

# **A Fist Full of Galleons**

by

DrT

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## **Chapter I**

July, 1995

Dumbledore blinked in confusion, and then demanded, "What do you mean Harry is missing?"

Moody shrugged tiredly. He had a long way to go to recover from his recent ordeal, which was why he had agreed to take an occasional turn checking up on the Potter boy. "The boy is gone, and his trunk and owl with him. I would have checked with the Muggles except for two things."

"And what are those?"

Moody smiled grimly. "First of all, you said I was just to look after him, and not to interfere unless he was attacked by Death Eaters. Wasn't easy not stepping in last week when his uncle slapped him around a bit."

Dumbledore winced; he had never intended for Harry to suffer (at least to such a degree), but he felt trapped by his previous decisions. "Yes, well, what was the other reason?"

"They weren't there. Had Figg ask around, and none of them have been seen since last Friday night."

"Four days ago. . . ."

"Exactly. Potter hasn't been seen since last Tuesday, when his uncle. . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know, you told me." Dumbledore frowned again and reluctantly made a decision. "Come, Alastor, let us see what is going on."

"Exactly where're we apparating to?" Moody demanded.

Dumbledore fished a knut out of his pocket and made it into a portkey for the pair of them rather than answering. A few seconds later, the pair disappeared.

\*

The pair appeared in what had been Harry's bedroom. The two noted the signs of a rapid departure, as well as various splotches of dried blood.

"There're at least three different sets here," Moody said. "Last week was not the first time. . . ." Moody's moving eye had stopped, angling down and to the outside of his face.

"What is it?"

"Follow me," Moody stated.

Moody led Dumbledore down into the kitchen. "I couldn't see this from the outside," Moody muttered.

"See what?" Dumbledore demanded, not happy about being left in the dark.

Moody cast the bubble-head charm on himself. "Check the rubbish bin. Under the sink."

Dumbledore quickly cast the same charm on himself and peeked into the bin in the cabinet under the sink, but just as quickly dropped the lid and slammed the door.

"Potter's owl, I take?"

Dumbledore could merely nod. Hedwig had been torn apart.

"They killed his familiar," Moody growled. Dumbledore could only nod.

"Are you at all surprised the boy ran?" Moody demanded. "This on top of the abuse and what the lad endured during the TriWizard?"

"We must find him," Dumbledore stated, but then he frowned in confusion.

"What is it?"

"The tracking instruments in my office . . . they did not show any trauma, and show him to still be under his family's protection."

"When was the last time you calibrated them? Did they ever show his injuries at school?"

Dumbledore flushed. "I never checked them at school, because I knew his condition."

"Then they are likely useless to us, although you might as well check them." Moody frowned. "We need to find the Muggles. . . . Albus! There are three Muggle police cars pulling up!"

The two wizards disillusioned themselves, and went to discover what was going on.

Two pairs of police officers started to canvas the neighborhood while two officers and a pair of plain clothes detectives unlocked the front door of the Dursleys. As soon as the front door closed, Dumbledore enchanted the quartet. He and Moody separated them into two pairs, quickly questioned them, did a light memory charm on each, and then left them to their investigations, taking the return portkey back to Hogwarts.

"What did you get?" Dumbledore asked as he sat down.

"The constables didn't know much," Moody snapped. "Tell me what the detectives knew."

"The Dursleys' died in an auto accident, and from their description, I do not think magic was involved. The police are interested because there was ample evidence that Vernon Dursley was escaping the country with a large amount

of money, and a quick check at his employment revealed a recent major theft, as well as possible long-term small-scale embezzlement."

"So, they killed the boy's owl, he threatened them and ran away, and then his relatives did a bunk just in case he could carry through?"

"On the surface at least, that seems the most likely story," Dumbledore agreed.

"I'll talk to Shack," Moody said. "He's worked with the Muggles before this." Dumbledore nodded. "Still, that leaves the main question."

"Indeed. Where has Harry gone?"

\*

"So, Harry was SAFE with Petunia and her walruses?" Sirius sneered the next afternoon. Dumbledore had just finished giving Sirius, Remus, and Molly Weasley a fairly expurgated summary of what had transpired. "Tell me, o mighty leader of the light, how abused was Harry really?"

Molly had about to scold Sirius for disrespecting the leader of Light Magic (at least in the considered opinion of many in Britain) when her brain finally made some connections, making the color drain from her usually florid face.

"What is it, Molly?" Remus asked.

"What the boys said that summer . . . it must have been true!"

"What did which boys say what summer?" Sirius demanded.

"The twins said that . . . that they hadn't just picked Harry up. . . . They claimed they rescued him . . . that . . . that they had had to pull those bars off of his window to free him. . . ."

"They actually had the bars and you didn't believe them!" Sirius shouted.

"The twins are a lot like we were," Remus pointed out. "We would have picked up some to give verisimilitude to an otherwise. . . ."

"Shut it!" Sirius commanded. "You always resented Harry for taking up Lily's time. . . ."

"No more than you resented Lily and Harry for taking up James'," Remus retorted. "It was part of growing up on all our parts that was torn apart by Peter and Voldemort."

Molly looked at the pair with disgust, forgetting how she had felt years before, before she had transferred most of her energy into controlling her children.

Sirius ignored them both and turned to Dumbledore. "What are you doing to find Harry?"

"Alastor should be here any minute," Dumbledore said. "However, the instruments I thought were tracking Harry apparently went out of order when he came to Hogwarts his proximity to them seems to have overwhelmed them, and they just have repeatedly reported the same information they did at the time he was physically well and in a place where he was supposed to be."

Before Sirius could continue, the quartet heard Moody's peg-leg out in the corridor. He came into the kitchen of Grimmauld Place and sat down heavily. "No news?" Dumbledore asked.

"Some, but none immediately useful," Moody replied. "First of all, we confirmed that Potter was not in the vehicle with the Dursleys. Shack checked the car, and there was no magical tampering with it." Moody looked up. "However, according to the Muggle experts, it seems as if someone who knew cars had tampered with it. Not sure myself how the things work, but something called break lines' had been fixed to fail, and when they failed,

Dursley couldn't stop the car. Kept going right into an intersection and were rammed by a pair of lorries, one from each direction. Crushed everything."

"I don't see how Harry could have had anything to do with that," Dumbledore stated.

"Don't see it myself," Moody admitted, which was a relief to the others.

"Shack said the Muggle police examiners know their job, and they said it was done by experts, which Potter certainly isn't. It's possible Dursley had his fingers into some other dirty pies besides theft and mid-level embezzlement. It's also possible young Dursley was the cause."

"Oh?"

Moody nodded. "You may or may not know that the Muggles have been having problems over the last few decades with illicit drugs. Opium, hemp, and other substances. They are, to Muggles, addicting, just like tobacco is to them. The boy's luggage was filled with over a pound of processed hemp and several bags of pills and powdered cocaine. The police are pretty excited, as those amounts show that the Dursley boy was either selling the drugs, or possibly had stolen the drugs from someone who was. In those amounts, it's possible someone was after him, even if he was only what one officer called a mule'."

"A what?" Molly asked before anyone else could.

"A mule is a pack animal. In the drug trade it apparently means the same thing; a low-level agent who carries the drugs, so that the more important people won't get caught actually in possession of illegal drugs."

"From what Harry has said, Dudley seemed like he could be the low-level muscle type," Sirius mused. "If he was supposed to be delivering those drugs when his parents forced him to join them in running for whatever reason. . . ."

"Someone might have had them tracked down and eliminated," Moody



agreed. "The total amount was worth well-over two thousand Galleons when sold." The amount made even Dumbledore blink.

"Yes, that was a fine family you placed Harry with," Sirius sneered. This time, Molly joined him and even Remus looked faintly disapproving.

"In any case, the Dursleys seem to be a washout as far as Potter's current whereabouts are concerned," Moody went on. "The police were going to put out an alert for him as a possible suspect. Did you know that the Dursleys told the neighbors that Harry Potter was a congenital criminal who spent most of the year in a facility for delinquent adolescents!" All four were glaring at Dumbledore now.

Moody went on, "Shack talked to his contacts, and the boy is now listed as a run-away and the neighbors are being told that it was actually the Dursley boy who was the delinquent. They are collecting a lot of stories of bullying and worse from the younger children of the district, and putting together quite a case against the Dursley boy's gang. Still, that's none of our concern. The important thing is, if Potter is hiding in the Muggle world, the police should find him, and when they do, they'll contact Shackbolt."

Dumbledore nodded. "Harry might try to contact his friends. Molly, you'll see to things if he contacts your sons?" She nodded. He turned to Lupin and Moody. "After the Weasleys, Granger is the next most likely. Remus, see her as soon as possible. I'll give you the addresses of the other boys in his year and his Quidditch teammates. I really don't think there is anyone else he might contact."

Dumbledore turned to Sirius, who glared back and said, "I'll see to Harry if he comes to me. I might send you a note."

Dumbledore decided not to press the issue. Finding the Chosen One was the most important thing. Deciding how to handle him afterwards could wait upon events.

\*

Despite competent, if at best moderately intense, searches by the Muggle authorities, and intense if fairly incompetent searches by the Order of the Phoenix, nearly a month passed without any sign that Harry Potter still existed. One Monday morning early in August, however, a standard post owl for hire appeared at the Burrow and presented its leg to Ron Weasley. Ron took the letter and exclaimed, "Hey, it's from Harry!" as the owl flew off, obviously instructed not to wait for a reply.

Molly Weasley reached over and took the envelope from his hands. "This could be important, Ron. I shall take it to the Headmaster immediately."

"But. . . ." Ron started to protest.

"But nothing, young man!" his mother corrected him. "Make certain you wash and stack the dishes and cutlery." She hurried to the fireplace and soon flooded away.

The five Weasley children simply sat, shocked. When one finally started to say something, Fred snapped, "Don't say anything, Percy."

"Mum may have had to report the letter to Dumbledore, but it was Ron's letter," George agreed. "He at least should have been allowed to read it before she grabbed it."

"That was odd," Percy allowed, and then shrugged and went back to his porridge.

\*

Hermione Granger was home alone, as she often was during the summer vacation. Some days, she went with her parents to answer the phones, allowing the receptionist some time off, but usually only once or twice a week. The rest of the time, she stayed home and read, both magical tomes

and to catch up on Muggle technology and other advances. Her parents did not want her to lose touch with the regular world.

When the mail came through the flap, therefore, she moved slowly through the house, reading a book on HTML mostly thinking about ways she might be able to incorporate the basic ideas into a magical book with internal links.

She picked up the mail and took it to the kitchen to sort. Only when in front of the little table her parents used to sort mail and pay household bills did she carefully mark her place in the book and flip through the mail, muttering, "Electricity, circular, circular, Mum's romance book catalogue. . . . Harry!" Hermione dropped the rest of the mail and stared for a moment at the plain envelope, but she, even more than Ron, recognized Harry's scrawling handwriting.

Hermione was startled by a loud POP' behind her. Swirling around, she saw a woman she did not recognize grab the envelope and say, "Right, I'll give this to the Headmaster." With another POP', the woman disappeared.

To say Hermione was outraged was putting it mildly. She had a natural inclination for authority, but in this case the clear violation of her legal rights easily put this agent of the Headmaster's into the wrong. It also made her wonder if the Headmaster might not be as light' as she had been lead to believe.

\*

That evening, Dumbledore showed up at Grimmauld Place. "Where is it?" he demanded.

"Where is what?" Sirius asked mildly, which told the Headmaster much of what he wanted to know.

"You know what! The letter from Harry!"

"I can assure you, to my knowledge, there is no letter here for you from Harry," Sirius replied.

"You know perfectly well I mean the letter Harry sent you!"

"What concern is of yours?" Sirius asked.

"I demand you turn that letter over! We need to find Harry!"

"Is that what you told the Weasley boy and the girl?" Sirius demanded. "Did you even give them a chance to read their own, PRIVATE, letters? You didn't, did you?"

"Give me that letter!"

"Or what?" Sirius shouted back. "You'll put me back in Azkaban, like you did before?"

"I had nothing to do with your being sent to Azkaban!"

"Oh, you had nothing directly to do with it," Sirius sneered. "You looked over every transcript of every trial and questioning session of every accused Death Eater several times, looking for information, didn't you? Don't lie, you had to sign them out, and I had someone take a look. You never questioned why I was never given a trial, let alone never questioned, unlike every other accused Death Eater! You may not have known I was innocent, but you never really knew I was guilty, either!" Sirius stood and faced Dumbledore nose to nose. "You were happy I was in Azkaban, so that YOU could illegally throw Harry into prison with those Dursleys."

"How dare you!"

"How dare I what?" Sirius suddenly sat down. "Here's what you are going to do. First, you going to stop trying to read my mind I built up some mental defenses against dementors; mere Legilimency is nothing. Second, you're

going to let me read the other two letters, and then you will return them to their rightful owners with apologies. And only then will I show you my letter." Sirius smiled. "And if you're thinking of using your wand, you should think again."

"Why?" Dumbledore asked coldly.

"Because there are three witnesses, and two of us already have our wands drawn," Moody said from behind Dumbledore.

Dumbledore turned and saw Moody, Lupin, and Arthur Weasley. "If you all trust me so little, it will be difficult to work together.

"We've never worked with you, we've worked for you," Moody responded. "Someone has to be in charge, and that is you. Never think we have the kind of loyalty to you that Voldemort demands from his people, though."

Dumbledore was shocked. "You . . . you think I am Dark?"

"That Dark? Of course not," Arthur responded. "However, was it necessary to break a Muggle law?"

"What law?"

"Stealing mail is an offense," Arthur pointed out.

"Most of our interactions with Muggles would be considered illegal, unethical, or both, to them," Dumbledore pointed out.

"Molly will not be stealing our children's mail for you again," Arthur said simply. "Well, not before they had a chance to read it at least."

"And yes," Sirius stated, "your actions today were Dark. I know Darkness; I grew up surrounded by it. It starts by putting yourself higher than common decency, to think your goals serve the common good. . . ."

"I believe he calls it the Greater Good'," Remus broke in.

"Fine, Greater Good, then," Sirius retorted. "It may or may not, but every time you break common decency, you should regret it, and make amends, even if what you did turned out to be right."

"Like your treatment of your elf?" Dumbledore asked mildly.

Sirius flushed.

"So, we're all sinners," Remus pointed out. "Do our sins excuse yours? You never answered Sirius' statements."

"I did not ignore his plight because it served my ends!"

The four men glared at the Headmaster, who glared back for a moment, but then sheepishly admitted, ashamed, "I did not knowingly ignore his plight because it served my ends. I . . . it may be possible that there is some truth to the idea in that I should have investigated, and did not."

"And since the letters did not lead you to Harry. . . ?" Arthur demanded.

"I shall have them returned," Dumbledore agreed. He sighed and pulled the two letters out and laid them on the table.

Arthur picked up the letter to Ron and read, " Dear Ron. You may have heard that I ran away from the damn Dursleys. Well, I would say that I escaped from them. They were worse this summer than usual. They murdered Hedwig because a neighbor saw her fly to my window, and they were worse to me before than they had been at time other than after second year you remember, when they had me locked in my room 23 hours a day and you had to rescue me. I had more than enough and left. I've since heard on the Muggle wireless that they died in a car crash. I wish I could say I was sorry to hear it, but I can't. Considering the hell the Headmaster put me in when they were alive, I

hate to think what kind of prison he will put me in if I ever put myself under his full control again. Sorry I can't tell you more, your parents would certainly find out and tell Dumbledore. I don't know if I'll be at school next year or not. If so, I will likely not see you or be able to contact before the train leaves'." Arthur looked up. "It's just signed Harry'."

"You may as well hear mine then," Sirius said. He pulled out the letter. "It's almost exactly the same. Dear Sirius. You may have heard from the people Dumbledore had spying on me that I ran away from the damn Dursleys." Sirius looked at Dumbledore. "Obviously your guards weren't as competent as they thought."

"Unless Potter somehow found out since," Moody pointed out.

"Possible, but unlikely," Sirius agreed. He went back to the letter. " Well, I would say that I escaped from them. They were worse this summer than usual. They murdered Hedwig because a neighbor saw her fly to my window, and they were worse to me before than they had been other than after second year when the Weasley brothers had to rescue me. I had more than enough and left. I've since heard on the Muggle wireless that they died in a car crash. I wish I could say I was sorry to hear it, but I can't. Considering the hell the Headmaster put me in when they were alive, I hate to think what kind of prison he will put me in if I ever put myself under his full control again. About the only thing worse than Dursleys would be Snape, especially if the stories of what he has his Slytherins do for him and to him have any truth to them'." Sirius glared at Dumbledore. "If Snivellus touches Harry, especially that way, I'll kill him and then you."

Dumbledore flushed and stated, "I can assure you that Severus does NOT have inappropriate contact with students!"

"I noticed that you let a great deal of what should be considered intolerable behavior slide by when it was Severus doing it," Remus remarked. "Don't be so certain he isn't doing things you are unaware of. And I really don't think Harry would make such a story up. They may or may not be true, but there

are obviously rumors of some sort."

"I shall make certain they are false then," Dumbledore ground out.

Sirius went back to the letter. " You're my god father. Even if you're on the run, can't you do anything? Don't put yourself in danger to do it, but does Dumbledore respect your authority or not."

"Seems to be a very open question," Remus muttered.

"Sorry I can't tell you more right now. I don't know if I'll be at school next year or not. If so, I will likely not see you before Christmas, unless Dumbledore interferes then , too. Your god son, Harry'."

Dumbledore said nothing but reached towards Hermione's letter. Remus snatched it first, and handed it to Moody.

" Dear Hermione. I am sure have heard by now that I ran away from the Dursleys, from the media if not from Dumbledore's people, since he has had people spying on me but not helping me. I would say that I escaped from them. They were worse this summer than usual. They murdered Hedwig because a neighbor saw her fly to my window, and they were worse to me before than they had been other than after second year you remember, when they had me locked in my room 23 hours a day and Ron and the twins had to rescue me. I had more than enough and left. I've since heard on the telly that they died in a car crash. I wish I could say I was sorry to hear it, but I can't. Considering the hell the Headmaster put me in when they were alive, I hate to think what kind of prison he will put me in if I ever put myself under his full control again. Sorry I can't tell you more, but you do seem to respect authority figures, especially Dumbledore, until you can be shown why they can't be trusted, and I can't take the risk right now. I don't know if I'll be at school next year or not. If so, I will likely not see you or be able to contact before the train leaves. Your friend always, Harry'."

"Not really worth offending so many people for, were they?" Remus asked



mildly.

"Not a clue on any of them," Moody snarled. He handed Remus Hermione's letter.

Lupin nodded and turned to Dumbledore. "Who confiscated it, and was it before or after Hermione knew it was delivered?"

"Miss Vance. . . ." Dumbledore started, but couldn't finish.

"She ripped out of the girl's hands before she could open it," Moody said, shaking his head.

"Oh, dear," Remus said.

\*

That Friday, Hermione sat at the kitchen table, looking at the remains of a tuna sandwich, while Crookshanks contented himself with licking the tin clean. She was slightly startled by the telephone; the Grangers got few calls at home during the day.

"Hello, the Granger residence."

"Don't say my name," Harry warned.

"Keith! How nice to hear from you!" Hermione responded. "I was starting to wonder if I would hear from you this summer!"

"Didn't you get my letter?"

"Yes, well, there were some problems, I have to say, but they weren't my fault."

"One of Dumbledore's people took it from you?"

"Like taking candy from a baby," Hermione admitted. "Still, it was interesting when I finally saw it."

"Okay, first let me say that I am perfectly safe."

"That's good. I hope you're eating healthily for once in your life."

"I am, and I am getting lots of exercise. You wouldn't know how to get in touch with Professor Lupin, would you? I mean, without the Headmaster's other people finding out."

"Probably, but you know how parents are. They seem to have eyes everywhere. I'll probably have to call, if that's not a problem."

"I understand," Harry said. "You have a phone number?"

"Why yes!"

"If you can, phone him from your parents' office and tell him that a package will be delivered for him and Sirius there sometime late next week. It will be addressed to you care of your parents' office."

"All right, that seems easy enough, but where does that leave me?"

There was silence for a moment, and then Harry said, "I am sure you can imagine there were a lot of people who hated what Voldemort did."

"Of course!"

"And that are lots of people who don't trust our Ministry."

"After the story you told me about the man in the cabin, I can understand that," Hermione answered, meaning the story of Fudge and Hagrid during their second year.

"Exactly. Well, there lots of people who also don't really trust the Headmaster, or at least his ways of doing things either."

"Believe me, I understand that now!"

"I didn't know it, but the Headmaster had his spies watching me, and so did the Death Eaters, although they couldn't really get close to me. There were at least two other groups watching me, maybe more. When I made my break, one covered me from the Headmaster's watchdog, while the other took out the Death Eater. They almost fought over me, but decided to work together. That's all I can say about where I am and who I'm being trained by. I don't know if I will be back or not. If not, well, I miss you."

"I'd miss you, too, Keith, so you'd better stay in better touch!"

"I'll do my best. Bye!"

"Goodbye . . . Keith."

When the phone went silent, Hermione went to her bedroom to have a good cry. The watcher shrugged and never bothered to report the incident to the Headmaster.

## **Chapter II**

“Moony should be picking the package up any minute,” Harry told Hermione over the phone. “It’s possible that he’ll be tracked.”

“Which means what, exactly?” Hermione asked, both curious and worried.

“That I probably can’t call you any more,” Harry admitted.

Hermione could hear the regret in his voice, which gave her a little comfort. “I’ve enjoyed talking with you every day, too,” she said simply. “By the way, why did you tell me to watch those movies?”

“Why do you think?” Harry retorted.

Hermione thought hard and said, “The first three were all about lawless societies, to some degree. Is that how you see our world?”

“To a degree,” Harry agreed. “Think of the oldest one. . . .”

“‘The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance’,” Hermione pointed out.

“Right. The people wanted law and order, but one man could disrupt everything because the people wouldn’t band together. That’s a lot like magical Britain, except here the newspaper doesn’t help out.” Harry paused in thought, and Hermione had learned not to push. “I see you a lot like the Jimmy Stewart character, and I mean that as a compliment.”

“Are you John Wayne?” Hermione asked.

“I have to be,” Harry replied. “I learned this summer that there is a prophecy about me.”

“Do you believe in . . . such things?” Hermione asked, remembering that

there was a chance her watchers were eavesdropping on her to some degree.

“I don’t know,” Harry said honestly. “But it was made to Dumbledore, and he and Voldemort both seem to be acting as if they believe it. So that means I have to at least act like I do.”

“I can see that,” Hermione admitted. “How about those next two films? They worry me.”

“The two Clint Eastwood westerns? I hate to say it, but they remind me a lot more of wizarding society than ‘Liberty Valance’ did.”

“Which one more?”

“Oh, ‘High Plains Drifter’ even more than ‘A Fist Full of Dollars’,” Harry answered, “although I can’t really place you that movie.”

“But you can in ‘Dollars’?”

“Yes, you’re the two good townspeople who help the Eastwood character out, although you’re much better looking.”

“Ha, ha. Who can you place in ‘Drifter’, then? Besides you as the hero, of course.”

“Fudge as the Sheriff,” Harry replied with such confidence Hermione nearly giggled. “Ron as Mordecai, and Dumbledore as the mine owners. . . .”

“What?” Hermione demanded.

Harry thought of something. “You know, come to think of it, you actually are in the movie, in a sense.”

“Not the harlot or the hotel owner’s wife, I hope!”

“No, not at all,” Harry assured her.

“Then who?”

“The little Indian girl – reaching for knowledge instead of candy, and being denied because of prejudice.”

Hermione tried blinking away tears and whispered, “I understand.” Hermione now had tears going down her face. She recovered quickly, however, as she did not want the conversation to end. “How about the last movie?”

“‘Die Hard’? To be honest, it was mostly because the villain sort of reminded me of a de-greased Snape.”

Hermione thought about that for a moment and then actually giggled.

“I’d love to look Snape in the eye and say, ‘yippee k. . . .’”

“Don’t you DARE finish that quotation!”

“All right. Did you get the note I had left at your parents?”

“I did. I’ll start lessons tomorrow night. Why?” Harry had asked her to study meditation if she could.

“Dumbledore and Snape practice Legilimency, that’s the magic of reading surface thoughts, if not deeper. Meditation is a way to learn if you are being read, and the first step to building defenses. I’ll have a pamphlet for you in September.”

After a few moments of silence, Hermione whispered, “I hope I get to see you on the First.”

“If not, I promise to save you at least.”

“What?” Hermione asked aghast.

“Voldemort is back. As things stand, I’m the only person that can really stop him and I can’t do much the way Fudge is stopping the news from getting out and the way Dumbledore is holding me back. If Dumbledore doesn’t agree to our terms, I’ll have to leave, but I won’t leave you. As the top Muggle-born in school and my best friend, you’d be a major target. So, if I go, you’ll go if you want.”

“Thank you,” she choked out.

\*

“I suppose you wouldn’t tell me where you got this?” Dumbledore asked Lupin.

“No, I would not,” Remus answered. “I won’t be going back, but why cause unnecessary trouble?”

Dumbledore nodded and undid the wrapping, until the large crystal at the heart of the package was revealed.

“What is it?” Sirius asked, curious.

“A communications crystal,” Dumbledore answered, sounding a bit impressed. “More secure than any sort of pensieve; the memories can not be altered or lost until the crystal is destroyed.”

“I was told all the three of us had to do was touch the crystal with our wands and state our full names,” Remus said.

Dumbledore did so after Sirius and Remus, but once the crystal glowed a faint blue, showing it was active, instead of the projection of Harry, or at least someone, which was what the three expected all that appeared was a vague robed figure. When it spoke, the voice was obvious so altered that it

was impossible to be sure if it was even male or female, let alone determining what sort of accent it might have had.

“Albus Dumbledore,” the voice intoned, “we have long wanted to address you. However, due to . . . circumstances . . . that has not been advisable until now. First, let me saw that this is a recording. However, should any of you speak, it will cease until there has been five seconds of silence.”

“Really?” Sirius asked. Remus and Dumbledore glared at him, and after five seconds, the recording resumed.

“Now for the important background information,” the voice continued. “We did not kidnap Harry Potter. We either rescued him or at least offered him a new direction as he fled the abusive relatives you imprisoned him with, depending on your point of view. I wish I could hear you, but tell the other two, did you know there were many watchers around Harry other than those of your bird-watching club?”

“Bird-watching club?” Sirius asked.

“The Order of the Phoenix,” Remus retorted, rolling his eyes. He looked at Dumbledore. “Did you?”

“There were often agents whom I could link to Lucius Malfoy and others,” Dumbledore agreed. “As long as Harry was in proximity to his aunt or cousin, he was safe from them.”

“You probably knew about the paid agents of Lucius Malfoy,” the voice went on, “but there were always at least seven others, at least for the last four years.” It was clear that this information surprised Dumbledore. “One was even Muggle, from the American intelligence services. Unlike the British, the American intelligence services have links to the North American Confederation, who also had observers.” That made Dumbledore growl.

“No matter, all any of us did until that night was watch. We were the closest,



and were able to rescue Harry and neutralize Voldemort's agent. After a few days of recuperation – he was close to starving, as usual – we met with Harry and worked out an agreement with him.” Despite the voice alterations, the disdain now came through. “We believe it would be better for Harry to disappear while he is trained, but he believes it might be worth continuing his worthless education at Hogwarts, for his friends' sake if nothing else. If you agree to terms, then Harry will return to Hogwarts, at least for a time. We will return to that later.”

Dumbledore wanted to protest, but stopped himself, knowing there was no arguing with a recording.

“Next, we wish to point out that we are appalled that you allowed Harry to keep carrying around a Horcrux. . . .”

“What?” Remus shouted.

“What's a Horcrux?” Sirius asked, puzzled.

“So that's how Voldemort survived!” Remus answered as he quickly bit the pieces together, agitated. “Voldemort split his soul. The container for a piece of soul is called a Horcrux, among other things. He must have split it more than once. You use several Dark spells to prepare your self, and then you split your soul while committing murder. Harry's scar must contain a Horcrux.”

“Exactly,” Dumbledore conceded. “As far as I know, the only way to break one is to destroy it and its container. . . .”

“Harry!” Sirius exclaimed, alarmed.

“Precisely,” Dumbledore agreed. “In theory, however, should another killing curse be used on Harry, especially if used by Voldemort. . . .”

“It might break the Horcrux without killing Harry?” Remus asked.

Dumbledore nodded. “Obviously, it is not a theory I could test.”

The other two men were shocked into silence. After five seconds, the recording started up again. “It is possible you simply didn’t know how to break the Horcrux without harming Harry. Well, we didn’t either,” the voice admitted, “so we found someone who did. It took us about six days, and then it only took two days to destroy the Horcrux. Harry had a headache for about three hours. The Horcrux is gone.”

Again, Dumbledore was clearly shocked.

“Our expert was able to find echoes of five earlier Horcruxes. These were: the diary Harry destroyed; the diadem of Ravenclaw; the ring and locket of Slytherin; and Hufflepuff’s cup. Our expert, examining the memories Harry had of Voldemort’s rebirth, is of the opinion that he must have created a seventh Horcrux while an homunculus, but we have no idea what that might be. It was quite easy finding Slytherin’s ring, as it was hidden on Riddle’s maternal property. Our expert and Harry broke that Horcrux as well. If you really want to be helpful, you might wish to concentrate on finding the other four. Should we find them first, we shall inform you. We expect you to inform Harry. . . .”

Dumbledore snorted, but that was not enough to stop the recording.

“. . . although that would be against your past practice. Yes, we also know you and your bird-watchers are currently concerned with guarding the Prophecy you were given about Harry.” Dumbledore was, if anything, more shocked than he had been. “We retrieved it so that Harry could hear it. He was most upset with you for keeping it secret. We substituted a new false prophecy orb, set with the same protection wards, on the off-chance you are trying to lay a trap for Voldemort. We’re informing you of this in case you don’t want to risk the lives of your watchers over a faux prophecy.”

Dumbledore could feel the glare of the other men.

“We reversed your middle initials so you can tell it was switched.”  
Dumbledore’s muttered curses silenced the voice for a short time.

“So much for the background. Now, our demands.” There was a slight sizzling sound, and a parchment appeared next to the crystal. “You have four choices. Listed you will see two sets of demands. It would be best, if you trust in Harry, to agree to both. Or you may agree to just one set. Finally, of course, you may decide to agree with none. In that case, Harry will be schooled and trained far away. Do not think your reach goes past your school and your vigilantes these days. Fudge has clipped your political wings well, and there are few who would rise above their dislike and jealousy of you to do you favors. Choose well, Albus Dumbledore. Sign one of the three lines in your blood if you wish. As his legal guardian, Sirius Black must agree with your decision, although if anyone signs for the total agreement others may still choose one of the other options as long as they all choose the same one. One of the four others listed must do the same, although considering that some one, most likely Fudge’s agent Dolores Umbridge, seems to have recently sent a pair of dementors hunting through Little Whinging looking for Harry I would not suggest approaching the Minister. You have forty-eight hours from the time the parchment appeared to sign. If you do not have three signatures by then, then Harry leaves the country.” The crystal stopped glowing, then for a second turned bright blue, which cracked it, leaving it useless.

Remus glanced at the parchment. “Actually, it seems as if the Ministry must co-sign, or one of the other executors of the will who are still alive and considered competent – Minerva, myself, or a representative of the goblins.” Dumbledore and Sirius were crowded next to him, also reading.

Remus snorted. “There’s no use even considering the second option.”

“And why is that?” Dumbledore demanded.

Remus pointed on one clause. “Harry may leave if given any unfair

detentions or loses any points unfairly. Severus will have Harry gone in a week.”

“You are being unfair. . . .”

“ME! Go through the records and see how he treats the students, the number of unfair and unreasonable. . . .”

“Severus has a role to play. . . .”

“Nonsense! He has created a House which reflects his bullying, bigoted attitudes! Yes, there were always Slytherins like that, but they were found in all the Houses. Now most are concentrated there, and they all think they can get away with nearly anything, because Severus will cover for them. On top of that, if you think he can alter his mistreatment of Harry on your say so, then you have to answer for his past treatment of Harry.”

“You do not understand. . . .”

“I do not understand? YOU do not understand what is going on in your own school,” Remus argued. “You sit in your office and receive your reports from your spies. . . .”

“Spies?” Sirius asked.

“The paintings, the elves, even some of the suits of armor,” Remus answered. He turned back to Dumbledore. “Muggle Studies, Divination, and History are jokes. Defense has been little better. I like Hagrid, but he is turning Care into a joke as well, and Severus so mis-teaches potions. . . .”

“Severus is one of the best potion masters there is!” Dumbledore snapped.

“He is,” Remus agreed. “But if he’s such a fine teacher, then why have the numbers of OWLs awarded dropped by over thirty percent, and NEWTs by over seventy percent since he’s been teaching?”

Dumbledore blinked at that.

“I swear, living mostly in the wizarding world retards not only a person’s common sense but the ability to see facts right in front of them. No wonder Fudge can’t see that Voldemort’s back; he’s just a small sign of how corrupting the system is.” Remus started to leave the room but then halted. “Minerva is out of the country. Good luck finding her in less than two days. As for me, I refuse to sign. I think the best thing for Harry would be to leave the country.”

“Do you really think he could?” Dumbledore asked with scorn.

“Yes,” Remus retorted. “And you might be friendly enough with the heads of Salem and the Ysgol to kidnap Harry back into Hogwarts. I admit I can’t say either way – although if the Druids were the ones who rescued him, I pity you or anyone stupid enough to try and extract him from their care.”

Dumbledore paled at that thought as well, as it had not occurred to him. “But if they send him to the California school or to Alice Springs, or to one of the Indian schools, then I’d say he’d be better off and well out of your reach.” Remus left and slammed the door.

“I’m tempted to say much the same,” Sirius said into the sudden silence.

“You raised Harry to be a sacrificial weapon. Thanks to you he had no childhood, and little happiness. Snivellus certainly mistreated him, and you can’t pretend he’ll be safe at Hogwarts, especially if you don’t find a defense teacher and Fudge appoints some toady.”

“If what we were told about the dementors was correct, that is certainly true,” Dumbledore had to agree. “We cannot allow Harry back only under the second set of demands,” he added.

“Snape. . . .”

“I still believe Remus is wrong about him,” Dumbledore declared. “If

Severus is not seen as useful by Voldemort, he will be ordered to kill me, or worse, Harry. That would end his role. As for the Ministry, should Cornelius manage to send in an agent, it would most likely be Dolores Umbridge. If there were dementors in Surrey, they would almost have to have been sent by someone close to the Ministry, and as we were told, that would most likely have Dolores. She would clash with nearly every staff member, and it is apparent from the Ministry-inspired stories in 'The Daily Prophet' that Cornelius is determined to undermine both Harry's and my reputations. She would confront Harry, and I cannot see him knuckling under."

Sirius signed the parchment for both alternatives. "He's fifteen, and while that's too young to really exercise his 'head of house' powers, I don't see any reasonable alternative." Dumbledore looked surprised. "If I had any clue who these people were and if I could trust them any more than I trust you, it would be different, but I don't. As tempting as it is to get Harry out of the country, for some reason I feel this is best."

"I understand your position," Dumbledore answered. "I will certainly go along with the first set of alternatives at the least. If I may, I shall take the parchment and see the goblins."

As Dumbledore turned to go, Sirius asked, "What did you mean a while ago when you said I was mistreating that treacherous elf?"

Dumbledore turned to Sirius. "Would you admit that Kreacher was both twisted and abused by your parents?"

"Of course," Sirius said.

"Then who could he take his anger and frustrations out on but you and perhaps your brother? Lucius Malfoy's elf struck back by rebelling and helping Harry. Kreacher instead identified with his abusers, as often happens, and instead abused you. It may not be forgivable; that is up to you. Do understand why he acts as he does. You are his master; you could find ways of using him which does not cause more harm."

“Moony said the same thing, so you may be right,” Sirius said with a gleam in his eye. “Tell you what, I’ll try to reform Kreacher, try to end his hatred and make a better . . . individual with him on one condition.”

“And what is that?”

Sirius’ face hardened, “If you do the same with Snape.”

Dumbledore scowled and left the room.

\*

Dumbledore had many decades of dealing with goblins. While not really prejudiced against them, he knew well that their values were far from his. Still, even he was surprised when he was shown in to see an unnamed goblin in a very opulent office. The goblin was obviously very highly ranked.

“You have the parchment?” the goblin demanded.

Startled, and now aware that the goblin probably knew more about what was going on than he did, Dumbledore handed the parchment over. “You do realize that your Ministry, pushed by Lucius Malfoy under orders of his Master, is trying to destroy both you and Mister Potter?”

“I am aware of it,” Dumbledore replied simply.

“What are you going to do about their attempt to infiltrate Dolores Umbridge into your school?”

“I am trying to find a defense teacher. . . .”

“Trying? So you still have not succeeded?”

“No, I have not,” Dumbledore admitted. Had he been able to find Horace

Slughorn, he would have offered the job to Snape, but he did not dare do so otherwise. He needed to be able to offer Slughorn the job if necessary to probe his mind. Dumbledore had not yet realized that the information Harry's friends had given him meant that Slughorn's information was likely redundant.

"Then we offer you John Wilkes for one year, with a bonus payment of five hundred Galleons, half for us and half for him." Wilkes, an Australian, was the chief curse breaker for the goblins. The Ministry would not dare object to him.

"I accept," Dumbledore answered.

"You do know that there will be those in your Ministry who will object to Mister Potter having the full rights as Head of House?"

"I do, but if they try and void those rights, they will be ending a right their own families might need some day."

The goblin nodded. "I was asked to give this to you." He slid a bit of parchment over.

Dumbledore read it in surprise. A second Horcrux had been destroyed, Hufflepuff's cup, with the aid of the goblins.

"The additional magic was destroyed, not the object," the goblin said, noting Dumbledore's reaction. There was nothing Dumbledore could read in the goblin's surface thoughts, and he did not dare probe a goblin who was this senior. The goblin bared his teeth.

"I suppose there is nothing you can tell me about the people around Mister Potter?" Dumbledore asked, not really expecting any answer.

"While we were paid a small fee for our inconvenience, we were happy to provide our services," the goblin answered. Dumbledore nodded; there were



few humans the goblins would say, or do, such favors for.

The goblin studied the parchment and signed it on the same line as Sirius. Dumbledore had only agreed to give Harry Potter his full House Rights, which besides other rights and privileges basically made him exempt from Gryffindor's point system, while detentions could only be served with Dumbledore. "Do you not intend to give Mister Potter any of the other requested powers or exemptions?"

"Perhaps a few," Dumbledore said without committing himself.

The goblin handed Dumbledore a small bit of parchment. "If you have any further communications, you may send them through Ragnot's office," the goblin stated as he sent off the contract to be processed, indicating that the meeting was over. Dumbledore nodded, and left to set up another uncomfortable meeting. He only looked at the slip of parchment when he returned to Hogwarts. He was unsure of what the film titles meant, but resolved to look them up.

\*

The next morning, Severus Snape stared at Dumbledore. Finally, he said, "You have kept far too much to yourself, Albus."

"As it has turned out, you may be correct," Dumbledore admitted. "I certainly realize you cannot make a complete turnaround."

"The Dark Lord would not appreciate it, and I must say, I would not like to have to kill you," Snape retorted.

"You must reign in your students," Dumbledore urged. "I am not certain what changes to expect in Harry, but I anticipate he will be dangerous. And do not sneer! Harry drove off twice as many dementors as I could, and his power over-came Voldemort's last June. I had hoped to direct his attention and his power along other channels, but I dare not."

“So, you think he will finally become the arrogant. . . .”

“No,” Dumbledore cut in. “I anticipate a different attitude. If my information is correct, Harry will not be an arrogant prince, but a knight errant.” He had spent the night watching Muggle movies.

Snape snorted in derision and left. As the door to Dumbledore’s office shut, he wondered what the Headmaster’s murmured, “Yippy ki yay, m. . . .” meant. Snape shrugged and kept walking.

### **Chapter III**

Friday, September 1, 1995

Hermione Granger had had her parents bring her to the station two hours early, which was when the platform would first be accessible. Crookshanks was in his travel basket and Hermione was scanning the gathering crowd, hoping that Harry would be early . . . hoping, in fact, that Harry would actually show up.

Hermione's breath caught when she saw someone shimmering into being off to the side. Then, to her additional surprise, she realized that it was Harry, without a trunk. Harry was taller, although he could not certainly be called tall, or muscular for that matter. Hermione decided that he should now be called 'lanky' rather than 'scrawny'. He no longer wore glasses, and was dressed all in black. With a quick movement of his left wrist he flipped a black cloak around himself. Harry glanced around and then made a bee-line toward Hermione.

Hermione gave Harry a hug, which to her surprise he returned more than he ever had before. When they separated, Harry grinned and said, "Congratulations on being made prefect."

Hermione frowned and looked down. Sure enough, her prefect's badge was hidden. Then Hermione realized how Harry knew she was wearing it, and blushed slightly. "And you?" she asked, to break the sudden tension.

Harry shook his head. "The Headmaster wouldn't give it to me now. He probably gave it to Ron."

"Ron? He's about the most un-prefect-like person I can think of!"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe. Neville should get it, but I doubt he will. I also won't be playing Quidditch."

“Really?”

He nodded his head. “I have other responsibilities.”

“Ron won’t like it,” Hermione warned.

Harry shrugged. “I can’t do everything and I can still fly for fun.” He looked down. “Shall I take your trunk and the beast while you do prefect-stuff?”

“Where’s your trunk?”

“My trunk is in my pocket,” Harry answered. Hermione nodded, and Harry went off to find a compartment.

\*

Harry was about to enter a compartment, but stopped when a somewhat oddly-dressed blonde did the same from the other direction. “Go ahead,” Harry said.

“You’re welcome to join me, Harry Potter.” She glanced at the trunk and caged cat. “So is Hermione Granger.”

“Thank you. And you are?”

“Luna Lovegood.”

Harry looked at her thoughtfully. “Don’t you live somewhere near the Weasleys?”

“On the other side of the village,” she acknowledged. “My father publishes ‘The Quibbler’,” she added.

“I’ve seen it,” Harry answered politely. He had never really read one.

Harry and Luna chatted for over an hour before the train started, and then for an hour more before Hermione showed up, followed by Ron, who wearing a prefect badge and dragging his trunk from wherever he had stored it. Harry introduced Hermione and Luna. Hermione had obviously read 'The Quibbler', as she had rolled her eyes when Luna wasn't looking.

"So, where have you been?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "Can't really say."

"Why not?" Ron asked, confused. "Don't you trust me?"

"Sure. Do you trust Snape?"

Ron pulled a face. "No, why?"

Harry explained, "Because Snape is constantly practicing something called 'Legilimency' – that means he's almost always trying to read your surface thoughts. He can also probe deeper. So, anything I tell you, he can probably find out."

Ron paled. "Really?"

"Really." Harry slipped a pamphlet out of his pocket and gave it to Hermione. Seeing it was a book, Ron ignored it.

"There are those who believe that when the Headmaster's eyes twinkle, that is what he is doing," Luna commented from behind her upside-down newspaper.

Before Ron could comment, Harry merely said, "It's certainly possible."

Ron decided to ignore all this, especially Luna's eyeing him around her 'Quibbler', and gave voice to his main complaint. "Can you believe it? Malfoy and Parkinson are prefects!"

“I can see you being surprised at Parkinson,” Harry agreed. “Davis or Greengrass were at least just as good possibilities. But of the fifth year boys? Nott’s family is just as involved in the Death Eaters as Malfoy’s, and Crabbe and Goyle would have been impossible. What luck would Zabini have had against the sons of four Death Eaters?”

“Good point,” Hermione agreed, which made Ron frown. It was only then that he noticed that Harry and Loony Lovegood were seated across from each other in the window seats, while Hermione was not only sitting next to Harry but closer to him than Ron considered she needed to be. He, of course, was sitting as far away from Loony as he could. This made him frown more.

Harry, seeing the frown, pulled a small magical sack from under his cloak and dumped a pile of treats on the seat next to Ron. Ron’s eyes lit up and he grabbed two bags of crisps and three chocolate frogs from the pile. Ron heard Hermione mutter, “Bits of string and shiny objects,” and Loony’s giggle, but ignored them both, just as he ignored the small pile of wrapped Panini and the bottles of lemonade (he did grab the two bottles of pumpkin juice, however) which Harry had also produced. After they had all eaten their fill, the quartet allowed the rhythm of the rails to lull them into light dozes, although Ron’s snores prevented the other three from sleeping too deeply.

It was nearly two hours into this comfortable part of the ride that the door to their compartment was yanked open. Hermione and Luna saw that Harry was already sitting up straight, his wand hand under his cloak, looking at the sneering Draco Malfoy in the doorway, his two goons behind him partially blocking the corridor.

“Hope you enjoyed your summer, Potter,” Malfoy spit.

“I did, for the most part,” Harry answered tonelessly. “Thank you for asking.”

“Get out,” Ron spat back, managing to stand.

“I’m not here to talk to the likes of you, Weasel,” Malfoy retorted.

“Sit down, Ron,” Harry commanded.

To his surprise, Ron sat.

“Did you want something, Malfoy, or are you just here to remind us that your Death Eater father re-enslaved himself to his half-blood master last June, and that we should be afraid of him, even though I disembodied him as fifteen months and over-powered him in a duel that night while your father and his friends kissed his robe like the servants they are?”

Malfoy was too shocked to say anything, although his mouth was moving.

“You should really think for once in your pathetic life, Malfoy,” Harry said seemingly carelessly, although Hermione and Luna both noted that Harry seemed ready to spring into action if necessary. “I’ve over-powered your father’s master twice. If you think you are a bigger threat to me than he is, he will likely Crucio you until your eyes pop and what passes for your brain fries.”

Malfoy flushed during this speech and started to pull his wand. Harry was out of his seat, and had pulled Malfoy’s wand out of his grip with his left hand while slapping Malfoy on each cheek before Malfoy could hope to react. “Go away, Malfoy, and stay out of my way.”

“Give me my wand, Potter!”

“No. I’ll give it to the Headmaster at the Feast.”

“Give me my wand!”

“No,” Harry responded calmly.

Malfoy tried to lunge at Harry, who easily batted his hands away while repeating the two sharp slaps to the face. Harry then shoved Malfoy into Crabbe and Goyle. "If you or anyone else tries anything this year, that was just a taste of what I'll do to you."

"I'll. . . ."

"Yes, you'll whine like the little shite you are to your father and to Snape because you can't stand up for yourself," Harry stated coldly. "Now, leave or I'll snap your wand."

"You wouldn't dare!"

Harry feigned surprise. "Your father didn't tell you? I'd be surprised if he didn't know, since he pays off most of the idiots at the so-called Ministry. I have assumed all my rights as the Head of House Potter, and you threatened me. What can I do to you, little boy?"

Malfoy turned paler than he had been, while Crabbe and Goyle actually looked worried. Goyle put his hand on Malfoy's shoulder, and Malfoy allowed himself to be led away.

"And just WHAT did all that mean, Harry James Potter?" Hermione demanded. Ron looked stunned, while Luna went back to reading her 'Quibbler'.

"We both knew that the wizarding world is bigoted and backwards as well as corrupt, right?"

"I suppose so. . . ."

"Come on, you two," Ron started, but stopped at a glare from Harry.

"Corrupt . . . Malfoy and Buckbeak, need I go on?"



"No," Ron and Hermione both admitted.

"Bigoted? One whole House where Muggleborns are banned? Blood prejudice, sentients treated as slaves, and, well, need I go on? " Harry asked.

"I suppose not. . . ." Ron muttered, not totally agreeing, but not willing to argue.

Harry turned back to Hermione. "Now, legally, if there is a situation where it comes down to your word against Malfoy's, or Ron's for that matter, the system has to choose a Pureblood's word over the word of a Muggleborn of the same status, and what's more, you can't challenge his word."

Hermione frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means you can't swear an oath or offer to take a truth potion in court to prove him wrong," Harry answered.

"Except in the case of rape," Luna put in, still behind the paper. "Then you could, but only because you are magical. Squibs and Muggles cannot be considered raped by the magical."

"That can't be right!"

"It is," Ron said simply.

"Now, Malfoy could ask you to swear or take a truth potion," Harry went on. "Until my birthday, Boy-who-Lived or not, I was legally just a half-blood under the age of fifteen who did not have a blood guardian -- a magical guardian who was a close blood relative."

"What does. . . ?"

"From eleven to fifteen, we are considered semi-competent witnesses, from fifteen until we turn seventeen we are legally competent witnesses, and at

seventeen we are of course legal adults," Luna explained simply.

"By assuming my magical rights as Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, whatever anyone might think of my blood status, that status is legally irrelevant. Any head of an ancient house over seventeen outranks me until I reach seventeen, but I outrank anyone else and I could force Malfoy to take a truth potion under certain conditions, and he knows it."

"And what else does it mean?"

"Well, if I had broken the Ferret's wand, or he one of ours, the minimum penalty is being confined to the common rooms except for class and meal time for six months, plus paying twice the value of a replacement wand," Ron answered. "Harry would just have to pay to replace his wand."

"And when I lodge my complaint against him, even he'll be lucky to get off with two weeks confinement," Harry added. "What's more, 'The Prophet' is being notified of my change of status. I'm not a member of the Ministry or anything. I might be famous, but I no longer fit the wizarding definition of a public figure because my new status gives me protection unless I actually do something. I can legally sue their arses for libel or slander as the cases may be, as well as any member of the Ministry for that matter, and the notification comes from a firm of solicitors famous for biting hard."

"Well, since they can report the Quidditch scores, that might not work," Ron said, some what apologetically.

"Ah . . . I won't be playing Quidditch."

The compartment was silent for several long seconds, and then Ron tried to shout, but could not make a sound beyond a slight squeak.

"I'd really love to," Harry told Ron, almost pleading with him. "But with Voldemort back, I have to train to face him. I can't do that and give my all to Quidditch."

"Bloody wanker," Ron muttered. Then, as Hermione and Luna both gasped at his comment, he colored. "I meant Volde . . . you know, the wanker!"

\*

Harry left his friends behind as soon as the train arrived. They understood that he wanted to beat Malfoy to the castle. As the trio made their way towards the carriages, Hermione felt Luna tug on her robe. Turning, she saw Luna make a gesture with her head.

Hermione looked, and saw Malfoy, whining and surrounded by his minions, just ahead of them, while Harry was already on his way to the castle in the first coach. Hermione smiled grimly, and then noticed Luna starting to fall back. "Come on," Hermione said, "aren't you going to ride with us?" Hermione missed Ron rolling his eyes, but did not miss the surprised and pleased look on Luna's face. Hermione, remembering how she had felt before the incident with the troll, smiled gently and held out her hand.

Luna smiled brightly and first took Hermione's hand, and then linked her arm through Hermione's. The pair happily talked about Runes from that point through the ride to the castle, and then into the great hall, much to Ron's dismay.

Harry had arrived at the castle shortly after the other three had gotten on their carriage. Making his way into the great hall, he saw that none of the professors were there yet. He therefore went to the small room where they often gathered, dismissing the memories of the room from the TriWizard tournament the year before, and knocked.

Harry was glad to see it was Professor Sinistra answered. "Yes, Potter?" she asked.

"I need to see the Headmaster before the feast starts," Harry answered. "Is he available?"

Sinistra shrugged and replied, "I'll see if he has time to see you." She shut the door, and Harry waited.

In less than two minutes, Dumbledore opened the door. Harry was not surprised, although not pleased, to see Snape standing well within hearing distance. "Yes, Harry?"

"Headmaster," Harry said formally, "I wish to file an official notice, as allowed and even required under the Hogwarts Code of Conduct. A common underage student, Draco Malfoy" (here Snape edged closer to the door) "pulled his wand and threatened the Head of a Noble and Ancient House and three other students. I reprimanded Mister Malfoy and relieved him of his wand." Harry pulled the wand from his cloak and handed it to Dumbledore. "As the Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter, I am willing to swear out a formal complaint."

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention," Dumbledore replied. "Professor Snape?"

"Headmaster?"

"You heard?"

"Yes, Headmaster," Snape responded, his face impassive.

"And your suggestion?"

"I shall of course investigate."

Neither Dumbledore nor Harry moved or said anything. After several seconds, Harry could see Snape's jaw muscles clench for a moment, and then he said, in a slightly strained voice. "Depending on the outcome of the investigation, Mister Malfoy may be subject to more than the minimum required penalty."

“Should I have someone else take the time to monitor Mister Malfoy’s confinement? Or will you leave that to me?”

Snape nearly ground his teeth, but replied, “Thank you for taking your time to do this, Headmaster.”

“Oh, I assure it is no burden. I have decided I shall have to take a more active role in all our students. This is an obvious place to start. Shall I return Mister Malfoy’s wand.”

“I can do that for you, Headmaster.”

“Do you have any objections, Mister Potter?” the Headmaster asked, with not a glimmer of a twinkle.

“Of course not, Headmaster,” Harry replied. He noted a slight movement under the Headmaster’s beard, perhaps indicating just the slightest smirk of approval.

“Professor,” Dumbledore said, now fully turning to face Snape, “I would hope you will impress upon Mister Malfoy, and his friends, that I am looking over all the infractions, and rewards, very carefully this year.”

“Of course, Headmaster,” Snape replied. “I am certain all the staff will remind their charges of this.”

“Of course.” Dumbledore turned to Harry. “Was there anything else, Mister Potter?”

“No, sir,” Harry replied formally, adding a very slight bow. “I thank you and Professor Snape for your time.”

Snape’s eyebrows went up a bit at being included. ‘The boy is actually trying,’ he noted with a bit of surprise. Snape would never understand that

what he would have called Harry's passive-aggressive stance against wizarding manners had been pure ignorance.

"If I could have a short moment of your time tonight after the feast, I would appreciate it," Dumbledore told him.

"Of course, sir," Harry answered. "Shall I wait for you here?"

"The entrance to my office will be fine."

Harry bowed again slightly and walked off. He just barely heard Snape admit, as the door closed, "His manners have certainly improved."

Harry saw that most of the students were milling around the tables. When the staff came out, they would all take their seats. Malfoy and Parkinson were glaring at him, which is all he would have noticed in previous years. This time, he noted that Zabini, Greengrass, and Davis were looking at him with slight smiles. Harry wasn't sure if that meant they approved of what he had done to Draco or if they were just hoping to watch Draco get his revenge.

Harry stopped and greeted a few people in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, stopping for a moment to speak with Luna, much to the shock of her Housemates. "I'm glad we got to know each other on the train," Harry told her.

"So am I," Luna said, flushing slightly from the attention. Harry moved on, and Luna meandered over to a seat.

"We see that. . . ."

". . . little Harrikins is making new friends."

"Fred, George, how goes the business?" Harry asked cheerfully, taking the time to nod at Ginny, who was passing by.

“Great!” Fred said.

“We’re ready to start full testing on a wide-range of products,” George agreed.

“Testing?” Hermione nearly growled. “On whom?”

“Paid volunteers,” George answered quickly.

“We’ll discuss this later,” Hermione stated firmly. “You two, myself, and the other prefects.”

“What?” Ron demanded.

“That sounds like a very good idea,” Harry said firmly. “We wouldn’t want you two to get into any serious trouble, now would we?”

Seeing the steely look in Harry’s eyes, Fred and George looked at each other and nodded their agreement. Hermione gave the pair a shark-like smile, and then rolled her eyes as she grabbed Ron’s robe.

“What?” Ron demanded.

“We have to sit down the table,” she reminded Ron. “You know, since as the fifth year prefects we have to help the new students?”

“Oh, all right,” Ron grumbled, following Hermione reluctantly.

“Now that’s our kind of prefect,” Fred said mockingly.

“Seriously, Harry, why aren’t you the prefect?” George asked. “Somehow I think McGonagall would have been glad to hold off until you arrived at the station this morning.”

“I doubt she was given the option,” Harry replied. The twins frowned. “How

competent does the Ministry seem to you, your father excepted.”

“Percy fits right in,” Fred pointed out.

“Shouldn’t have to say more,” George agreed.

“The Headmaster is powerful and knowledgeable. However, look at how the school’s been run since you’ve been here. How competent and wise would you say he’s been?”

The two looked at each other, surprised, and then thoughtful.

“Not very,” George said, surprising himself and his twin.

“Hate to say it, but I think we were all taken in by his reputation,” Fred acknowledged.

“Thought we were smarter than that,” George said with a sigh.

“Almost Percyish,” Fred added, grimacing.

“So, will you be a fourth corner in this fight the Ministry claims won’t be coming?” George asked.

“I might have to grow up to be just that,” Harry replied softly.

“Then we’re with you,” Fred stated firmly.

“Now go claim the seat Hermione’s saving for you before Ginny latches on to you,” George said. “She’s a bit obsessed.”

“We know you wouldn’t take advantage of her. . . .”

“. . . more like she would take advantage of you. . . .”



“But we wouldn’t like to see either.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, and went to sit and await the Sorting Hat’s song.

\*

The Hat sang a song pleading for unity in a time of growing danger, but only a few in the great hall paid attention to it. The new defense instructor, John Wilkes, was applauded to some degree by everyone except one person seated at the teacher’s table.

Dumbledore then introduced the other new figure. “While Hogwarts is independently governed, a series of modernizations took place during the 1860s and 1870s, which included the introductions of the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exams. Although not fully used since then, the Ministry not only has general oversight of Hogwarts, apprenticeships, and homeschooling leading to taking the general exams, but also the right to appoint a Visitor to assure the efficient running of the school or, if the Visitor is also a member of the staff, an Inquisitor. Madam Dolores Umbridge from the Minister’s Office will be taking the position of Visitor during the school year, and I expect we shall see her here quite often. Madam Umbridge.”

The squat woman in pink stood, and said in a surprisingly coy and even schoolgirlish voice, “The Ministry is quite interested in seeing that you all are properly educated and informed as you prepare to take your proper places within the wizarding hierarchy. I shall be in the castle at least every Monday, to attend and evaluate classes and instructors and to see that all is well. I can assure you, despite the insidious rumors floating around, the wizarding world is quite safe and the Ministry has everything well in hand. I am sure, by the end of the term if not before, you will all come to acknowledge that. All of you,” she repeated, looking towards Harry. “Thank you.”

As the food arrived, only Hermione heard Harry mutter, “The utter arrogance. Even if things were going well in Britain, the Ministry does not have any influence on the rest of the world.”

“Harry,” Hermione hissed quietly, “she made a direct threat against you.”

“She did, but don’t worry. Unless Dumbledore really wants her here, she’ll be finished by Monday morning, if not tonight.”

## **Chapter IV**

"Come in, Harry."

Harry walked carefully into the office, almost overwhelmed by the ambient magic. Almost, but not quite. "You wanted to see me, Headmaster? Or did you just want to test my Occlumency shields?"

"My apologies, Harry," Dumbledore said. "You cannot be surprised that I would test you."

"I suppose not," Harry allowed. "Was that all, since I am not going to tell you anything about my summer and I've shown you can't steal the information? Or did you want to talk about our 'Visitor'?" Harry almost spat.

"There is little we can do about her," Dumbledore pointed out. "Granted the Ministry has not recently exercised this authority. . . ."

"Nearly a hundred and thirty years is longer ago than recently," Harry pointed out. "And the fact that you can say that points up something many Muggle-raised people point out as one of the most common faults of the magically-raised."

"And what are those?" Dumbledore asked, honestly curious.

"The arrogance of magic users, and their general intellectual laziness," Harry retorted, "which combine to form the overall bigotry."

"Really?"

"Do I have to illustrate the arrogance?" Harry asked.

"No, nor the overall bigotry. Elucidate the intellectual laziness."

"Laziness and poor attention span, actually," Harry retorted. He then explained, "Other than the total reliance on Muggle advances in astronomy, the ignoring of advances in chemistry and physics, and the complete ignorance of technology, even by the Muggle Studies instructor?"

"Yes, as I sense you are trying to tell me something specific."

Harry had to nod as he continued. "You weren't at Hogwarts when the reforms happened back in the 1860s and 1870s, correct?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I am very old, Harry, but not that old. My father was a student when they started, and told me of the scandals which caused the Ministry's actions and the improvements."

Harry nodded. "And therefore, since you are generally aware of what happened, you haven't actually read the agreement, have you?" Dumbledore blinked. "If you read it, you will see that the adoption of the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. system, the prefects, Muggle Studies, and so forth was part of what Hogwarts had to accept, along with the general oversight of the Ministry." Dumbledore nodded. "However, the Purebloods of the time had to be bought off, unsurprisingly. All the above is paid for via the Hogwarts Trust, which is what we pay our tuition and fees to, correct?"

"Correct."

"And that includes paying the examiners."

Dumbledore nodded again.

"However, you'll see the acceptance of the general Ministry oversight, including the appointment of a Visitor or if necessary a resident Inquisitor, was traded off for the Ministry providing at least thirty full scholarships for totally-indigent Purebloods. For those connected to the Muggle world, the Ministry arranged for special grants, which is how Tom Riddle was supported. But there are numerous poor magical families, like Riddle's

mother's family, the Gaunts, who could not afford an education. His grandfather was your near-contemporary, wasn't he?"

"You are amazingly well-informed," Dumbledore admitted. "Yes, Marvolo was a student here, a few years older than I, through his Fifth year. He did not fit in by any means."

"The scholarships were only through the fifth year," Harry agreed. "However, when many of those poor families had members recruited by Grindelwald, the Ministry cut back, and then suspended the scholarships in the 1930s."

Dumbledore nodded. He had forgotten most of this, but recalled it now.

"Don't you get it? The Ministry broke the contract by doing so, and therefore gave up the authority of imposing either a Visitor or an Inquisitor."

Dumbledore sat up straight, blinking in surprise. "I must find our copy of the agreement," he said.

"Happy hunting," Harry said, leaving. It was only five minutes later that Dumbledore realized that Harry had not only answered none of the questions he had planned, he had not even been asked them. "I believe young Harry might be right," Dumbledore muttered. "Ah ha!" He pulled out the agreement in question, and read it quickly, smiling in satisfaction. Further searching found the notices of the 'temporary' suspension of the scholarships. By midnight, Dumbledore would correctly decide that he had ample ability and evidence to remove Umbridge, and most Ministry supervision, other than over O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s, which he did not wish to suspend in any case.

\*

While Harry was meeting with Dumbledore, Snape was starting a meeting of his own with the children of his 'associates'.

"Things are changing," he started off.

"Never mind that! Where's my wand?" Draco demanded.

Snape instantly petrified him. "Watch your mouth," he snarled. "If you hadn't acted like the spoiled little brat you are on the train, some of this would not be necessary."

Snape turned to the others. He had been torn as to how to handle the situation, as four years of heaping abuse on Potter had been satisfying to a degree. Still, given the choice of revenge on the long-dead James Potter and revenge on Voldemort, who had perverted the Pureblood ideals Snape still mostly held on to, the choice had to go in another direction, now that it looked like Lily's son might survive and even win. "I spent the entire summer convincing the Headmaster that despite your family associations, none of you were dangerous and were not even likely to be spies. Malfoy here ruined all that work in less than a day because of his usual petulance. I had worked very hard to insure that the Headmaster's attention has been spread evenly throughout Hogwarts. Do not mistake his kindness for other weaknesses, nor expect his mercy to be limitless, nor believe his power within the school minor. Thanks to 'Mouth' Malfoy here, most of the Headmaster's attention will be on you, especially you fifth years. Any bullying, any stepping out of line, may be met with harsher punishments than you are usually subject to, including expulsion."

Snape turned on Malfoy. "It took a great deal of argument on my part to save you from be expelled. You are in House confinement for the month of September and on probation for the rest of the year. That means, if you accumulate a deficit of minus fifteen House points you are back on suspension until you even the points out; while if you gather a score of minus fifty or a detention, you will be before the four Heads of House and the Headmaster, who will decide if you should be expelled. The Headmaster made it clear that no positive points from me will be counted, and the vote on expulsion is made by a majority decision."

Snape pulled the prefect's badge off of Malfoy's robes. "He has also removed

you as prefect." Dumbledore actually hadn't, although he did suggest it might be necessary. Snape now decided it was. He handed the badge to Nott, who made a show of distaste before taking it, mostly so that Malfoy would blame him less. "I have also just finished firecalling your parents. Your father emphasized that he had directed you to keep your eyes open and your mouth shut, and he is most displeased you ruined your chances to collect information for the cause. You are nothing to the cause except a possible recruit. Places are earned, not given, and you are no longer in a position to earn your place." Snape had just dropped Malfoy's status in the group from top dog to lowest mutt, although he would likely be treated much as he had been -- for a while at least, in case he rapidly recovered.

Snape looked at the group. "Unless you have a direct order, not just from outside but from the highest authority," and there was no doubt in any of their minds who that highest authority was, "you are all to behave yourselves. Most of you are Slytherins, the rest Ravenclaws. You are supposed to be cunning and intelligent. Make the rest of Hogwarts see you as good citizens; trustworthy, open, friendly, and unbiased against mongrels and Muddbloods. Only then will you find it easy to accumulate information, to become useful while you are here. Lull the opposition into thinking all is well. Do not disparage wizarding culture, but defend it with tact. Be helpful, get the others to know what our culture should stand for. We are the elite of humanity; make the others see the glories of magic, so that when the time comes He will have an even greater following. In short, be the House of Cunning, not the House of Loudmouths." Snape saw he at least had their attention, and hopefully most of their cooperation. He had long hoped they would come to similar conclusions about their tactics by themselves, but they had not; Snape was incapable of understanding that his divisive treatment of the students, indulging his Slytherins while abusing most of the others, could have had results different from what he had created – a group of spoiled, arrogant brats. To himself, the furthest he would admit was, 'The Headmaster had been right; it was time to stop coddling them'. "You are dismissed."

When they were gone, Snape released the seething but frightened Draco from the hex. "If you ever speak to me that way again, you will suffer," Snape told

the boy, and Draco believed him. "In addition to your other punishments, you will not be Quidditch captain. You are still on the team, but if you manage to put yourself in a future Confinement, you may be off the team as well. Oh," Snape said with an evil smile, "your father told me to give you something in private."

"What's that?" Draco asked, brightening.

"Crucio!"

\*

Harry swung by the kitchens to talk with Dobby and Winky and then headed directly back to the common room. He was unsurprised to see that Hermione was one of the few people still there, obviously waiting for him.

"What's up?" Harry asked.

"There was quite a rumpus . . . well, several," Hermione admitted.

"About what?" Harry asked, sitting next to her.

"You," Hermione said frankly. "You implied before that you know what they have been saying about you in 'The Daily Prophet'?"

"Oh, yes," Harry replied, making a face.

"Well, Seamus' mother believed most of them. Seamus was a bit loud about it, and Ron and Neville nearly hit him."

"Neville?"

"Oh, yes," Hermione said, nodding. "Anyway, Dean straightened the three of them out before they got TOO loud. Well, that did cause a lot of discussion, and Lavender started attacking you. I started defending you when Ginny



tackled Lavender and they had a regular cat-fight."

That surprised Harry. "Really?"

"Oh, yes. Kicking, screaming, scratching, biting, and lots and lots of hair-pulling. McGonagall got here before we could get them separated. . . ."

Harry noticed Hermione was sitting very stiffly.

"Are you hurt?"

Hermione nodded, and seeing they were now alone in the common room, she half-slid off her robe and unbuttoned her blouse. She showed the startled Harry her bra-covered cleavage, and then Harry realized that she was actually showing him a nasty bruise, which was developing right below the front of her left shoulder and collar bone.

"May I?"

Hermione nodded, and was startled when Harry placed his right hand over the bruise. A wave of warmth ran throughout Hermione's body and then back to the bruise. Harry removed his hand, and Hermione saw the bruise was healed. "How. . . ?"

"One of the tricks I learned this summer," Harry answered. "It isn't really wandless magic as such, and I didn't really heal you. In a sense, I used you as a wand, sending out a spell that collected your own magic, which then came and healed you. It's similar to, but not as effective as, a 'mother's kiss', but. . . ." Harry blushed slightly.

"Thank you," Hermione said quietly. She also blushed as she buttoned her blouse back up.

"What happened to Ginny and Lavender?" Harry asked to cover up his own slight embarrassment.

"They are both in the Infirmary for bruising and to have their hair fully regrown. Ginny nearly scalped Lavender, and Lavender got more than a tuft or two out of Ginny. They'll be alternating detentions with McGonagall every night for the next four weeks."

"Why would Ginny do that?" Harry asked.

"Harry," Hermione said, as if talking to a child, "she's had a crush on you since before she ever met you, plus you saved her life."

"Ah. . . ." For the first time that day, Harry looked uncertain and a bit confused.

Hermione leaned against Harry and exhaled. "Don't worry about them, Harry."

At that moment, Dobby appeared, making both Harry and Hermione sit up straight. Dobby was hopping up and down in his excitement.

"You actually found one?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Winky found!" Dobby said quietly but ecstatically. "Dobby was called to doggies. They also found one." Dobby held out his hand and two boxes appeared.

"Good work, the pair of you. Do you have a piece of parchment?" Harry asked Hermione as he relieved Dobby of the boxes.

"May I know what's going on?" Hermione asked as she handed some parchment to him.

"I'll ask the Headmaster if you can join us," Harry said. "You'll take care of everything?" he asked Dobby.

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir, and we thank you." Dobby disappeared.

"What are they thanking you for?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"I don't believe in slavery any more than you do," Harry replied. "Other places don't either. Elves have been free in the Americas, for example, since the late nineteenth century. They are bound to their families by contract, however. It really does strengthen them. Dobby and Winky are in my employ as a supplemental employer until I leave school, then they'll work for me full time."

"Not an ideal solution, but a much better one than slavery," Hermione commented.

"I agree," Harry said simply. He smiled at Hermione and gently squeezed her now-healed shoulder, and then went to bed.

Hermione frowned a bit, shrugged, and did the same.

\*

The next morning, when Seamus woke up, he was confronted by the sight of a fully-dressed Harry Potter staring at him. Harry was not the short, skinny ragamuffin of previous years. He would never be tall, but he was now average height for his age -- about the same height as Seamus, had he been standing. He was again dressed all in well-fitting black -- dragon hide boots, black jeans, a black t-shirt with the logo of a European wizarding band called 'Death Angels', and a black silk shirt currently unbuttoned and hanging out. "I hear there's something you want to say to me," Harry said quietly.

Seamus flushed. "Me Mam thinks you're dangerous to know, and worse. I know you're not a liar, Harry, but I really don't know what to think."

"Fair enough," Harry said. "How about a useful neutrality?"

"Meaning?"

"Watch my back in public and keep my secrets, but at the same time feel free to keep your distance, so nothing will get back to your mother."

"Sounds doable," Seamus said in relief. "Thanks."

"No problem." Harry buttoned up his shirt and tucked it in. He grabbed his school robe and tossed it on.

Harry found Hermione down in the common room with most of the first years. "Isn't Ron awake?" she asked.

"At seven thirty on a Saturday morning?" Harry asked, amused. "Hardly."

"Could you please round up the other two first year boys?" she asked. "I want to show them the way to the great hall and then to the classrooms after."

"Not a problem."

\*

There weren't many at breakfast, and Madams Hooch and Pomfrey were the only staff members. Harry had barely seated himself when, unusually for the weekend, Dumbledore appeared and signaled to Harry. When he got back, he whispered in Hermione's ear, "Meet me at the entrance to the Headmaster's office at ten twenty."

Hermione merely nodded as she finished peeling an apple, and then cutting it up into her oatmeal as well as into a second bowl for one the first chattering first years and some into one for Harry as well. Harry just rolled his eyes but said nothing, taking only one deviled kidney and two poached eggs for the rest of his breakfast. He ignored Hermione's dirty look as he prepared a cup of milky sweet coffee, a habit he had picked up over the summer.

\*

Hermione showed up to the gargoyle guardian exactly on time. "I assume you wanted to talk to me before we meet with the Headmaster?"

Harry nodded and pulled his wand. He laid down several detection spells and seemed satisfied. "Did you ever wonder how Voldemort survived being disembodied?"

Hermione gave Harry a crooked smile. "His pseudonym means something like 'Flight of Death' and he calls his minions 'Death Eaters. . . .'"

"'Minions'? I don't think I ever actually heard someone use that in a spoken sentence," Harry teased.

"Hush, you. From what you learned down in the Chamber, Tom Riddle grew up a frightened and abused orphan. He obviously had no religious beliefs, and probably believed that death is the end. He would have undergone some sort of dark ritual or rituals to anchor his soul in this world."

"Exactly. When you kill a sentient being in hot or cold blood -- for any reason other than a genuinely compassionate mercy killing and true self defense -- you damage your own soul. It's possible to split your soul if you've prepared yourself before hand and store it. He had done it five times, into two artifacts of Slytherin, a pocket diary, and one artifact each of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, before he attacked me. He planned on a total of six. He didn't realize that my scar was one, and he's made one more. He's very lucky he didn't so split what was left so much that he couldn't be reanimated. The diary Ginny had was one piece and I destroyed it. My scar was exorcized and that Horcrux broken. Slytherin's ring and Hufflepuff's cup also have had their Horcrux broken."

Hermione nodded. "That leaves three."

"Exactly. Let's see the Headmaster."

\*

"Miss Granger," the Headmaster said politely. He turned to Harry. "Do you really think it wise to involve another student?"

"I think I need at least one person at Hogwarts I can fully trust," Harry answered simply, making Hermione blush in pleasure and the Headmaster flush in shame. "And yes, I know enough not to tell her anything I don't want you or Professor Snape to lift from her mind."

They saw Dumbledore wince at that thrust, but he did not deny it.

"I presume Professor Snape still has your full confidence?"

"He does," Dumbledore acknowledged, "and he has agreed to crack down on the Slytherins, provided others do not initiate trouble."

"I certainly shan't," Hermione said, "and we both know Harry won't."

"I'll speak to the Weasleys brothers, but I don't know how much influence I really have," Harry added. "I will try to set a good example."

"Excellent. What did you wish to talk to me about?"

"Horcruxes." That shook Dumbledore. He had not really expected Harry to mention those in front of Hermione. Harry pulled out two boxes. "We've eliminated two more."

"We?"

Harry nodded. "I asked Dobby to check around Hogwarts to see if Voldemort had stashed any here. Another elf found it and gave to Dobby. I broke the Horcrux last night. . . ."

"That is incredibly dangerous, Harry!"

"Not for me," Harry corrected, before Dumbledore could try and guilt-trip him. "Even with the Horcrux on me broken, I retain a certain sympathy with Voldemort's magic. In fact, I'm even more sensitive to it. For example, I can now detect the Dark Mark within sixty feet or so, although I would not try to command it, even with Parseltongue."

"You're still a Parselmouth?"

Harry merely nodded. "In any case, here is Ravenclaw's diadem." He slid a box over. "Strangely enough, Remus found another." Dumbledore's eyebrows went up in surprise. "It turns out that Sirius' brother Reggie took the family house elf to some cavern or other and liberated Slytherin's locket." Harry slid the other box across. "That's what killed Reggie. Sirius is reconsidering his opinion of that elf, I can tell you, as well as his brother. In any event, that means we have six down, but have no idea what the seventh is."

"We do," Dumbledore said. "Voldemort's familiar."

"Nagini?" Harry asked, surprised. "You mean the Horcrux is in the snake, right?" Dumbledore shook his head. "But that's stupid! Even if we don't kill the snake it will die sooner or later. Making it a Horcrux doesn't make the snake immortal, does it?"

"I wouldn't have thought so, but I suppose it might be possible," Dumbledore answered. "It may also be that Voldemort believes it to be so and is mistaken, or that he merely had no other choice when he made it. Still, that is the final Horcrux."

"Great! Even though the snake can move and even defend itself, it's not going to be easy for him to hide a bloody great snake. . . ."

"Language!" Hermione scolded.

"May I borrow your pensieve, Professor?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore blinked at that, and then asked, "For what purpose?"

"I want to show Hermione a memory of Nagini." He turned to Hermione.

"Trust me, when you see it, you'll say, 'that's a bloody big snake!'"

Dumbledore smiled while Hermione rolled her eyes.

By the end of the meeting, Dumbledore was frustrated that he could not tease any additional information from Harry. He had agreed that Professor Snape would investigate the possibility of poisoning Nagini.



## ***Chapter V***

Oddly enough, the so-called Houses of ambition and action both tended to be the latest risers on weekends when their House teams were not involved in Quidditch. As Harry and Hermione were just ending their meeting with Dumbledore, most of the Gryffindors were just showering and getting ready for lunch, all a bit wary of the upsets of the evening before.

Meanwhile, a sub-group of the children of Death Eaters was just starting a meeting of their own. This time, they were all Slytherins, fourth year and higher, and a few 'interested parties' from the Slytherin sixth and seventh years -- the ones who seemed most interested in joining once they left school.

"Snape wasn't clear enough last night?" Nott asked once their meeting room was secured. His prefect was starting to give him a little spine in dealing with Malfoy.

"I don't think he was speaking for the Dark Lord," Malfoy retorted.

"Do you claim you are?" Montague demanded in turn.

"Of course," Malfoy said arrogantly.

"Directly on His orders?" Montague pressed.

"No," Malfoy was smart enough to admit that much for his own sake, although it was clear he was tempted to claim otherwise. "I have communicated with my father, and he should be able to clear this up. Until then, I think we should continue trying to recruit and set in motion the plans we were going to go forward with before last night." Draco knew his standing had taken a hard hit the night before, and it had taken Pansy and his two henchmen a bit of effort to get everyone together. Draco had to take a stand if he was going to reclaim any authority over the group.

"Which were what?" Nott asked.

"The Dark Lord wants to finish Potter off," Malfoy replied. "That doesn't mean we shouldn't hurt him badly along the way."

"How?" Montague demanded. "It's not like we can legally duel the twerp. And even if the Ministry is trying to discredit him, if the Boy-Who-Lived was attacked, or even suffered some 'accident', the aurors would come in and probably do a real investigation, maybe even using truth potions and testing wands."

"Potter, probably," Pansy agreed. "The Weasel and the Weaselette, or the Mudblood, probably not."

"Maybe," Montague mused. Whoever pulled anything off, if they were authorized by the Dark Lord, would get the credit, not Draco, although Draco did not realize that.

"We shouldn't actually do anything until one of us gets an assured go-ahead," Nott insisted, "but I agree with the idea we should have something planned if we get that order." There were murmurings which could be taken for agreement.

"Pansy, everyone knows you hate the Mudblood," Nott went on, "so you shouldn't have anything to do with taking her down. You and Malfoy would be the top suspects, along with Millie. Maybe you should be thinking about the Weaselette."

"Agreed," Pansy said. "Millie and I will handle the little blood traitor."

"We'll handle the Weasel," Morrison, one of the sixth years, said. They had all been tricked by the twins too often and this might be their chance at revenge against the family.

"Then I'll see if I can take out the Mudblood," Montague said. "If," he stressed, "we're ordered to take action."

Malfoy smiled smugly, and went off to write a letter to his father. He should have known that his would not be the only letter sent out from the groups that had met that morning and the evening before, but he still thought of himself as the Prince of Slytherin and the Dark Lord's only conduit.

\*

Much to Harry's surprise, most of September was a very pleasant month, perhaps the best he had spent at Hogwarts to date. True, the rest of the Quidditch players had been unhappy with his decision to quit the team, but he had promised to be the reserve seeker if called upon, and he occasionally flew with them in practices. Ginny and Ron had made the team as seeker and keeper respectively, although it had been a near thing in Ron's case.

Oddly, of the Quidditch players and those students most interested in following the team, Ginny seemed the most upset with Harry. She made a point of calling attention to the fact that she was ignoring Harry at all times, other than those few times when he flew against her. This did not matter much to Harry, who put it down mostly to the fact that he had so-far beaten her to the snitch seven out of eight times. Hermione and the Gryffindor chasers merely smiled and rolled their eyes at Harry's interpretation.

Ron and the twins had tried to put pressure on Harry that first Saturday evening when he had announced his intentions. He had the three of them get up at 5:30 the next morning and made them go through his workout with him. Ron had given up in less than twenty-five minutes, Fred followed a few moments after that. George had lasted nearly forty-five minutes, but had then thrown up. None were then willing to practice dueling with Harry.

They had not bothered Harry much after that.

Hermione, and to Harry's surprise Luna, joined him nearly every afternoon to

practice meditation and then Occlumency exercises. The pair also learned some basic Tai Chi from Harry as well. Ron was becoming wrapped up in Quidditch practices and in recruiting students as test subjects for his brothers – in part because he was paid three Knuts per volunteer per test and in part because he was afraid if he didn't find volunteer test subjects, he might be 'volunteered', so Luna fit into his partially missing slot.

Hermione didn't seem to mind, in part because although she and Luna argued at least as much as she and Ron had, they were debating ideas and knowledge and Hermione found she was learning even when she disagreed with everything Luna was saying. Harry didn't mind, in part because he was still somewhat close to Ron in class and on the playing field when he did join in the practices.

The other thing that bothered Harry and Hermione (Harry for the first time, Hermione just to an increased degree) was that Ron's greater physical exertions, coupled with the fact that left to himself he would have sometime remembered to shower on Saturdays when reminded daily, was making him even more aromatic than he had been in the past. By the first Wednesday of class, Fred and George were often tasked with reminding Ron of his personal hygiene (usually by throwing him physically into a shower after practices when he showed no sign of going on his own). Ron's greater activity also did nothing to improve his eating habits, as he was even more hungry than he had been in the past. Harry solved that (although it did nothing for anyone else) by always sitting to Ron's left, rather than across (in the line of sight) or to Ron's right, where there was too much elbow action. Harry did worry that this inattention to the left would cause some problems to Ron as keeper, but so far it hadn't carried over to the practice field.

Hermione made certain to sit at Harry's left, and one scowl from Harry always caused a shift for Hermione to fit in.

The parts that surprised Harry were that he was really enjoying classes and that he wasn't being bothered by the Slytherins. All of 'the usual suspects' were laying low and most were being surprisingly reasonable to the point that

a number of Gryffindors had discussed the situations several times. Harry and several others were admittedly confused. Hermione and a few others were confident, or at least hopeful, that the Slytherins were coming around to a reasonable outlook. Ron and most of the rest were convinced it was all a trick.

It was nice having a defense teacher who was not only competent but inspiring. John Wilkes was taciturn, even laconic; a middle-aged hard-faced man who brooked no nonsense. On the other hand, he was a good teacher who did not spook the more timid but who also challenged the most advanced.

Snape was also acting differently. Compared to any other teacher Harry had ever had, Snape was rude, nasty, and both very unhelpful and uninspiring. Compared to the Snape of Harry's first four years, Snape was almost unrecognizable, at least to Harry, although Neville suffered as severe a tongue-lashing as he ever had when he had melted a cauldron in their second week.

Harry was therefore surprised to have Snape yell at him with all his old fervor during the third week of class for having a 'totally unacceptable' potion – especially as Snape made certain Harry saw that his actual grade was been an E. Harry caught on when he was assigned a detention rather than losing any points. Turning around and seeing Malfoy's smirk made Harry even more convinced that Snape wanted to talk with him privately and without arousing suspicions.

Harry made his way into the dungeons late that afternoon, just in case this was a better-baited trap than the Slytherins usually came up with. Snape, he knew, sometimes had a level of sense not common in the wizarding world. Snape motioned Harry into his inner laboratory, an area Harry knew about but had never ventured into before, with a jerk of his head.

Snape put up a number of wards and motioned for Harry to sit on a stool, and then Snape did the same. After a moment of silence, Snape stated, "The

Headmaster has informed me of several changed circumstances. Therefore, I thought it finally possible for us to have a talk which I once thought we might have had in your first year.”

Harry merely responded with a puzzled, “Yes, sir?”

Snape fidgeted for a moment and then blurted out, “How much did your aunt tell you about me?”

Harry blinked, as he never would have guessed that comment was coming. “Professor?” he asked puzzled, “how would Aunt Petunia have known you?”

Now it was Snape’s turn to be puzzled. “Hadn’t she told you the details about growing up with your mother?”

Harry’s face hardened, and he thought hard and fast. Seeing this, Snape held back for a moment. Then Harry looked Snape in the eye and said, “Cast it.”

“Cast. . . ?”

“Legilimency,” Harry stated.

Snape hesitated, but looked Harry in the eyes. He was instantly assaulted by image after image, memory after memory, of abuse and ridicule. After fifteen minutes, Harry relented and asked, “Is that enough, or would you like to see more?”

“No,” Snape whispered, holding on to the lab table that separated him from Lily’s child. “No more.” He closed his eyes and tried to process through at least some of what he had seen and felt.

After nearly five minutes, Snape sat up straight and said, “I knew your mother and her sister before we came to Hogwarts. Your aunt . . . well, as despicable as I thought her then, I did not imagine she would turn out any where as near as vile as she apparently did.”

Snape halted for a moment as considered some more. “What I am about to tell you goes no further.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said simply.

“I am a half-blood, like yourself. As such, I was not welcomed with open arms in Slytherin. At the same time, your father and his cronies enjoyed tormenting me in much the same ways as it seems your cousin and his gang tormented you. I did not take that lying down, although I was usually outnumbered. After some months, a few of the other Slytherins decided that I had earned their help – I would only later learn that they were using that help to recruit me into the Dark Lord’s service. I would say your father’s gang and I fought to more or less a draw until the end of our fifth year. Your mother was really the only person who was kind to me, largely because of our prior acquaintance.”

Harry merely nodded.

“By the end of my fifth year, most of my protectors had left the year before and the few others were heavily involved in their N.E.W.T.s. Your father used the chance to publically humiliate me. In my embarrassment, I foolishly lashed out at your mother, who was a witness. That broke our friendship, especially when she started seeing your father the next year. Although we continued as potion partners and even worked well together in class, I could not repair the damage.”

“I see,” was all Harry said.

“After we left Hogwarts, I even more foolishly fell further under the Dark Lord’s spell until I had taken his Mark.” Snape smiled grimly. “I understand you met a version of Tom Riddle.”

“I did,” Harry agreed.

“Perhaps he was not so under the circumstances, but I am told he was particularly charming as a young man.”

Harry snorted humorlessly. “Well, Ginny thought so as a first year.”

“Well, he was and still can be,” Snape told Harry. “As long as he wants something from you that he knows he cannot force from you, that is. After he has what he wants, he must be one of the cruelest beings in creation. In any event, as you know, I became a spy for the Headmaster.”

Snape looked Harry in the eye again. “When I thought about you coming here, I was torn. A small part of me resented your being Potter’s son. Most of me resented the idea that I would have to treat you badly, as you were Lily’s son.”

“Even if I had been Sorted into Slytherin?” Harry asked.

Snape snorted, “Not likely.”

“Actually,” Harry said with a small smile, “if I had not met Malfoy already, I would have been. That was the Hat’s suggestion, and I begged it, ‘anywhere but Slytherin’.”

“That would have complicated matters,” Snape mused. “In any case, the Headmaster was torn. . . .”

“Between using me as a tool, really creating me as a tool, as I might have to die for Voldemort to die, and hoping it wasn’t going to work out that way,” Harry stated.

“Exactly. He was clear before you arrived that I could not favor you in any way, and I knew that treating you well could . . . complicate my dealings with my former comrades. I was prepared for a high level of playacting.”

“Until you decided I looked almost exactly like my father.”



“Precisely,” Snape admitted. “That made it too easy for me, and I admit, I over-did my part. If you had at least worn a different style of glasses . . . without them, it is easier to see the subtle differences.”

Harry merely nodded. He did wonder how much of this was true, how much was Snape exaggerating or leaving out, and how much it was Snape lying to himself.

Snape looked at Harry. “Some of my Snakes would love to challenge you, but won’t dare without a direct order from the Dark Lord, although Draco is likely enough to lose his temper and try something on the spur of the moment. Granger and the two youngest Weasleys are the most likely targets – if Parkinson or Bulstrode have their way, it will be Granger. Draco would be happy with any attacks on Granger or your sidekick. The others are more likely to target either Weasley – they’ve all suffered pranks at the hands of the twins.” He handed Harry a sheet of Muggle notebook paper. “Memorize the names. Those with the x next to their names should be considered the most dangerous. That will turn to ash in fifteen minutes.”

“I understand, sir,” Harry said quietly. He looked at Snape. “Are there any fifth year Slytherins I could trust?”

“Zabini, Davis, and Greengrass should not attack unless they are forced to do so, which is why they are not on the list.. Do not discount the possibility that they can be blackmailed or otherwise coerced into doing so.”

Harry nodded.

“One more thing,” Snape said. He held out a potions book, which Harry took. “I do not know where your mother’s copy is. Perhaps it’s in the Potter vault, or it may have been destroyed . . . that night. She and I worked out many improvements, and included the best as annotation in our copies. That one has had all of our annotations added, although it is of course in my handwriting. Still, most of it was as much her work as it was mine. You do

not have her flair and instinct for potions, but they should at least improve your brewing. I would ask you not use it in class, but if you study it, you will learn a great deal.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Harry managed to say, surprised.

“There are also . . . spells, mostly hexes, which are my own discoveries or even creations. Some are borderline Dark, and a few are over that line. I ask you not to teach them to anyone while I live without my prior permission. If you are unsure of what any do, ask before you try them.”

Harry agreed, and there was a moment of silence before Snape asked, “I suppose there is nothing you are willing to tell me about your summer?”

Harry smiled grimly. “I take it a meddling old codger asked you to probe?”

“He did,” Snape agreed, “as did someone much more dangerous.”

“Ah. . . .” Harry thought a moment and then made a decision. “You’ve no doubt heard the expression, ‘there is no good or evil, only power and those willing to use it’, or words to that effect?”

“A favorite saying of Slytherin, as well as the Dark Lord,” Snape agreed.

“To me, that just seems like an excuse for the powerful to do as they like, and an excuse to themselves as they go Dark.”

Snape nodded his understanding.

“Dumbledore has a failing common among those who want to think themselves Light . . . that every problem can be solved by goodness and understanding. Hermione’s the same way about elves and such.”

“True,” Snape agreed. “I sometimes wonder what Albus would do if the Dark Lord arrived and claimed he wanted to confess his sins and seek a lighter

path.”

“I shudder to think of it,” Harry agreed. He then looked Snape in the eyes, and Snape felt Harry’s power growing on him “I spent the summer with people who think both approaches are wrong in many ways. The wizarding world is not the entire magical world. Still, in the wizarding world, power is still the final measure – there is no true rule of law, there are few communities of faith, certainly none are left in Europe. The Ministries are all corrupt to different degrees, and serve power, not their citizens. Even the best-run Ministry makes the average authoritarian Muggle dictatorship look pleasant.”

“Agreed, although I am surprised to hear you say it,” Snape interjected, somewhat impressed.

“Unfortunately, as I said, what matters is power – magical, financial, political, and personal. I have some financial resources, and I will have more when I turn seventeen.”

“The Potters were a moderately wealthy family, but that is all concentrated in you now,” Snape agreed. “And as the official Head of your House, you have some political rights most of us do not.”

“True. I don’t have many personal connections, and the Ministry has been smearing my name since late June, but I would think ‘the Boy-Who-Lived’ would carry a little weight among the sheep.”

“Sheep?”

“I can’t answer for the rest of the wizarding world, but yes, wizarding Britain reminds me more than a bit like sheep. Tell me, what should happen if six Death Eaters attacked the average wizarding house, one with the usual available wards activated and where say three adults were prepared to fight it out?”

“The Death Eaters would fail,” Snape agreed. “Even in 1981, most wizards did not have their wards fully engaged because it was ‘inconvenient’, and when attacked, when they could not apparate or easily floo away, they almost always panicked. We always attacked with at least three times the number of total wizards we thought would be present just in case they did fight back.”

“I had power equal to Voldemort’s when I disembodied him,” Harry stated, and Snape, who had been sensing a build-up of Harry’s power, believed him. “Do you know what I think? By accident or by design, Dumbledore trapped me with people who forced me to underachieve, who punished me every time I equaled or surpassed their idiot of a son. I followed the same path in nearly every subject here – well, I matched myself to Ron in most classes. He’s not an idiot by any means, but he’s also not a dedicated student. I had such a knack in Defense that I passed Hermione by, never mind Ron, but neither seemed bothered by it so I really didn’t stop myself there.”

Harry smiled coldly, and Snape felt more than a bit nervous. “This summer, I learned how to really use my power.” Snape shivered. “You don’t have worry, and neither does the Headmaster. I will not become the next Dark Lord after I ‘vanquish’ Voldemort.”

“‘Vanquish’,” Snape asked.

“According to the Prophecy the Headmaster heard about me, that’s what I am called upon to try and do. I always wanted to just be normal, just Harry. Well, I can’t. I wouldn’t like to be like any of the Dark Lords I’ve ever read about – and yes, I read about them this past summer; I certainly did not learn about them from Binns – and I also wouldn’t like to try and become a puppet master like Dumbledore. I have the wealth to disappear after Voldemort is gone, and I intend to do so. You can tell your Light puppet master all of that. As for your Dark puppet master, you can tell him if he doesn’t want to be ‘vanquished’, he can give up trying to conquer the world and concentrate on being immortal.”

“I’ll tell them, but I doubt either will accept it,” Snape answered.

“I would be shocked if they did,” Harry admitted.

There was another moment of silence, than, “Potter. . . .”

“Yes, sir?”

“Your friend Granger’s shields are almost strong enough. When I determine they are, I will let you know, and then you may tell her what you will, so long as she agrees it goes no further.”

“Thank you,” Harry replied, even more surprised than he had been a moment before.

“Did you complete your potions homework for next week?”

“No, sir.”

“Then sit down, do it carefully for once, and then you may go.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry answered, knowing this would prevent his being seen leaving the area too early, “for everything.”

\*

Harry warned his friends to be careful anytime they were alone or when there were any of the students he named, although he did not say why he suspected some of them. He could tell Hermione, at least, had some ideas on the matter. Hermione, Neville, Luna, and Ginny all agreed to be more careful. Ron pointed out that he had never trusted anyone not in Gryffindor to begin with, and so would be able to continue to take care of himself.

Harry hoped his friend’s prejudices would keep him safe.

## ***Chapter VI***

Ron strained against the hexes holding him tight; his senses exploding in agony as he was clubbed with beater bats. He had been silenced, so he could not scream, but he knew that Hermione, who was on prefect patrol with him, was likely suffering at least as bad, and perhaps worse.

Suddenly, there was a scream, which was followed by several more, and the beatings stopped.

Ron lay on the floor, gasping, and could only see out of one eye, but he saw several bodies weakly writhing, and several figures in plain black robes starting to run away.

One figure turned, and Ron saw whomever it was had a white mask made out of fabric – not a Death Eater, but obviously someone trying to pretend to be, although he could not comprehend that at the moment. The figure tried to hex someone, but then the person's wand hand exploded. As the figure screamed, collapsing in agony, the other figures kept running.

Ron finally passed out.

\*

It was shortly before 9:30 when Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster entered the Gryffindor common room along with Dolores Umbridge, two people in auror robes, and a very imposing witch with a monocle. Umbridge puffed up to speak, but the witch started firmly, "Let's not cause any confusion in the record." She passed out parchment and commanded, "Everyone write down your movements with the best estimate you have of the times since you left the great hall tonight. If you were not at dinner, list your movements since Four o'clock. List as best you can who was in the common room along with the times they entered or left and where they went to or came from." Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore went to the different dorms to bring anyone there to the common room, where they were

given the same assignment.

Umbridge snatched Harry's parchment away as soon as he was finished, although the other woman claimed it immediately. "Do not disrupt the chain of evidence again," she warned. "Mister Potter, are these times correct?" She showed Harry the piece of parchment.

Harry looked at her for a moment, glanced at the parchment, and then pulled a wand from an inner pocket of his robe, saying, "I swear on my magic that those times are correct to the best of my knowledge." After the flash, he put the wand back inside his robes.

After another twenty minutes of comparing parchments, the woman came back to Harry and said, "I am Madam Bones, head of the MLES. Please hold your wand out."

Harry did so, and in a moment there were flashes coming from the end of the wand. Bones turned to Umbridge and said, "He's clear."

"What are Minister and his lying lickspittals claiming I'm doing now?" Harry asked softly, glancing at Umbridge.

Umbridge took the bait. "You attacked several defenseless Pure-Blood. . . ."

"Silence!" Bones snapped. "His house mates place him here for the last two hours, his wand is clear, and he swore an oath." She turned to Harry and said, "Perform a bit of magic, please."

Harry shrugged and wrote, 'Fudge is Voldemort's buttboy' in large flaming letters.

Harry then carefully placed his wand away and stood up. "Someone will explain. Now." There was something in his voice that made everyone in the room shiver in fear, including the Headmaster and Bones.

“Several Slytherins, most of them indeed of alleged Pure-Blood, were crippled tonight,” Madam Bones drawled. “However, they had obviously been attacking. . . .”

“That is not proven!” Umbridge protested.

“We shall see when their victims wake up,” Bones snapped.

“They were attacked with beater bats! No matter what those poor, delusional children might claim, there is no evidence. . . .”

“Fingerprints are excellent evidence, and most match, except for Pucey, who lost his hand,” Bones retorted. “We’ll have the others caught within the hour.”

Umbridge blinked in shock. “But . . . but that’s a Muggle idea!”

“That is hardly true, as the concept was accepted as evidence in Magical contracts long before the Muggles adopted the idea.”

Harry took a step towards Bones, breaking up the argument, and everyone leaned or stepped further away from him. “Who was injured?”

“Harry . . . Mister Weasley and Miss Granger. . . .” Dumbledore obviously did not quite know how to finish that sentence.

Harry’s head snapped around and demanded, “Are they badly hurt?”

“Yes,” Dumbledore stated simply.

Everyone’s eyes went wide as they could see the power radiating from Harry.

“Harry, you must let justice take its course. . . .”

“We all know there is only incidental justice in magical Britain, unless you



consider bribes and extortion justice,” Harry spat. He marched out of the common room, and none dared stop him.

\*

“Mister Potter, I cannot let you see them,” Madam Pomfrey pleaded rather than ordered. “And you know I cannot tell you their exact injuries.”

“Harry. . . .”

The pair looked up at the sound of Hermione’s soft moan. Madam Pomfrey thought a moment, and then nodded.

Harry slipped behind the screen and knelt by Hermione’s bed. She was covered in bandages soaked in restoring potions. Like Ron, her head was mostly untouched, although there were many scrapes and bruises.

“Tell him,” Hermione mumbled.

“Very well. She was not . . . molested, but she has multiple internal injuries, there are over fifty breaks in her bones, most minor, and you can imagine the soft tissue damage.”

Harry just nodded.

“Just five minutes,” Madam Pomfrey warned. “The potions should have her fully asleep by then.”

Harry just nodded, and looked at Hermione as the nurse gave them a bit of privacy.

“I don’t know how you did it, but thank you,” Hermione whispered.

“I wish I could have done more at the time,” Harry said. He pulled the sheet down and touched a bit of flesh showing through the bandages and placed the

other hand on her forehead. Then Harry very carefully kissed Hermione gently on the lips.

Hermione glowed a soft green for a few moments and then fell into a healing sleep. Harry covered her back up and muttered, “I think Ron would rather ache a bit.” Then he left to do what he had to do. As he had ignored the injured Slytherins, the aurors guarding them had fully ignored Harry.

\*

Draco Malfoy had gone to sleep a very worried would-be dark wizard. The plan should have worked perfectly. Granted, it had been a large group – twelve Slytherins and three Ravenclaws. Nine conducted the actual attack while six acted as lookouts. Numerous others in both Houses were prepared to give false alibis. If the whole scheme completely unraveled, there would be hell to pay, and Draco was not sure if he could avoid being caught up.

At the moment, he was mostly worried what would happen to him at Hogwarts. That the Dark Lord would punish him far worse for pushing the scheme which resulted in his losing nearly all his sympathizers among the older four years at Hogwarts was beyond Draco’s imagination. Even though Draco had not come up with the plan, it had been he who had pushed for attacking Potter’s friends. The Dark Lord would hold him responsible.

Granted, Draco had more immediate concerns. While he had been enjoying the first sounds of the Weasel and the Mudblood being beaten, someone, or something, invisible had swept past him and Goyle (Crabbe had been in on the attack.), throwing them against opposite walls.

Draco was not sure what had happened next, but the attackers had been chased off and apparently injured. All those concerned had pledged before hand not to give out any names if caught, but it remained to be seen if that would hold.

And so, Draco had tossed and turned for some time before falling asleep.

Why was he suddenly awake?

Draco started to sweat as he realized he was not only awake, but petrified face up, and blindfolded. A muffled voice he could not identify whispered in his ear, “I don’t know if your role will come out, Malfoy, so I’ll serve you and your buttboy some justice now. Zabini and Nott cannot hear a thing. No one will save you.”

Although in terror the like he had never felt before, Malfoy’s panic increased as he heard several dull thuds, which he knew sounded like the noises made in the attack on the Gryffindor prefects. He couldn’t fully accept the idea that Goyle was being beaten, and that he, he, Draco Malfoy, would soon meet the same fate.

There was silence for a moment, and then without further warning, a beater bat crushed Draco’s right knee. Draco’s left knee and hands followed. There was a brief pause which Draco did not really notice, and then his world exploded as the beater bat struck directly on his testicles.

Draco passed out, not knowing that when the swelling went down, his fertility would have been lessened by 80%.

The assailant used his wandless magic to cancel the magic he had laid down the same way and then left. As he did so, he dispersed the beater bat he had conjured. He therefore left no fingerprints on the weapon, and had been careful to leave none anywhere else.

\*

Hogwarts was in an uproar the next morning, except Hufflepuff to a degree, as it was the only House untouched. Ravenclaw had had one member temporary crippled, as her right hip and thigh bones had been pulverized and the flesh shredded. It could all be magically healed, but the associated nerve damage would leave her with a slight limp after the treatments. She and a fellow Ravenclaw had also been arrested.

Slytherin was even harder hit. Five of its members had also been severely injured. Pucey's wand hand had been exploded and could not be restored. Crabbe's lumber vertebrae had been pulverized, and although the bones themselves were being restored, the spinal cord injuries would leave him a paraplegic for the rest of his life. Two other Slytherins had suffered nearly identical injuries. Montague, who had been the one leading the assault, had been the first, and most precisely hit – a near-surgical strike had left him a quadriplegic, barely able to breath or swallow without magical aid. He was under no illusions – he had failed and was now just an expense to his family. He would be dead as soon as the MLES was done with him. The Ministry would not bother imprisoning and therefore paying for the upkeep of anyone his condition.

The news of the twin assaults on Malfoy and Goyle was even more disturbing, as there had been three aurors stationed in their common room. Altogether, it was hardly surprising that classes had been suspended for the day, with students only allowed to travel between their common rooms and the great hall, and only in groups. Nevertheless, Harry was not surprised to be called into the small staff room off the great hall when he finished breakfast.

Harry found the Headmaster, Professors Snape and McGonagall, and Umbridge and Bones waiting for him. “Is there anything you wish to add to your statements of last night, Mister Potter?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry pulled out the wand from an inner pocket and swore he had nothing to do with the attack on Malfoy or Goyle. He restored the wand after the flash and looked directly at Umbridge. “Perhaps, while I'm here, Madam Umbridge would care to swear an oath that she knows nothing and had nothing to do with a pair of dementors wandering around my home town this past summer.”

“I resent your cheek, boy,” Umbridge snapped.

“I notice you're not swearing,” Harry retorted. “I admit, I'm not surprised to

see you sucking up the Death Eater families, now that Voldemort is back.”

“You-Know-Who is not back and will never be back!” Umbridge shrieked.

“Then say his name!” Harry challenged. Umbridge said nothing, so he turned to Dumbledore. “Please, sir, may I spend the morning with Hermione and Ron?”

As Dumbledore thought about it, Snape said, “I need to take Poppy some important potions for the students. Potter can help.”

Dumbledore gave Snape a stern look, and the two seemed to communicate without speaking for a moment. Then the Headmaster nodded.

When the two entered Snape’s private lab, he saw that Harry was fingering his wand. “No need for that, Potter,” he stated, leaving his hands in full sight. “I know you must have been involved somehow, but I do not need to know exactly how. In fact, I don’t want to know. . . .” Snape paused and then admitted, “Actually, someday I would like to know how you are getting away with these oaths, but not today.” Snape almost smiled and asked, “As for you, do you have any questions?”

“How are the non-involved Slytherins taking this?” Harry asked.

“They are confused,” Snape admitted. “They have been used to keeping their heads down, and aren’t certain what all this might mean. The attacks on Malfoy and Goyle terrifies them, as they aren’t sure if they will be hit by association. Nott is particularly worried.”

“He probably should be, as he was certainly involved,” Harry agreed.

“However, I would guess that whoever is behind this had proof of some sort against Malfoy and Goyle, but could not present it to Madam Bones. Hopefully, whoever is behind this will only strike when proof is available but also when what passes for law and order with can’t or won’t act.”

“You have little regard for the justice system,” Snape observed.

“I understand why you dislike, even hate, Sirius,” Harry answered. “Still, you have to agree he spent over ten years in Azkaban without a trial and for no good reason. Fudge sent Hagrid to Azkaban because he felt he needed to seem to be ‘doing something’. Malfoy’s father stayed out of jail in 1981, got away with planting a Horcrux on Ginny Weasley, and paid off the Ministry to have Buckbeak put down. No, I have relatively little faith in what passes in wizarding Britain as a ‘system of justice’.”

Snape nodded. He should be able to pass that on to both of his masters without straining the relationship he was building with Potter. He picked up two large boxes of bottles, which kept his hands full. “Take that small box and get the doors, Potter.”

“Yes, sir!”

\*

Harry found Ron and Hermione asleep. He therefore pulled up a stool next to Hermione’s bed and sat and waited patiently. Madam Pomfrey came behind the privacy screen and looked at him.

“Is there something wrong, Madam Pomfrey?”

“Don’t act innocent with me, young man,” she said almost kindly. “You may look innocent, but I know you better than anyone at Hogwarts, except Miss Granger here. I don’t know if you had anything to do with the injuries the attackers suffered last night, but I do know you did something to Miss Granger.”

“Is she all right?” Harry asked, concerned.

“She is better than all right, as you very well know. It is as if here original injuries decreased by over half, and the healing sped up by a week. When she

wakes, she'll be able to leave."

"I . . ."

"Don't deny it," Pomfrey snapped, insulted. "I know her injuries five minutes before you sat with her and the differences fifteen minutes after you left. I will tell no one, Mister Potter. It is covered by my oaths in any case, both to her and to you. You did a good thing, and I presume there was a good reason you could not do the same for Mister Weasley."

"How could Mrs. Weasley, and possibly only Mrs. Weasley, heal a minor bruise on Ron?" Harry asked softly.

"The 'mother's kiss' is a powerful wandless healing spell," Pomfrey said. "Even Muggle's have heard of it, although it really doesn't work well for them."

"Can only a mother use it?"

"Siblings and lovers may. . . ." Pomfrey blushed.

Harry blushed as well. "I don't know how I feel about Hermione," he said, "but I don't think Ron would want me kissing him. I also think that, as badly as he's hurt, as he heals he'll be prouder of trying to protect Hermione."

"Protect. . . ?"

"Why else would he be more injured?" Harry asked.

Pomfrey nodded. "Very well, I understand and will go along with it. But, Harry, you would have had to kiss. . . ."

Harry blushed even harder and shook his head. "No, the only kiss I stole was on her lips."

A tear ran down Pomfrey's cheek. She leaned over and kissed Harry on the forehead. "You must be the most powerful wizard I have ever met then, Harry Potter, but as powerful a wizard as you are, you are a very good boy." As she pulled back, she was shocked to see tears running down Harry's face as well. "Harry?"

"No one has ever said that," Harry whispered.

"Said. . . ?"

"That I was . . . that I am, a good. . . ."

Pomfrey kissed his forehead and then patted his cheek. "Harry, you are a very nice and good boy. You seem to be burdened with a destiny. Don't let that destiny darken you more than it must."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry whispered. Pomfrey left him alone, and then Harry felt Hermione take his hand.

"How much of that did you hear?" Harry asked.

"I think nearly all of it," Hermione answered softly. "I thought I imagined you kissing me. I'm glad it was real. Thank you."

"I'd do almost anything to help you," Harry answered. "I only wish I could have done more."

"I suspect you've done more than anyone else could have already," Hermione answered. "Now, since you don't want to help me with a bedpan any more than I want to be helped, help me to the toilet and we'll see if Madam Pomfrey was serious about letting me go."

\*

Hermione was not allowed to leaving right away, but by 10:30 she was



dressed and ready to leave. Rather than going to the common room, the pair slowly moved to the great hall, where students would start coming for lunch soon enough. Armed with a pass by Madam Pomfrey, they were not worried about being stopped.

“You’ll tell me all about things some day?” Hermione asked quietly. Harry had warned her that the paintings passed on gossip.

“Some day,” Harry agreed sincerely.

“And the kiss?” she almost whispered.

“I wasn’t entirely sure it would work, but I didn’t want you to suffer if I could help you,” Harry answered.

Hermione wrapped her arm around Harry. “I’m not hurting, but I wouldn’t mind if you did it again.”

It took them some time to make their way to the great hall, but they were still the first ones there. The two certainly enjoyed the kissing, but they were both unsure if they wanted to be a committed couple. To them, ‘friends with benefits’ meant hugging and kissing, although the Hogwarts term was simply ‘snog buddies’, a common stage for couples exploring their feelings.

Luna presented herself to the pair before many others were in the hall. She looked at them carefully, smiled a little ruefully, and kissed both on the cheek while congratulating Hermione on a speedy recovery.

“What was that about?” Harry asked as the first food appeared.

“Knowing Luna, she’s both happy for us but wishing she was exploring snogging with you,” Hermione said. She paused and said, “I really wouldn’t mind if you wanted to.” ‘Snog buddies’ were not necessarily exclusive.

“Only you for now,” Harry answered.

“Only Hermione for what?” Lavender asked, sitting down. “I’m glad you’re better, by the way,” she added. She had worked out her differences with Harry’s defenders.

“Thank you,” Hermione answered. She glanced at Harry and shrugged. It would be all over the school by dinner, even if Luna said nothing. Therefore, Hermione glanced around and seeing no teachers looking at them, gave Harry a quick kiss.

“Buddies?” Lavender asked.

“Right now,” Hermione answered, “and exclusive, except maybe Luna.”

Lavender nodded. Few poached on snog buddies, but Hermione was known to be the possessive type, and after Harry’s display the evening before, few in Gryffindor at least would be willing to cross him. Further up the table, Ginny Weasley winced. She did not enjoy her meal.

Hermione had not thought to look behind her. Professor McGonagall had observed Professor Snape watch the scene. She was shocked that he had done nothing. She therefore allowed him to observe her watching him as he turned away.

Snape came up to her. “I have made peace with my feelings about Mister Potter,” he said. “Let the dead be at peace. I now realize I have enough to do for the future without refighting the past.”

McGonagall nodded, and then whispered so only Snape could hear. “Do you really think he had something to do with last night?”

“He must have,” Snape answered simply. “Don’t ask me how. Maybe he just has ways of helping to bring people into the castle. I really don’t know.”  
Snape’s face hardened. “While I thought I was encouraging and helping my students, it appears that most misunderstood what I wanted them to learn. I

then warned them directly. They did not listen. I know more must have acted as lookouts at least, and others seemed ready to back up the attackers with alibis. If nothing else, perhaps they have all learned there may be consequences they will not like.”

“Is that all?”

Snape considered, and then said, “A new player has entered what would have been a three-sided game between the Headmaster, the Dark Lord, and the Ministry. I find it difficult to believe that Potter is the player, but he must at least be a piece. He is no longer the Headmaster’s rook in reserve, and he was never the Ministry’s pawn, no matter what Fudge might have wished for in the past.”

“You haven’t seen Potter’s wand work this term,” McGonagall said. “If he is not the new king, he is at least a battle queen in terms of power. Filius has always maintained that Harry has the quickest reflexes of any wizard he has ever seen. If Harry was practicing all summer, and it appears to me he likely has . . . and if that practice was combat rather than just fifth year spells. . . .”

Snape nodded. Harry was powerful, if likely limited in repertoire – the question would then be, how limited?

## ***Chapter VII***

The students who had directly beaten Hermione and Ron claimed that, in fact, they were merely defending themselves from a vicious attack launched by Hermione, aided by Ron and 'someone else'. Backed by Minister Fudge and Madam Umbridge, this negated any charges being formally filed against the nine students. Neither were the nine pressed to name any confederates very hard.

There was no chance for five of the nine to continue at Hogwarts as they were far too injured, but Dumbledore formally expelled them as well as the other four students. When their parents had sought to fight the expulsion, all four of the healthier students pleaded to stay out. They did not know who had attacked them, not to mention Malfoy or Goyle, but they had no desire to stay at Hogwarts and find out. The four disappeared back into their families, although they would soon be on the fringes of the Death Eaters. As for the five seriously injured, four were dead within three days of their leaving Hogwarts, euthanased by their families. Only Pucey was ever seen again, and he was spotted wearing a black glove a few weeks later. Harry was not the only person to suspect there was a silver hand within the glove.

Despite her hands being largely tied on prosecution, Madam Bones ordered six aurors stationed at Hogwarts every night for at least the rest of the term. They would patrol most of the corridors between 7:30 at night and 7:30 the next morning in pairs in overlapping shifts. The prefect patrols continued, but only in corridors near their own common rooms, and only in corridors where there were plenty of portraits. Because of his injuries, Ron gave up his prefect's badge (he had not really liked any of the duties in any case), and he was replaced by Harry. Ron was supposed to concentrate on his studies, but he was spending more time trying to get physically ready for the first Quidditch game, which was taking a great deal of his time.

The other major event had occurred just three days after the attacks, when Lucius Malfoy had strode into the great hall during lunch to demand 'justice'

for his son. He had halted in mid-arrogant stride when what had appeared to be a ministry owl had approached him. It had not been a real owl, however. The 'owl' had exploded in Malfoy's face, spraying him, and yet only him, with several powerful acids. While he did not lose his sight, his eyes were somewhat damaged. In addition, no one would ever think him handsome again. Rather, he would now look mostly like Lon Cheney in the silent version of 'The Phantom of the Opera'.

He did not return to Hogwarts.

Harry rather enjoyed his prefect duties, especially when he patrolled with Hermione. They had been rather worried about how Ron might react to their semi-dating, but Ron had taken it in stride, mostly for two reasons. The first, he was milking his injuries. He had quickly accepted the idea that he had heroically taken on most of the assailants, thus partially saving Hermione, and there were several younger Gryffindors who were happy to lionize him. Harry was especially happy that Dennis Creevey had switched his devotion to Ron; he only wished Colin had as well.

The second reason was that one of the third year girls, Romilda Vane, not only lionized Ron, by the end of October she had become Ron's snogging buddy. She was actually the oldest third year, born on September 2, and so only a few weeks younger than Ginny. Hermione thought that the two made a good pair, since as far as she could tell they were on the same stage of emotional development. She was, however, happy that Ron was now showering every day without prompting. Harry thought Romilda was a bit obsessive and possessive about Ron and a bit too proud to be the first third year in such a relationship, but said nothing, as he was happy Ron had some one.

Ginny was disgruntled about the whole thing. She obviously still had her crush on Harry, but liked Hermione too much (and knew Hermione's temper and capabilities far too well) to even think about trying to move in on Hermione's hopefully temporary territory. As Ginny herself would never share, so she never thought to wonder if Hermione would. Ginny was also

unhappy that a girl a year behind her and three weeks younger had a boyfriend before her, even if it was Ron. As for the twins, while they ragged Ron a bit, they actually left the pair mostly alone. They were too busy planning their prank shop, with some additional funding from Sirius Black, and ideas from both Sirius and Remus Lupin.

Things therefore were very very quiet as September flowed into October. This pleased the Hufflepuffs, as they mostly wanted a calm life. Nearly all the Gryffindors seemed to accept this as natural as well – there had been an upset, but now life went on pretty much as it had before.

Many Slytherins, however, would have felt as if they were walking through a minefield blindfolded, had they known what a minefield was. The rules had obviously changed and none of them, even those who did not want to side with the Dark Lord, were happy with the changes. The only word which came back for those more-directly tied to the Death Eaters was ‘watch, report, do nothing – or else’. Even Draco had retreated into a rather cowed submission. This was not aided by the fact that he was still hobbling painfully, and whining loudly about it, weeks after Ron had stopped his own public complaining about his greater injuries. It was clear to everyone, even Malfoy, that Ron had been hurt worse and was dealing with it better. What Draco was not to know was that Ron was limping and whining almost as much as Draco – other than when a Slytherin was nearby. Most of the Gryffindors realized, however, that Ron was doing that largely because his girlfriend adored him as the ‘wounded hero’.

Ravenclaw was more obviously divided than Slytherin. Where at the beginning of the year a quarter in Slytherin had openly favoring the Dark Lord and nearly half leaning in that direction, in Ravenclaw the numbers had been more like ten percent and a third. The attack had cleared out nine supporters from the two Houses and had clearly marked Draco and Greg Goyle of those remaining. The pro-Pure Bloods in Ravenclaw, even though none had been attacked in their House, felt even more nervous than the Slytherins. Few had thought to suspect Ravenclaws, as opposed to Slytherins, and each felt slightly more paranoia than they should have.

In that, Luna was lucky. She had clearly been adopted by the-Boy-Who-Lived and his snog buddy. Had they felt entirely safe, the persecution Luna had long been subjected to would have continued, albeit at a lesser rate. Now all the bullies, pro-Dark Lord or not, pulled back, at least for the moment. They doubted Harry Potter had really frightened witches like Bones and Umbridge, but they did not doubt it was better to be cautious.

Luna realized that, but enjoyed the friendship Harry and Hermione were offering her too much to pull back. She did refuse to flaunt the relationship, however. Despite that friendship, Luna was surprised to be asked by the pair to join them on the first Hogsmeade visit, the 29th of October.

Despite all the speculations, at the moment at least Harry and Hermione were just two very good friends who were discovering that there were many more interesting things to do together besides studying magic. They felt tremendous affection for each other, mostly when they were kissing. Luna seemed to compliment their affection and friendship, rather than interfere with it.

All three had been to Hogsmeade, as of course all the non-third years had as well. “Why do you think everyone acts as if they have never been here before?” Luna asked her friends as they walked towards the village, for it was a fine autumn day. They were in the middle of the strung-out line of students heading for the day out and most of their fellow students were acting very foolishly to Luna and Hermione’s eyes. “The older students are acting sillier than the third years.”

“I think it’s just the change of scenery,” Hermione speculated. “Plus those students who are dating or trying for more committed relationships are especially glad for a bit of freedom.”

“What freedom?” Harry asked, curious. “There are certainly less places to snog in Hogsmeade than at the castle, let alone places to try anything . . . more serious.”

“Kisses almost have to be stolen outside the common rooms,” Luna answered. “Professor Snape enjoys taking points even for hand-holding inside the castle, and would probably wish to do so outside as well, if he were allowed. This allows couples to demonstrate they are couples.”

“And friends to show they are friends,” Hermione agreed, linking her arms with Luna and Harry.

As they closed in on the village, Luna frowned as asked, “Does something seem odd to either of you?”

Hermione frowned in turn, wondering what Luna might find ‘odd’.

“Do you mean the fact that all of the students suspected of being sympathetic to Voldemort are trailing far behind us?” Harry asked, who had noticed this for some time.

“Ah,” Luna said happy the problem had been answered, “that must be it!”

Hermione’s eyes had gone wide with panic, but Harry simply said, “Don’t worry.”

“But Harry. . . .”

“Don’t worry,” Harry repeated. Harry’s left arm snaked around Hermione’s waist and he made certain his forearm was against Luna’s. As the group entered Hogsmeade, they started to disperse. Harry simply pulled his friends out of the line and around at cottage towards the back lane. The few that paid any attention presumed that Harry and Hermione would be snogging in the back lane with Luna acting as ‘lookout’. Instead Harry hustled the pair into the still-empty Three Broomsticks and said, “I’ll be right back.”

“Harry is certainly energetic,” Luna said simply as Harry placed an order and ducked into the men’s toilet for a brief moment.



Hermione was speechless as Harry returned with their warm butterbeers.

“When?” Luna asked.

“About ten minutes,” Harry answered. “We’ll be fine here.”

Hermione tried to absorb all this, failed, and decided to observe.

Sure enough, a little over nine minutes later, there were shouts, and then screams, from the street. Harry forced Hermione to stay seated. “We aren’t expected to patrol until twelve thirty,” Harry stated firmly. “Until then, we stay here, out of the way.”

Hermione forced herself to subside, and in less than four more minutes, the shouting was over. Professor Dumbledore and three aurors came into the tavern less than three minutes after that. Harry merely cocked his head and asked, “What happened.”

“How long have you three been here?” one auror asked as the other two rushed to the back stairs, knowing that Madam Umbridge would want that information.

“We came directly here,” Hermione said, “and we haven’t left.”

“True,” Madam Rosmerta added from behind the bar.

“A group dressed as Death Eaters appeared and started cursing everyone in the square,” Dumbledore stated. “Six of them were killed by a sniper on the roof.”

“My roof!” Rosmerta demanded.

“She was here the whole time,” Harry stated.

The auror wrote all that down and joined his colleagues on the roof. Dumbledore merely regarded Harry for a moment and then said, “The rest of the visit is cancelled. Come along. The carriages will be taking you back.”

Harry shrugged and finished his butterbeer while Dumbledore waited impatiently. Luna did as well, and then asked, “May I have gilly water next time?”

“Of course,” Harry answered, and he led his two friends out of the tavern.

The leader of the attack, who had been the first killed, turned out to be none other than the scarred Lucius Malfoy. He and the other five had been hit with a powerful, silent curse, which had not shown up well in the bright autumnal light.

It was clear to the aurors, Dumbledore, and other experts that the spell had had the same effects as the powerful and difficult lightning spell, but that was both loud and very bright. It took several weeks of work before the British-based wizards learned that the spell was an electrical spell from North America, where it was primarily used to recharge powerful magically-harnessed battery systems, used in advanced technomage research, an area of magical theory mostly banned in Britain. As the various technomage groups denied being responsible, there was little the Ministry could do, other than obsess about outside interference.

In the meantime, the student sympathizers, who had hung-back under orders from their parents for the friends’ parents, spent that Saturday evening fearing retribution, such had visited some of them after the attack on Ron and Hermione. Draco Malfoy, for one, was totally unable to sleep.

When nothing happened, they all breathed a sigh of relief, and most went to bed early Sunday evening. They all woke up screaming at the same time, as they had been stunned with an advanced hex which revived them all simultaneously. Each had been laid face down on their beds and their hands nailed to the bed frames.

Again, there was no evidence of how the perpetrator or perpetrators had gained access to the Houses, making some wonder if these were performed by actual Ravenclaw and Slytherin students.

Albus Dumbledore doubted that idea very much, and called Harry to his office Monday afternoon.

“You wanted to see me, Headmaster?” Harry asked politely.

“These attacks on students must cease, Harry,” Dumbledore stated firmly.

Harry cocked his head to the left and asked, “Has there been another attack like the ones on Hermione and Ron?”

“No, and you know very well what I mean!” Dumbledore scolded.

“Do you mean the punishments handed out to the Junior Death Eaters?” Harry asked in a puzzled tone.

“Punishments! These are innocent students. . . .”

Harry snorted. “Draco Malfoy is stupid and bigoted, but he and his kind are hardly innocent.”

“You must allow for how they were raised,” Dumbledore said firmly.

“Why?” Harry asked, curious.

“What do you mean, ‘why’?” Dumbledore asked, confused.

“I am curious why you think coddling the bigoted, allowing them to bully the truly innocent, could ever get them to reform,” Harry responded.

Dumbledore merely looked at Harry in shock.

“You know, you cost a number of my mentors a fair amount of money this summer,” Harry said, making Dumbledore blink at the apparent non-sequitur. “There were apparently a lot of bets made on if you were a Dark Wizard that Voldemort was trying to replace, or just a silly arse.”

“What!”

“After you were dumped by the Wizengamot and the International so easily, the ‘silly arse’ faction collected on the bets, of course.”

“Mister Potter. . . .”

Harry glared into Dumbledore’s eyes. “Why do you think you get to define ‘the greater good’?”

“I beg your pardon!”

“You decided to send a toddler into purgatory ‘for the greater good’. You decided allowing Snape to spoil the Slytherins, reenforcing their parents belief that they can get away with anything because of their bloodlines, was somehow ‘for the greater good’. You would have allowed them to get away with beating Ron and Hermione half to death, or even allowed them to murder them had someone not interfered, all ‘for the greater good’. You allowed Quirrell and Crouch free access to the students for a full year. And now, just because someone is giving the Junior Death Eaters some negative reinforcement. . . .”

“Negative reenforcement!”

“Perhaps someone decided this is for ‘the greater good’,” Harry retorted.

“But so much pain. . . .”

Harry glared at Dumbledore. “I have become an expert in experiencing pain,”

Harry said coldly. "I doubt whatever happened to them last night would equal the pain I experienced when Dudley broke my arm at six." Harry's glare intensified. "What? You know that I have learned Occlumency. You should have known my tutors would find the Obliviates you put on me, which included watching you and Snape Obliviate the Dursleys, the hospital people, the police, and I presume the neighbors. Right?"

Dumbledore said nothing.

Harry thought a moment and said, "Yes, I can see any type of competence would surprise you."

"You are turning Dark. . . ."

Harry again snorted. "I have to destroy Voldemort, and then live in the world left behind. If that world doesn't change for the better, I will be leaving Britain, as most of the Muggle-born-and-Raised do." Harry sighed at Dumbledore's look. "What? I'm surprised Hermione hasn't looked this up. . . ." Harry shook his head. "From your reaction, I'd guess the information has been purged from the library. Still, it's all out there, and I'm sure she'd dig it up on her own sooner or later. What was the magical population of Britain in 1900? You don't remember? 40,000. Now, with a Muggle population a third larger than it was a hundred years ago, the wizarding population is somewhere under 18,000. It should be 60,000." Harry gestured. "Hogwarts should have a student population four or five times what it is, and a staff at least five times larger. Where are all the wizards? True, there are still many so poor they have to stay in the marshes and fens and bogs, and forests and mountains, learning a little magic from their relatives with wands cobbled together and brewing primitive potions. And some other families were killed in Grindelwald's wars, or in Voldemort's first war. But most left, and are still leaving. They went to North America and Australia in their thousands, and to New Zealand, South Africa, and East Africa, and islands in the Caribbean, Atlantic, Pacific, and even the Indian Ocean by the hundreds. Certainly most of the Muggle-raised who do not marry someone magical but not Muggle-born by the time they are twenty-five or so do." Harry smiled grimly.

“Someday, even the Muggles will notice that there are dozens of major islands missing around the world, and that Bermuda is actually five times larger than they think it is.”

Harry’s eyes turned dreamy just for a moment. “And just think, the Potters even own one, which means I own one. I can just go to Potter Island in the Pitcairns.” Harry again glared at Dumbledore. “I’m sure you would never have told me in time to state my claim before I turned eighteen, which means I would have lost it to the owners of the other three magical Pitcairn Islands.”

Dumbledore could not deny it.

“Tell me, did you know that full accounts of your mutual ‘admiration’ with Grindelwald, including plans for ‘guiding’ the magical and Muggle worlds, are available in North America and Australia?”

“I can assure you, they are not really accurate,” Dumbledore mumbled, embarrassed.

“Do you know what I do not want?”

“No,” Dumbledore admitted.

“I don’t want to be you. I don’t want to defeat Voldemort and be held up as some sort of hero, someone people can bring all their problems to in order to solve them. It may not be possible, but I hope I can defeat or destroy or vanquish or whatever what’s left of Tom Riddle in such a way that no one will know for sure it was me.”

“And then how will you change society?”

“I really can’t, no matter what I do,” Harry admitted. “But, hopefully in the process of destroying Riddle, his followers will learn there are consequences to having done so. I want them to do what is apparently the most difficult thing for a ‘Pure’ wizard to do.”

“And that is?”

“I want them to actually think.”

## ***Chapter VIII***

After dinner that Monday, Harry and his friends were working on homework in the library. Neville was about to elbow Harry to get his attention when he saw that Harry was already eyeing the trio lazily making their way in their general direction.

“Potter,” Tracey Davis said softly in greeting a few minutes later.

Harry wondered if she was indeed the speaker for herself, Greengrass, and Zabini, or if she had been chosen because she was dainty, cute, and apparently harmless. “Davis,” he acknowledged.

“We’ve never had a direct problem with you,” Tracey went on. “The same is true of a majority of Slytherins.”

“A bare majority, perhaps?” Harry suggested.

“Perhaps,” she had to acknowledge. “A group is emerging which had . . . different opinions of you and some of your friends. Recent events seem to be getting them to look in other directions. One would like to speak with you. She’s three aisles over, holding a book on dragon flowers.”

Harry nodded, and the Slytherin trio moved away, splitting up as they did so. Harry waited twenty seconds, and then stood.

Harry was slightly surprised to see that it was Millicent Bulstrode waiting for him. “Bulstrode.”

Millie sighed. “Lord Potter.” Harry’s eye brows went up at her use of the archaic title; few used it unless they were trying to claim something, like Voldemort. “Look,” she said softly, “I don’t like you, what you stand for, or your friends, especially Weasley or Granger. Still, while Slytherin is supposed to be the House of Ambition, it’s also supposed to be the House of



the Cunning.”

“And?”

“And obviously you, or someone who supports you, is working Hogwarts.” She held up her hands, and displayed where there were still small faint red marks from where she had been nailed to her bed frame, as they were still healing. “I’m glad you’re not denying it.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I did,” Harry said with a shrug.

“That’s for sure! In any event, I may not be the brightest person around, but I know when I’m outclassed, and we are certainly outclassed. I know that if whoever had blown by Greg and Draco had come from another direction, then Pansy and I might have had our joints broken as well. Whoever is doing this isn’t playing.”

“And your gang was just ‘playing’ when you beat Ron and Hermione half to death?” Harry snarled.

Millie swallowed nervously. “Point taken. So, I’m retiring from the game or the field of battle or whatever the hell you want to call it. I have to tell you that if asked to collect information for Draco or whoever, I will, and I’ll even give them an alibi.” She swallowed nervously. “I’ll also send you reports of everything, asked or not.” She held out a folded parchment, her hands shaking.

Millie almost wet herself when she realized Harry was pointing a wand at her. She gulped as sparks came out and hit the parchment.

“If that parchment had been a trap, you would have lived to regret it . . . but not for long,” Harry said tonelessly.

Millie nodded her understanding. To cover for herself, she said, “That has everything I know about what’s going on.”

“I’m sure Malfoy still thinks he the Dark Lord’s golden child,” Harry mused. “What about Parkinson and Goyle?”

“Greg’s even more worried than I am,” Millie admitted. “Vinnie’s crippling and then his death hit him hard, as they had been raised like twins. Plus, he had never really been hurt, and now he’s bit hurt twice. He doesn’t want it to happen again. His father is at loose ends, since Mister Malfoy was killed, and has just told Greg to keep his head down and not to burn any bridges. Pansy . . . Pansy is torn between staying with Draco, maybe even pushing him further along, or trying to get you interested.”

“Discourage her on both counts,” Harry said coldly. “And if Hermione or Luna are harmed in any way, I will suggest that what happened these last times should look like pats on the head.”

“If you’re serious about Lovegood, you should know Pansy and her buddy Marietta, from Ravenclaw, plan on hitting her soon if she goes traipsing around the castle right before curfew again,” Millie blurted out.

“Are they stupid?” Harry asked, gesturing at Millie’s healing hands.

“Yes, plus they’ve somehow convinced themselves that this wouldn’t be seen as an attack on your friends, since she’s a Ravenclaw.”

Harry sighed. “How soon?”

“Any time this week,” Millie answered, gesturing at the parchment, which had included that information.

“Including tonight?” Harry asked. Millie nodded. Harry frowned and asked, “Isn’t this Marietta some friend of Cho’s?”

“She is, but she’s been Pansy’s friend longer, since they were toddlers.”

Harry seemed to blur before Millie's eyes, and then she was looking deep into Harry's cold eyes. "Thank you," was all he said, though, before he turned and left.

Millie hurried to the girl's toilets, just managing to make it before she lost all control. She had once been taken by her father and Walden McNair when they went 'hunting,' using the Killing Curse on rabbits and the like. She wondered if Harry's eyes had always been the color of the Killing Curse, or just when they glowed in anger, as they had that night.

\*

Luna hesitated before walking through a rather dark and lonely intersection of corridors. She had never felt fear walking the corridors before. She shivered as a toneless voice whispered in her ear. "Walk quickly and without fear, and do not look back."

Luna looked in the direction, which was of course empty, and mouthed, "Yes, Harry,' without making a sound.

Luna strode forward, and only heard, "Grab h. . . ." She merely kept going as she did every second or third night, whenever the whispers and comments in the Common Room got even to her.

\*

All heads of House had ways of taking a head count at curfew. Snape's position had always been that if anyone caught his students, they deserved whatever punishments they received, especially from him. Therefore, when the counters in his office showed one female was out late, he did nothing, as it was not time to patrol yet.

Flitwick, however, went to investigate. For an instant, before he fully comprehended what he saw, he was appalled. When he realized what had happened, he managed to recover a bit. He was so startled that he did not

notice the various ‘notice-me-not’ charms which had been put up and aimed directly against the patrolling aurors.

During apparation, a person might ‘splinch’ – ie apparently leave part of themselves behind or send part of themselves to a different destination. It was painful, but otherwise not harmful. In reality, the person was still whole, but occupying different spaces. If one was not put back together correctly, it would also be very painful.

Pansy Parkinson and Marietta Edgecombe had been totally disassembled via forced apparation and reassembled into two composite people. It would be determined that each had been split into seventy-two pieces.\* Even when parts of the same person had been put back adjoining each other, they were just off enough that the parts had to be separated and rejoined. The process of joining them back together properly would have to be done with the person fully aware and cooperating.

It would take some three hours of hard work from Flitwick, McGonagall, Snape, Dumbledore, Hooch, and Pomfrey to put the pair back together again. Each had also had the statement, “I will not bring harm to others” etched into their skin on the backs of their hands and magically healed so that the scars showed. It would take a few weeks of treatment to repair that as well.

Neither would admit to what they had been up to, but neither dared claim innocence either.

Snape had managed to read their intentions as they had been put back together, and told the other staff they had been planning on attacking Luna Lovegood and defacing her with the same types of acid which had disfigured Lucius Malfoy. Neither had seen their attacker, and the acid was now missing. Some discreet questioning and Legilimency the next day revealed that Harry had been with witnesses the entire time. Luna had claimed no knowledge, and both Snape and Dumbledore had enough prior experience with her to know that trying to read her mind would yield no facts, only powerful headaches.

Snape did notice that Millicent Bulstrode had suddenly become a very quiet wall flower, but thought that was because of the attack.

At first.

\*Think little pieces – each hand would be divided into 14 finger parts plus the hand, for example.

\*

“Hermione? What’s wrong?” Harry asked the following afternoon. Usually she was in the library before dinner, not on the way to the common room, her eyes red.

Hermione sniffled, and said, “The Headmaster. . . .”

“The Headmaster what?” Harry asked, confused. Hermione just sniffled again. “Did he hurt you?”

Hermione shook her head. “He tried . . . he tried. . . .”

With a look of outrage, Harry asked, “Did he ‘touch’ you?”

That made Hermione blink. Then she shook her head, “No, besides, from all the stories, he’d be more likely to try and ‘touch’ you than me.”

“Blech.”

Hermione pulled herself together. “No, on one level, what he was basically saying was that wizarding culture is so different from the Muggle that I would have to learn to shun the Muggle-lifestyle. Not that Muggles are bad or anything. . . .”

“Some of my best friends are Muggles, but I wouldn’t want my daughter to

marry one?" Harry suggested.

"Basically. Plus he said he could find some summer programs for me on the continent during the summers – which would get me away from you as well as my parents, although he didn't say that." Hermione looked Harry in the eye. "He was also still trying to paint you as 'going Dark'."

Harry frowned.

"I really think he must have been seriously tempted in that direction, to come down so hard on you, while trying to give all the Junior Death Eaters fourth and fifth chances."

"Probably," Harry agreed. "And?"

"And he was trying to use Legilimency the whole time. At the end, he brought his wand out. I screamed, and he was so startled I got away."

Harry growled, and then said, "We can't do much to the manipulative old bastard right now, but I think it's time to at least partially declaw him a bit."

Harry gave Hermione a hug, which made her feel a bit safer.

\*

"Ah, Severus," Dumbledore said with sympathy the next Sunday morning. "I trust your meeting with Tom was not unduly stressful?"

"Amazingly, it was not," Snape admitted. "He is as puzzled as you and the Ministry about these assaults, and he is worried about the new player on the field even more since the failed attack on the students in Hogsmeade."

Dumbledore's eyebrows went up in surprise. "You are no longer puzzled?" he asked.

"I am, but not as much as you," Snape stated, almost smugly. "If you would loan me your pensieve? As you know, whenever I return from such a meeting, I examine my memories for blocks, and I came up with two interesting such blocks, which I have at least partially dealt with."

With a gesture, the door to the cabinet the pensieve was stored in opened. Snape walked over and added two memories. He then gestured Dumbledore to join him. What Dumbledore saw was first Snape questioning Millicent Bulstrode. Then another memory intruded, which Dumbledore recognized as coming from Legilimency.

"Stop!" Snape commanded, and the memory halted.

Dumbledore studied the blurred image of Harry. "What does it mean?" the Headmaster asked, puzzled.

"I have no idea," Snape admitted. "However, unless I see other evidence, I take this to demonstrate that Potter had something to do with that splinch-merging of Parkinson and Edgecombe. I think he's communing with someone."

"Very likely indeed," Dumbledore had to admit. "Why didn't you bring this to my attention before now?"

"Wait until you see the next memory," Snape told him.

The next was a very confused set of memories, obviously interfered with.

"I don't understand," Dumbledore said.

"I spent all this morning, trying to piece things together," Snape told him. "Basically, it shows my showing you that memory of Bulstrode's sometime last week, you having me show it to McGonagall last Friday, and then our confronting Potter that night. Then it ends, having been fully, instead of partially, erased."

Dumbledore was flabbergasted. Someone had dared attack HIS memories?

"There was an aural addendum, in a disguised voice, advising me to tell no one, and to leave Potter alone."

Dumbledore managed to say, "And yet you're telling me."

Dumbledore did not like the smirk on his subordinate's face. "I decided the risk should be taken, if only to see what happens. Perhaps you should search your memory?"

"I should indeed!" Snape left, to allow Dumbledore the deep meditation needed to scan his memories for blocks.

An hour later, Dumbledore was awoken when someone went past his guardian. "Come in!"

A troubled Severus Snape came in and looked at Dumbledore.

"Ah, Severus," Dumbledore said with sympathy. "I must have dozed off. I trust your meeting with Tom was not unduly stressful?"

A very shaken Snape said, "He is very worried about the new player, after the death of Malfoy and the others."

"As am I," Dumbledore admitted. "Any luck getting close to Nagini?"

"Not yet. If I might be excused? It has been a very long two days."

"Of course," Dumbledore agreed. "Perhaps you should have some hot chocolate."

"I just might," Snape said, and then he hurried from the room. He considered the additional message which had been added to his memories -- "This is your



last warning. Next time, I start erasing more thoroughly. And remember this: Hogwarts loves me more than she does Dumbledore, and certainly more than she does you.'

\*

“You wanted to see me, Professor Snape?”

Snape regarded ‘the-Boy-Who-Lived’, who some of the students were starting to call ‘the Chosen One’. Finally, Snape said, “Someone is playing a very dangerous game.”

“I would think there are many dangerous games going on in and around Hogwarts, never mind the rest of Wizarding Britain,” Harry retorted. “Which one in particular are you thinking of?”

“Someone has not only Obliviated myself and Professor McGonagall at least once, but the Headmaster at least twice.”

Harry was impassive. “You don’t say.”

Snape scowled. “Look, Pot. . . err, Mister Potter. . . .”

“Harry is fine in private, if you wish, Professor.”

Snape shook his head, trying to clear it. He gave up after a few seconds. “Look, Harry. . . .” Snape snorted. “Does that sound as odd to you as it does to me?”

“Probably,” Harry agreed, smiling slightly.

Snape sighed and continued, “Look, Harry, I don’t know how involved you are, but this has to concern you, since whomever Obliviated us did not want McGonagall or the Headmaster to know about your conversation with Bulstrode.” He frowned. “You blurred in it, and even replaying the memory

in a Pensieve, we could not understand what was happening.”

“One possibility; that memory was not the real cause of the Obliviation, but a red herring of some kind.”

Snape thought about that, and then said slowly, “It is possible, but I cannot feel it likely without further evidence.” He glared at Harry. “Do you have a suggestion as to why I have been allowed to keep those memories, if a bit buried?”

“Perhaps the alleged blurring. . . .”

“I know what I saw!”

Harry shrugged. “Perhaps it was interfered with.” Snape just rolled his eyes. “In any event, perhaps you need to know about Bulstrode’s offer, if nothing else.”

“And the Headmaster?”

Harry’s eyes bored into Snape’s. “How concerned has he really been with the welfare of the Slytherins, never mind the rest of the students? I mean as individuals. He seems to have allowed them a lot of rope, but not to overly care if they used the rope to rescue themselves or hang themselves.”

Snape considered that and admitted, “There may be some truth to that.”

“I’m glad you asked me to come. I need to talk to you in any case.”

Snape tried to glare at Harry, but could not quite pull it off. “What else do you want from me?”

“Dumbledore hasn’t told me much of anything,” Harry replied. “I don’t care what the Order is up to. I do need to know what Voldemort might be planning.”

Snape thought for a moment, but then nodded. “First of all, he is still trying to figure out a way to get to the Prophecy. He is convinced that since you have learned Occlumency, that is the only thing stopping him from influencing you directly. He has me researching a potion which would lessen your resistance, but so far I have found nothing which would likely work.”

Harry nodded, and Snape continued. “He is confused, as we all are.”

“About?”

“Potter, you could not have trained yourself to do all this damage. It’s barely conceivable that you could be doing all that is being done here by yourself.”

Harry grinned and said, “Okay, how about this. I escaped the Order guard because wizards are too stupid not to fall to some very simple Muggle strategies. I tried to disable Voldemort’s sentry, but killed him by accident. I fled to Hogwarts, where I discovered that she is fully sentient, but had been crippled by Slytherin’s Chamber, which I neutralized when I killed the basilisk. She trained me.”

Snape considered for a moment and said, “That doesn’t fit all the facts.”

“How about this, then? I was rescued by, well, pick a group or two or three: International hit wizards; Druids from North America; a coven of vampires; the Magical Mafia; an ancient order of immortals; Muggle mutants with strange powers; a hidden group of free elves who want to liberate their brethren; a coven of prophesying shopkeepers; people or beings from another dimension; some group of actual gods; the Pacific or North American technomages, the Muggle intelligence service of any country you might think has an interest; Fate herself; the goblins,” Snape shuddered at that thought, “or whomever. They can’t or don’t want to get directly involved but they trained me.” Harry grinned, and added, “How about a time-traveling me, and I am actually a merged being with the power of both?”

“Merlin help us if THAT one is true,” Snape muttered.

“In any case, -Hogwarts is fully sentient, and decided that she liked the new me when I snuck in during the summer with some of my mentors to render the basilisk into potion ingredients.” Harry scowled. “I was quite surprised to only find the skeleton.”

Harry glared even harder at Snape, who defended himself, “The Headmaster had Fawkes fly me in right after you left school after your second year to render it down. The skeleton was aging, to allow the magic to settle down. . . .”

“I conquered it; it was mine by right of conquest. How much did that cost me?” Harry demanded.

“A few hundred thousand Galleons,” Snape admitted. “The Order will be well-funded.”

“Fuck the Order,” Harry snapped. “They don’t ever seem to take any action. In any event, what is Voldemort up to? I won’t give you another chance to help me.”

Snape was about to sneer and demand to know what Potter thought he could do to him. He stopped himself, as the evidence was either Potter could do quite a bit to him, or at least have it done. “The Dark Lord is planning something big, but since it isn’t supposed to concern Hogwarts or Hogsmeade, I am out of the loop. If I find out, I will inform you . . . after I inform Albus.”

“Fair enough,” Harry agreed. “Do you think your Junior Death Nibblers have learned enough lessons for now?”

“I would hope so,” Snape answered. “I would hope there will be punishments only when they do something.”

Harry nodded. "I am sure none of it is done for the mere pleasure of inflicting pain, or even revenge."

Snape nodded, thought a bit, and then asked, "Where will you be over the holidays, if I need to contact you?"

"Do I need to stay here?" Harry asked.

"No, but I will need to know how to contact you."

"I'll be staying with Sirius, even if Dumbledore keeps refusing to tell me that Headquarters is at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place."

Snape blinked at that. "Then how the h. . . ?" He shook his head. "I refuse to believe you were able to use Legilimency on the Headmaster! And I know you cannot learn the secret through Legilimency on someone who knows the secret!"

"No," Harry retorted, "you know that YOU cannot do those things."

"What did you do? Did the Headmaster tell you before you had him Obliviated?"

Harry merely shrugged, smiled, and then touched the nearest wall, and seemed to melt into it, disappearing from sight.

## ***Chapter IX***

Snape's belief (and deep hope) that his Slytherins would be keeping their heads down and their mouths (largely) shut was maintained throughout the rest of the month of November. It was apparent to him (and the rest of the staff) that the Slytherin centrists were keeping an eye on the remaining extremists, and Snape had little doubt that some intimidation was going on behind the scenes in the dorm rooms. Snape was very glad that the main outside agitators, the Weasley twins, were still occupied with testing many of their products. At least those being victimized these days were being paid for it, and most of the current test subjects were currently Hufflepuffs.

Even though the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch match aroused a great deal of partisanship, the rivalry was kept within reasonable bounds. The fact that the match ended in a 270-270 tie, when Draco Malfoy just managed to beat Ginny Weasley to the Snitch may have helped with any aftermath, although Ginny Weasley herself was depressed for the rest of the term. Some of the more optimistic members of the staff were starting to suggest that they might get through the rest of the term without a major explosion.

One Monday morning in early December, however, Harry looked up from his breakfast. "Something seems to have stirred people up," he observed.

Hermione looked up from the first year's homework she was proofreading and saw Harry was right. Something was causing a louder buzz than usual. Seeing a number of departing owls, she said, "It must be something in 'The Prophet'."

"It is," Katie Bell said from further up the table. She passed her copy down to Harry.

It was a notice that half a dozen Death Eaters had escaped from Azkaban.

Harry looked around and saw that Neville was at the entrance to the great

hall, talking with a group of Hufflepuffs. He slapped together some toast, eggs, and ham into sandwiches, and left the table. Hermione watched as Harry culled Neville from the group and led him from sight.

Hermione was not the only person who noticed that Neville was more nervous than usual for the rest of the month.

The escape seemed to bring Draco and his few remaining cronies back to life. They resumed taunting select students, especially Neville and Ginny, but they always made certain that Harry was never in sight. Only Draco was brave (or foolish) enough to taunt Hermione and Luna, but again, even he made certain that Harry was not anywhere near by when he did so and compared to some of his insults in previous years, he was rather restrained in his taunts, and he made no overt threats.

Draco was not to know that reports of his actions, certainly violating the Dark Lord's command to watch only, were being reported back to his would-be Master not only by a large number of his fellow students, but by Snape. Snape, in fact, was managing to make it appear to the Dark Lord that it was mostly due to Draco's continued spouting off that security arrangements at Hogwarts were so strong and were likely to stay that way. Snape even agreed with Pansy Parkinson's report that Draco had been behind her attempt on Luna, although he knew that it had been almost totally Pansy's plan.

Draco would be in for a shock when he went home for the holidays.

Except for the slight raise in tensions caused by the escapes and Draco's taunts (as all the blame for the increased taunting was being laid on Draco, even though he was not behind even half of them), nearly all of the students were able to get into the holiday mood as the month progressed. Most of the staff felt the same way, although Dumbledore was seen to be a bit out of focus mentally. Dumbledore himself realized this, and knew that part of the problem was that he was still unable to really communicate with Harry – which to Dumbledore meant getting information from and control over The-Boy-Who-Lived. Each attempt had ended with Harry somehow distracting

him from his purpose. In addition, for some reason each time he thought about questioning the Granger or Lovegood girls, he promptly forgot the thought. Even more troubling, the Headmaster felt his magic was off, and he was having difficulties communicating with the castle – or at least the castle was refusing to tell him everything he wanted to know. All of that worried him, and Dumbledore wondered if age was finally catching up to him. He resolved to take time over the holidays for some deep meditation to explore his magic.

The only development concerning Harry which Dumbledore did not feel was totally negative was that the boy was going to spend Christmas with Black. He was not thrilled with the idea, as Black and even Lupin had been largely uncooperative since the summer, but it was better for Harry to be at Grimmauld Place with the Order as well as Black and Lupin than to have the boy somehow going off to his mysterious tutors. And, since Dumbledore refused to share the location with Harry, the boy could only come and go with an escort of some kind. Black was still largely confined to Headquarters and there was a full moon coming up which should keep Lupin on a short leash. That meant that the Order members could control any attempts by Harry to leave.

Again, not totally satisfactory, but acceptable as far as Dumbledore was concerned.

\*

The night before the students left on holiday, Snape was surprised to find ‘the Chosen One’ in his private potions lab. He mostly suppressed the irritation he felt and demanded, “What do you want?” He knew it would be no use pointing out that it was near curfew.

Harry shrugged and asked, “I was wondering if you wanted to score some points with the grand pooh-bah?”

“Who?”



“The all-unknowing, all unseeing leader of the Order of the Pheasants.”

Snape rolled his eyes, but merely asked, “How?”

“He’ll likely figure this out over the break, as so far as I know no one will be here to keep up his conditioning, so you might want to get the ball rolling.” Harry glared at Snape, “So long as you agree not to say anything until after dinner tomorrow night.”

Snape again repressed his first response, and agreed.

“Good. Now, look into my eyes.” Snape reluctantly did so. “After dinner tomorrow, ask Dumbledore why he is using a different wand. You can not ask before then, and even if you somehow managed to, Dumbledore would not be able to respond.”

Harry blinked, and Snape quickly shut his eyes and shook his head. He didn’t know what had happened – it was not Legilimency, the Imperious, or anything he was familiar with. He did know he could not disobey the commands he had been given, and was grateful they were commands he did not overly-mind following. After a moment, he asked, “Do I want to know what the hell you just did?”

“No,” Harry said seriously, “you do not.”

\*

After dinner the next evening, Snape left the nearly empty great hall with the Headmaster. As soon as they were sitting in the Headmaster’s office, a rather tired Dumbledore asked, “You have something to report?”

Snape shook his head. “No, not something to report, but I do have a question to ask you.”

Repressing a tired sigh, Dumbledore merely asked, “And what is that?”

“Is that your usual wand? Something looks different about it.” As soon as he said that, Snape saw the wand change color and shape. It was indeed a very different wand.

Dumbledore frowned and looked down at the wand on his desk. Suddenly, a look of horror overcame him. Dumbledore swallowed hard and picked the wand up, his hand shaking slightly. “Indeed. This is not the wand I have been using these past fifty years. It is not even the wand I bought as a youth.” He studied the wand for a moment and then blushed slightly.

“What is it?”

“Pussy willow and . . . flobber worm? No wonder my magic has seemed so weak of late!” Dumbledore flung the wand on the desk in disgust and opened a drawer, pulling out a different wand, which immediately shot off a huge display of sparks. “That’s better,” he sighed with a relieved smile. He looked at Snape and said, “My original wand.”

Snape merely nodded.

Dumbledore stood. “I must confront Harry about this.” He turned towards the fireplace, but then stopped. He slowly turned to Snape. “Do you remember where Headquarters is?”

“Of course,” Snape replied. “It’s at Black’s.”

“I know that. But the actual location, the address?”

Snape opened his mouth, but then closed it. “No, I don’t remember,” he had to admit. He frowned. “But you put the Fidelius on it!”

“I did, and it is not broken,” Dumbledore agreed. “Somehow, and I would have thought it impossible, someone who knew the secret has overlaid my

Fidelius with another!” And, Dumbledore knew, that almost certainly meant whomever had done so had used the Elder Wand. That also explained how he had been bewitched – having studied it for over fifty years, Dumbledore knew his native magic could not easily overcome the effects of the wand. If, as he suspected, Slytherin’s ring held the Resurrection Stone, then it was likely that Harry now commanded all three of the Deathly Hallows, and hence more power than Voldemort could command, never mind himself.

Dumbledore also reminded himself that, now that he no longer wielded the Elder Wand, he would be unable to confront Voldemort directly, at least with any real chance at survival.

That knowledge shook him almost as much as the amount of magic that had been used on him.

\*

Draco Malfoy screamed in agony yet again as he was tortured. “Very good,” Voldemort said with real satisfaction to his minions. “You all seem to have recovered your magic.” A flip of his wand restored Draco, physically. “Since dear Lucius spent so much on securing you all quarters well-away from the dementors, we will leave this self-proclaimed ‘Prince of Slytherin’ to get his rest.” After a pause, Voldemort stated, “You may start working out your anger tomorrow by practicing your skinning charms on him.”

The six escapees chortled; Draco passed out.

\*

“Stop pacing, Moony,” Sirius growled.

“You don’t wonder where Harry is?” Remus demanded.

“To tell the truth, yes,” Sirius admitted. “There is a hell of a lot going on that we don’t understand. But let’s face it, we are slightly less in the dark with

Harry and his friends running things than we were when Dumbledore was in charge, plus Harry seems to care about us a lot more than the Headmaster did.”

“True,” Remus admitted. “Still, we’re no better informed, and I really wish we knew something more about these allies of Harry’s.”

“You mean other than the fact they seem to have trained him amazingly well?”

“Yes,” Remus snapped. “If what we’ve been told about what’s been done at Hogwarts this past term is true, then Harry’s walking a fine line.” Seeing Sirius’ frown, Remus added, “Oh, I disagree with Albus as much as you do. Harry has not gone dark grey, let alone truly Dark. Still, he’s a lot more ruthless than I think is good for him.”

“So, you think it’s all Harry? That Harry could actually do all that himself?” Sirius seemed doubtful.

“I have to say yes to that,” Remus stated. “Do you think it could be a group of students, led by Harry?”

“No,” Sirius had to agree, “that doesn’t seem likely.”

“Then could Harry really be able to slip even one person in-and-out of Hogwarts at will? Or hide a group in Hogwarts all term, without them being caught? I assure you, Padfoot, the staff have lots of ways of monitoring the students, and Dumbledore has even more. I can see the school allowing Harry to get away with a lot, but not bringing in outsiders.”

“I have a difficult time believing Hogwarts is alive,” Sirius grumbled.

“Alive? Well, in the sense that she exists and is sentient and intelligent, she is, just as the Sorting Hat is. Dumbledore and the others do not seem to understand that; they know Hogwarts can feed them information, but refuse

to see that she has opinions, and even favorites.”

“Like Harry.”

“Like Harry,” Remus agreed. “Still, that’s different than allowing outsiders, even those vouched for by someone like Harry, to have access within the wards.”

“You may be right,” Sirius admitted. He scowled, and added, “I just wish we knew anything about his allies.”

Remus rolled his eyes, and Sirius demanded, “What?”

“We were talking to him while he unpacked, Paddy.”

Sirius shrugged. “So?”

Remus sighed, “So, think about his trunk. What did you see?”

Sirius frowned, but sat back and thought the question through aloud. “It was a five compartment trunk, although we only saw three of the compartments. The first compartment was filled with his clothes.”

“True,” Remus agreed.

Sirius thought some more and then shrugged. “The other two compartments we saw had books. You and the Granger girl and the Ravenclaw must be corrupting him.”

“Ha, ha,” Remus retorted. “Think again.”

Sirius gave Remus a dirty look, but complied. After a few moments, Sirius said, “Well, Harry did have an out-putter and some similar odds and ends.”

“‘Out-putter’?” Remus teased. “Spoken like a true Pureblood. It’s called a

deluminator.”

“Whatever,” Sirius said dismissively.

“And did it not occur to you that deluminators are licensed items? That the Ministry proscribes most technomage items and that Harry must have had at least twenty such devices?”

Sirius sat up straight. “Hey! You’re right.” Now it was Remus’ turn to roll his eyes. Sirius ignored that and asked, “How did he slip that by Minnie, never mind Dumbledore?”

“That type of trunk is also a proscribed item for Hogwarts students,” Remus explained. “We only saw it was a five-compartment trunk because Harry allowed us to see that.”

That made Sirius blink. After a moment of futile thought, he asked, “What do you think it means?”

“What do you know about the technomages?” Remus asked.

“Not a lot,” Sirius admitted. “I know it’s a new movement and they mess about trying to get magic and technology to work together, and that most of their items are banned almost everywhere.”

“It’s mostly banned in Europe, North Africa, and parts of the Middle East,” Remus said drily. “And yes, that’s how it started off, some seventy years ago in North America, although some claim it started over a hundred years ago. That’s where ideas like the wizarding wireless came from. But the movement has really grown in the last thirty years, and Japan and Korea have been partnering with Australia as an alternative center to North America. Between the two areas, they’ve gone far beyond merely getting Muggle technology to work around magic and making use of Muggle ideas to form things like the wireless. They are truly merging Muggle technology and magic to form a whole new area!”

“I thought most Muggle things couldn’t work around magic,” Sirius complained.

“Normal Muggle devices can’t,” Remus answered. “I can’t explain more, because the knowledge of how to make it work around, or with, magic is proscribed. That’s why Arthur got into so much trouble with his enchanted car.”

“So, you mean my cycle. . . .” Sirius started.

“How the hell did you even sneak that into the country? And yes, items like that are, and always have been, illegal to possess in this country without a special permit.”

Sirius shrugged. “I saw it in Salem when I went there for Dumbledore. I simply shrank it and brought it home.”

“Doing that now would be a 10,000 Galleon fine,” Remus said drily.

Sirius winced at that amount, but quickly recovered. “So, you think Harry is in contact with these technomages?”

“It’s certainly possible,” Remus agreed. “Still, most North American groups could have supplied him with the gizmos as well.”

“Not the Japanese or Koreans?” Sirius asked with a grin.

“I can’t see why they’d be interested,” Remus answered. “However, the Aussies might be.”

“Are they very different?” Seeing Remus looked puzzled, Sirius added, “I mean what the two groups’ ‘gizmos’ do.” He frowned again. “‘Gizmos’?”

Remus shrugged, “That’s sort of the generic name for the devices. And since

even most of the information is banned here, I can't really say."

"Banned?" Sirius asked.

"There are at least three printed technomage journals," Remus replied.

"Having one copy of any of them in Britain is a hundred Galleon fine. And, since I can't afford either a computer or an internet connection. . . ."

"A what and a what?"

"Advanced Muggle communication technology, allowing you to read documents over a telephone connection," Remus explained. "And no, I can't explain it more than that."

"Is that something we could install here?" Sirius asked.

"I doubt the information would make it through one Fidelius, let alone two," Remus retorted.

The two fell silent for a moment. "You still look worried," Sirius finally pointed out.

"If Harry is directly working with, or for, the technomages . . . well, some of them are as radically progressive in their own way as Voldemort is the exact opposite."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning they may be using Harry in ways he doesn't realize."

Sirius nodded. "Either way, we back him up, and help him as needed.

"Agreed."



## ***Chapter X***

Harry looked down at the read-out screen, flipping through the different modes. He had been told that one of Voldemort's 'safe houses' was in use, and had gone to check it out. When he had arrived, he had found eight magical signatures, one of them pushing the top of the power scales, meaning, most likely, Voldemort.

Harry would have loved to have confronted Voldemort, but had to admit that he was not ready to do so, even with some surprise on his side. And, no matter what the surprise factor, he was not going up against Voldemort and seven others, especially as there was a lot of magic being let loose inside the cellars of the old abandoned nunnery.

While deciphering the output, Harry decided that one of the people was being tortured. He was just starting to decide if there wasn't, after all, something he could do, when the output settled down, showing that the torture was, hopefully, ending.

Less than five minutes later, Voldemort was gone, and ten minutes after that, four of the others disappeared as well.

Harry decided to wait and see what happened next.

Over the next twenty minutes, one figure moved around the structure, and then the bio-rhythm output showed that whomever it was had fallen asleep. Two guards, one of them now asleep, and a prisoner.

Harry decided he had to stage a rescue.

\*

Draco Malfoy was not in any way coherent – he really wasn't aware of what was going on around him except when his guard entertained himself by

flinging a stinger at him just for fun. It therefore took Draco a few moments to process that someone had said something, and that he had not suffered pain immediately before or after.

“What?” he managed to bleat through his dry, cracked lips.

“I said,” stated an odd voice, “you were about the last person I expected to be here. Take this and drink it, idiot.”

Draco was hoping for some sort of restorative potion, but wasn't about to turn down a canteen of cool water. “More?” he asked, his vision starting to clear. He only now realized that the magical torches were barely burning, and that he could just barely make out the figure before him. In his current state, the figure looked tall and imposing.

“It will automatically refill in about three minutes,” the voice said. “Now you can drink this.”

Draco drank the potion in the vial and immediately felt a little better. “I could have used this first,” he complained, realizing it was a pain potion and restorative.

“You are either a lousy potions student or you have a lousy teacher,” the voice mocked. “You should know that this type of potion works best when you're hydrated.”

Draco wasn't sure what 'hydrated' meant, but wasn't up to arguing yet.

“Now, what do I do with you?” the voice mused.

“Save me, of course,” Draco managed to say. He was still trying to process everything that had happened and that was happening.

“Why?” the voice asked. “You're Draco Malfoy. You're so Dark that you are of no use to the Light, and apparently you're so incompetent you're of no use

to the Dark Lord, either.”

The mocking tone was lost on Draco, but not the basic meaning the words. “I am Draco Malfoy, and I order you to save me!” he commanded.

The figure straightened up with a snort. “You really are an idiot, aren’t you?”

“Send me home!” Draco insisted.

“Very well.” The lights came up slightly, and Draco recoiled. The figure before him was dressed in a black hooded robe, and the face was not visible, only a black mask. All that was visible were a large pair of red-glass eye pieces (magical infrared lenses, although Draco would never know that) and a piece of metal where the mouth was, which distorted the voice. “Look at me and think of your house’s location.”

Draco struggled to do so, and then felt the information being lifted from his mind. As he relaxed, he saw one of his torturers bound and unconscious. “Kill him before you send me back,” Draco snarled. “I want to see him die!” There was a moment of silence, so Draco commanded, “Didn’t you hear me, whoever you are? Do as you’re told, or let me do it!”

The figure froze, as if making a decision. Finally, it said, “Very well. On your head be it. You will fully wake up where you just visualized,” the voice told him. “If I were you, though, when you wake up, you should run.”

“Run?”

“Run. For your life.”

Draco never saw the stunner that hit him.

\*

Two hours later, Amelia Bones entered the abandoned nunnery, called there

by her aurors. “Walk me through, Shack,” she said.

“We have a lot of ambient magical residue,” Kingsley told her, “and eight distinct magical signatures. Essentially, You-Know-Who, the six escapees, and one Hogwarts student.”

“A student?” That worried her. “Which one?”

“Draco Malfoy.”

Madam Bones scowled. “How. . . .”

“His wand set off the underage magical detectors despite the wards, and as soon as the analysis came through as to what he had used, well, here we are. We would have been here sooner, but the wards prevented us from really understanding what was going on, and analyzing the readouts took some time.”

“Spell it out,” Madam Bones ordered before Shack could once again suggest upgrading the Ministry sensors. They were first-generation technomage creations from the 1920s, and the Wizengamot refused to import any newer creations.

“As best we can tell, by the faint traces and blood, the seven spent some time torturing Malfoy. A very plausible scenario, and certainly typical of these people and the evidence, is that they tortured him, healed him, and then tortured him some more.”

Amelia nodded.

“Then five left, leaving the Lestranges. . . .”

“Which two?” Amelia broke in.

“Rodolphus and Bellatrix,” the auror retorted. “Rodolphus was apparently

looking after Malfoy, Bellatrix went to sleep. Rodolphus must have fallen asleep, because I can't see him being careless enough to allow Malfoy get the drop on him in any other way."

"And then what?" There had to be more to the story than this to bring her out this early in the morning, even with two of the prisoners being the Lestranges. "How did Malfoy capture them?"

"Capture? He didn't just capture them, he killed them," Kingsley stated. "He showed them no mercy, either. He stunned them, trussed them up, and then started their executions. At some point, he enervated them. He then made an illegal portkey, hit each with a Cruciatus, and left. It was this, plus the other spells, that got us here. He must have realized that, unless he was way out of it by then. We're trying to trace the portkey now. They should have a general direction at least soon."

"Stop making me ask," Amelia snapped, "or do I have to see for myself?"

"You don't want to see, but you might have to," Kingsley answered. "He blood-eagled Rodolphus."

"He what?" Bones had heard the term, but couldn't remember what it meant.

"He stripped the pair, then he stretched Rodolphus out, cut through his chest and separated the ribs from the breastbone, and then opened the ribs out, exposing the lungs. Then he cut through the abdominal wall, so his guts spilled on the floor."

Amelia swallowed nervously, glad she had not had breakfast. "And Bellatrix?"

"He impaled her."

"How?"

“The hard, fast way,” Kingsley answered. “He took a six foot piece of splintery timber, sharpened one end, and sent it up her back end and out her mouth. Bellatrix was dead when he got here, but Rodolphus died shortly afterwards. Legilimency only picked up Malfoy killing him through the waves of pain.”

“Nasty, very nasty,” Amelia mused. “I don’t care that these were the Lestranges, Malfoy was by all accounts no angel. I want him brought in, and if he can do this to the Lestranges, he has to be considered dangerous, and potentially hostile.”

“Right.” Not a ‘shoot on sight’ order, but ‘prepare to shoot if he tries anything suspicious’.

\*

Later that morning, Dobby considered the unconscious, blood-covered form of Draco Malfoy. Several revenge scenarios played through his head, but he decided that the Great Harry Potter knew what he was doing. Dobby snapped his fingers, waking Draco up, slapped him with a newspaper, and then disappeared.

Draco managed to sit up painfully, still groggy and recovering from the tortures of the night before. His nose wrinkled in disgust at the amount of blood over him.

Then the headlines in ‘The Daily Prophet’ sank into his brain.

Snatching the paper up, Draco read what he had supposedly done. Then Draco remembered – he HAD done all those things. The memories weren’t clear, but they were not open to interpretation. Draco wondered if he had been under the Imperius, but somehow, he thought not, although he was certain he would not have been able to kill his relatives as he had, even though he had very much wanted to, without some outside force driving him somehow.

Slowly, it sank into his brain that he had not so much been rescued as set up. There was no way anyone would believe what had happened to him, short of a truth potion, and he was not likely to be given a chance to take any before being hexed, if not cursed to death. And, since he did not know for certain he had been under any type of compulsion, and he had certainly wanted to kill his relatives in exactly these ways, even a truth potion might not help him.

Then what the masked figure had said sprang to mind. “Run. For your life.”

Draco called for an elf, ordered it to pack for him, and then practically leapt into the bath, hoping he could get clean enough to travel before someone came for him.

If he did not escape, he could only pray that the aurors caught him before the Master.

Considering the many bruises and other minor injuries he had, Draco never noticed the small set of small cuts at the back of his skull.

\*

“I know you were out last night,” Tonks told Harry as he tried to eat an early lunch.

Sighing, Harry swore on oath that he had nothing to do with the deaths of the Lestranges. “As for Draco,” Harry added, “check Malfoy Manor.”

“The boy would have to be an idiot to go there!” Tonks exclaimed.

“He is an idiot,” Harry retorted.

“It’s possible that he would think he has some protections there,” Remus added.

Tonks looked at Remus and blushed slightly. “All right, I’ll pass that along,” she told him.

After Tonks left, Remus said, with an indifferent air, “You know, Harry, I was in New England for Dumbledore a few weeks last spring.”

“H’mmmm?” Harry muttered around a mouthful of his sandwich.

“I read about a controversy; it seems many believe the technomages are developing a device that simulates the Imperious.”

Harry swallowed. “I’ve heard about that,” he said. “Right now, it seems as if there is no such device – just one that would lower fear inhibitions, but not moral ones.”

“So, no one could be forced to something they didn’t want to. . . .”

“But which would allow them to do what they wanted to do, but were too afraid to do,” Harry finished.

“And if the subject is interpreted while acting out their desires?”

“Their brains are fried,” Harry admitted. Under Remus’ glare, Harry admitted, “I don’t think it’s ready for field use without more testing.”

Remus looked at Harry, and saw that under his stoic exterior, Harry looked very shaken. Remus shivered delicately, and decided he did not want to pursue the idea with Harry. Instead, he asked, “Then about what you did to Severus?” Seeing Harry’s somewhat surprised look, Remus said, “I overheard you tell Sirius.”

Harry shrugged. “Actually, it was in part misdirection, which I was able to do with Hogwarts’ help and the fact that I had memory charmed Snape before, which gave me the ability to by-pass his Legilimency shields. In reality, if he had really wanted to, he could have ignored the commands.”



Remus thought about that, and decided he could at least approve of this. Still, Harry had enabled Malfoy to go too far; executions might be necessary, even dramatically staged ones, but not the slow deaths Malfoy had inflicted on the Lestranges.

“I know, I know,” Harry agreed before Remus could say anything. “People have to be more careful when using tools they only think they understand.” Harry managed a wan smile. “At least I know why you asked that Tonks be filled-in on the new Fidelius,” Harry managed to tease.

Remus didn't want to talk about that, either, so he filled his mug with some strong tea, added some honey, and left the kitchen. Harry looked at his sandwich, sighed, and threw it down, unable to finish it.

\*

On Boxing Day, Harry went to visit Hermione. Since that was a Tuesday, they had agreed to meet for lunch at a Muggle bistro not far from her house. He instantly saw something was wrong and asked about it.

Hermione glanced around and Harry discretely cast a wandless spell after their food had arrived. “No one can understand us now,” he said.

“The Headmaster showed up twice,” Hermione said softly. Seeing the expression on his face, she added, “I've followed your suggestions. I've kept a time log, and I'm not missing any time, unless I was woken up at night. And I taped the conversations with that pocket recorder; the recordings are the same as what I remembered.”

“So I was being paranoid?” Harry asked.

“No,” Hermione acknowledged. “It was a bit disturbing to have him in our home. He tried to turn my parents against you, although he was trying to be subtle about it. Fortunately, I had already had a talk with them, and they saw

through him pretty well. It did increase their suspicions of the wizarding world, but we had talked about that, too.”

“They’d be okay with your leaving Britain?” Harry asked, somewhat surprised.

“Harry, I have relatives in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Falklands, South Africa, and Gibraltar. Some of the ones in New Zealand had lived in Kenya and Zimbabwe. Some of my cousins just moved from Hong Kong to Vancouver. Some of my more distant relations live in the States and Belize, and my mother’s best friend lives in the Bahamas.”

“A true commonwealth family,” Harry said with a smile.

“Exactly. They certainly would not mind my leaving for Australia or Canada,” Hermione stated with certainty. “In fact, my parents are considering moving to New Zealand and joining some cousins who have a medical practice there.”

Harry smiled back. “And that did the Headmaster have to say for himself?”

“I could tell was not happy with those blood runes you had me draw around the property,” Hermione said with a smirk.

“Yes, those particular runes create wards that wouldn’t stop an attack but they certainly prevent casual trespassing as well as eavesdropping ,” Harry said with a smile.

“My parents caught on to that very quickly,” Hermione agreed. “Other than that, he seemed upset with you, but never got around to explaining why. He was testing my Occlumency shields the whole time, but I don’t think anything more than you and Luna are good kissers.”

Harry blushed slightly.

Hermione's face grew solemn. "He did tell me about Draco."

"I never thought he could be that vicious," Harry said regretfully.

That satisfied Hermione. She took Harry's hand. "Enough of the wizarding world. We have a date."

Harry smiled and ended the spell. The pair discussed their movie choices.

\*

Remus Lupin scowled. He was in a small apartment in Grimmauld Place, a few doors away from the Black residence. With Sirius' money and a lot of his own work, he had managed to rent the flat, get a telephone connection, and buy a computer and a modem, and sign up with an internet provider in under a week. The whole thing was set up and turned on. Remus was ready to go, but the computer did not seem interested.

"Why the hell did the screen turn blue?" Remus wondered.

\*

As Harry entered the street of Grimmauld Place that evening, Dumbledore, dressed in a suit which would have been considered loud back in 1910 when had bought it, stepped into view.

"Mister Dumbledore," Harry acknowledged. "Loitering with intent?"

"I believe you have something of mine, Mister Potter," Dumbledore said sternly.

"I can assure you, I do not."

"Where is my wand!"

“I believe it is in your hand,” Harry pointed out.

“Not this wand! The Elder Wand!”

“It was no more yours than it was Grindelwald’s,” Harry said with a shrug.

“I won it from Grindelwald. . . . “

“And whomever possesses it now must have won it from you,” Harry retorted equally sternly, “otherwise they could not have cast a Fidelius over yours.”

Dumbledore’s jaw muscles bulged. “And I suppose you’ll claim that Draco Malfoy killed the Lestranges.”

Harry stared Dumbledore in the eye. “I have no reason to think otherwise. Now, I admit, I could have executed the Lestranges, or killed them in a fight. I would NOT kill them like that!” Harry’s eyes narrowed. “And if anyone spreads rumors that I would, I’ll meet them in court or on the dueling pitch.”

“How dare you. . . .

“How dare I what? Treat you as you have treated people for decades?” Harry glared. “And don’t even try to guilt-trip me. Ever. You’ve been trying to walk a line between directing people’s lives while not interfering too much. It failed, Headmaster, it failed. You failed. Now, if I were going Dark, I’d be planning on trying on running things at least as much as you have. I do not. I’ll be gone if I am recognized as the ‘vanquisher’ of Voldemort.”

Dumbledore again made eye contact, and the return gaze froze his heart.

“And if you decide to try and trap me in magical Britain somehow, I’ll destroy it myself,” Harry declared. “If you don’t like what’s being done, too bad – you should have taken the steps necessary to destroy Tom Riddle forty years ago. Speaking of which, is the snake dead yet?”

“No,” Dumbledore choked out. “Severus and I have prepared a variety of poisons, but he has not had the opportunity to use them yet.”

“If the snake is not dead by the end of school year, my mentors may have another solution, which I assure you, you won’t like. The idiots at the Ministry, of course, won’t care, since many are still claiming Sirius was behind Lucius Malfoy.”

“Madam Bones knows the truth,” Dumbledore managed to assert. “Severus has not been able to locate Pettigrew.” Dumbledore frowned. “I suppose it was you who finally convinced him that Sirius should be cleared?”

“Snape is an amoral, cruel, bastard, even if he’s been feeding me some very skewed stories to show himself in a good light,” Harry stated. Since they were not in school, Dumbledore didn’t try to correct his language. “He also tries to pretend he cared more for my mother than I think he actually did. Still, he isn’t totally evil, and he would like to see Voldemort dead. He’s also convinced that I will win, and I will survive, two things he was not so certain when he was your creature.”

Dumbledore blinked, as he realized what Harry was saying. Snape was now Harry’s minion, not his own.

“So, if he helps me, and that includes clearing Sirius, I might not crush him for his past treatments of me.” Harry smiled. “I think he also likes the idea of Sirius at least partially owing him his freedom.”

“I can see where that would appeal to Severus,” Dumbledore admitted.

Harry’s glare again came back, and Dumbledore was worried about exactly how effective that was. “Do I need to talk to you about not bothering Hermione ever again?”

Dumbledore nearly ground his teeth. “No, nor Miss Lovegood or the Weasleys.”

Harry laughed. "I know you didn't bother the twins or try to read Luna's mind more than once, and you should have learned that I'm not as friendly with Ron as I was."

"True. May I ask why not?"

Harry sighed. "Ron is still a total schoolboy. You, or fate, or whatever, took that away from me, even though I was fighting it until last summer. Hermione and Luna aren't normal school children either. I outgrew Ron, and part of me resents it a great deal. Still, I can't go back."

"I suspected as much when you refused to play Quidditch," Dumbledore admitted. He sighed. "I could try and beat you in a duel to win back mastery of the wand, but I suspect I should not try. Could you please stop memory charming me at least?"

"Of course," Harry smirked, "unless, of course, it's for the greater good."

## ***Chapter XII***

“Hey, Harry, Hermione,” Neville asked one afternoon in late January, “may I ask you two something?”

“Sure,” Harry replied, while Hermione nodded. The fifth year Gryffindors were heading back towards the common room, having finished classes for the day. Most wanted to relax for the hour and a half before dinner, while Hermione wanted to drop off most of her books and then head over to the library for some extra research.

Neville hesitated, but then asked nervously, “Do you believe there are such things as elementals and shadow-mages?”

The last part of the question got everyone looking at Harry with great interest. The story of the Slytherins’ encounter with ‘the Shadow’ had quickly spread throughout Slytherin, and then escaped into the general student population, none of whom had ever heard of the old American Muggle wireless show. Apparently, none had seen the recent American film, either. So far, no word of ‘the Shadow’ had escaped Hogwarts, but Harry knew it was likely to happen soon.

Harry rather regretted going over the top with this, but there was little he could do about it now. All he said in reply, however, was, “What are elementals or shadow-mages?”

“Well,” Hermione said confidently, “elementals are mythical mages, or wizards if you prefer, who are supposed to have had special affinities with the basic philosophical elements: fire, water, earth, and air. An air elemental would have control over the wind, for example.”

“You and Remus Lupin can both conjure bluebell flames without a wand, which most of us can’t; does that make you fire elementals?” Harry asked, curious.

“Not really,” Hermione answered. “Think creating and controlling heat that could refine and forge steel instead.” She considered. “I suppose, if they actually existed in the past, little things like a bluebell flame could be some remnant of the power. . . .”

Harry looked at Neville. “Sounds pretty iffy to me,” Harry said, “at least on the scale Hermione thinks they should operate on. What’s a shadow-mage?” Hermione and Dean also looked interested.

“A shadow-mage would be a wizard whose powers are enhanced by darkness – not the Dark Arts, I mean, well, like shadows,” Neville replied. “Supposedly they can travel invisibly through the shadows, maybe even from one shaded area to another.”

“Oh?” Harry replied, “that sounds interesting. Is that what people think this ‘Shadow’ might be?”

Neville, Ron, Seamus, and Parvati all nodded.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Harry admitted. “If there are people who claim to be able to do any of that, I bet it’s either a trick of some kind or some other kind of magic.” Despite everything, Harry decided to confuse the issue some more. “Unless, of course, you think Ninjas are shadow-mages.” Dean looked thoughtful at that.

“Ninjas?” Neville asked. “What are Ninjas?”

Hermione sighed and said, “Even though we didn’t cover it, the magical Ninja are covered in the second year history of magic text, chapter seven, and the epilogue of Lockhart’s stupid ‘Year with the Yeti’.”

The others stopped and looked at Hermione with affectionate awe, making her flush.



“How. . .” Seamus started, but then he shook his head. “Never mind. Just mark us down as impressed.”

Within two days, most of the students were debating if ‘the Shadow’ was a shadow-mage, a Ninja, or both. Harry, Hermione, and Luna all mildly encouraged the idea of ‘the Shadow’ being a Ninja, as obviously Harry could not possibly be one.

\*

Voldemort looked down at the inert form of Draco Malfoy. What he had found in the boy’s mind was difficult to process. Voldemort had prided himself on being a ‘master of magic’ since his Hogwarts days, but whatever had been used on Malfoy – and Voldemort could not determine if it was a hex or a potion or something else – was something totally new to him.

That worried him. He had now viewed the chain of events so often that the boy’s memories of the event were somewhat addled, and therefore useless for reviewing.

Voldemort could not believe that Potter would have allowed Malfoy to destroy the Lestranges as he had. Therefore, as he suspected (not realizing that this view had been subtly encouraged by Snape), Potter was not anywhere near the center of his new opposition. It was even more clear that Dumbledore was not either, and the Ministry certainly could not be. Whatever power and knowledge the old schoolmaster had, it did not include killing, let alone allowing the old-style painful deaths of the Lestranges! As for the Ministry, while he only had a few Marked followers there, Voldemort knew that the majority of Ministry workers would side with him, although only a few out of loyalty – at least at first. A few parts of the Ministry were to some degree efficient, such as the aurors and the Unspeakables, but again, no one in the Ministry could have allowed this level of death to be inflicted on Purebloods.

These ideas, taken in combination, easily eliminated the other European

Ministries as well – they were all similar to the British Ministry in the attitudes to some degree. There was not a hint that any other Ministry outside of Europe was concerned either. That meant some other person or group was behind this opposition.

Could it be the Druids, coming out of their multiple hiding places? Voldemort considered them. They were a large and very powerful group, secluded in mountain recesses throughout Europe and especially in the Americas. They could also be frighteningly bloodthirsty if directly challenged. Still, he had deliberately done nothing to upset them, and he had been served with none of the traditional warnings, and the Druids were certainly about tradition.

The same was true of other old groups throughout Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas. He really could not threaten most of them for decades, perhaps even centuries, after his planned conquest of magical Britain, if ever. He had therefore been careful not to threaten or challenge them.

Who else could be out there? The idea that there might be a new group, whose rising over the previous hundred or so years had escaped his notice through the 1970s, did not occur to him. Therefore, there was little Voldemort could do but demand more information, and hope some came in that was useful.

Voldemort ordered Malfoy taken back to his cell and pondered. What could he do next if his next move failed? It depended on young Nott, who apparently still did not know his father was dead. Voldemort grimaced, thinking of Nott made him think of Pettigrew – who seemed to be his current most effective, or at least most useful, tool. That Wormtail might be his most useful tool worried Voldemort most of all.

\*

“Harry!”

Harry responded to the stereo exclamation. “Fred. George. I wondered when

you'd come along."

"You knew?" Fred asked.

Harry nodded. "Sirius asked me over the break if I minded, and I said of course not! It gives him something to do, and I know the two of you won't cheat him."

George frowned. "How would we cheat him?"

"He's still on the run; you could probably get around a contract," Harry pointed out.

"Well, you're right, we wouldn't," George stated firmly.

"Especially since he and Professor . . . I mean Remus have some really great ideas, and not only that, they know how to make them work!" Fred said happily.

"Since you are the Head of House, you can sign even though you're underage," George reminded Harry. "We were thinking, twenty-five and a half percent for each of us, twenty-five percent for Sirius, since he's investing so much, and twelve percent for both you and Remus."

"What I gave you was just that," Harry pointed out. "A gift. However," he added quickly, "I'll invest half of whatever Sirius has to get the twelve percent offered."

"That would be another thousand," Fred pointed out.

"Money well-invested," Harry replied. "I'll send a note to the goblins."

"Thanks, Harry!" the twins chorused.

\*

It wasn't until the end of the first week in February when Nott finally asked Millie Bulstrode to arrange a meeting with Harry that next Sunday. He refused to let her, or Pansy, join him in the meeting, and asked that Harry meet with him alone.

Harry was therefore rather wary going into the meeting. He checked out the room they would meet in secretly and thoroughly the night before, laying down magic detectors in case Nott or some other student tried to lay a trap. Hermione thought he was being overly-cautious, but had to agree he was hardly being paranoid.

Snape disagreed, and thought that Harry was being properly cautious. That did not bother Hermione. Luna, however, was also concerned, although she was not certain why. That did bother Hermione, who was still trying to find the good in nearly everyone. The fact that Snape was now helping Harry, and, so far that term at least, Dumbledore was not (apparently) in any way interfering made her feel justified in her optimism.

Harry, and Luna, both realized that Snape was helping Harry to save his own skin and to side with the eventual winner. He was still trying to subtly hint that he and Lily were boon companions through most of their Hogwarts years, which Harry was not buying, although he did not show Snape his doubts.

\*

Nott walked into the classroom and looked around. Not seeing anyone, he took a deep breath to steady himself and walked in. Then, Nott pulled out his wand.

“Nervous?”

Nott spun around and saw Harry blocking the door.

“I’d advise you to put away the wand,” Harry said tonelessly.

Nott lowered his wand, but he did not put it away.

“No offense,” Harry stated in the same voice, “but the fact you haven’t put your wand away is not encouraging my confidence in you.”

“Potter. . . .” Nott managed to say, his voice cracking, “if . . . if I don’t. . . . It’s not just me. . . .”

“Meaning?” Harry demanded.

“If I don’t . . . all my family . . . dead. . . .” Nott’s hands were shaking badly, and Harry could see the boy was terrified.

Still, a terrified person might do anything, without thinking things through. “You can’t kill me, Theodore Nott,” Harry stated. “If you try and fail, won’t your family be equally dead?” Nott hesitatingly nodded.

“In fact, I understand your father is already dead.”

That shook Nott. Almost shivering, he asked, “Are you sure?”

“Pretty certain,” Harry allowed.

“Then . . . then the rest of my family . . . my little sisters. . . . If they are not already dead. . . .”

“Then they are already likely as good as dead. Do you want to add to their sacrifice by dying as well? If you really want to die, and for them to die for certain, then keep that wand out. Just try and use it, and you will be gone. I’m not going to lie and say I can have some allies of mine save any of your family if they are still alive, but that slim chance that I might be able to is all they have, because it’s a bigger chance than your being able to harm me.”

The silence stretched several moments.

“Well?” Harry asked.

“I have to at least pretend to try,” Nott whispered. His wand hand twitched.

Before Nott could complete whatever hex he may have hoped to try, he was screaming. His wand was broken and his hand was crushed.

Before anyone could enter the room to aid Nott, the teen looked at Harry. “Please?” he moaned softly. “Pansy is supposed to know where they are.”

“She’s decided, then.” It was another statement, not a question.

Nott managed to nod. “She brought the notices; she betrayed me.”

“Then she not only looks like a pug, she is a bitch,” Harry mused. He looked up as Snape and the Headmaster entered. Snape stunned the teen and took him away.

Dumbledore looked into the hard green eyes of ‘the Chosen One.’ “I’m glad you didn’t kill him,” was all Dumbledore said.

“His heart wasn’t in it,” Harry retorted. “I don’t kill for fun, or just to tie up ‘loose ends’.” He sighed. “I think you should announce that he attacked me with deadly force, and that he died in the exchange of fire. Then send him out of the country for his own sake.”

“That will cost some money,” Dumbledore commented.

“Take it from the money you’re holding for me.” Seeing Dumbledore’s puzzled look. “You know, the basilisk skeleton I claimed was only part of what was mine from right of conquest.”

Dumbledore winced at that, and left to make arrangements, not realizing that made Harry free to make his own.

\*

Pansy was slightly worried. Nott was supposed to taken out Potter, and no matter if he had failed or succeeded, there should have been an uproar by now. If Nott had failed, he should be dead, and no betrayal was possible. Had he succeeded, he should have the ability to leave the castle, and again, she should be safe.

However, events of the past few months had shown that plans oft went awry. It was therefore in growing trepidation that Pansy went to bed.

Meanwhile, Dumbledore was talking to two of the aurors who were assigned to Hogwarts that term – there were only two at any given time, and this time they were, fortunately, Tonks and Shacklebolt. Dumbledore had also called in Moody. “Well?” he asked. The quartet had rounded up Harry and just sent him into the Gryffindor common room.

“Snape got the idiot away before we could question him,” Moody complained. “As for Potter, all four of us have full tracking charms on him. We’ll know wherever he goes for the next eight hours and we’ll know when he goes.” His eye angles to look into the common room, and he gave a little start.

“What?” Dumbledore demanded.

“The cheeky bugger flipped me off!” Moody exclaimed. “How the devil did he know I was looking?” He looked again and growled. “He did it again!”

“Never mind that, the important thing is, he’s in there,” Tonks pointed out.

Moody conjured a chair and sat, scowling at the wall.

“Well?” Shack asked, amused as he saw a flush creeping up Moody’s neck.

“Little bastard just had all the males moon me,” Moody griped. “They’re clearing out.” Moody suddenly flushed more deeply.

“What?” Tonks asked.

“Never you lot mind,” Moody said, not about to admit that one of Potter’s friends (Colin Creevey, in fact), in turning around, had displayed a suspicious mark above his pubic hair. Zooming in, he had seen it stated ‘Moody is a Perv’, but he was not about to proclaim it.

After five minutes, the other three had conjured chairs as well. It was thus an odd sight which met Snape when he found the group almost an hour later.

“Did you hide your Snake?” Moody complained, his head moving, but his magical eye keeping a close eye on Potter.

“I hid one and discovered that his family had indeed been captured. In fact, Nott’s maternal aunt had been killed in the attack, by all appearances sometime last night. I don’t know if this ‘Shadow’ can rescue the survivors or not. I tried my contacts, but those who were available do not know where they are being held.” Snape then admitted, “In addition, I seem to be missing one other student.”

“What does that mean?” Dumbledore demanded.

“It means that Parkinson’s dorm mates all swear she went to bed over an hour ago, but she is now missing. None heard or saw her leaving, or anything even slightly suspicious. Davis was awake the entire time, and her memory shows no signs of tampering. Neither did the others’.”

“What do we do?” Tonks asked. “We can’t search and keep our connections to Harry active.”



Dumbledore thought, and then said, “Alastor, keep an eye on Harry. We need him to have a complete alibi. The rest of us, and the staff, shall search the castle.”

“Right!”

\*

Despite their best efforts, Pansy was not found during the night. Of course, neither did any of the searching teachers notice a rat with a silver paw hiding in the shadows. In their defense, they weren't looking for something that small.

Moody was relieved at 5:20 that morning, when he reported that Potter was up. Rather than allowing Harry to go for his usual run inside the castle followed by a workout, he was pressed into the search parties. Seeing Harry's demeanor, Snape decided that he had already successfully pulled off whatever had been done. He nevertheless stuck close to Potter, as did the Headmaster. Dumbledore did so as he wanted to make certain Harry was not involved. Snape, certain Harry was fully involved, did not want to miss the unveiling of whatever had happened to Pansy. While he knew he was not likely to approve, it should at least be interesting.

The searchers did not abandon their searches, but did break it off for breakfast. Or, to be more specific, Harry announced he was having breakfast, and all the other searchers converged on the great hall.

Harry spoke briefly to the other remaining Slytherin fifth years about what had happened to Nott the night before, said good morning to Luna, who whispered words of assurance and affection, and then took his usual seat between Ron and Hermione.

It was a little more than ten minutes later when startled screams brought everyone's attention to the far corner of the great hall. A nearly nine meter-high tree had appeared, with a thick trunk and with heart-shaped leaves and

masses of pink flowers, some on the trunk itself, and there were some pods hanging from the branches as well. Then new screams, more terrified, rang out as a naked woman's body appeared, hanging motionless from a branch from a noose made from a thin rope, obviously dead. The face was blackish and mottled, but it was clearly Pansy Parkinson. From her left wrist hung a heavy pouch, apparently tied tightly before her death, as it had cut off the circulation to that hand.

“Prefects!” Dumbledore roared, “clear the students back to your common rooms!” He had forgotten that included Harry, but he was too busy to care. Madam Pomfrey was already at the corpse, magically making certain that the girl was beyond help.

As the last students clear out, they heard Professor Sprout state, “It’s a *Cercis siliquastrum* – the Judas Tree.”

No one was therefore surprised to discover that the pouch held thirty Sickles – thirty pieces of silver.

\*

The outrage of Pansy’s death could not be contained, as the news had blared in that night’s ‘Evening Prophet’. While some of the attacks were on Dumbledore and the MLES, much was directed against Fudge and Umbridge. Nott’s mother and younger sisters had appeared seeking asylum in South Africa, telling tales of a Britain under siege from the Dark Lord mostly because his activities were abetted by the leaders of the British Ministry of Magic. Over the next few days, Mrs. Nott would reveal how her husband had paid off several government officials after Barty Crouch had been dismissed back in the early 1980s so that he would not be too closely questioned, and she had named names, including Fudge and Umbridge.

Further stories of corruption, large-and-small, came out so quickly that it was clear to most that the stories had been well-known for years, just covered up. No senior Ministry official escaped clean, although some, like Arthur

Weasley, had committed only relatively minor infractions (like illegally enchanting a car).

With everyone seen as at least a bit soiled, the question was who would take the fall with Fudge? As tempting as it was to some, you could not fire over half the Ministry. Umbridge should have been kicked out with Fudge, but she managed to just hold on by promising to investigate the goings-on at Hogwarts. The hard-core Purists in the Wizengamot, feeling that Pansy's death had been largely passed by in the furor, agreed to give her one last chance.

And so, two days before Valentine's Day, Dolores Umbridge installed herself in Hogwarts and prepared to confront the one person she considered the main problem of wizarding Britain.

Harry Potter.

### ***Chapter XIII***

Although she knew there were unstated time constraints, Umbridge did not overly-rush herself in her quest to destroy Harry Potter. Umbridge believed in herself, but she knew she had not risen to near the heights of the Ministry through luck. She did not discount luck, but knew, in this case, she had to eliminate it from her enemy's favor. That meant careful preparation if she was to snare her prey.

Others watched Umbridge as she prepared, and the tensions around most of Hogwarts ratcheted up, ruining many couples' Valentine's Day. That automatically lost Umbridge some of what little support she had with many of the female students, most of whom, while shocked at Pansy's death, rather thought (although not out loud) that Pansy had been a rather stupid, ugly idiot who had obviously gone too far. Harry's supporters within Slytherin had spread the 'rumor' that Pansy had forced Nott into a confrontation with Harry, who had still had Nott's family saved despite the attack. As the remaining females who had at some time or another given the Dark Lord some support were now at least publically neutral, Umbridge would get little support from them now.

Harry's most open supporters were often seen glaring at Umbridge whenever she was seen outside her little group of offices. Only direct orders from Harry not to harass her kept things from getting out of control.

The staff resented Umbridge's presence, not forgetting how she had tried to invade their territory the previous September. Snape, of course, was the most interested in the developments. Should Harry fail to deal with Umbridge, Snape would have to rethink his current alliance. Should Harry have to deal with Umbridge inelegantly or too obviously, he would also have to rethink. Snape was certainly not against violence on principle, and he suspected that Harry was becoming to think of violence as an early option. Still, so long as Harry did not use violence against weak opponents, it was unlikely that the Boy was turning Dark. Snape was happy with a grey Harry.

Dumbledore was not happy with a grey Harry, especially one who could execute Pansy Parkinson – there was no doubt in his mind Harry had somehow done so. On the other hand, he recognized that, while not an active supporter of Voldemort, Umbridge was certainly a real threat to Harry’s main mission. After consideration, he decided not to ask Moody to be in the castle, and limited Tonks and Shacklebolt’s presence to between 10:30 at night to 6:30 in the morning. Harry had proven he could get around the three (not to mention Dumbledore), but the Headmaster decided he did not want to make things difficult for Harry. Hopefully, that would keep the bloodshed to a minimum.

If Umbridge’s mere presence was her opening salvo in the war of nerves, the first counter came Valentine’s night, when a new dish appeared on all the tables. There were only a few snickers, and Ron Weasley was heard to say, “Those are funny looking chicken legs.” Oddly, the entire great hall went quiet, as if on cue.

“Those aren’t chicken legs,” Hermione informed him. “Those are frog legs.”

Dozens of noses wrinkled at the idea, but Harry said, “Try ‘em; you’ll like ‘em.” Everyone seemed to watch Harry as he picked up a frog leg and ate the white flesh with relish.

At that point, an unidentifiable voices called out, “Yech! I don’t want to eat Umbridge legs!”

“She’s a toad,” a second voice scolded, “not a frog.”

“Oh, in that case, yum!”

Umbridge stood up, glaring and trying to find where those voices were coming from. At first, all she heard was laughter. Then, under the laughter but growing, she heard a chorus of, “Ribbit! Ribbet! Ribbet!” and other assorted croaks and calls.

Umbridge's conflicted instincts battled for a moment, but as the chorus grew louder, and as Dumbledore and the rest of the staff merely sat there, passing out the frog legs, she left the great hall.

She was not pleased that frog legs were on the dinner menu every night thereafter while she was at Hogwarts.

"Do you two actually LIKE those things?" Ron asked Harry and Hermione after Umbridge had left.

"Very tasty," Hermione said, delicately peeling the meat off the little bones with a fork.

"Just pretend they're chicken," Harry suggested.

Ron shrugged, and dug in.

\*

Despite the distractions, Umbridge felt, three nights later, that she was at last ready to deal with the Boy. The idea that he might be useful, let alone necessary, to the fight against a possibly revived Dark Lord did not enter her head. She was determined to quash the idea of any return, and to pin the death and violence at Hogwarts and even the attack on Hogsmeade directly on Harry Potter. The fame of this Half-blood had been annoying while he was growing up; it could not be allowed to spread and create alternate ideas to the Purebloods' control of the Ministry. All she had to do was add one more piece of crystal, in this case a ruby, to the runic crystal layout, and whomever was in the center of it would have to tell the complete truth, and would be physically under the power of the person in the control spot. Once completed, she would capture the boy on his way to his usual workout the next morning.

Umbridge squeaked in shock when the ruby flew out of her hand. She turned,

wand out, in the direction of the ruby and started to cast a hex.

To her shock, her wand followed the ruby. Both flew into the hand of a strange figure – it was obviously male, but the figure did not appear dressed in black – it was black, totally black, moving in the torch-lit room.

Umbridge swore as she was levitated and she and the Shadow moved around the room. Her eyes went wide as she saw the positions they were heading towards. Sure enough, in a few seconds, the runic ritual area was completed – she was in the position of the subject, the Shadow was in the control area.

“My, my, Madam Whatever-Your-Title-Is-Tonight,” the voice mocked, “a Hindu truth ritual? This is a banned ritual, except when used by the High Brahmin Council, or in front of the Tribunes of the International Confederation.”

“I represent the Government,” Umbridge stated. “I can do no wrong in administering justice!”

“If you weren’t caught in your own web, I’d say you were lying,” the Shadow replied. “Since you are, you must just be stupid. You obviously don’t know what justice means.”

“I demand you release me!”

“And I demand you tell me everything you have ever done to bend or break the laws, even if they were done with, to your blind eyes, the right of the Ministry behind them! Your memory crystals will record everything! Start talking!”

And Umbridge talked. She started talking at 7:50 that night, and talked for over ten hours, since the Shadow kept her to the main facts and rarely asked for any details, other than names of accomplices. He was shocked at just how corrupt the Ministry was, and how unlikely the system was to change, at least in the short-term, without even more bloodshed than he could stomach.

He was certainly surprised at Umbridge's bigoted stupidity – to believe that a Muggle could steal a child's magic was beyond comprehension, but then Umbridge also thought a werewolf could infect someone at any time just by kissing them.

That started a chain of thought, which would allow 'the Shadow' to solve several problems at once if he could get everything arranged.

The experience exhausted Umbridge, especially since she kept trying to fight her own creation. When the Shadow released her, therefore, she just collapsed. She did not notice anything beyond her own confused physical reactions until she felt a slight but sharp pain on either side of where her spinal cord entered the skull. "What. . . ?" was all she managed to say before a wave of calmness took her over, a feeling not unlike the Imperious, but still somewhat different. Umbridge realized that whatever was happening, her consciousness was separated from her body.

"Rest, little toad," the Shadow whispered, "while I duplicate the memory crystals – and add the layer of new runes to your little ritual that will allow me to get rid of you." He sighed, hoping these conflicts would soon be over.

Later that day, copies of Umbridge's confessions would appear in both the British Minister's office and the MLES, while other copies went to 'The Prophet' and 'The Quibbler' in Britain. Copies were also sent to the International and the ten largest-circulating Magical newspapers outside of Britain. The scandals would be rocking the Wizarding world for months, and numerous agents and members of various illegal and/or bigoted groups were exposed, as were corrupt officials all around the world.

In the end, it cannot be said that the officials who took over after the scandals settled down were honest and open-minded. However, in general, they were at least somewhat less-corrupt and slightly less-bigoted. In addition, several prisoners, who were in Azkaban or in other prisons at the behest of the British Ministry, were released, as it was shown they had only been kept in prison out of political vendettas. Sirius Black would be officially pardoned



then as well.

However, all that would take through August to occur.

\*

Breakfast was nearly finished when Dolores Umbridge marched into the great hall and stood in the door. The ‘ribbits’ barely started, and then died out. Umbridge was acting too oddly for the mocking to reign over the confusion and speculation.

At that point, Umbridge took a deep breath and announced, “Dumbledore! I have sinned against you and against the wizards and witches of magical Britain! I have decided to confess my misdeeds and remove myself! You will find copies of the evidence of my sins in the suite I forced you to open for me.” With that, she turned and marched out.

“Come on!” Ron shouted, “let’s see what the Toad does!” Despite the protests from many of the staff, especially McGonagall, the students poured out of the great hall until only Harry, Snape, and Dumbledore remained.

Harry finished his cup of hot chocolate and looked at the other two. “Shall we see what’s happening?” The pair followed Harry out. They were not going to let Harry out of their sight.

The trio soon caught up with the crowd. Umbridge was standing at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, one arm raised to stop the others from coming too close. She nodded at the approaching Headmaster. One by one, heads turned to take in Harry and Dumbledore.

Harry sighed, pulled out a wand, and swore, “I solemnly swear, on my life and magic, that I had nothing to do with this.” After the flash, Harry put his wand away and shouted, “Well, Madam Umbridge, what now?”

Umbridge stepped out of the protection of the Hogwarts wards and instantly a

chill was felt. Dumbledore started to pull his wand, but Harry shook his head. Dumbledore hesitated, but then decided he had to follow through. Snape then grabbed a hold of the Headmaster's wrist, preventing Dumbledore from fully drawing his wand, much to the old man's astonishment. At the same moment, the Shadow appeared out of the shadows of the forest, causing the crowd to gasp. A dementor appeared from behind the Shadow, gathered Umbridge into its arms, and to the horror of everyone, quickly gave Umbridge the kiss.

The dementor released the now-motionless body and bowed to the Shadow. Then, in a voice which sent chills through most of the present, the dementor spoke.

“Lord of Death on Earth, we thank you for this last meal. As agreed, most of the Brethren will now leave to return to the netherworld from which we came. The rest of us swear to stay on the Isle of Azkaban so long as there are evil doers there we may be near at least one hour a day.” The dementor bowed again. “We thank you for not sending us all deeper into hell.”

With that, the dementor returned into the forest.

A few gasps were heard as other shapes appeared out of the shade. These turned out to be two acromantulas, which led the body into the forest. The Shadow bowed to the students and then disappeared.

“I wish I knew how you do this,” Snape growled, low so that only Harry could hear the words.

Harry didn't react to Snape. Instead, he turned to Dumbledore and asked, “So, Headmaster . . . what do we do now?”

Dumbledore's mouth was moving, but no sounds were coming out.

Meanwhile, in the forest, the two spiders, still leading Umbridge's body, scuttled past a centaur. The Shadow came to the space a few seconds later.

“Pluto diminishes,” Bane said, not looking at the Shadow.

“Do you object?” the Shadow asked.

“No, Harry Potter,” the centaur quickly replied. He loathed wizards; this was the first one he both feared and respected. “The spiders do not belong here, any more than we should be in their lands. I admit I do not understand how this will work, but I do not need to know.”

“Only a few of the spiders will die,” Harry warned the centaur. “The ones who feed directly on Umbridge, and even then not for a week or more unless they are already ill. The others will be rendered sterile over the next few weeks. The process cannot jump species, so no other beings or animals will be affected. And, even if they have contact with others of their kind, the process will end in a month or so.”\*

Bane merely nodded. “The spiders will die out as we can now out-compete them since they can not so quickly replace themselves; the dementors are mostly returning to their ancestral demon-lairs. . . .”

“And Grawp has been moved to a new giant reserve in Idaho,” Harry said with satisfaction.

“Why?” Bane asked, curious despite himself.

“The giants have nearly destroyed themselves,” Harry retorted. “A few of the smaller and less aggressive male giants have been separated out, along with the more intelligent females. Hopefully, their off-spring will be more capable of surviving together.”

Bane nodded. “We will be moving deeper into the Forest. Please do not turn your attention to us.” Bane snorted and left.

“Good riddance,” Harry muttered, and left to straighten out the time line.

\*

\*The basic idea on how to treat this group of spiders is taken from 'Wizard's Fall' by Bobmin.

\*

That night, after several moments of silence, Harry glared at Snape. "Did you want to talk to me, or was there some other reason you gave me another phony detention?"

"I have admit, I am nearly speechless with admiration," Snape admitted.

Harry made a face. "I know you didn't want to just suck up," Harry pointed out.

Snape flushed slightly, but said, "I told the Dark Lord about your idea for getting the faux Prophecy a few weeks ago. He has apparently finally had it retrieved. Is there anything I need to know about it?"

"Finally!" Harry said.

Snape scowled. "You could have said it was important!"

Harry just gave Snape a bemused look.

Snape thought a moment. "Look, I wouldn't have told Dumbledore if you had told me not to!"

"It was more natural this way," Harry answered. "As for the faux prophecy, well, let's just say it gave Volde some information to test – he won't like the results."

Snape just managed not to blurt out a demand for the information.

"He should have reached the end of the possible times he can split his soul. He's already done it one more time than anyone else has successfully done it,

according to the so-called-experts. What he didn't know, and that the Headmaster did, was that my scar was a Horcrux."

"I'm surprised it hasn't faded," Snape admitted.

Harry smirked. "Muggle stage make-up." Snape looked surprised. "In any event, he won't want to try and kill me or have me killed. He needs to figure a sane way to remove the Horcrux."

"And if he does?"

Harry shrugged. "Then you'll be ordered to kidnap me. Until then, he has to play nice. You still need to get Nagini to eat some poisoned mice."

"Oh . . . I set that trap a few days ago. That business with Umbridge made it impossible to talk to you before now."

"What does Riddle think of 'the Shadow'?" Harry asked, curious.

"He'd love to know how the Shadow did it, as do we all," Snape admitted.

Harry merely smiled and left.

\*

"Actually, we'd love to know how you accomplished some of these things, too," Hermione admitted after Harry told her and Luna about his evening.

"You could figure it out," Luna pointed out. "You are being too trusting of what you see."

"I suppose you could explain all of Harry's tricks," Hermione snapped.

"All? No, of course not. However, the bi-location means either Harry has tamed a screw-tailed tricorn, or has a time-turner," Luna said off-hand.

“Or something similar, if more accurate,” Harry murmured.

“Good point,” Luna agreed, “although I am still betting that’s misdirection and it’s a tricorn. As for the oaths . . . Harry, can you do wandless magic?”

“A few spells, but nothing too powerful,” Harry answered. “Well, I can banish things pretty well.”

“How many wands and wand-like sticks do you have in your robes, Harry?” Luna asked.

“My Ollivander’s wand, the Elder wand, what one of my mentor’s called a throw-away, and a stick that looks like the Ollivander wand,” Harry admitted.

“So you pull out the stick, say the oath without casting magic, and give a light show?” Hermione asked, incredulous. “I’m surprised you get away with it!”

“The magical always fall for sleight-of-hand,” Harry said with a shrug. “They think it’s magic, because they know magic is real. It took you in, and you are more intelligent, more observant, and far less gullible than nearly anyone else.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. After a moment, she managed to shut her mouth, took a deep breath, and said, “I am not angry with either of you. Just at myself.”

“There are reasons why the magical fear Muggles learning about us,” Luna said softly. “If they don’t know about us, then we can use magic to confuse them. When they know about magic, then we can only try to overpower them – and they outnumber us more than 1000 to 1 worldwide, closer to 3,000 to one in Britain.”

Hermione merely nodded. She took another deep breath and then asked,

“May I ask who the other group was who rescued you this summer, besides the American technomages?”

“I never said if it was the American or Australian technomages,” Harry pointed out. “As for the other group, well, if I told you they call themselves, ‘the Gang’, does that give you a clue.”

“Doug and Dinsdale?” Luna asked, impressed

“Doug and Dins. . . .” Hermione stomped her foot in anger. “Harry James Potter! You are not going to ever convince me that these people are led by Doug and Dinsdale Piranha!”

“How do you know about them?” Luna asked, confused. “Few do in the magical world, and fewer in the Muggle.”

“They’re fictional! And from a comedy sketch!”

“Actually,” Harry answered, “they aren’t brothers. Doug is a Muggle-born, Dinsdale is a Half-blood. They do look a lot alike, and took the names from the comedy sketch.”

Hermione managed to control her breathing after a few moments, but then asked, “You work with mobsters?”

Harry shrugged. “Smugglers, for the most part. They operate on the fringes of both worlds. And Voldemort would use them and then kill them if he knew more about them, just like he would destroy the magic the technomages are creating. That’s why they are allies, and helping me, even if they don’t particularly like each other.”

“Enlightened self-interest?” Luna asked.

“Exactly.”

“Glad something is enlightened ‘round here,” Hermione complained, to which Harry and Luna laughed.



## *Chapter XIV*

Both the late winter and early spring saw quiet times at Hogwarts. There were certainly rivalries, but these were all personal, rather than truly House-driven. No doubt many students (and staff) felt strongly about issues of heritage and blood-lines, but everyone had, singly and collectively, decided to keep their mouths shut. So far, everyone could agree that those who had been punished, or worse, could be seen as having ‘deserved it’ to some degree. The students therefore collectively felt they knew the lines where they no longer dared to go.

For some of the Slytherins, that had been a hard lesson to accept, but accept it they all now seemed to.

For those students interested in the goings-on of the adult world, the fall-out of Umbridge’s confessions and subsequent ‘suicide’ made for interesting discussions. While ‘The Prophet’ usually kept to generalities, ‘The Quibbler’ and a number of foreign periodicals had few compunctions about printing large excerpts – unlike much of the Muggle world, wizarding Britain had no laws against such publication, even when there were trials in progress. Hermione had thought that through when she had been told of it, and decided that since the Wizengamot, which supplied both judges and juries when not acting as both, could not be considered unbiased to begin with, this lack made a certain amount of sense.

Dumbledore had his hands full with all this political fallout, plus the normal demands of running the school, and therefore could not easily keep track of what else was going on. Like Harry, he received full reports from Snape on Voldemort’s activities.

Since recovering the faux prophecy, Voldemort had been very quiet. He had been thrown totally off-balance and was trying to find information so that he could deal with the changes in wizarding Britain. In addition, the remaining dementors at Azkaban had not only refused to deal with him, they had

threatened to suck out what remained of his soul if he bothered them again.

That confused Voldemort, as the dementors had always been very much interested in dealing with him before. He was never to know that was because he had commanded (without ever knowing it) the resurrection stone, which had both the power to liberate the souls dementors had captured and to destroy the physical manifestations of the dementors themselves. Now that Harry commanded the stone, the dementors wanted nothing to do with Voldemort. They had been attracted to Harry before only because he had held part of Voldemort's soul in his scar, making him about the richest meal available.

Voldemort therefore sat back and waited to see what was happening, both within the Ministry (where his few Death Eater Ministry members were trying both to protect themselves from the fallout and trying to protect those sympathetic to their general agenda – neither would have much success, as Madam Bones was having suspects separated from sensitive information and also having them followed) and within magical Britain.

Harry and Hermione were both disappointed, although Harry was not greatly surprised, that while the constant revelations of corruption were clearing out just a few of the most bigoted, Dark, and even corrupt members of the Ministry (they were not to know that the biggest purges would come that summer), they were being replaced by at best conservative Purebloods.

“If this continues,” Hermione said sadly, “the Ministry people might be a little more honest, but they're unlikely be any more open to new ideas or civil rights.”

Harry could only agree.

Hermione and Luna were also worried about Harry. Most of the people around him thought he was looking worried and a bit worn because of the upcoming O.W.L.s. In reality, he was waiting for Nagini to be poisoned. Harry had given Snape a few more of the devices, but he had only been called to

one new safe house where he had been able to hide one. The waiting was getting on Harry's nerves far more than the O.W.L.s

That did explain why Harry was awake at 4:20 am one Friday morning in late March. He really did not want to start working out that early, so he dressed quietly and went down to the common room to wait. He figured after an hour or so, he could start his morning exercises.

On a whim, he had brought the map with him, in part to see if there were any ghosts materialized and wandering around that he might care to talk to. As usual, Harry scanned the castle and saw nothing unusual. This morning, however, Harry was also going to try an experiment, adding some charms designed by some Korean technomages. If the new charms worked, non-materialized ghosts would show on the map, noted as such.

It took Harry just five minutes to add the new spells, but the map took a further ten for them to be fully integrated. Harry nodded, noting the various ghosts fade into view. It worked as it was supposed to. Instead, what brought Harry up short was seeing the name 'Peter Pettigrew' retreating from the Slytherin common room, apparently heading towards the general direction of Myrtle's toilets.

Harry glanced around the common room and again looked at the map, making certain no one was near him. He then went towards the fireplace and melted into the wall.

Scabbers hurried towards the hidden entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. There were some cracks under the sink he could wriggle through. Although he had to come into Hogwarts through a long and torturous route, he could leave more quickly once he made it to the bottom of the slide and past the rock slide, where he could become fully human and then portkey out. (Voldemort could and had portkeyed in; however he was not certain he could repair the collapsed portion of the tunnel without causing further damage. He had therefore set aside that problem until after he had conquered Britain and could have goblin slaves do the work properly. Fortunately, the new anti-

portkey wards Dumbledore had installed after the tournament prevented anyone from portkeying from the chamber to the bottom of the slide. )

Still, despite being a fair-sized rat, corridors at Hogwarts were hardly designed for travel by a creature that size. Only the dark corridors helped Pettigrew make his appointed rounds when commanded by his Master.

Scabbers suddenly stopped.

Something had changed, but neither the rat nor the human mind inside of it could determine what had changed.

Then the world went dark.

\*

Remus Lupin was not running, but he was not taking his time. His werewolf senses were howling at him – he knew he was being followed.

Remus had not yet spotted whoever was on his trail, but he knew that he was carrying illegal technomage material, just printed off, and he knew he had knowledge that Dumbledore, the Ministry, and Voldemort wanted. He knew that the latter two would not be gentle in extracting it.

Suddenly, Remus realized that despite his skills and precautions, he was hemmed in by three large men, one on either side and one behind him. His nervousness was not lessened when he recognized one. “Brock?”

The huge man nodded. “Come on, Lupin,” the man growled. “Boss wants ta talk wit’ ya.”

“Dinsdale. . . .”

“Not Dinsdale. Doug.”

“Doug?” Remus asked nervously. He was by far the most dangerous of the two crime leaders.

“Doug.”

The three men herded Remus towards a main street and into the back of a large black limo. The three thugs then went into a follow-car as the limo pulled into traffic.

“Remus Lupin, I presume?” Doug ‘Piranha’ was a square-jawed, dark-haired wizard in his late forties. Until you looked into his expressionless eyes, he was in many ways just a heavily-muscled but other-wise somewhat nondescript man.

“Yes, sir,” Remus answered nervously.

“You did a little work for us back in the late 80s I believe.”

Remus merely nodded.

“Why did you leave?” Doug asked. “We didn’t care that you’re a were.”

“I’m suspect enough just because of the curse,” Remus answered. “I didn’t need to borrow trouble working for you.”

“It was a perfectly legal job,” Doug retorted. “The Ministry still isn’t on to that front.”

“I didn’t want to take the chance,” Remus admitted.

“You don’t like taking chances, risks, do you?”

“Not really,” Remus had to agree.

“Then why are you helping Potter?” Doug noticed the shift in Remus’ body

language. “Protective of the pup, are you? I guess that while he told you about the technomages, he didn’t mention us.”

“No, he didn’t,” Remus answered, not happy.

“In the short run, the Gang could make a lot of money helping Voldemort,” Doug mused. “But in the long term, he wants control on a scale that would destroy everything. Twenty-five years ago, when we were getting started, we avoided him because of the blood-issue. Some of the other groups operating in the shadows between the worlds didn’t, and got crushed or absorbed by the Death Eaters, or were exposed by the Death Eaters who bought their way out as part of the payments they made to the Ministry. The rest were either blackmailed into bankruptcy, or joined us. Voldemort would use us and destroy us if he could, and we knew, just by watching the toff Death Eaters, shite like Malfoy, that Harry didn’t destroy the tosser back in ‘81 but just drove him off.”

“So you kept an eye on Harry.”

“Malfoy kept an eye on Harry; Dumbledore kept an eye on Harry. Hell, the Ministry had the strongest underage monitors in Europe set up just to keep an eye on Harry, and it turns out there was a lot more watching him than just us.”

“And so you’re helping Harry. . . ?”

“Enlightened self-interest,” Doug answered. “Harry’s going to win. When he does, he’ll either leave to get away from the Pureblood bigots, or he’ll stay and straighten ‘em out. If it’s the latter, well, he understands now that we’re not really hurting anybody. Just making a bit of gold trafficking between the worlds.”

“And if Harry broke down those barriers?”

“Naw, Harry wouldn’t do that. No, we will still be in business, and even if

we have to adjust what we smuggle a bit, I'm betting we'll be able to expand business, as what will be in demand will expand as well."

Remus' eyebrows went up in surprise. Doug merely smiled. "A lot better to smuggle in some technology than illegal potion supplies. Believe it or not, properly masked wizard wireless sets make us a tidy little sum, since we supply most of Europe as well as the UK."

"The what?"

"Wireless sets that get both Muggle and wizard stations, with the magical bands hidden from Muggle eyes. Perfectly legal in the Americas and the Pacific and Asia, legal even in most of Africa and the Middle East, but banned here. The Japanese are developing a magical version of the tellie, and are trying to do the same with computers. The Yanks are right angry that they're being beaten, and are trying to come up with both before the Japanese get their products out. We'll sell 'em either way."

Remus sighed.

"Almost sad, isn't it?" Doug asked. "Still, so long as the European Ministries and the ones who act the same do so, there'll be money for us to make."

"And why have me picked up?" Remus asked.

"If you mean by me personally, I had a meeting in the area, otherwise I wouldn't have bothered. If you mean why in general, some friends of mine want a talk with you. By the way, Umbridge was the loudest about going after 'beasts', but she wasn't the only one to feel that way in the Ministry."

"I know," Remus pointed out.

"Then you should know that the remaining bigots and idiots are wondering if Harry had anything to do with her rather spectacular suicide," Doug retorted. "Chap by the name of Percy Weasley suggested it, if I heard right. If they

were to stop just wondering, they might go after you. They have you pegged as a possible ally. Wouldn't want you hurt, as Harry seems to like you. Just a nod."

Remus broke out in a sweat.

The limo pulled up to a small electronics shop. "Tell the man at the registrar that you have an appointment with Elric."

A befuddled and worried Remus did as he was told.

\*

Sunday afternoon, Harry asked for a meeting with the Headmaster and Snape. Neither wanted to miss out on what Harry might have planned. Dumbledore only hoped no further blood would be shed.

Harry did not waste any of their time. "Pettigrew was captured in the castle last Friday."

Snape blinked, while Dumbledore admonished, "And you are only telling me now?"

Harry was not phased. "He had to be questioned, not allowed to escape by the Ministry, or patted on the head and given a lemon drop by you when he gave you a sob story."

"So you tortured him?" Dumbledore scolded.

"Hardly," Harry said drily. "He sang like a canary once he realized he was trapped. Except for having the silver hand removed, he's probably in better condition now than he's been since he betrayed my parents. He only wants not to be killed or sent to the dementors. My side could promise him neither, unless they keep him, which they don't particularly want to do. However, in return for a full confession, he should be able to live in a nice cell far away



from dementors, especially if he can turn into the rat he really is whenever he wants.”

“And you want me to arrange that?” Dumbledore asked. Due to the current crises within the Ministry, he had grown stronger politically than he had been in years.

“That’s part of why we’re here,” Harry acknowledged.

“And why am I here?” a suddenly very worried Snape asked.

“Like I said, Pettigrew made a full confession.” Seeing no comprehension on either man, Harry added. “And named all the names he knew, along with their crimes.”

Still nothing beyond mild interest.

Harry sighed. “You are a Marked Death Eater, Professor, who has certainly committed crimes, remember?”

Snape flushed.

“Professor Snape. . . .”

“Was given probation back in the early 1980s,” Harry agreed. “That does not cover anything he did since, and just consorting with Death Eaters convicted of crimes since 1981, and some will be, could reimpose the full sentences.”

Snape went totally pale.

“Unable to protect your minion, Harry?” Dumbledore taunted, making Snape flush in anger again.

“Most people still respect your old reputation,” Harry answered. “And the Professor here has given you more information than he has me over the last

few months. And yes, when this is over, I will happily put in an accurate word about how he has helped the two of us. However, you're the high muckity-muck in the Ministry at the moment. You're the one who can give him cover with Bones before Voldemort's downfall, unless you want to waste him as a resource." Harry looked at Dumbledore with such curiosity that Dumbledore squirmed. "I always knew you cared for me only as a tool," Harry finally said, "but I thought your regard for the Professor here was at least equal to that, if not slightly higher."

Now it was Dumbledore who flushed. After a moment, he turned to Snape and said, "Indeed. My apologies, Severus. I shall of course shield you at the Ministry."

Harry nodded, put his hand into an inner pocket of his robe, and then slid a memory crystal across to Dumbledore. "I would hope this would hurry Sirius' pardon along," Harry commented. Dumbledore just nodded.

"Where is dear Wormtail?" Snape asked. "Are your friends sure he cannot escape?"

"Right now, Wormtail cannot wake up," Harry answered. "He's in an induced deep dream-state."

The two men nodded.

\*

Deep in the heart of Hogwarts, in a secret chamber, Peter Pettigrew lay, barely breathing, hooked up to several advanced technomage gizmos. In his dreams, however, Scabbers the rat huddled in a cage suspended above a seething room of vipers, all hissing – hissing that for once the rat could understand.

'Nice fat rat,' they all hissed in a cacophony of overlapping sound, "come down and play. We're hungry!"

\*

It was a very shaken Severus Snape who returned to his quarters after a foreshortened dinner. For a moment, he had feared that the Headmaster would throw him to the wolves in the Ministry. He was under no illusions – Potter might be able to protect him from many things, but not, at least for the present, the Ministry.

As much as he hated to admit it, it had appeared as if Potter had anticipated every move that afternoon, which meant that he had wanted Snape to see and understand what was going on.

Why?

It suddenly dawned on Snape – it had been a warning. Not a warning not to trust Potter, but a warning not to fully trust Dumbledore. Had Dumbledore refused to step in for Snape, Snape was under few illusions. If Potter had to choose between saving the Mutt or saving him, Potter would see Snape sent off to Azkaban, at least for a while. Potter had wanted to remind Snape of that, and that he might have to make that choice. Knowing it, Snape could have still saved himself by running.

Snape did not think anyone knew about his emergency escape plans, just in case he needed to leave Britain and assume a new identity. It seemed, however, that Potter had at least realized that Snape might have such plans, or could at least escape if he had to. Potter might have had to give up information which, without Dumbledore's help, could have condemned Snape to Azkaban if caught, but Potter was at least giving Snape the chance not to be caught if Dumbledore had backed off from some 15 years of commitments.

And, if only for a moment, Dumbledore had been tempted, in order to get back at Potter.

Snape decided he had best double check his plans.

## **Chapter XV**

“I don’t know,” Sirius told Remus. “I mean, I don’t like wizarding Britain, but move? And you won’t say where.”

“I don’t know where,” Remus admitted. “It could be the States, Canada, Australia, or even New Zealand. Wherever Harry goes if he goes.”

“And we still don’t really know these technomages,” Sirius pointed out. “And this ‘Gang’ sounds more like Dung’s friends than people we should trust.”

“They did trace Harry through Dung,” Remus admitted.

“So what do they want from Harry?” Sirius asked.

Remus shrugged. “In part, the technomages and ‘the Gang’ want what Dumbledore wanted from Harry – they want him to destroy Voldemort, although the details of why they don’t want Voldemort to win may be different. They’re just not playing as many games as the old man. Dumbledore thought Harry would have to sacrifice himself, so he was basically training Harry to do just that – so that Voldemort would send a killing curse at Harry, which should have destroyed the Horcrux inside of him, and then, hopefully, Harry would survive at least long enough to destroy Voldemort, or at least show the world how to do it.”

“A bloody lousy plan,” Sirius grumbled.

“It was,” Remus agreed.

“Is that a change of tune I hear?” Sirius mocked.

Remus shrugged. “I would have thought Dumbledore would have done a bit more research into ways to break the Horcrux without killing Harry, but I

think he was partly afraid the information would leak out, and partially afraid that doing so would break the Prophecy to the point where no one could stand up to Voldemort.”

“I wonder, if we live so long, if we’ll be so bloody cautious,” Sirius mused.

Remus shrugged.

“Why else do you want to go?” Sirius asked.

“They’re working on ways to get around the Curse,” Remus admitted.

“Oh?”

“They are able to simulate the moon’s effect in a chamber to the point where the physical changes happen, but the werewolf keeps his mind,” Remus told his friend. “Still hurts like hell, but they’ve also developed a potion that even cuts the pain drastically. They have some evidence that doing this repeatedly helps condition the werewolf to the point that they keep their minds during the regular change. What they can’t do yet is make the effect last through the cycle without the werewolf undergoing the treatment at least six times a cycle. Still, as bad as the pain is, if that pain potion does work I think it might be a decent trade off to taking the Wolfsbane.”

“The transformations take a lot out of you,” Sirius pointed out.

“They do,” Remus admitted, “but the Wolfsbane poisons us to the point where it might do as much harm in the long run as transforming, if not more.” The magical world did very little testing on long term potion effects, especially potions for ‘creatures’. “I’d like to help find out and at least leave a legacy of some kind.”

“I never wanted any legacy,” Sirius admitted. “Just to have fun while I was here.” He looked at Remus. “What about Tonks?”

Remus flushed. “Maybe, if this treatment really helps. . . .”

“Talk to her, Moony,” Sirius encouraged. “I bet those technomages wouldn’t mind hiring a trained auror, especially a metamorphmagus who might be able to help them copy the magic.”

Remus thought about that for a second, and then amazingly, made up his mind, “It can’t hurt to ask!”

\*

“You’re looking better this morning,” Hermione whispered in Harry’s ear one Sunday in late April.

Harry nodded and whispered back, “When you see Luna, tell her to meet us in the usual classroom at Three.” To any observer, the pair had just been engaging in a little nuzzling in the common room before leaving for breakfast. Since Ron and Romilda were busy exchanging tongue probes, the twins were involved in a five-way tongue-fest with the chaser line, and Ginny and Seamus were somewhat out of sight imitating Ron and his girlfriend, no one paid any attention to Harry and Hermione.

Except for some nervous twitches among the remaining, if quiescent, pro-Voldemort students, the rest of the student population had recovered from the traumas of the autumn and winter. The girls of Hogwarts had even prevailed upon the Headmaster, who had allowed an informal dance (music supplied by the wizarding wireless) the previous Friday. Many of the students were looking forward to the last two Quidditch games, which would be held in five and six weeks respectively – unusually, each of the teams still had a shot at the Cup. The House Cup was also very much up in the air. Ravenclaw was in the lead, but Slytherin, currently in last place, was still trailing by less than 60 points. The fact that the Cups, the dance, and the up-coming exams seemed at the forefront of nearly all the students’ minds was seen as a good sign by the staff that life had returned to normal at the school.

This was helped by the fact that the outside world was somewhat quiet. The political landscape was still up in the air, but most of the worst offenders were either out of office or at least demoted, leaving the rest of the Purebloods who were still running the Wizengamot and the Ministry to jockey for position. There had been no attacks, and if a few people who had been accused of being Death Eaters either in 1981 or in the autumn disappeared, no one outside their immediate families publically expressed any concern.

Snape, however, had reported the Dumbledore and Harry that a dozen Marked Death Eaters had disappeared since Pettigrew's capture and questioning. Pettigrew himself had been shipped out of the country for imprisonment, and few knew that he was safely tucked away in the high security South American prison, located on a small island in Tierra del Fuego. Harry swore that he had nothing to do with their disappearing, but by now, neither Snape nor Dumbledore put any trust in Harry's oaths.

However, Harry was telling the truth. The gizmo Harry had given Snape to place over his Dark Mark allowed the technomages to trace anyone who was Marked if they got close enough to someone with the right scanner – and there were mages operating scanners loitering around Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and even at times in the atrium of the Ministry. When a Death Eater was found isolated enough, he would be kidnaped by 'the Gang' and 'convinced' to sign over part of his fortune and confess his crimes. Those then had a modified gizmo which negated the Dark Mark attached, and they were imprisoned in the North American high security prison off Prince Patrick Island in the Arctic Archipelago in an arrangement with the Druids, bypassing the North American Ministry, and so there was no paper trail. The few who could not be 'convinced' simply disappeared.

Forever.

\*

“What has happened?” Luna asked as soon as the classroom was secured.



“Good news, in any event,” she asserted.

Harry nodded. “Nagini has finally taken enough bait to be tracked. It’s just a matter of time and a little luck before she’s dead.”

“And then?” Hermione asked.

“Most of the technomages who snuck into the country as Muggles have left,” Harry acknowledged. “The ones who remain are part of a trained strike-force. They’re the ones who have been helping ‘the Gang’ track down Death Eaters as well as tracking down safe houses. When the time comes, they’ll attract as many remaining Marked supporters as they can to Voldemort, and then, well. . . .” Harry pulled a small box from his pocket. It had a red button, three lights (red, which was lit, yellow, and green) and a switch.

“And what will that do?” Hermione asked.

“That will launch a number of small missiles, about the size of my arm, armed with magic disputer and explosives. That should kill them all, especially Voldemort.”

“And you have to push the button, in case that’s needed to fulfill the prophecy,” Hermione stated sadly.

Harry shrugged. “Exactly. Have your parents decided where they’re going to settle?”

Hermione nodded. “They sold their practice and the house for a lot more than they expected to. The Belize government made them a really good offer – a new house, a fully-equipped office, and the right to establish a private practice for the afternoons, and three hours of state work each morning. They’ll actually move in early June.”

“Did they send you your passport?” Harry asked. Hermione nodded. “And you?” Harry asked Luna.

“It came yesterday,” Luna acknowledged. The three would travel as Muggles to escape wizarding Britain, although Luna would have to return for her O.W.L. year unless her father decided to accept an offer the technomages had arranged for him as a crypto-zoologist or at least allowed Luna to leave. Mister Lovegood was tempted by the offer, but he did love publishing ‘The Quibbler’.

“Is there anything other than hoping the snake eats the rats in a hurry that we should know about?” Hermione asked.

“Well, the technomages will be tipping the aurors off to the more urban safe houses when they think they would be safe to attack,” Harry said. “When the missiles go in, we don’t want Voldemort somewhere where the collateral destruction could hurt others.”

\*

The first safe house was taken out by the aurors just a few nights later. Five more would be taken out by early June. After the first two had been taken, Voldemort had tried leaving a Death Eater or two to guard the remaining lairs.

With careful coordination, the Death Eaters had been kidnaped and then the aurors tipped off as to the locations. It turned out that the fourth safe house captured, in late June, had more than supplies.

“What is it?” Tonks asked Shacklebolt, the team leader. She wondered why she had been shown this smelly cell with the pile of rags in a corner.

Shacklebolt pointed at the pile. “That’s your cousin.”

Tonks looked a bit more closely, but not wanting to get too close. “If you say so,” she said. She waved her wand and muttered a complex spell, creating a display. “H’mm, I’m surprised he’s alive.”

“My best guess is that they used him for minor hexing practice,” Shacklebolt said.

“So, he just looks like an oozing slug under a pile of rags?” Tonks asked.

“Well, it might be permanent,” Shacklebolt hedged. “Anyway, guard it for now. Once the building is secure, I’ll send in the medics and we’ll take him to the secure infirmary. Guard him there as well until you’re relieved.”

Tonks shrugged and stepped back, so that while she could keep an eye on Draco, she wouldn’t have to smell him.

\*

Hermione looked up from her copy of ‘The Prophet’ two days later. “I wonder if Malfoy is sane?” she muttered. Seeing Harry’s look, she modified, “Well, as sane as he was before last Christmas.”

Harry shrugged. He wasn’t sure what, if anything, he should feel. No one deserved what Draco had apparently gone through, but that didn’t mean he felt any pity or compassion for the ferret, either.

“Does it say if he’s under arrest for killing his cousins?” Ron asked clearly. If nothing else, dating Romilda had cleaned up Ron’s remaining hygiene problems and even his table manners to a large degree. He still ate a lot and ate it fast, but was much neater about it.

“It says he’ll be questioned about that when he’s physically recovered,” Hermione said, watching Harry out of the corner of her eye. He seemed unconcerned, and Hermione hoped there was no reason for him to change his attitude.

\*

“So, what have we gotten out of the Malfoy boy?” Amelia Bones asked.

The healer attached to the aurors looked up from her notes. “Well, we learned a lot using my forensic spells on how to heal torture hexes,” she said. “You-Know-Who seems to be an expert on both.”

“Why would he know how to heal?” a junior auror asked.

“So the next round of torture is equally effective,” the healer answered drily. “As for the rest, all the Death Eaters he saw unmasked that he knew, we already have on our lists. As for the few he didn’t know, I have copied and stored in a separate pensieve. Hopefully we’ll have them identified in a few days.”

Bones nodded, and the healer went on, “As for the execution of the Lestranges, well, that is a bit strange. It seems as if he was rescued by someone in disguise. The description is somewhat similar to that of the so-called Shadow of Hogwarts, but it’s far from a match. What cannot be determined is if Malfoy was freed and he killed the Lestranges totally of his own volition – he certainly wanted to – or if the rescuer in some way helped or encouraged him.”

“But he wasn’t controlled?” Bones asked.

“It’s too fuzzy in his mind to be a hundred percent certain,” the healer hedged.

“Give me the percentages,” Bones said drily.

“To tell the truth, I think the best case is for diminished capacity,” the healer answered. “Malfoy had been severely tortured, and is of an unstable, spoiled, and sadistic personality by nature. My estimate is a seventy-five percent case for diminished capacity and a five percent outside influence.”

“And the other twenty percent?” Shacklebolt asked.

“Oh, then he’s even more of a psychopathic sadistic little bastard than he appears.”

“And if your most likely diagnosis is correct?” Bones asked. Seeing the healer wanted more, she added, “What would the odds be of his doing anything similar to someone who hadn’t actually tortured him?”

The healer thought about that, and tried to be impartial. However, she was less than a Half-blood – her father had been a Squib, her mother a Muggle. She had suffered for that in Ravenclaw, and been bullied by some of the Slytherins. Some of her paternal relatives had been killed by Death Eaters back in the late 1970s. That may have influenced her decisions, although she would never admit that to herself. “I think Malfoy is still egotistical enough to crawl back to his father’s Master if You-Know-Who gave any sign he would be a torturer instead of a victim,” she finally said. “I also think he would be more likely to torture anyone whom he would see as thwarting him. I wouldn’t like to say that he would be safe interacting with Muggles, either.”

“Your recommendation?”

“Well, there’s a Muggle procedure called a lobotomy. . . .”

Three weeks later, a lobotomized and sterilized Draco Malfoy was released to his mother, who always put Draco’s condition down to the tortures he had undergone. The pair left Britain a few days later, never to be heard from again.

\*

“I can’t leave,” Tonks pointed out. “There’s a class-two emergency going on, you know. Aurors can’t even retire.”

“That situation might be resolving itself,” Sirius stated.

Tonks gave the two men the eye. “Which of you are asking me to leave?” she finally asked.

“We both are,” Remus answered.

“We do have very different motives, though,” Sirius pointed out. Remus blushed.

“Really?” Tonks asked, surprised. Then she noticed Remus’ blush. “Remus? Really?”

Remus managed to nod.

“Yippee!” Tonks yelled, leaping at him.

Remus just managed to catch her, and had he not been a werewolf, the pair likely would have fallen and gotten hurt. Instead, Remus caught the currently-violet haired witch and managed to steady them. “That’s my big, strong wolfie!” Tonks crowed.

“I think I’ll leave the two of you alone,” Sirius smirked. “Don’t forget to breathe!” he reminded the pair. With their lips fully engaged, neither could make an oral response, and Tonks’ hands were becoming too busy to make any gestures.

Sirius shut the door, and then sighed as he walked away. “Once I get my pardon, I gotta get me some,” he muttered. “No more poodles.”

\*

It was in late May, a week before the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. exam team showed, that Harry called Hermione and Luna into another meeting after curfew.

“Tonight?” Luna asked.

Harry nodded.

“What will happen?” Hermione asked.

“Nagini has eaten enough that she will be poisoned once a signal is given,” Harry said. “It will take her between just a few seconds to die to a few minutes. While that is happening, a gizmo planted in the safe house she’s at will emit an imitation ‘all call’ signal to the Marked Death Eaters. . . .”

“I would hope you warned Professor Snape,” Hermione broke in.

“Partially,” Harry answered. “I told him to wear the wrist gizmo. If he is, then that will block the recall signal from affecting his Dark Mark. If he isn’t wearing it, well, then I hope he has the brains not to go. If he does. . . .” Harry shrugged.

“And then?”

“Right now, Voldemort is at the safe house. No doubt, the death of the snake will both confuse him and throw him into a rage, especially with all his Death Eaters popping in unexpectedly.” Harry pulled out an ear piece and placed it in his ear. “If the Death Eaters or Voldemort start to leave, I’ll be told and I’ll hit the button.” The girls saw that the light on the trigger was now showing yellow. “But, if they mill about in confusion, we want to wait until there are at least twenty Death Eaters present. The current estimate is that there are at most only forty-one Marked people, at least in the country, and a few high level associates. There could be fewer Marked and more associates.”

“And one of the Marked people still in the country is Snape,” Hermione mused. Then she asked, “Associates?”

“Unmarked people in the Ministry – hopefully all of them have been arrested anyway – and an alpha werewolf, the one who bit Remus.” Harry shrugged again. “There could be others.”

“How many Death Eaters are there in the house now?” Hermione asked.

“Six.” Harry looked at them. “I hope you don’t mind. . . .”

“You shouldn’t go through this alone,” Luna said.

“We’re always with you,” Hermione agreed.

Harry smiled gratefully, and flicked the switch on the small device. The yellow light went out and the green light started blinking. “When the green light goes steady, Nagini is dead,” Harry said. “This also starts the Death Eater recall.”

\*

Pucey ran into the Dark Lord’s chamber, crying out, “Master! Your snake! She’s convulsing!”

That news prevented Voldemort from cursing the young idiot for invading his inner sanctum. Instead, Voldemort hurried from the room, towards the area where his familiar made her den. Several diagnostic spells later, and Voldemort was still confused. The snake was obviously dying from some sort of infusion of magic, but there was nothing he could find to do.

Suddenly, the snake shuddered, and it died. For a fraction of a second, a rather surprised-looking, slightly more human-looking, version of Voldemort was seen, before it dissipated. Stunned, Voldemort realized that he had just seen the destruction of a Horcrux.

Then he screamed in anger and fear – if this Horcrux was gone, what of the others?

It was only then that Voldemort saw there nearly every Marked Death Eater, as well as Fenir Grayback, was in the room. “What are you doing here?” he



snapped.

“We were summoned, my lord,” Dolohov answered, confused.

Tom Riddle had been the brightest wizard to attend Hogwarts in the twentieth century. Despite how stubborn he had become in refusing to accept some facts, he did not like where his thoughts were leading. He would have to check out the locations of the other Horcruxes, but first. . . .

It was, however, too late to warn his Death Eaters. Harry had pushed the button, and thirty-six small missiles were on their way.

## ***Chapter XVI***

A very shaken Acting-Minister Bones appeared at what had been an isolated old manor house in a small Welsh valley, owned by the Flint family. The building had been pulverized. “What can you tell me, Rufus?” she asked.

“It’s going to take a long time to piece everything, and everyone, back together,” the chief auror said. “Basically, just before midnight, a flux set off every magical recorder and tracker from Iceland through Italy and all points in between. All the ones in Britain, Ireland, and Brittany are disabled. That one Muggleborn auror you let in – Smith – made the suggestion that we contact the other Ministries and see if they could get any directions. I have to admit, I didn’t know what good it would do but at least it gave us something to do. He took the directions and, what did he call it? Triangulated them or something. Anyway, they led us here just at dawn.”

“And?”

“All this was done by magic, but damned if any of us have any guesses how.”

Bones looked around, assessed the damage, added up the events, and whispered, “Don’t be a fool. We know how.”

Scrimgeour grimaced, and glanced around as well. “Magic-busters?” he whispered. Amelia nodded. This was an explosive device developed by the technomages, and used (at least legally) only by a few Ministries. The rest of the wizarding world had banned their use. “The North Americans, or the technomages? Or both?”

Amelia shrugged. “I doubt we’ll ever know. I think someone at least got a hold of some of these and some other technomage things and has been using them against the pro-You-Know-Who people around the country . . . and at Hogwarts.”

Scrimgeour made a face at that. "I had wondered, but I have to admit, I don't know enough about them to say you're right. Do you?"

"Not really, no," Bones admitted. "Any bodies?"

"Well, parts," Scrimgeour admitted, glad to get off the subject of technomages. That topic was a can of worms no matter how it was considered. "There could have been anywhere between twenty-five and forty-five as best we can tell. There was also a bloody great snake." Bones shot him a look.

Scrimgeour nodded. "It fits in what Potter told Dumbledore last year and what Dumbledore told us. I think Fudge was wrong, and He is, or was, back."

"Was?" Bones asked eagerly.

Scrimgeour nodded and conducted Bones over to a long table, where bits of bloodied white cloths covered a number of lumps. "We've been collecting heads over here," he said. "Pretty sturdy part of the body, all things considered." He looked at a rather pale auror in his mid-twenties. "How many we got now, Smith?"

"Twenty-one, sir," the auror replied.

"Take a look at this one." Scrimgeour flipped over a piece of bloody cloth. Bones wrinkled her nose and back away. Scrimgeour covered the head and followed.

"That does agree with the description of the remade Dark Lord," Bones said.

"Aye," the chief auror agreed. "Of course, that still begs the question."

Bones' mouth quirked. "Indeed. Is the Dark Lord mostly dead again, or completely dead.."

\*

“You wished to see me, Headmaster?”

“Ah, Harry . . . would you happen to know why Professor Snape is unconscious, and was found with an illegal technomage device wrapped around his forearm?”

“Know? No, sir.”

Dumbledore sighed and placed his head in his hands, the heel of his hands covering his eyes. “Please, Harry. I asked to meet you here in a normally-closed classroom so there would be no witnesses. I will swear not to reveal what I learn if you so wish.”

“Considering you’re more skilled at wandless magic than I am, I don’t know if that would be worth much.”

Dumbledore sat up straight behind the teacher’s desk, his mind ticking away furiously. Finally, he said, “Oh . . . bollocks! I can’t believe I fell for that once, never mind all the times you bloody did that!”

Harry smirked and held out his left hand. “The gizmo, please.”

Dumbledore hesitated, but then handed it over. It disappeared into Harry’s robe, which Dumbledore only now suspected had many concealed pockets.

“How does Professor Snape’s forearm look?” Harry asked.

“A bit raw, as if he had recently had a severe burn there, which has mostly healed.”

Harry nodded. “There is one less mutated snake in the world as of last night, and twenty-seven fine upstanding, more-or-less Pureblood citizens may be reported missing, even if a few might have spent some time in Azkaban.”

“Twenty-seven?” Dumbledore was shocked at the possible carnage. “So many?”

Harry nodded. “If there was anyone else at a certain house in Wales, he won’t be missed since most people never suspected he was still around.”

“Are you sure?”

“There was a body this time, wasn’t there?”

“I haven’t heard anything from outside about this,” Dumbledore had to admit. “When I do, you’re right. If there is a body, that would go a long way to satisfy my worries.”

“Mine, too,” Harry agreed. “However, unless he disappeared in a way which wasn’t apparation, floo, or port-key, the sequence of events should have been what we would have wanted.”

“And the twenty-seven others?” Dumbledore scolded.

“Could anyone really take the Dark Mark unwillingly?” Harry retorted.

Dumbledore shrugged. “We may never know how many took that path and regretted it, how many did not have the opportunities Severus had to go on an alternative path. We know it was possible. Severus did so, and so, apparently, did Regulus Black.”

“True,” Harry agreed. “Still, sometimes your actions catch up with you, something you and I will have to live with. There may also have been others who weren’t there. Let’s hope this time they at least will behave themselves.”

“Come see me here after dinner tonight, and I will let you know what I find out.”

Harry nodded.

\*

Harry returned to the classroom after dinner. The Headmaster was waiting.

“Any good news?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore nodded. “Voldemort’s body was indeed found. We of course cannot be one hundred percent certain – he may have had another Horcrux despite the unlikelihood of it succeeding yet again. Perhaps with just one Horcrux, the body may remain instead of being totally folded into that non-corporeal form?” Seeing Harry’s glare, Dumbledore shrugged. “However, I must admit, while I shall keep an eye out, I am fairly confident he has passed on.”

“Perhaps some of the Voodoo or similar practitioners could be consulted?” Harry suggested.

Dumbledore thought a moment and then nodded. “It should be safe to approach them this time.”

“This time?”

“I was afraid the news might leak out and that would lead to his being resurrected in one of their ceremonies. As,” Dumbledore, admitted, “he was, although not by them.”

“I see.”

“Twenty-three others have now been identified. A few, I must say, I still had at least a little hope for.” Dumbledore saw that Harry looked a bit skeptical, and admitted, “A few, like Fenir Grayback and Voldemort himself, I long ago gave up hope on.” He sighed. “While I would not have wished for so much bloodshed, I have to admit I am please there was no truly innocent

blood shed by you.”

“So, it was all for ‘the greater good’?” Harry asked, somewhat bitterly.

“That’s the best we can hope for, Harry, the best we can hope for. We do the best we can, and hope we don’t make too many mistakes. As you know, from my many errors, we can only hope to approach ‘satisfactory,’ never perfection. Tell me, will you be playing Quidditch next year?”

Harry was surprised by the question. “I don’t know,” he said after a moment’s reflection. “You’re right, of course. I won’t have to train as hard as I have been.”

“As hard?”

“I’m in great condition,” Harry pointed out. “I don’t want to lose it.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Let us hope there will be no more upsets this academic year. If I do not have occasion to speak to you privately before the end of the year, I hope you and your friends did well on the O.W.L.s.”

“Thank you, sir.”

\*

Harry had not held himself back on the O.W.L.s. Only the fact that he had shared much of the theoretical information he had been given with Hermione kept her at the number one theory student at Hogwarts. Harry’s practical charm and defense work awed the examiners, while he and Hermione would be vying for top honors in Transfiguration as the examiners debated their scores. When the exams were over, Hermione had tutored Luna and some of the fourth year Gryffindors for their upcoming end-of-year exams, while Harry, to Ron’s astonishment, kept studying.

“Hermione must have infected him with some study disease,” Ron muttered

to Dean and Seamus.

“Maybe she just worked out a really good reward system,” Seamus retorted, making Dean laugh and Ron blush a bit.

In truth, Harry still had a lot of catching up to do in Muggle mathematics and basic science. He saw no reason to tell anyone that, as Hermione and Luna already knew.

When the academic year ended, Harry took the time to say goodbye to McGonagall, Flitwick, Hagrid, and Snape. Only Snape realized what this meant. Since they were in Snape’s private lab where they could not be eavesdropped on, he asked, “Shall you ever be back?”

Harry smiled. “Someday, absolutely. Hogwarts made me promise.” Harry again made the hand gesture and said, “Be seeing you.” He only had one more stop to make that evening. He was already packed, and Dobby had moved almost all of his gizmos and other questionable possessions not only out of Hogwarts but out of the country.

Almost.

Harry made his way into the deep dungeons, where no person, only a few ghosts, had been in many years, in some sections, centuries. Finally, he reached a small room, lit by a single candle, which burned with a dark blue, almost purplish flame.

“You can’t keep me chained forever, Potter,” the ghost of Pansy Parkinson sneered at him. She was bound to the cell wall by Hogwarts itself.

“Well, I probably can’t keep you chained here forever,” Harry answered.

He pulled out the Elder Wand and the Ring, and then wrapped the cloak around his shoulders. “Here are your choices. I can banish you to the other side, whatever that might be.” He then pulled out a small metal box, and



shoved it with his foot under Pansy. “Or, I can imprison you in that for the rest of my life.”

“Meaning?”

“When I die, no matter if that’s tomorrow or a hundred years from now, you’ll be set free and be a normal ghost.”

“I’ll tell them all what you did!”

Harry nodded. “If you wish. The world already knows what you did.”

Pansy opened her mouth, but then hesitated. “What will it be like?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted. “This was invented by a pair of Squibs who helped create an American company calling themselves ‘ghost-busters’. They aren’t sure if you’re in stasis – sort of a dreamless sleep – or if you’re conscious. To tell the truth, I don’t think they much care.”

Pansy looked indecisive.

“If you fear your time alone, daughter,” the Fat Friar said, appearing, “I shall go with you.”

“Why?” Harry asked before Pansy could.

“In life, I gave comfort to the ill and troubled, and I have done the same in my centuries here,” the Friar said. He looked at Pansy. “You have sinned greatly, my daughter, and are filled with anger. You must release both if you are to move on.”

“Why don’t you move on?” Pansy snarled.

“I enjoyed life too much,” the Friar confessed. “I am still too attached to this small segment of reality. Still, if you wish, we might have a chance to learn

together. Will you take it, my child?"

Pansy sneered, "You're a fat old perv, you are." She spat at Harry. "Put me in your bloody box if you dare, Potty!"

"You might want to step outside," Harry told the Friar.

Sadly, the Friar did so. Less than two minutes later, Harry came out. "That was a good thing you offered to do," Harry said.

The Friar nodded, and then looked at Harry. "And you, my son? Have you considered the value of confession and reconciliation?"

Harry hesitated, but then said, "No, I haven't. Why don't we talk about it?"

The Friar nodded, hoping he could at least help one troubled soul that night.

\*

"You look much better this morning," Hermione told Harry as they came into the great hall for breakfast.

"I feel much better," Harry admitted. He looked around the buzzing great hall. "This is a beautiful place, isn't it?"

"It is," Hermione agreed.

"Close your eyes and feel," Luna suggested. "I can feel the magic . . . the magic of Hogwarts, the students and staff and ghosts." She closed her eyes, and then smiled. "The green houses are bursting with the magic of life. The forest is dark and brooding, but pulsing with power. There is the cycle of life and death, of growth and renewal, all gently spiced by magic to be more intoxicating than any place merely created by sentience or form through the accidents of nature. Hogwarts is the combination of all magics, of all life. We shall forever form a tiny part of her, and she shall always have a share in us."

Hermione thought about that, and close her eyes. Then she smiled and said, “I like that.”

The three walked over to the Ravenclaw table, so that Luna could have her breakfast.

\*

Sirius looked at Remus, who was scowling. “What’s wrong?” Remus merely nodded up the platform. “What?” Sirius asked, confused. “I see Harry and his friends.”

“Do you see the twins?” Remus asked.

“Talking to that guy in the blue Muggle suit? So?”

“So that’s one of Dinsdale’s people.”

Sirius shrugged. “They’ll need access to difficult to get ingredients and equipment.”

“‘Difficult to get’? That’s the new term for ‘illegal’?”

“Sleeping with an auror has made you awfully stuffy these days, Moonie,” Sirius teased.

“Stuff yourself,” Remus muttered.

“I guess I shouldn’t tell you what Ginny Weasley and two of her friends will be doing next year.”

Remus let out an exasperated, “Merlin only knows. What?”

“They’ll be selling some tiny little wireless sets that pick up wizarding

wireless only. Technically legal to own, but not to import.”

Remus sighed. They saw Harry say goodbye to his friends. The Weasleys went off the platform, while Luna stood in line to take the floo home. Hermione came with Harry; she would be leaving for her parents from Grimmauld Place. They would leave for Belize in under a week, and then Hermione would leave from there at the end of June. Luna would go with her father on one last trip as well.

“Ready to go home, Harry?” Sirius asked.

“Sounds good.”

\*

One of the first things Harry did at Grimmauld Place was remove the make-up from his scar. It had been about eleven months since the Horcrux on the scar had been broken. The scar still showed, although it was fairly faint at this point. He had thought about having a minor medical procedure, which should eliminate the scar, but decided not to bother. The scar would fade, and he really didn't care much about it, either way.

When he was done, Harry unpacked his possessions, deciding which would stay at Grimmauld Place and which would come with him. He put his old Quidditch jerseys, Weasley jumpers, and his first school uniform into one pile, which Dobby would put away for him. His other school uniforms and his barely-used sets of dress robes into another pile, which would be donated. Harry hoped some poor students would get some good out of them.

Harry next went through the Muggle clothes. Everything he had been given by the Dursleys had long ago been discarded, but he had still managed to outgrow most of the clothes he had started the school year off with. Harry looked at the remaining pile, and decided that he had more than enough clothes to last him until he could go shopping in ten days or so.

With a sense of sad completion, Harry shut the clothes to be given away into a cardboard box.

\*

Monday, 1 July, 1996

The bus stopped. “Welcome to Eucla,” said the driver in a strong Australian accent. “We’re stopping here for ninety minutes. If you’re looking for a bit to eat, the restaurant is on your left. If you want a stretch before the long stretch on to Kalgoorlie, you can see the Bite and the Southern Ocean over on the right.” With that, the driver left the bus to relieve himself and have a cup of strong tea.

The bus quickly emptied, with three teens being the last three off the bus. “G’day!” they heard behind them.

Behind them were two men, both in khaki shorts and shirt and wearing a bush hat, which had corks hanging on strings from the brim. Their noses were covered with a thick layer of white sun screen. The cute short-haired brunette rolled her eyes at the overly-stereotyped people, especially as it was only 20 C, if very bright. The long-haired blonde looked especially interested in the hats.

“My name’s Bruce,” one said, “and this is my friend, Bruce. And you are?”

“I’m New Bruce,” the third teen answered, holding out his hand. “This is my girlfriend Sheila and this is our partner Sheila.”

The two Bruces smiled widely and shook hands. “We like your style, New Bruce. Not many, especially Pommy Bastards, have that good a sense of reality.”

“Here,” second Bruce said. “You need a little sun screen on a sunny day like this, even in winter. Bruce here will get your bags and suggest to the driver

and passengers that you actually got off at Nullabor. Now, just come 'round to the back of the charabanc.”

The three teens followed Bruce as Bruce went to do some minor memory charms, and in a moment, the quartet was gone.

\*

The tall, thin man behind the desk stood as the trio of students and their two escorts entered his bright office. The building they were in was carved out of a cliff overlooking the Southern Ocean, so anyone observing from any distance would think that stretch of the coast was uninhabited. “Welcome to the Southern Academy of Magics and Technomage Studies,” the man said. “I’m the principle, John Cross. These two, normally serious, instructors are Bruce Boxer and Bruce Feather.”

“G’day!” the two Bruces chorused.

“Stop that!” Cross ordered. “Believe it or not, these two really are knowledgeable in their fields – Bruce here,” he nodded at Boxer, “teaches mundane and magical maths, while Bruce there teaches charms and enchanting, and is also in charge of. . . .” Cross grimaced. “Now they have me doing their routine!”

The two Bruces smiled.

Cross invited them all to sit. “I have your Hogwarts paperwork, and your O.W.L. scores, Harry and Hermione.” He looked up at them and smiled. “You’ll find we’re all pretty informal here. The youngest we take students would normally be fifteen, although we’re making an allowance for Luna here, and have ten levels, remedial through level nine. Passing the level eight exams confer a mastery certificate, although of course most of the magical world prefers certification through apprenticeships instead. We have two terms of just over five full months each – early January through mid-June, and then early July through mid-December. So, for the next week, you three

will be tested to see if we need to adjust your schedules, and if you'll need any remedial work we missed. As you should know, we have much stronger requirements than most magical schools – mandatory classes in Charms, Potions, Maths and Arithmancy (or as we usually just say, Maths), and Technomagic as long as you stay, or through the seventh level. We also require electrical engineering – what we call Gadgetry – through the fifth level. We also have minimum skills at, and optional classes in, Transfiguration, Defense, History, Herbology/Biology, Languages, Divination, and the Mundane Sciences, although after this year Computing will be mandatory. There are some other, advanced classes available once you get your skills past the fifth level, such as warding and curse breaking. You need to take at least seven classes, and no more than nine.” The three nodded, all nervous.

“Hermione, you will be in the third year of Charms, Potions, and Maths, and remedial Technomagic, and second year Gadgetry. You passed your basic sciences, and would be in the first year of any of those you would care to take. You would be in the third year – nearly the fourth! – in Transfiguration, the second year of Defense and Languages, and the first year of History and Biology.” Hermione nodded.

“Harry, you would be placed in the Fourth year of Defense, the third year of Charms, second year Transfiguration, Potions, and Gadgetry, and first year Technomagic. We want to retest you especially on the Maths, to see if you can be placed in the first year or not. As for the other classes, you need some remedial science work, and could be placed in first year Biology.” Harry nodded.

“Luna, you would be placed in second year anything, except for maths and Gadgetry, which would be first year, and some remedial science and Technomagic work.” Luna now nodded in turn. “Any questions?”

“I was wondering if there were any magical courses on languages available,” Harry asked.

“Of course.” Cross smiled. “We also field three Quidditch teams in the summer and autumn term, and an all-star team plays Alice Springs in September, and the winner goes on to play the winning New Zealand all-star team in early November.”

Harry grinned, while Hermione rolled her eyes. Luna beamed at the pair of them.



## *Chapter XVII*

The staff were gathered at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, waiting for the students to fully gather for the welcoming feast. As usual, Severus Snape stood off to the side, watching his colleagues with a practiced sneer. This year, it was not directed at the new DADA teacher, as that was himself. Dumbledore had finally gotten Horace Slughorn to return, although even Dumbledore could not explain why this still seemed important to him.

Snape's expression broadened as McGonagall bustled into the room, and Snape edged his way in Dumbledore's direction so that he could overhear.

"Is there a problem, Minerva?"

"Problem, Albus? I would say so. We are missing three students, two of them prefects."

"Oh, I am certain they are loitering about somewhere," Dumbledore replied dismissively. "Who, by the way?"

"Mister Potter, Miss Granger, and Miss Lovegood," McGonagall retorted. "They were not seen on the train."

Dumbledore blinked and seemed to waver a bit.

"Don't worry, Minerva', you said. 'I am certain they will be here', you said when the owls couldn't find them this past summer," McGonagall scolded. "We shall have to choose new prefects. I am certain Mister Thomas or Mister Longbottom could be the boys' prefect, but to have to choose between Miss Patil and Miss Brown. . . ."

Dumbledore's panicked eye spied Snape. "Severus, do you know anything about this?"

“Not as such, Headmaster,” Snape replied drily. “I had wondered when it seemed as if Potter and even Granger were spending an inordinate amount of time last spring saying their goodbyes, but that was all.” Snape smiled evilly and twisted the knife. “It would seem as if Mister Potter has finally fully escaped you. Tell me, did you have any contact with Black or his werewolf all summer? I did mention that Lupin told me he would no longer need the Wolfsbane Potion after June. You did see in ‘The Prophet’ that their friend, Miss Tonks, left the auror corps on the first of July? I would check the Alice Springs Magic School and the California Institute of Magics to see if they have a few transfer students.” Seeing Dumbledore’s dazed look, Snape added as he stepped closer, “Or at least see who requested their transcripts and scores from the Department of Education.”

Dumbledore nodded dumbly.

“Why does it matter, anyway?” Snape asked in a low voice that only Dumbledore and McGonagall could hear. “We know that Potter ended the threat of the Dark Lord. He is no more. As Potter mentioned to me, the Dark Lord has shaken off the mortal coil and joined the Choir Invisible. You don’t need your tool, as he did his job.”

Dumbledore looked stricken. “I . . . I had hoped to make up for what I was forced to allow happen to him. . . .”

“It was too late for that long ago, Albus,” McGonagall said, firmly, but kindly. “Harry has the right to find his own way, especially now.”

“You go get the students ready,” Snape told McGonagall. “I’ll see to the Headmaster.” She nodded and left.

The students were hard to quiet down, as they noticed Harry was missing. Snape’s eyes narrowed as he saw the anticipatory glee in a few students’ eyes which promised possible retribution to Potter’s followers.

Even after the Sorting and the Feast itself, the students were restless.

Dumbledore had finally forced himself to address the students, when suddenly the candles dimmed. A deep, even forbidding voice, intoned, “WHO KNOWS WHAT EVIL LURKS IN THE HEARTS OF MAN?” The lights went out for a moment as the voice proclaimed, “THE SHADOW WILL KNOW!” As a frightening laugh followed, the candles relit, revealing the Judas Tree had returned, with a noose swaying from its branch.

Snape was not surprised at how docile the suspect students were that year.

\*

The next evening, Snape and McGonagall were called to the front gates, where they found Aberforth Dumbledore along with a very drunk Headmaster. “Could you please take him?” Aberforth requested. “He drank all my tequila, threw up on two customers, and turned two of my tables green.”

The pair took their inebriated leader back to his quarters without comment.

Dumbledore said nothing about the incident.

That provoked both staff members’ curiosity. It was McGonagall who broke first, however, demanding several weeks later if there was any news about the students’ whereabouts.

“Too much, in fact,” Dumbledore said sourly. “Their records were requested from three schools in North America as well as Education Departments or Ministries in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, India, and South Africa.”

“Well,” McGonagall retorted, “I can only hope they are learning.”

\*

Five years went past, and the students fell into what even McGonagall felt were acceptable patterns of behavior. To everyone’s surprise, Snape

continued on as DADA instructor the entire time. While he enjoyed teaching Defense more than he had Potions, he found that not having to deal with the student potion makers had greatly increased the joys of potions research. He had informed his colleagues that first Christmas that he was heavily into several new fields of research.

Dumbledore had thought he must be getting in contact with Harry, and was disappointed that some spying that next summer had shown that Snape had instead retreated to his parents' house at Spinner's End to work, only going out to access Gringotts and to pick up packages of imported materials. Snape said almost nothing about his work, not even to the curious Slughorn.

Then, on the afternoon of September 1, 2001, Snape showed up for the staff meeting actually smiling. It was then that he announced the publication of new work. He first presented personal copies of one monograph to Dumbledore and Slughorn, and a copy for the library as well.

It was Flitwick who started laughing when he saw the cover page, which only made Dumbledore glower all the more.

“101 USES FOR LARK'S VOMIT”

“With Notes and Annotations on the Effects of Specialized Feeding and Harvesting”

by Luna Lovegood-Granger, Severus Snape, Hermione Granger-Potter, and Harry Lovegood Potter

“I was not aware there are magical larks,” Slughorn said.

“There aren't,” Snape agreed. “I am not certain why Miss Lovegood was feeding a lark a flobber worm, but it did not agree with the bird. The process did some interesting things to the magical properties. We have been working on it since.”

“You've been with Harry?” Dumbledore demanded, unable to contain himself.

Snape shook his head. “Actually, no, I had seen any of them since the day they left Hogwarts back in 1996. The first I heard from them was the letter from Mrs. Lovegood-Granger. . . .”

“They’re serious about that?” Sprout exclaimed.

Snape nodded. “I am not certain where they live, but wherever it is, polygamy is apparently legal, although they define their relationship as three equal partners.” Actually, Snape knew which Polynesian island chain recognized their marriage, he was just uncertain which island they maintained an official residence in. He knew the trio lived at various locations, as the feeling and needs moved them. “In any event, I misspoke, as they were not yet Bonded. I had heard from Lupin a few weeks before, and agreed to monitor some research there. Mrs. Lovegood-Granger merely asked for the same arrangement.”

Snape produced another monograph, although this time he only had one spare copy, this time for the library.

“MANAGING YOUR WERE”

“Eliminating the major negative effects of the were-curses (wolf, bear, and felines) through the combination of potions, conditioning, and technomagic” by Elias D. Doright, Rachel J. Childs, Severus Snape, Gary V. Parker, & Hermione Granger-Potter (Potions Team);

Martha G. Villagomez, Harriet V. Sayers, Mary Mott-Stanley, N. Tonks-Lupin, Luna Lovegood-Granger, Mark N. Spenser, Sirius Black, & Leonore L. Bernstein (Conditioning Team);

Violet C. Brown, Bilius G. Packer, Pearl L. Apple, Harry Lovegood Potter (Technomages);

Lon L. Talbot, Remus J. Lupin, Michael A. Howard, Michael L. Rivers, Jane R. Kelly (Weres)

“Oh, dear,” McGonagall said. “This will not be popular.”

“Ah, but look closely at the technomage team,” Snape pointed out.

“I do not know if Harry’s old reputation will allow any sort of allowances for technomagic,” Flitwick said sadly.

“You may be right,” Snape smirked. “Perhaps this will help – or perhaps it will hurt. It should be interesting to see.” Snape materialized a large box, from which he passed out copies of a third, and final, book to each of the staff.

“THE RISE AND FALL OF VOLDEMORT”

“How I destroyed Tom M. Riddle, a.k.a. Lord Voldemort, with the help of technomagic and a number of ‘outcasts’, in spite of the limitations of Wizarding Britain and the manipulations of Albus Dumbledore”

by Harry James Lovegood Potter

with Hermione Jean Granger-Potter, Luna Selene Lovegood-Granger, Remus J. Lupin, & Sirius Black

“Oh dear,” McGonagall said.

“How much. . . .” Dumbledore tried to ask.

“Pretty much everything,” Snape answered. “Horcruxes, illegal placement, abusive Muggles, you name it. Potter has pretty much burned his boats here, unless the Ministry gives him a pardon, which he admits and points out in the introduction. I must admit, I did see Potter once since he left after his fifth year – last week in fact, when he dropped the cartons of books off. All three go on sale today. In fact, Mister Lovegood was selling copies of Potter’s book on the Express Platform this morning. I believe he sold all hundred copies.”

“I think . . . I think . . .” Dumbledore could not catch his breath.

Pomfrey was out of her chair and casting diagnostics on the Headmaster. “I think you need to lie down and have a calming draught,” she stated. She

levitated the Headmaster from his chair. “Now, just relax.” With that, she took Dumbledore from the room.

“You enjoyed that entirely too much,” McGonagall scolded.

“You’re right,” Snape agreed. “I enjoyed that . . . just as much as you all did.”

No one disagreed.

\*

The scandal was nearly as bad as the revelations which had rocked political Britain back in 1996. Harry had in fact not identified himself directly as ‘the Shadow’ nor had he mentioned the rescue of Draco Malfoy in December, 1995. Nearly everything else was there, however.

Millicent Goyle and Theodore Nott gave interviews admitting to their crimes in 1995, and pointing out that they, and Harry and his friends, were all legally underage at the time. Granted, Harry’s Head of House status put him in a grey legal area, but while they were the younger generation, many of Harry’s associates were part of influential families. They all demanded full pardons for Harry and his associates.

Fred and George’s businesses had prospered, and they had branched out into several other areas, including a business with Justin Finch-Fletchley importing legal Muggle items, creating what was essentially the first true wizarding department store. They pushed for the ban on most technomage gizmos, especially televisions, radios, etc. to be lifted. It would take five more years and numerous regulations to insure that such items did not spill over into Muggle hands. When it turned out that many such gizmos could be built with fail-safe devices which made them useless outside of contact with magic users, all but the most hard-core traditionalists started to waver, especially when Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas introduced a magical DVD player and a series of pirated Muggle porn.

Albus Dumbledore however, did not really survive the scandals. He suffered a mild stroke shortly after reading the new monographs, and retired as headmaster that Christmas. His mind slowly retreated from the world, and by the following summer was under the care of various minders. Dumbledore spent the next two years mostly having conversations with two people named Gellert and Ariana. Aberforth disclaimed all knowledge of who they might be.

The caretakers were under oaths as part of their jobs not to reveal anything they learned from their patients. However, one reporter did manage to sneak into the small house near Hogsmeade where the increasingly senile Albus Dumbledore was kept. Fortunately for what remained of his tattered reputation, but unfortunately for the beetle animagus reporter, one of the care givers, Hannah Abbott, loved plants and was a good friend of Ginny and Neville Longbottom. The beetle was caught by a magical carnivorous plant, and Rita Skeeter was never heard from again.

No one seemed to miss her.

In 2011, Harry and his friends and partners were given blanket pardons as part of a very controversial deal. Hermione Granger-Potter became the Muggle Studies Professor at Hogwarts on a ten year contract. Harry taught advanced classes in enchanting and basic technomagic, and was also the flying instructor. Luna Lovegood-Granger was to have a position as well, but was allowed out in order to help care for the trio's six children.

The Trio discovered that, while they loved Hogwarts, they really felt even more out of place in Britain, even Muggle Britain, than they had anticipated. Except for those few who knew the Trio to some degree, most were especially surprised that none of their children would attend Hogwarts. All of their children instead attended the Alice Springs School at least through their fifth year. Two then transferred over to the Southern Academy of Magics and Technomage Studies.



As for the Hogwarts students, the students, staff, and parents were shocked to discover that only one or two of the Muggle-raised students had the backgrounds to take the very basic Introduction to Technomagic Studies each year. Still, there were a few other Sixth and Seventh year students with enough talent in both Charms and Transfiguration and knowledge of Runes and Arithmancy to do well in Enchantments.

Whereas Harry had a difficult time getting his classes to understand the material, Hermione had fewer problems. Besides the (essentially nonsense) material needed to pass the O.W.L., she taught what she called 'Practical Survival Skills for the Muggle World', which included several popular field trips to high streets, Muggle tourist sites, an airplane ride from Glasgow to London, and the London Underground. The small number of students taking Muggle Studies doubled, and continued to increase once the Trio had left Hogwarts, since Hermione's replacement kept the basic curriculum.

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In later histories of the period, 1991-2010 was seen as when British wizarding society changed its direction. It had been, in most ways, a very stagnant society after the Grindelwald Wars. The old families not only had a stranglehold on its social system, which was not unusual for many societies, but also on the political and economic systems as well, and those families were dead set against change. In many ways, the First Rise of Voldemort was seen later as having been between those factions of the older families which had political power and those, like the Malfoys and Lestranges, which wanted to follow Voldemort into control and domination.

Compared to most wizarding cultures, Britain, and Europe in general, would always lean towards the conservative side. Their populations would remain fairly steady, with more people leaving the societies for more liberal and open ones than migrated in. Still, the deaths of the many pro-violence Purebloods, and the political humiliation of many of the establishment ones in the 1990s, did lead to a Ministry where merit at least had equal standing with blood purity, which was an improvement. Corruption and nepotism had

also dropped, as competitive exams led to better hiring policies, while, by 2010, nearly all Pureblood legal rights had been extended to the rest of the wizarding population.

Sirius Black had returned to Britain in 2003 and had led the reform movement from within the Wizengamot. No one ever connected his various places of residence with an increase of the crup population.

Luna, once the children were all off to school, became the most famous magical Zoologist of the twenty-first century. As she had also gotten degrees in the Muggle world, some of her theories were incorporated into what were considered 'fringe' texts, but which became very mainstream once humans made contact with alien worlds. By the late twenty-third century, she was considered one of the mothers of Xeno-zoology.

Hermione became a very prominent writer on sentient rights within the wizarding world, as well as a major theorist whose ideas bridged the magical, technomage, and Muggle worlds. Her theories led to major discoveries in the late twenty-second century, which would later lead to the unification of the wizarding and Muggle worlds, with the technomages providing the links. She was well-honored as a founder of the unification, as well as Luna.

Harry, outside of those who studied British or European wizarding history, would be the least famous of the Trio, best known for being the man who fathered Hermione and Luna's children. Unlike Hermione and Luna, whose theories dominated their fields, Harry was only a middling technomage, brilliant at performing magics rather than creating new ideas. He was acknowledged for his fight against Voldemort and as a leader in the suppression of three other would-be Dark movements, but that was all.

One of his direct heirs would always have an invisibility cloak. Another, usually whichever one possessed 'the Sight' to the highest degree, would wear a very old ring. However, when Harry died, undefeated in battle, his heirs found that the wand he most commonly used, made from elder, was now no more than a worn stick. Whatever power it had held or channeled no

longer functioned.

Pansy's ghost was indeed released a few days after Harry's death. She was surprised to learn how much Harry had revealed. Her statement that Harry had been the Shadow, and had stunned and hanged her, did nothing to injure his reputation in the long term. Historians who interviewed Pansy often came away rather wishing they could strangle the bitter and bigoted ghost all over. Pansy was kept on as an exhibit by the technomages for hundreds of years, so that people could learn exactly how bigoted and hateful the twentieth century had been. When she finally faded away, no one really missed her.