scattering of paperbacks. On a separate shelf was a row of back numbers of scholarly journals. Most of these were recent editions of the *Cambridge Journal of Social Anthropology*.

For lack of anything better to do--a glance at the clock on the desk told him it was ten minutes to five--he wandered around the room. He ran a hand along the shelves, idly reading a few titles. The names meant little to him--Social Customs of So-and-so, Cultural Studies of This-and-that. Quite a few of the books looked like textbooks,

anthropology and archaeology texts with a few history and sociology books tucked in among the lot. Some were in foreign languages; he noticed a tidy set of eight hardbound books on an upper shelf that had French titles. Behind the professor's desk was a section devoted entirely to reference materials: writing style guides, four or five foreign language dictionaries, a battered Latin grammar that might have been an old school exercise book, a thesaurus, and a copy of the Oxford English Dictionary that looked as though it had outlived several owners before coming to a dilapidated rest on that particular shelf.

Standing beside the desk, he turned around, searching for the place where the mirror must have been. On the wall opposite the desk there was a gap between two bookshelves, the right size and shape to accommodate an oversized, floor-length mirror. But in the gap there was only a framed Ordnance Survey map of Roman Britain hanging on the wall. A small table, like a writing-desk, sat below it.

Harry shuffled over to one of the two chairs in front of the large desk and sat down. He let his eyes drift.

As he sat and stared, he found that the room disturbed him. There was something about it didn't ring true. He stared and stared, and it took several moments of more careful scrutiny to realise what was bothering him.

There were no photographs anywhere in the room. Not a single snap of family or friends, or even of Professor Stanton himself. And apart from the framed map (which didn't really count) there were no other pieces of artwork, or knickknacks, or decorative objects. Nothing that might have hinted at any sort of hobby. There wasn't so much as a potted plant--nothing to suggest the slightest interest in the decoration of the room. And while it could be argued that the room was ideal for working, completely free from distractions, the lack of a personal touch was as distracting as the presence of objects would have been.

It felt sterile.

He shivered, suddenly cold.

Just as he was about to stand up and walk around the room again, he heard noises outside the door--the sound of muffled voices.

"Miss Merridew. Mr Featherstone. May I help you?"

"You told me to stop by to pick up my letter, sir. The recommendation?"

"So I did. You wanted it on University letterhead, correct?"

"Yeah--I mean, yes."

"I have it here...somewhere....ah, here you are. Good luck with it. The application deadline's next Friday?"

"I'm posting it tomorrow."

"Good for you. Best of luck, Miss Merridew."

"Thank you, sir."

"Oh, by the way, sir, your nephew's in your office."

There was a silence, broken only by Harry's own quickened breathing.

"...my nephew?"

"I--we said he could wait in there. I hope that's all right, seeing as how he's family and all. The door was open, and--"

"Thank you, Miss Merridew. If you'll be good enough excuse me...."

Harry leapt to his feet at the sound of the handle being turned. He heard the first door open, then the second, and then--

--for half a second, no longer than a heartbeat, he would have sworn that he was back in the little room off the library. Daunting and magisterial, dark robes swirling, the towering figure of Professor Stanton seemed to fill the room--

--but then he turned, and closed the door.

The billowing robes shrank in size, taking on the modern cut of a long dark overcoat. The Old One's presence lessened to the point where it was no longer overpowering, and one could breathe again.

Until he spoke.

"Ah. Mr Potter."

Harry swallowed. His chest felt as if a great hand was squeezing it, and his throat seemed to be sticking to itself.

"H...hello, sir," he said. It required effort to make the mechanisms of speech work properly.

"How are you today?" The question was quiet, polite, unemotional. The sort of question one might ask a stranger.

"I'm fine." Harry's reply was equally quiet and polite, though copying the lack of emotion was a strain. "And you, sir?"

"Quite well, thank you. And your friends?"

"They're fine, too, sir."

There was a moment when neither of them seemed to know where the conversation ought to be going, or even whose turn it was to speak next. Neither moved from where they stood.

Abruptly, Professor Stanton held up a hand. Harry couldn't stop himself flinching, but a burning relief that was closer to shame swept over him when the hand merely gestured toward the two chairs on the far side of the desk.

"You *can* sit down, Mr Potter," Professor Stanton said dryly. "And take off your coat, if you wish. I'm not about to order you out into the rain, not after you've been to such lengths to find me in the first place." He slipped an arm out of his own water-spotted raincoat. "Do sit, please."

Obediently, Harry sat, perching on the very edge of the nearest chair. He took off his raincoat but held onto it, clutching it to his chest in an unconscious attempt to shield himself.

Professor Stanton hung up his overcoat and brushed a few stray droplets of water from his suit-jacket.

"Miss Granger and Mr Weasley are here with you, I trust?" His face was still turned away from Harry.

"No, sir," Harry said. "Just me."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir."

Professor Stanton paused in the act of adjusting the knot of his tie. He murmured, more to himself than to Harry:

"It takes courage to go alone."

Harry could not bear it any longer. The awful tightness in his chest felt as if it would crush his lungs. He said, wildly, "Sir, I wanted to come by to tell you that I'm--"

"Harry."

He broke off, the last of his pent-up breath escaping in a hiss like air from a punctured tyre. He glanced up.

Will had turned to look at him. He was smiling a strange, sad smile.

"It's all right," Will said quietly. "In all honesty, I should be the one apologising, not you."

Harry's mouth opened, but not a sound came out.

"Can I offer you something?" Before Harry could answer, Will was already moving toward the door. "I don't keep much here, only tea things and the like. I take my meals in Hall most nights."

"Oh, I don't want to--" Harry began anxiously.

"Tea, then," Will interrupted decisively, as if he hadn't heard a word of protest. "And we'll see what else I have at hand. I won't be a moment--the gyp room's just at the end of the corridor."

He disappeared through the door, leaving a very baffled Harry alone in the room once more. Within seconds he was back with two teacups, saucers and spoons, a sugar bowl, and a creamer balanced precariously in his hands. He deposited everything on his desk and vanished again. When he returned a few minutes later, he was carrying a plain white china teapot, a plate, and--to Harry's great delight--a package of chocolate-covered digestive biscuits.

"You're in luck," Will remarked as he opened the box of biscuits. "I bought these only a few days ago." He arranged some biscuits on the plate, then picked up the teapot. "Black or white?"

Harry blinked. "Er, white, please."

"Sugar?"

"Yes, please."

Will handed him a brimming cup and pushed the sugar bowl toward him. "Would you care for anything else?"

"Oh, no, thank you. This is great...lovely." And it was. The last food he had eaten was a meagre and distinctly soggy cheese sandwich that he had bought on the train, and though hot butterbeer was always delicious it did nothing for one's appetite. The tea was smooth and flavourful, and the biscuits tasted...like biscuits. Simple, normal, chocolate-covered.

He sipped tea and nibbled biscuits until he had taken the edge off his hunger. The familiar ritual had a calming effect, though he did not realise how calming it was until he found that he was chatting away quite easily, talking to Will as if being in the older man's office was the most natural thing in the world.

"I didn't know you worked here," he said, taking another biscuit. "I went to the Social Anthropology building before I came here, and the lady at the desk told me--"

"Ah." Will shook his head ruefully. "So you had the misfortune to run into our Mrs Harriman."

"Yes...er, no!" Flustered, Harry corrected himself. "No...I mean, that is...."

Will laughed quietly. "There's no need to flatter her to me. Most of the undergraduates call her 'The Harridan'--though that is warm praise compared to what some my colleagues have said about her."

"She wasn't very nice," Harry confessed.

"She's been the Departmental Secretary since before I was first an undergraduate here. I still haven't determined exactly what I did to end up in her bad books, lo those many years ago." Will set his cup on his desk. "But she sent you here, and I expect you told the porter the same thing you told her...that I was your uncle."

Harry took another sip of tea. "Mm."

"Very clever of you. And that same story got you into my office. Incidentally, how does it feel to be on the other side of the mirror?"

"I like it." Harry looked around. With another person in the room, it didn't feel sterile at all. "It's...old. But it's a good sort of old. Like Hogwarts."

"That's because you're seeing it as I see it." Will tapped his fingertips together lightly. "Try squinting at the grate, and tell me if you notice anything out of the ordinary."

Harry did as Will asked. He stared hard at the grate, and all of a sudden his vision wavered, and he saw an smooth concrete slab where the polished metal and open space of the fire had been.

"It's--it's blocked up." He rubbed his eyes, and suddenly the grate was there again. He looked to Will. "What happened to it?"

"When those who do not possess magical abilities enter this room, they see what looks like any other office of a rather junior Lecturer at this College." Will made a sweeping gesture, indicating the room at large. "Bricked-in fireplace, cheap modern furniture, and so on. But you see the room as I see it--something a little less modern and a good deal more comfortable."

Harry was fascinated. "Did you make it that way?"

Will nodded. "During term time, I spend an average of nine hours a day in this room. Between supervisions, research, marking essays, and the thousand other things I do here, I think I can be forgiven for wanting to make my work environment rather more habitable."

Harry silently agreed. He drank the last of his tea, grimacing at its overly sweet taste.

Will held out the teapot. "Care for more?"

"No, thank you."

He insisted on helping Will clear the tea things away, and followed the professor down the corridor to a tiny kitchen crammed in a space barely large enough for two people. The crockery was rinsed and set to dry, the milk and sugar and biscuits returned to their proper shelves. They made short work of the clean-up, and Will led Harry back to his office.

"Now," he said when the door was closed, "you were speaking before, and I interrupted you because I believe that I do owe you an apology. I must confess that I'm very surprised to see you here at all after what I said to you."

Harry held back a shudder at the memory. "It's all right."

"No, Mr Potter." Will shook his head. "I lost my temper and took out my anger on you, even though I knew full well that you were in no condition to face it. For that, I am sorry."

"But not for what you said." The words were out of Harry's mouth before he even knew what he was saying.

A fleeting, ironic smile crossed Will's face. "There aren't many who would take such criticism from their closest friends, let alone a passing acquaintance."

"I don't think of you like that," Harry said forcefully, sitting up very straight. "As an acquaintance, I mean. And...."

His stomach wrenched. This was what he had come to say--he had to say it just right.

"And you were right," he continued in a rush, scared that he would lose his nerve. "I *was* being stupid. Everyone kept telling me that it wasn't my fault, but it always sounded like they were trying to make me feel better. I never believed it, not really. But when you said it...no one had ever said it like that before. Like they weren't just saying it to make me feel better. Like it was the truth."

He stopped. His legs were trembling, and his hands were clenched in his lap.

Will looked thoughtful. "Was that what you came to tell me?"

Harry nodded, miserable.

Will stood, and walked around his desk.

Cringing, Harry looked up at the Old One's solemn, severe face, and felt the beginnings of a cold sweat on his brow.

"Then I hereby absolve you, Mr Potter, for the most horrific and terrible crime of being human." Will's voice was deathly serious as he passed one hand over Harry's head in a manner reminiscent of a benediction. "Go now, my child, and see that it doesn't happen again."

The awful tension that had been humming in the air snapped like a rubber band.

Harry burst out laughing.

At first he tried to stifle it, but the laughter refused to be stifled. He laughed until his sides hurt, until tears came, until he was falling out of his chair. He clung to the arm of the chair with one hand, held his aching ribs with the other, and wheezed helplessly.

When he was finally able to wipe his streaming eyes, he saw Will holding out a glass of water, regarding him with a half-amused, half-concerned expression.

"Drink this," he ordered, pressing the glass into Harry's hand.

Harry drank, and the cool water ran down his throat and washed away the last of the hysterical laughter. He eased back into his chair, feeling tired and giddy and very, very relieved all at once. At last he composed himself, brushing away the last of the tears and folding his hands in his lap.

"Thank heaven that's over," Will said when he had settled back in his own chair. "So how is everyone? Enjoying the summer?"

"Everyone's well," Harry said. He told Will about Ron and Ginny and the Burrow, about his letter to Hermione and her response. He talked about living with Sirius and Remus, about Wookey Went and the quiet peace of the countryside and what it was like to live in a real house with a real family. He talked about the end of school, and the late nights of frantic revising for exams, and how Hermione had broken every single school record for the O.W.L.s and how no one had been at all surprised when she did. His own marks had been very good, though it had taken him a while to get used to using his new wand.

And while he talked, Will sat in his chair and listened, and his sympathetic silence made it all too easy for Harry to turn from the good times to the bad ones. He spoke of Hagrid's face, of Snape's hands and eyes, of the desolation he had seen on the faces of the students in Slytherin House when McGonagall announced that Professor Vector would be their

acting Head of House for the remaining weeks of term. He spoke of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team awarding the victory to Slytherin for their final game, of the tearful Leaving Feast and McGonagall's toast to those who had died, and how everyone had stood and raised their glasses high and drank to the memory of Draco Malfoy.

He spoke about all these things, and his voice did not falter until he came the letter from Mrs Figg.

"She wanted me to tell you that she fought," he said, struggling to remember the exact wording. "That...that she fought, and she didn't give in without a fight."

Will closed his eyes.

"She was a good woman," he said quietly, sorrow running deep beneath his even words. "I will always feel that it was an honour to have known her, and a rare privilege to have been her colleague."

'Not that I care what he thinks of me...it's the principle of the thing.' Harry hoped that Mrs Figg had known what Will thought of her. He thought she would have been pleased.

"Can I--" He caught himself, then tried again. "*May I* ask you a question?"

The Old One nodded, pleased with the correction. "By all means."

"Why did you make them forget?"

Will did not answer right away. His gaze turned vacant and cloudy, sliding past Harry and over his shoulder. Harry glanced back, and realised that Will was looking at the place where the mirror had been.

"Why should they remember me?" Will said after a long pause. "It was your magic that defeated Voldemort, not mine. Your friends helped you to cast his own spell back at him. I was there to help you, nothing more."

"But you were there," Harry said insistently. "You saved Professor Snape. You brought Dumbledore back from...from where he was. And I know you brought the Aurors onto the Quidditch pitch." *And you saved me. You saved all our lives, and now no one will ever know it.*

Will drummed his fingers on the desk. "A variation on the Portkey magic was already under development, crafted to link to a person's location rather than a fixed place. It was Albus Dumbledore's idea to link the Portkey to me, and after a satisfactory testing of its

abilities it was decided that I would arrive first, and they would follow."

From Cornwall. "So you never got my letter at all."

"Not until after the fact. Though I will say that you showed excellent judgement in sending it."

Harry felt his cheeks grow hot from the unexpected compliment. "But I still don't know why everyone had to forget."

"Everyone'?" Will echoed, faintly disapproving. "Surely not everyone."

"Well, no," Harry said slowly. "Ron and Ginny remember everything. At least I think they do. And so does Hermione, and Neville and Colin." He frowned, thinking hard. "And...and Sirius and Remus, and Ron said that his dad...."

He trailed off, and bit his lip.

"The people who need to remember will remember," Will said simply. "As for the others...it is better if they forget. Does that not make sense?"

Harry wanted to say no, it didn't make sense; no, it wasn't better. But Will's eyes were boring into his own, so he gave the tiniest of nods and said, meekly:

"Yes, sir."

Will's face went suddenly stern. "Now, if I may ask a question of my own, exactly what were Miss Granger and Mr Weasley playing at with their little trick during the battle? *I* certainly don't recall teaching you anything of that sort."

"I don't know," Harry said honestly. "They wouldn't--I mean, they never told me. I never asked them." And he hadn't. He hadn't thought to ask.

"I see." Will stroked his chin contemplatively. "Well, the next time you see them, please thank them for me. It was well done."

"I'll tell them," Harry promised, a vicarious thrill of pleasure running through him.

They talked for a little while longer, and soon the topic of conversation turned to the upcoming school year. Harry answered a question or two about sixth-year classes and preparation for the N.E.W.T.s, but his answers were monosyllabic, never more than a sentence.

"You don't sound as if you're looking forward to this coming year," Will remarked tautly after Harry had answered "Mm" for the fourth time in a row.

Harry looked down at his shoes. "Would you?"

"It's a different world you're living in," Will said, matter-of-factly. "You've fought long and hard for it, and you deserve to enjoy it."

"So everyone's been telling me."

"And they're quite right."

Harry sighed, and dug his toes into the carpet. "I can't believe it's really over. It doesn't seem possible--"

"That an ordinary boy could have saved the world from the powers of evil and darkness?" The irony in Will's voice was palpable, rapier-sharp, though the light in his eyes was kind.

Harry scowled at his own idiocy. "Stupid, I know."

Will shook his head. "Not stupid. Short-sighted, yes--but certainly understandable."

Harry didn't think it was so understandable. For five years he had lived in a world where people had been hurt for nothing more than being in the same place with him, or being someplace where he should have been and wasn't, or being someplace where he shouldn't have been and was. And now all that was supposed to be over and done with--and yet he still woke up with green lights flashing in the back of his eyes and the sound of his mother's dying screams fading in his ears.

"How did you cope?" he said suddenly.

"Cope?" Will looked mildly puzzled. "With what?"

"With...." His hands flailed, tracing shapes that had no meaning to illustrate an idea that didn't exist. "With everything."

There was a beat of silence.

"Everything?" Will repeated, doubtfully.

"Well...." Words failed him yet again. He decided to give up on explanations. "Everything."

The Old One studied him for another beat, then folded his arms across his chest.

"I honestly don't know," he admitted with disconcerting candour.
"But when I do figure it out, you'll be the first person I tell."

Harry grimaced.

Stupid, he thought angrily. *What a stupid question.*

"Not at all," Will said, startling him out of his black thoughts. "You've earned the right to be completely and hopelessly confused. But you've also earned the right to shove that confusion aside and get on with things."

"I wish I knew how," he sighed, hearing too late how dangerously close to whining his wish sounded.

Will's eyes narrowed to slits.

"Have you learned nothing?" He sounded very cross, the schoolmaster who has discovered that his star pupil has not been paying attention to the lecture. "Your friends will show you how."

"My friends?"

Will gave him a look of infinite patience.

"Go live, Harry," he said, gently. "For pity's sake, don't spend the rest of your life sitting around in darkened rooms, waiting for the other shoe to fall. Read a book. Read twenty. Go for a walk and don't return home until dinnertime. Go on holiday, go abroad, even--there's far more to the world there than this little island. Or you could play that sport you seem to enjoy so much--Quidditch, wasn't it?"

Harry's mouth hung open.

"After all," Will continued, quite naturally, "you weren't born solely to defeat the Dark Lord. Why should your life end with his?"

Behind and slightly above the open mouth, Harry's mind was working furiously. The way Will had put it--it couldn't be as simple as all that. It couldn't.

Or *could* it?

"But what about you?" he said, grasping at the first coherent idea that formed in his head.

Will tilted his head to one side. "What about me?"

"What are you going to do?"

"The same thing I've been doing for some time now." He waved one hand, the same sweeping gesture that managed to encompass the room

and all its contents. "I'll be here, if you should have need of me. You know I can always be found."

Harry's mouth twisted. "That's not what I meant."

"I know," Will replied. "But what becomes of me is not your concern. I'll be here long after you're gone. That is all you need to know."

The last sentence was spoken in the tone of voice that forbade all questioning. Harry knew that the subject was closed. But there was something else, something that had not entered his mind until a moment before.

"Could..." he began timidly. "Would you mind if I stopped by again, sometime?"

"You...." It was Will's turn to be astonished. He stared at Harry as if he could not believe his ears. "You what?"

"If it's all right," Harry added quickly, with a nervous grin. "I mean, it wouldn't look right if your 'nephew' didn't come to visit once in a while."

Will ran his fingers through his hair. Twice, he opened his mouth to speak, but shut it again. His eyes had gone entirely out of focus, not seeing anything.

"Is...is something wrong?" Harry ventured to ask. It was deeply unsettling to see Will Stanton looking so...*lost*.

"No, no," Will said distractedly. He blinked several times, and he seemed to be pulling himself together. "I...I'd like that. I'd like that very much."

Harry grinned, for real this time. "Great."

Will appeared to be about to say something, but at that moment the little clock on far end of his desk chimed seven strokes.

Harry checked his watch. It was indeed seven o'clock. He had been in the room for over two hours, though it had felt like barely twenty minutes had passed.

A rustle and a squeak made him glance up, and he saw that Will had pushed back his chair and stood up. He was buttoning his suit-jacket.

"Well then, what are you sitting 'round here for?" Will said briskly, doing up the last button and striding toward the office door. He laid a hand on the knob, and looked over at Harry. "Go on!"

Now it was Harry's turn to stare blankly. "What?"

"Go on, I said." Will tapped his foot on the ground, showing every sign of impatience. "Leave me to my work. This is no place for a young man like yourself."

"But I--"

"Mr Potter." The composed professor, the austere Old One, had returned in full force. "Do I need to make this a formal request?"

Harry knew that tone of voice all too well. He stood, his knees protesting at the unwelcome change of position, and collected his now-dry raincoat. But when he reached the door, he stopped, and held out his hand.

"Thank you, sir...Will," he said, in an adult voice that did not sound like his own. "Thank you for everything."

Will smiled at him and took his hand, gripping it firmly.

Their hands had barely touched when, acting on a sudden impulse, Harry let go of Will's hand and threw his arms around the older man.

The Old One stiffened at the unexpected physical contact. A soft, surprised sound somewhere between a gasp and a cough forced its way out of his throat.

For a instant, Harry was horribly afraid that he'd done something wrong, but the fear dissolved when he felt the touch of a hand on his shoulders, and then a gentle pressure as Will returned the hug.

They stood like that for...Harry never knew how long they stood there. The even rhythm of Will's heartbeat blended with the measured ticking of the desk clock and the blood rushing in his ears, and Time seemed to stretch all out of proportion. Whether it was his imagination, or whether it was some greater magic of the Light...he didn't know.

He didn't care.

Then, after a space of time that might have been seconds or minutes or hours, the pressure was gone, and Will's hands were on Harry's shoulders, and he was looking down at Harry with the most unguarded expression the young man had ever seen. It was as if emotion itself had crept up behind him and taken him unawares. His eyes shone with warmth and pride and an ancient, ageless radiance that made Harry's heart swell, beating faster.

When he finally spoke, his voice was no more than a husky whisper, but it was so thick with emotion that Harry felt his own throat close up in response.

"Go well, Harry Potter," he said. "And may the Boy Who Lived live well, and be happy."

Harry smiled back, and nodded, because there was nothing he could say.

There was nothing he needed to say.

* * *

The varnished oak door closed behind him, and he walked the length of the corridor and down the flights of stairs. His feet felt strangely light, as if his body was floating an inch or two above the ground with every step.

He pushed open the glass-panelled door and stepped into the courtyard. The heavy grey clouds had broken up, revealing patchy blue sky above. A gentle wind pushed the clouds further apart and rustled the leaves on the trees, flicking drops of water into the air like spray from a garden hose. Harry paused on the step, inhaling the light, sweet fragrance of the rain-washed summer evening, before he started walking once more.

He had the grounds all to himself as he followed the crushed stone path through the archway and around the perfectly tended lawn of the first courtyard. The porter nodded to him from the office in the covered entryway. Harry nodded back, not really seeing the man.

There was the little door, the keyhole in the ancient wooden gate. He side-stepped the sign that proclaimed that the College was 'Closed to Visitors', passed through the little door, and was back in the main street once more.

Just outside the gate of the College, he paused again, breathless. For the briefest of moments as he passed through the door, he had thought that he had heard music--a sweet, yearning, bell-like strain whistling past on the breeze. It caught at the deepest part of him, but as he turned and raised his head to better hear the last notes the thread of music vanished, fading into the dimness of things almost remembered.

He checked his father's watch. It was five minutes after seven.

Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his raincoat, he set off down the street, leaving Christ's College behind him. He was heading in the direction of the railway station, and there was a return ticket in his pocket...but there were two Galleons in there as well.

He smiled to himself as he raised his wand hand. Yes, he had paid for the train ticket, but the Knight Bus would be faster.

He couldn't wait to get home.

*When the Dark comes rising, six shall turn it back
Three from the circle, three from the track
Wood, bronze, iron; water, fire, stone
Five shall return, and one go alone.*

*Enter, Watchman of the Light
Grant to us your inner sight
Enter, for the time draws near
Power will erase our fear
Enter, lest the darkness win
We the Six now call you in*