

Harry Potter and the Psychic Serpent

Chapter One: Manual Labour

Harry had planned to sleep late on his first day of summer vacation. He felt as if he needed to sleep for a year after what he'd been through during his fourth year of wizarding training. Harry Potter was possibly the most famous wizard in the world, apart from the dark wizard who had killed his parents. And now he was probably even more famous, having won the Triwizard Tournament just a couple of weeks ago. But he was only famous in the wizarding world; in the non-magic Muggle world, he was just an annoyance to his aunt and uncle and cousin. He just wanted to sleep late and try to forget everything that had happened to him during the previous ten months.

But instead, he awoke at seven-thirty in the morning to the shouts of workmen, the squeal and grinding of a backhoe, and the shrill voice of his aunt shouting instructions to the workers who had been hired to relandscape the garden at Four Privet Drive, where Harry felt about as welcome as an arsonist in a paper factory. It was impossible to continue to sleep with all the racket, so Harry resigned himself to it and threw back the sheet, sitting on the edge of the bed and fumbling for his bedside table for his glasses. The room came into focus now, littered with wizarding paraphernalia that was spilling out of his trunk, which he had not properly unpacked yet. He rose to walk to the wardrobe and stood looking at his reflection in the mirror on the inside of the door.

He had grown several inches during the previous year, and the bottoms of his pajama pants hovered around his shins. He'd been so busy just trying to stay alive through the Triwizard Tournament that he hadn't even noticed that he now had a full-blown Adam's apple. He tried to sing a little of his school's song, to see how his voice sounded. Traditionally, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, everyone sang the school song to a different tune. He was partial to Lockhart's Lomond and started singing, "I'll take the high road and you'll take the low road..." but it came out sounding rather like a cross between a garden gnome being sat on by a dragon and a rabid cat being kicked about. He cleared his throat and tried again, managing this time to produce a recognizable tune in a reedy tenor, causing him to be optimistic, but halfway through the first verse, his voice cracked and made a noise that was so startling that his snowy owl Hedwig squawked from her cage and flapped her wings agitatedly.

There was a sudden silence in the garden, and one of the workmen yelled, "What in the hell was that?" Harry had hoped that the worker was referring to Hedwig, and not to him, but a second worker now replied, "Cor, Dick, I think it was someone singing." Harry grimaced into the mirror; he decided to drop the voice experiments for now and lifted up his hand, examining the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, a mark he'd received as a baby on the night Voldemort killed his parents, and attempted to kill him. He let the hair flop back onto his face. He needed a haircut. When he was younger, he'd always fought against haircuts (his aunt and uncle were endlessly frustrated by his hair), but now he was thinking he needed something that made him look a bit less like a scared little kid (as though it were standing on end because he was afraid) and a lot more like a wizard that a powerful Dark Lord had to take seriously.

He also noticed that there was a dark, downy haze starting to appear on his chin and upper lip and along his jawline. Facial hair! At last! Maybe he would be shaving before the summer was over; he wondered whether there were special charmed razors that wouldn't ever cut a person's skin while shaving. There had to be something; he'd never noticed a single wizard walking about with little tufts of toilet paper stuck to the shaving cuts on his face, like his Uncle Vernon did every morning. Sometimes they fell off his face at the breakfast table and dropped into his coffee or his food; Harry never said anything when this happened, trying not to grin broadly as he watched his detested uncle eat a spoonful of eggs prominently adorned with a wad of bloody paper, which his uncle did not notice when his face was buried in the morning news. At times like this he would invariably say to Harry's Aunt Petunia, "Petunia! What have you put in the eggs this morning! They're smashing!" And his aunt would look self-satisfied and smug, launching into a discourse about a famous chef she'd seen demonstrating recipes on a chat show. Harry would have to drop his fork and put his head under the table to avoid them seeing the gleeful look on his face, and once he almost choked on his orange juice, trying not to laugh.

The facial hair was nowhere near ready to be shaven, though. It looked more like he hadn't properly washed his face and a dirty film were still on his skin. He looked at his chest in the mirror; he never slept with a shirt on anymore; somehow he had developed a phobia about being strangled in his sleep, and the collars of even V-necked shirts made him feel like the air was being blocked. His chest was pale and flat and hairless, he was still so thin that his ribs showed beneath the skin. He tried flexing his muscles; he turned his head to look in the mirror. Ludicrous. In a month he would be fifteen and he had no muscles to flex.

Then he lowered his arms and examined the other Voldemort-related scar he bore; the cut on the inside of his right elbow where Wormtail had taken his blood to add to the cauldron where he was brewing the potion that would resurrect Lord Voldemort. His blood--the blood of a foe-- was the final ingredient needed for Voldemort to get his body back, after being

from his father's grave and flesh from a servant (Wormtail had cut off his own hand and had been rewarded with a new silver one.)

Harry shook himself to clear his head, to rid himself of the horrific image of Wormtail writhing on the ground, holding his bloody stump of an arm...

The workmen had started up again, yelling to each other, and, like a descant above their chorus, his aunt harangued them about the way they were doing the work. His uncle's drill plant was doing very well, and he had told Aunt Petunia that she could have the garden redesigned so that she could impress her garden club. She had hired a garden designer, whose plan the workmen were following, but now she was spending all of her time changing her mind about every detail at the last possible moment and driving everyone crazy with the resulting chaos.

Harry put on some shorts and a T-shirt, pulled on his socks and sneakers and went out the door after slipping Hedwig an owl treat. In the kitchen, his uncle was reading the morning paper and preparing to bite down on a bit of bacon that had the requisite bloody paper sitting on the part he was about to put in his mouth. Harry stifled a laugh and thrust his head into the refrigerator to look for food, so no one could see his expression.

Harry sat down at the table with some orange juice and a banana he picked out of a bowl on the counter, then took a piece of buttered toast from a plate on the table. His cousin Dudley was sitting at the table already, almost done his breakfast of yogurt and fruit and a rice cake. He'd been upgraded from grapefruit because he'd actually been pretty good at sticking to his diet at school the previous year. To Harry's eyes he did look noticeably smaller, even a little muscular, rather than like a mound of quivering blanc mange. Since Harry had been home, Dudley had even been reasonably civil to him, helping him carry his trunk up to his room from the car, and bragging about all the weight he'd lost. He didn't ask Harry anything about how his school year was; just prattled on about this girl he wanted to ask out in September, gushing on about Julia this and Julia that. Harry listened patiently; he wasn't allowed to use magic outside of school, and that's the only thing that probably would have made Dudley shut up. Besides, he would rather listen to Dudley blither about his girlfriend than be on the receiving end of a pounding from him, as happened all too often during his early childhood.

His aunt finally sat down to eat her breakfast, having left the workers in the garden alone for the moment. But the peace at the breakfast table was suddenly shattered by a large barn owl that came flapping in the open window. It landed on Vernon Dursley's chair and prodded him to take two parchments from her right leg, then turned an eye on the rest of his bacon. Annoyed, his uncle got up and backed away from the large bird of prey, yelling, "Harry! What does it want"?

Sighing at his uncle's magic-phobia, Harry went to the owl and removed the parchments, surreptitiously slipping the owl some bacon as he did so. He looked at the parchments; one was addressed to his aunt and uncle and seemed to be written in his godfather's handwriting, and the other was addressed to him, on official Hogwarts stationery. The owl hooted. Having successfully performed her duty and receiving no instructions to wait for a reply to be drafted, she flew back out the open window. Harry heard the workers outside yell in surprise, as he realized they'd done when she'd arrived, but he was too preoccupied to notice before.

He handed his uncle the letter from his godfather, Sirius Black, who was a fugitive from justice in the wizarding world because his former friend, Peter Pettigrew (the silver-handed servant of Voldemort known as Wormtail) had successfully framed him for his own murder and the murders of a street full of Muggles (non-magical people). Ever since he had told his aunt and uncle that he had a fugitive wizard for a godfather, the Dursleys had treated him slightly better.

His uncle opened the letter and read with an expression that started out as annoyance (time taken out of his day to deal with what he called "Harry nonsense") moved on to perplexed and then surprised and even frightened. Harry had not opened his Hogwarts letter yet; he wondered what Sirius could have written that would make his uncle respond this way. Uncle Vernon thrust the letter at Harry, seeming to be cautious about touching him, as though he were afraid that Harry could do magic on contact. Harry read the letter.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Dursley,

I am writing to you because I am concerned about Harry. I wish I could have him with me and look after him myself, but you know, my legal status in the wizarding community makes that impossible; even if I continue to successfully elude the authorities, traveling with the most famous young wizard in the world will make me appear somewhat conspicuous, and that will do nothing to enhance Harry's safety. The headmaster of Hogwarts feels that he is safest with you for the summer, but I want to caution you not to make life unduly stressful for him, as he has experienced an inordinate amount of stress this year.

Harry may not have told you about this, because he is very modest, but he is the winner of the Triwizard Tournament that was held at his school this year for the first time in over a century, and he is the youngest winner ever. Another reason he may not tell you this is not modesty, however, but because he does not wish to remember what occurred at the end of the Tournament, when he was transported to a place where the same dark wizard who betrayed his parents was preparing to resurrect the Dark Lord who actually killed them.

Harry experienced horrible things that day, including seeing a fellow schoolmate killed before his very eyes. He dueled with Lord Voldemort himself and escaped with his life, returning with his schoolmate's body so that his parents could mourn over him and give him a proper burial. He did more than many adult wizards could have--or would have--done, and this has made me very proud of him, for his moral strength and integrity as much as his magical ability. All signs point to Harry being one day being a very powerful and formidable wizard. Please treat him well--he won't be in school forever.

I will come to accompany Harry to do his school shopping near the end of the summer, and to deliver him to the school train on September the first.

Sirius Black

His uncle looked at him through narrowed eyes. "And just how exactly would everyone recognize you as being the famous Harry Potter?" Harry drew his lips into a straight line and lifted his hair from his forehead to reveal his scar. Vernon drew his own lips into a straight line and muttered, "Oh, right." He sat down in his chair again, now that the owl was no longer sitting on it, and sneered at Harry, "So! You're the hotshot tournament winner! You must think you're God's gift to magic!" Harry was surprised; normally, his uncle avoided the M word. But then, he shouldn't be surprised that his uncle was trying to needle him. It was as though he hadn't read the parts of the letter about modesty and trying to forget about Cedric...

Cedric Diggory had been the other Hogwarts champion, The Real Hogwarts Champion, proclaimed buttons that some of the students had worn the year before, buttons that, when pressed, proclaimed POTTER STINKS in bilious green letters that were supposed to be reminiscent of his eyes (which were more like emeralds). He and Diggory had gone into the final round of the tournament tied for first place. It had been so recent that Harry could still feel the weight of Cedric's lifeless body, could still see the staring expression on his frozen face, the blue eyes forever vacant and unseeing...

Harry grimaced at his uncle but didn't dare say anything; he was biting back rude responses that could mean his being imprisoned in his room for the summer with his magic supplies locked in the cupboard under the stairs again. Just because his uncle was full of himself and never missed an opportunity to brag, he thought everyone was that way. Harry saw that Dudley was actually looking at him with something like grudging respect.

"Well!" his uncle said at last. "Just stay out of my way this summer is all I ask!" He thrust the letter at his wife and left for work, just short of having steam coming out of his ears, as though he had decided after all to take Sirius' advice and had been biting back some choice words of his own. Dudley managed to get the letter from his mother, who had gone to the open window to yell something to the workers again.

Harry suddenly remembered that he was holding a letter of his own and he opened it, unable to stop a grin from creeping across his face as he read :

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY
Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc., Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump,
International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter,

As your head-of-house, I am pleased to inform you that I have named you to be a prefect, effective when the new term begins on September the first. This is a responsibility that I know you will not take lightly, as your record speaks for itself. You will be responsible for other students' conduct when professors are not present and you will be expected to uphold school rules and regulations to the letter. This is an important leadership position. We expect nothing but the best from our prefects. Both of your parents were prefects, and I know they would be proud of you.

As a prefect, you will have access to certain school facilities that are not available to the general student population, and you will be required to attend regular meetings of all of the prefects in the fifth, sixth and seventh years, which are led jointly by the Head Boy and Head Girl, who will be Roger Davies of Ravenclaw House and Alicia Spinnet of our own Gryffindor House.

Congratulations, Harry! I look forward to welcoming you as a prefect on September the first.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall
Deputy Headmistress

Harry looked at the accompanying list of new fifth-year prefects.

Gryffindor
Hermione Granger
Harry Potter

Hufflepuff
Hannah Abbot
Ernie MacMillan

Ravenclaw
Mandy Brocklehurst
Evan Davies

Slytherin
Millicent Bulstrode
Draco Malfoy

Malfoy! Harry groaned; he should have known it, though. Of course Snape would pick Malfoy to be a prefect! Severus Snape was the Potions Master and head of Slytherin House. He thought Malfoy could do no wrong; he thought Harry could do nothing right. He wasn't too surprised about the Hufflepuff prefects; he knew Hannah and Ernie from Herbology class, but he didn't know Mandy Brocklehurst at all and only knew that Evan Davies was Roger Davies' brother and also on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team.

"I'm a prefect," he said simply to his aunt and cousin, trying not to sound too pleased. His aunt grunted.

"You! A prefect!"

Harry could not keep the hurt out of his voice. "My mum and dad were prefects. In fact, my mum and dad were Head Girl and Head Boy".

His aunt looked stern. "I don't want to hear about your parents. Or that--that--school of yours," she said, as though she didn't think school were the right word at all.

He took his letter up to his room, bringing some smuggled bacon for Hedwig, and wondering with whom he could share his good news. He thought of his best friend, Ron Weasley, but then, Ron hadn't been named a prefect, so perhaps that wouldn't be especially tactful. He had pretty much forgotten the part of Sirius' letter that mentioned his modesty; he was just bursting, and wanted to tell somebody who would actually be happy about it. He could send a letter to Hermione, who was visiting the Greek Islands with her parents, but she would be getting her own prefect letter and know all about it, if she didn't already. After Greece, the Grangers would all be going up to visit Viktor Krum and his family in Bulgaria. She had met Viktor when he had come with his headmaster from another wizarding school, Durmstrang, to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. Viktor had been the champion from his school, and had rescued Hermione from the lake on the school grounds during one of the tournament tasks. Harry would write to Hermione later, on the pretense of congratulating her on being named a prefect.

Then it hit him: Hagrid! He pulled some parchment and a quill and some ink from his messy trunk and sat down at his desk to write a quick note to Hagrid to tell him he was going to be a prefect; he knew Hagrid wouldn't think he was crowing or putting on airs, he would be genuinely happy for him. Hagrid was one of his best friends, a large half-giant who had been expelled from Hogwarts in his third year because he was thought to have opened the Chamber of Secrets (he was framed by Voldemort himself, who fifty years earlier had simply been the student Tom Riddle). After that, he landed the job of gamekeeper at the school, where he'd been ever since. It had been Hagrid who had come to fetch him to Hogwarts when he was eleven and had no idea that he was famous or a wizard or even that his parents had been

assassinated by a Dark Lord, not killed in a car accident, as he'd always been told by his aunt and uncle (in an extremely nasty tone of voice, as though it were all their own fault and they richly deserved it).

He finished the note to Hagrid and tied it onto Hedwig's leg, giving her the rest of the bacon before she flew off, hearing another shout go up as the landscapers were alarmed by yet another owl flying about in the daytime. Oops, thought Harry. I shouldn't have done that. Aunt Petunia'll be having kittens...

He wasn't exactly sure where Hedwig was going to find Hagrid, but he was certain that wherever he was she would find him. Harry knew that Dumbledore had sent him to the continent on a diplomatic mission to speak to giants about uniting against Voldemort, now that he was back in power. Voldemort was counting on the giants being on his side, and Dumbledore knew he had better do something to guarantee their loyalty before Voldemort got to them. Dumbledore was also worried that Voldemort would find a way to get to the Dementors and turn them to his side; they were the guards at the wizarding prison Azkaban, where his godfather had been incarcerated (without a trial) for twelve years before his unprecedented escape. Dementors were eerie and had given Harry nightmares at one time; in his third year, when he was learning to fight boggarts (which always turned into whatever the person feared most) his boggart always turned into a dementor. He had learned to fight it by conjuring a Patronus. He had a feeling that these days, if he encountered a boggart, it would no longer turn into a dementor...

He had also inquired whether Hagrid had heard anything about his own mother, Fridwulfa, a giantess with a bloodthirsty reputation who had left him and his father when Hagrid was very young. Giants in general had a very bad reputation, and were credited with some of the worst mass Muggle killings during Voldemort's reign of terror. Harry hoped Dumbledore could in fact make allies of the giants, although he was not so sure that they should be on the same side as such murderous creatures. Better than having them on Voldemort's side, he supposed.

After he had sent Hedwig off with Hagrid's letter, he stared around his room, at a loss for what to do, since he wasn't sleeping late after all. He heard another noise in the garden and went over to the window to look out. The backhoe was digging a rather large hole in the garden for an artificial pond. Harry watched for a few minutes, then decided that he would go out to have a better look. Watching the landscapers seemed like a better idea than just moping around his room wishing he could run and shout, "I'm a prefect! I'm a prefect!" at the top of his lungs.

He went out the kitchen door and found an unobtrusive place to sit against the wall of the house while the workmen moved rocks and used surveyor's equipment and consulted lists and other paperwork. They'd been working for about two weeks, according to his aunt and uncle. The garden already looked completely transformed to Harry. After a while, he became restless, and asked Dick, the boss, whether they needed another pair of hands. He felt Dick appraising his thin, pale arms. He said, "Ye sure ye're up to it? 'Tis hard work".

Harry assured him he was indeed up to it and set to work moving and lifting whatever they told him to, enjoying the camaraderie of just engaging in manual labor with men he didn't know, who treated him at first as a frail, laughable kid, and then soon gave him a surprising respect, after seeing how hard he was willing to work, and also being surprised at his wiry strength, and by what he was able to do. Maybe I have some muscles after all, thought Harry, carrying a large rock across the garden.

He took lunch with the workers, some of whom removed their shirts in the hot noon sun, or laid back on the ground to absorb the sun's warmth. Harry decided to do the same, leaving himself open to some good-natured jibes about blinding them all with his pallor. In a week, however, his pallor was a thing of the past, and his lack of visible muscles was starting to be a thing of the past, too, as the work began to have a defining effect on his body.

After he'd been working with the landscapers for a week, he was startled by a small garden snake slithering past him while he leaned back and soaked up some sun after lunch. The snake caught his attention because she was talking, and he could understand every word she said.

The snake was muttering, "Find a perfectly good home and the next thing you know, it's being rent asunder, great yahoos tromping all over the place, digging up my favorite flower beds..." Even though he had known since he was in his second year in school that he was a Parselmouth (someone who can understand and speak snake language) he didn't often talk of it. He seldom had any contact with snakes. He spoke to the snake now, though.

"Sorry about all this. It was my aunt's idea. It may be going on for a few more weeks, I'm afraid".

The snake stopped moving and lifted her head and seemed--if it was possible for a snake to do this--that she had a shocked expression on her face. "What did you say"?

"I said that it was my aunt's idea. Messing up your home like this. If you like, maybe I could help you find some other garden to live in".

"No," the snake said. "What I meant was, I've never been spoken to by a human in my own language before. I hear humans speak Human language. But never mine".

"Oh," Harry said, hissing. "I'm a Parselmouth. I'm going into my fifth year of wizarding school. When I was a baby, a very powerful wizard who was also a Parselmouth tried to kill me and failed, and some of his abilities transferred themselves to me. But I don't get to be around snakes much, so I tend to forget I can do it".

"I have heard of wizards, and I have heard legends of wizards who could speak Parseltongue, but I never believed it".

"Well, it's pretty rare. One time I talked to a boa constrictor. He told me he'd never been to Brazil. He lived in the zoo, but he accidentally freed him".

"What is a boa constrictor?" she asked. She paused. "They are looking at you," the snake suddenly informed him, before she went slithering off into a bush. Harry looked up to see the entire crew gaping at him as though he'd gone mad. After a minute, he realized that they hadn't actually heard what he'd been saying to the snake; they'd only heard hissing. Even in his own ears, when he spoke in Parseltongue, it sounded like just so much hissing, although his brain then converted the hissing sounds into words. He could only actually speak Parseltongue when he was confronted with a snake. He smiled sheepishly at them.

"Well, you've got to speak to them in their own language," he said, shrugging. There was perplexed silence at first, then Dick rearing back his head in unrestrained laughter, which was the signal for the others that they were allowed to do the same too. Harry laughed with them. Well, he was telling the truth; he was speaking to the snake in her own language. While he was working that afternoon, he kept an eye out for her, but didn't see her. He was sleeping soundly every night, rolling into bed exhausted from the work, his muscles aching, but at least now he had some muscles. And his skin wasn't the color of parchment anymore, either. He was glad to have the physical activity to take his mind off Voldemort.

Very early the next morning, before anyone was up, he finally gave in to the temptation to write to Hermione about being prefect, and she apparently had also succumbed to this temptation, as her owl arrived in Harry's bedroom about five minutes after Hedwig left to give his letter to her .

Dear Harry,

Congratulations on being a prefect! Of course I had really hoped that I would get to be one, and I had a feeling that, out of all the fifth-year boys, it would be you.

Harry hoped she didn't tell Ron that; he was very touchy about competing with his older brothers, two of whom had been prefect and then Head Boy .

Mum and Dad and I are having a great time in the Greek Islands. In a couple of weeks we're going up to Bulgaria to visit Viktor's family. They live in Sofia, the capital. Maybe Viktor can help me improve my broomstick technique. He's gotten a new job as reserve Seeker with--guess what team? The Chudley Cannons! Ron should be pretty happy about that!

Harry strongly suspected that Ron would be torn about that; he had been pretty agitated about Hermione and Viktor Krum going to the Yule Ball the previous Christmas, and only at the end of the term had he given in to his impulse to ask Krum for an autograph. Krum had been the star of the Quidditch World Cup the previous summer. Quidditch was a wizarding sport played on broomsticks, and Harry played Seeker on his house team at school. He looked down and finished reading Hermione's letter .

So, since Viktor will be working in England, he can meet me in Hogsmeade on weekends when we're allowed to go out to the village. You don't think they'll cancel Hogsmeade visits now that You-Know-Who is back, do you ?

Here's a photo of me and my parents at the Parthenon. Next we're going on to Corfu. Please take care of yourself and tell Dumbledore and Sirius right away about your scar hurting or anything else that could indicate dark magic. Missing you.

Love from Hermione

Harry looked at the photo she had enclosed; it was a Muggle picture, no moving people in it. Hermione stood with her parents in front of a large Greek temple, both of them with their arms around her, their little girl who was not so little anymore. She was wearing a very tight sleeveless white top and a matching skirt that was very brief. Her exposed arms and legs were already very brown, and then he noticed that she'd cut her hair; it was rather short, curling all over her head in a free and yet much more orderly way than it usually did. The shorter haircut seemed to work much better with her hair's natural wave, and he almost didn't recognize her at first. But after squinting at it for a moment, he could tell from the nose and shape of the face and the way she smiled that it was her. She wore dark glasses against the glaring Greek sun and looked quite happy, enjoying a trip to the Greek Islands with her folks. Harry caught his breath for a moment and thought, I just hope they're safe. What if Voldemort tries to get to her while she's traveling?

Harry had mentioned to Sirius that he was concerned that Voldemort would try to coerce him to do his bidding by coming after Ron and Hermione. Sirius agreed that that was a danger, but he took a wait-and-see attitude, and promised to discreetly check in on each of them during summer vacation.

Then he looked up in surprise as Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon, flew in with a letter. Ron's owl was very small and could be held in the palm of one's hand, and he was also very excitable, yet not dreadfully useful for owl post because he couldn't handle anything really big. Pig fluttered frantically around the room for a minute, while Harry tried to snag him and grab the letter he was delivering. When he finally had the letter in his hand he sat down on the bed to read it.

Dear Harry,

Well, congratulations on being a prefect. Hermione wrote and told me. Can you believe Malfoy got chosen too? He'll be even more of an insufferable git than he was before--if that's possible.

Did you know that Hermione is going to visit Krum? And that he's going to play for the Cannons? I feel like I'm in prison; we never go anywhere. That trip to Egypt a couple of years ago was a contest we won. And now we don't even have the excuse of going to Romania or Egypt to visit Charlie or Bill because they're taking time off work and staying here for a while. Dumbledore thought it would be a good idea. And yet SHE gets to flit around the Greek Islands and visit a wizard who just graduated from a school where they actually TEACH the dark arts!

Anyway, Sirius said he's going to fetch you at the end of the summer and bring you here on the Knight Bus. Then we can go shopping from here using floo powder. Dad's getting Ministry cars to take us to the train on September first. I can't believe you have to stay with the Muggles until then! But Dumbledore says that's for the best too.

I haven't heard from Hagrid, have you? I'm not sure whether I want him to find his mum or any of the other giants. I'd settle for them to just stay in the mountains and not get involved in a wizard war at all. How's your scar? No pain, I hope. Write to me and tell me what you want for your birthday. See you in August. ---Ron.

Harry put the letters away and propped the photo on a shelf. He gave Pigwidgeon an owl treat and sent him on his way early in the morning and he needed to get dressed and down to the garden to get back to work. It was very satisfying, somehow, the way the landscaping was coming together. Harry could have been quite happy to go into work like this, if he had never discovered he was a wizard. He tried to imagine a life of being a Muggle, being completely ignorant of the wizarding world...but he couldn't. His life was so different now from the way it was before his eleventh birthday, it was as though those pre-magic years were lived by someone else.

After grabbing a quick breakfast, Harry went out into the garden. It was very early, so no one else had shown up yet, and Harry started moving rocks about. After about half an hour, Dick came walking up the path from the street, alone. Harry looked up in surprise.

"Morning, Harry".

"Morning, Dick. Where's everyone else"?

Dick looked about sixty, but Harry was just guessing; he was as brown and leathery as you could hope a gardener to be with silvery hair swept back from his face and kind blue eyes. Harry was sometimes reminded of Dumbledore when he saw him. Dick put his hand on his chin now and looked as if he were reluctant to deliver some bad news.

"Well, the thing of it is, we've gotten another job, and they're payin' double for it to be done quick. Plus, your aunt has--well, made my men reluctant to work here anymore." He paused and looked around the incomplete garden. "But, we do

have a contract, so I'll stay on here and continue this job, and a few times a day I'll check in with my men on the other j
You still want to help me, Harry”?

Harry smiled at him and nodded. “Of course. I've been enjoying myself”.

Dick sighed and looked his age for once. “Some's have the right to do it just for enjoyment; some's have to do it to make
living”.

Harry flushed, thinking of all the gold in his vault at the wizarding bank, Gringott's. Ron was touchy about money, too, a
was upset with Harry for not telling him that some leprechaun gold he'd given Harry had disappeared the following day
leprechaun gold was apparently not permanent.

So he and Dick got to work on the garden, and things slowed down considerably. Harry didn't mind, though; he wasn't
especially fond of working with a crowd. After it had been just the two of them for several days, it seemed like it had
always been like that. It was very comfortable working with Dick; he wasn't much of a talker. They ate lunch together
companionably in the sunshine, then Dick laid back against a pile of potting soil bags for a little nap. Harry took off his
shirt and leaned back too, basking in the sun. When it was time to get back to work, Harry put on his shirt again and
picked up the trash from the lunch to take it inside. As he was going in the kitchen door, he heard a hissing voice say,
“The rocks will fall. The rocks will fall. The rocks will fall”...

Harry looked around, perplexed. There was a pile of rocks in the corner of the garden waiting to be used around the
artificial pond. Harry squinted around the garden, looking for the snake he'd talked to before. He couldn't see her. Saying
“Hmmm,” to himself, he carried the trash into the kitchen. As he was coming back outside again, Dick went over near the
rock pile to select a small shrub with sacking around its roots to plant near the back door.

Harry was probably a good fifty feet away when it happened; there was nothing he could have done. The rocks came
clattering down, knocking Dick onto his side and then shattering his left leg. Harry ran around the various obstacles in his
path to try to reach him. Dick was lying on the ground with a huge mound of stones on him, sweat running down his face,
looking like he wanted to scream and holding it back. Harry reached him, remembering breaking his leg during the
Triwizard Tournament. And once, he'd had to grow back all of the bones in his arm after a Quidditch match. But he didn't
have access to magical medicine here, or even enough magic to help his friend get out from under the pile of rocks. Harry
felt like he was in a trance as he worked swiftly to move all of the rocks, one by one, off poor Dick, who was looking ashen
under his tan, biting his lip and breathing raspily. Two weeks before, Harry would have had trouble moving any one of the
rocks he was practically tossing aside now, with no regard for where they were landing (a number of carefully-placed
plants were crushed and would have to be replaced). While he worked, he yelled for his aunt and cousin to call for an
ambulance. They finally appeared at the kitchen door as Harry was removing the last few rocks from Dick's body.

Harry grasped Dick's hand while the paramedics set his leg and rolled him onto a stretcher so they could carry him to the
ambulance. He watched the ambulance drive off, and he tried not to feel responsible, but it was difficult. He'd heard the
warning, and he'd done nothing; he disregarded it. He was sure it had been a snake's voice he'd heard, the same snake
he'd talked to before. He didn't quite hear his aunt complaining bitterly about the work not getting done, and ranting about
the plants Harry had crushed. Harry moved about in a daze, ignoring her at first, then facing her stonily and said, “I'll do
it.” She looked at him through shrewd, narrowed eyes, eyes that wondered what he was up to. “If you pay me,” he added.
He tried to come up with an amount he knew his aunt couldn't refuse--he mustn't get too greedy. “Five pounds a day,”
said, drawing himself up to his full height of five-feet six-inches, looking her in the eye. He was as tall as her now.

She narrowed her eyes even more, looking for the catch, but it was a low enough amount that even she couldn't argue.
She agreed and went back into the house, leaving Harry to look around the garden helplessly, feeling guilty and alone.
He swept his eyes over the entire garden quickly, but he didn't see the snake, so he tried calling softly, “Here snake, here
snake...” but it sounded like English; he wasn't speaking Parseltongue. She must not be nearby, he thought. He worked
for the rest of the afternoon alone, stacking the rocks in the corner more securely, and assessing the damage from his
having thrown them about to remove them from Dick.

He collected five pounds from his aunt at the end of the day, making himself a sandwich for dinner and then rolling into
bed early, aching all over. Now, every day, he got up with the sun, showered and dressed, and went out to the garden
to continue his solitary labour. A few days after Dick's leg was crushed, Harry was basking in the sun after eating lunch
when he heard a hissing voice near him.

“How is your friend? Why did you not tell him about the rocks”?

Harry looked around, then saw the snake near his feet. She was about twenty inches long and dull green, with glittering eyes and vertical pupils, like a cat's. "He'll be okay. I--don't know why I didn't tell him. I didn't realize that--that"--

"That snakes have the Sight?" she hissed softly. Harry nodded. His least favorite class at school was Potions, because he couldn't stand Professor Snape. But at least he did feel that Potions were useful, that he was learning something important. He thought that his most useless class was Divination. Professor Trelawney seemed to enjoy spending every class predicting Harry's untimely death. According to her, he was supposed to have died dozens of times over by now. Harry had never seen anything while staring in a crystal ball or at a lump of tea leaves in a teacup, and he tended to mess up things when doing star charts.

Now, though, Harry was confronted by the possibility that the snake was telling the truth. And since very, very few humans could understand snake language, who would be in a position to know that snakes could predict the future? Even he hadn't believed her; he was as sorry as he could be about that.

"If you have the Sight," Harry said to her, "tell me: will Voldemort be stopped"?

"Who?" the snake hissed. "You do not understand. I can only see a few minutes into the future, and only what is right around me. I cannot predict events happening far away. And I get only a glimpse of the future; the larger a snake is, the further into the future her sight reaches, and the farther distant".

Harry had a sudden thought. "Would you like to come to school with me in September? It's up north, and cold, but I could--I could--" Harry floundered, then had a brainstorm. "I could wear you wrapped around my arm to absorb my body heat. You could be my pet snake"!

She looked at him. "What is 'pet'? I do not understand".

"Well," Harry said, "humans sometimes choose some animals to take care of and give them names and bring them into their houses to live with them. Those animals are their pets".

The snake hissed at him, "I am not a pet. If I go with you, it will be my choosing, not yours. What is a name"?

"Well," Harry said again, "my name is Harry Potter. It's what people call you..." he trailed off, unable to put the concept of names into words.

"I thought you were called 'lazy git,'" said the snake. Harry realized she had heard his aunt addressing him.

"No, no, that's not the same as my name. That's called an insult. It's to be mean. Let's see, you predicted the future and I didn't believe you, so I'll name you-- Cassandra".

"Why"?

"Because there was this seeress in Greek mythology named Cassandra who was blessed with being able to predict everything about the future, but cursed to have no one believe her." The snake did not reply; he wondered whether anything what he had just said made sense to her. "But Cassandra is a little long to say all the time, so I'll just call you Sandy for short".

"For short what"?

Harry was starting to get a little impatient with the snake; just because you could talk to snakes, he thought, didn't mean you could really talk to them. "For a nickname. A nickname is like a shorter version of your name".

"What is your nickname"?

"Well, I guess it's Harry," he said, never having considered it before. He'd never seen his birth certificate. Was his real name Harold? Or Harrison? Or it could be that his whole name was just plain Harry. He had no idea.

"But that is your name".

"I know." Now Harry was really tired of explaining concepts to the snake that every human just knew. He wanted to get back to work. He put his shirt back on, shivering; some clouds had passed in front of the sun.

"Harry Potter," the snake said suddenly.

"Yes, Sandy?" Harry said, trying out her new name.

"I want to try your arm".

"What"?

"The sun is hidden. I am cold. You talked about wearing me on your arm. I am very cold".

He picked her up, enjoying the feel of her smooth skin, and carefully wrapped her twice about his upper left arm. She adjusted her tail and settled her chin on it, letting out an audible sigh. Harry smiled. She didn't weigh more than a few ounces; no wonder she can only see a short distance into the future, he thought.

Harry worked the rest of the day with her wrapped about his arm, and they talked every so often. He tried to speak simply and clearly to her, as though she were a little dim, but he tried not to be insulting. He didn't want to confuse her about human concepts she'd never been exposed to before. She seemed to be trying to speak simply to him too, as though her words were not quite bright enough to understand otherwise. When he was having trouble lifting a very heavy rock--not one that had fallen on Dick--she told him she had heard the other workers telling each other to lift with their legs.

Harry looked down at his legs, which were still rather thin, although they were at least tanned now. "I can't," he said. "They're not strong enough".

"Make them stronger," she said simply. Harry thought about this. Yes; he could take up running. That would make his legs stronger.

But he was far too exhausted to run at the end of the day; he just needed dinner and sleep. So he decided that first thing in the morning, he would go running, before beginning work in the garden. He also decided that he knew what he wanted for his birthday: a book about performing magic using snakes. He had heard that some powerful dark magic could be done with snakes; maybe some things could be done that weren't dark magic. He would ask Sirius about it.

He went to bed that night feeling like this wasn't such a bad summer after all. He'd spent the previous year becoming stronger magically, for the tournament, and now he was becoming stronger physically and also making use of some of his more arcane abilities. And if it helped him fight Voldemort, maybe he should learn some dark magic; Voldemort wouldn't be expecting that, or a snake of his own...

Harry picked up the picture of Hermione and her parents and looked at it while lying in bed, preparing to go to sleep. I won't let anything happen to you, he thought fiercely. Or Ron. I won't. Voldemort will have to come through me and Sarah to get you.

* * * * *

Chapter Two: Training Dudley

The next morning, Harry got up even earlier than usual and dressed in shorts and a singlet and sneakers to go running. He drank two glasses of water before going, but did not eat anything yet. At first he felt fine, his feet pounding on the sidewalk as he passed house after house, the lawns dewy and moist-smelling. But after a few blocks, he was winded, unused to the pace he was attempting. He pushed on, nonetheless, until he reached the park that was about a half-mile from the house, then turned around and ran half-heartedly back home, feeling every moment as though his heart would burst.

He finally arrived back at Four Privet Drive, sweat running down his face and his legs wobbling with every step, as though he'd just learned to walk. He staggered up the stairs to the bathroom for a shower, collapsing in a heap in the corner of the stall while the water beat down on him.

For the next week, he didn't get much done in the garden; running in the mornings had him all done in, and he felt like he was just dragging himself around the rest of the day. By Saturday, his aunt and uncle were complaining about how slow the work was going, and Harry actually didn't blame them; he felt that if he were moving any slower, he'd be going backwards.

“Sorry,” he said at dinner, barely able to keep his head from falling into his plate. “I’ve been trying to build up my stamina by running in the mornings. I only just started, so I’m not really there yet. But I’ll work over the weekend too, don’t worry.”

He was startled by a light coming into his aunt’s eyes. “Is that what you’ve been doing? Running!” He could virtually see the little wheels in her head spinning around. “In that case, you have another job--unpaid, I might add. You can be Dudley’s trainer!”

Dudley looked up from his celery sticks and lettuce; the rest of them had pork chops and potatoes and buttered beans. Harry and Dudley looked at each other, equally horrified.

“But Mum”--

“But Aunt Petunia”--

“But nothing!” his aunt declared. “You start tomorrow”!

Harry and Dudley both grimaced, looking warily at each other. There’d been an uneasy detente in the house since Harry’s return, but that didn’t mean they wanted to do things together, especially running every morning. Harry had in fact been getting better and better every morning. That day he had run back and forth to the park twice, keeping a good steady pace the whole time and feeling more energized at the start of his work day than winded. It was starting to work. He had also learned about warming up and warming down before and after running from a report on the evening news, and he was cramping up now, as he had on his third day out.

The next morning, he knocked on Dudley’s door after he had gotten dressed. There was no answer. Harry turned the knob and entered.

Dudley was still in bed, fast asleep. Harry looked around his room; Dudley’s room was a dream for any fifteen-year-old boy. He had two televisions and video recorders, a state-of-the-art stereo system, a computer with a twenty-inch screen and about a hundred computer games. He had every CD he wanted, every video he wanted (some, Harry noted, were very racy) and there wasn’t a book in sight. He looked through Dudley’s dresser for something he could wear to run, and found some sneakers and socks too. Then he shook Dudley roughly.

“Wake up, you! Your mum wants us to go running, so we’re going running!” Harry never wasted his breath being polite to Dudley, as he did with his aunt and uncle; that was just for self-preservation. Dudley rolled over and opened his eyes, looking alarmed. Then he closed them again, covering his head with his pillow.

“Geroff! Go away! This is a nightmare”!

Harry pulled the pillow off his face and threw back the covers. He put his face about an inch from Dudley’s and tried to sound like a drill sergeant he’d seen once in an American movie about the army.

“Get up, you git! You are going running”!

Dudley tried to swat him away, but Harry was too fast; he sprang across the room, jogging lightly in place near the door.

“If you want to whomp me you’ll have to catch me”!

Dudley grunted and reluctantly pulled on the clothes Harry had gotten out for him and tied his sneakers. Then Harry turned and ran out the door and down the steps, feeling the entire staircase shuddering as Dudley angrily followed him. Harry opened the front door and sprinted down the front walk, Dudley following after he’d shut the door.

After he’d passed a couple of houses, Harry realized he wasn’t hearing another set of footsteps behind him anymore. He turned, jogging in place again to keep up his heart rate, and saw that Dudley was standing in front of the house next door to Number Four, his head in the vicinity of his knees, panting and already dripping with sweat.

Harry jogged back to Dudley, then simply hopped up and down next to him, waiting silently. After a couple of minutes, Dudley straightened up and Harry nodded at him, still jogging in place.

"Right then," he said to Dudley. "Ready to go on?" Dudley nodded grimly, no longer attempting to whomp Harry, but seemingly determined to do anything his skinny cousin could do. And possibly, Harry thought, considering his chances with Julia in September...

Harry slowed down some, although he still was literally running rings around Dudley. He would jog forward about a half block, then jog back to Dudley, stay by his side for another half-block until the pace started to frustrate him too much, then sprint forward again, only to backtrack once more to be by Dudley's side again. When they finally reached the park, Dudley just wanted to collapse on the grass, but Harry wouldn't let him.

"Stretching now," he told him. "Should have done it before we left, but now will do. Otherwise you'll cramp up." He demonstrated for Dudley, who gamely tried all of it, even reaching for his toes (he wasn't even close). Harry nodded at him, surprised that he was doing as well as he was. He wouldn't have thought Dudley would be able to do half of what he had, let alone do it without constant whining.

After the stretching, Harry told him to get up for the run back. Dudley did better this time; he and Harry actually jogged side by side much of the way back to Privet Drive, although Harry felt as though he were holding himself back. When they reached the front gate, Harry told him they had to do warm-down stretches, and Dudley nodded, red-faced and panting, complying without a word. When they were done, they rose to enter the house and Harry simply slapped Dudley on the back, giving him a small smile. Dudley gave a tired smile back, but it seemed to be a great effort, and it ceased quickly. Dudley closed his eyes and staggered up the stairs to the bathroom for a shower. As Harry watched him go, it seemed to him that in the time it had taken them to run to the park and back, something had somehow changed between them. He wiped his sweat from his forehead with his arm as he walked to the kitchen, then turned on the faucet at the sink, bent his head under it, and proceeded to drink directly from the tap.

After a week, Dudley was actually running by Harry's side every morning, although Harry was still going slower than he would have liked, and sometimes sprinted ahead and then back to Dudley again. He usually drank a good deal of water and had some food while Dudley showered, then took his turn. He was so busy working on training Dudley and doing the landscaping seven days a week that his birthday crept up on him.

On the morning of July thirty-first, Dudley came into Harry's room to wake him up, instead of the other way around, as was their usual routine. It was a Monday morning, bright and humid, and Harry was particularly tired because he'd stayed up late reading for his History of Magic summer homework, and writing a parchment and a half about Dumbledore defeating Grindelwald in 1945 (Grindelwald had been on the Axis side during World War II, no surprise there). Harry couldn't tell whether Dumbledore was actually being credited with ending the war by bringing Grindelwald down, but it wouldn't have surprised him in the least. Hitler was known to have more than a passing interest in magic and the supernatural, and Harry knew that all of the most important Allied victories occurred after Dumbledore had taken care of the dark wizard.

Harry groaned and looked up at Dudley much as Dudley had done on their first day of training, only to see his pillow coming down on his face. "Hey!" he yelled as Dudley pressed it down on him, then managed to worm his way off the bed, falling on the floor with a thud. Dudley threw the pillow onto the bed, laughing.

"You should have seen your face!" he howled. Then he pulled a package from behind his back and tossed it onto the bed. "Happy Birthday, Harry." Harry looked up at him from the floor, in shock. He had never in his life received a birthday gift from his cousin. He pulled himself back up onto the bed and opened the wrappings, which had concealed a portable tape player and headphones, and there was already a tape in it. It was good to go.

Harry smiled at Dudley. "Thanks, Dud." He looked at the tape in the player; it was some Goth band. "Goth?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "Just because I'm a wizard"?

Dudley shrugged. "It's all I could think of. It's not new. Neither is the tape player; it's an extra one. I don't need three." Even though Dudley was admitting that he had made a minimal effort to get him a birthday present, Harry appreciated it more than his aunt and uncle had ever done. Just as they were about to leave, a sudden flurry of owls came in the window. Harry had sent Hedwig to Sirius several days before, with a letter asking about spellbooks for using snakes in magic, and now she was returning with his present and a card. Harry started to open it, but then a medium-sized brown owl flew in with a package unmistakably bearing Hermione's handwriting, followed by Pigwidgeon hauling a package far too large for him and a frightening eagle owl that Harry suspected had brought something from Hagrid, who had given Hedwig to him as his first birthday gift ever, when he was eleven.

Dudley backed up into a corner, alarmed by the four owls flying around the room, but trying to look composed. Harry took the packages from them, one by one, gave each of them owl treats, and sent each of them on their way except for

Hedwig, who settled down into her cage for a nap. Harry tore the paper off Sirius' package first. He set the card up on a shelf and then looked at the large book in his hands: *Sorcerers, Serpents and Snakes* by Colleen Colubra. Inside, Sirius had inscribed it: "Dear Harry--Happy Fifteenth Birthday! From your godfather, "; and there followed a scrawl wherein Harry could vaguely make out an S and a B, but which was otherwise illegible. Harry started to page through the book, grinning. This looked like it might have something useful in it. He wanted to start reading it right away, but instead he forced himself to move on to Hagrid's package. It had some kind of very sweet-smelling pastry with honey and walnuts in it, which Harry identified as a Ukrainian version of baklava. "...not that I'm saying I'm in Ukraine..." Hagrid's note said. Harry smiled. Hagrid was terrible at keeping secrets.

Next he opened Ron's package. After setting another card up on the shelf above his desk, he found a cake sent by Ron's mother, a box of Honeydukes sweets, and a belt with two entwined snakes for a buckle, and a narrow holster attached to it for his wand. Sirius has been talking, Harry thought. Then he noticed that there was another card and a small bundle at the bottom of the Weasley parcel. The card was from Ginny, saying simply, "Happy Birthday, Harry. Love, Ginny." He opened the accompanying paper-wrapped lump and found a small amulet on a silver-colored chain. The amulet was shaped like a basilisk, and it had small glowing green eyes. He smiled upon seeing it, and immediately put it around his neck. Dudley took the card and read it, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

"Love, Ginny, huh"?

Harry grimaced, not feeling up to explaining Ginny and the basilisk to Dudley. Finally, he opened Hermione's package, which he could already tell--no surprise there--was another book. Sirius had definitely been talking, for it was a thick text on the care and feeding of snakes. As Harry opened the card, a photograph went fluttering onto the floor. Harry read the card while Dudley stooped to pick up the photo.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday! I hope you find this useful. Sirius said you might. Here's another photo, this time on Corfu. Now we're in Bulgaria. Sirius will be accompanying us, posing as our dog. It seemed like the best plan of action. Mum is still a bit alarmed whenever he becomes human again; I think she prefers his canine form. Hope to see you in Diagon Alley! I'll say hello to Viktor for you. Thinking of you.

Love from Hermione

Harry smiled at the thought of Hermione's parents coping with Sirius changing into a large black dog and back again as the mood struck him. Her parents weren't in the least bit magical; they were dentists, but they had accepted their daughter's status as a witch with equanimity, putting aside their dreams of her one day going to medical school (as Hermione had assumed she would from the age of six).

Harry looked up at Dudley, who was holding the photograph he'd picked up from the floor. Harry could see that on the back of the photo, Hermione had written Happy Birthday Harry, With Love From Hermione. Dudley's jaw was hanging open stupidly. He swallowed "Is she your girlfriend?"

Harry sighed; he'd had to contend with that question much of the previous year, when it had even been reported as fact in the wizarding newspaper *The Daily Prophet*. "No, we're just friends. She's one of my two best friends. Boy, people think just because a girl and boy are friends"...

"She's not a girl," Dudley interrupted.

Harry frowned at him. What was in the picture, anyway? Dudley was holding it very tightly; his knuckles were white. "Of course she's a girl, what are you on about"?

"Nope," Dudley insisted. "She's a woman." He handed the photo to Harry, and now it was Harry's turn to let his jaw drop.

Hermione was alone in the picture this time, instead of with her parents. She was on a sunny beach, leaning back on her hands for support, with one tanned leg extended straight out, the other one with the knee raised. All she was wearing was a black crocheted bikini. It was a very small black crocheted bikini. Harry was floored. Hermione had so much--skin. She wore dark glasses again, as in the Parthenon picture, but she wasn't smiling this time; she looked rather serious. Harry felt his mouth go dry.

From what seemed like a million miles away, Harry heard Dudley's voice saying, "Are you sure she's not your girlfriend?" Harry looked up at him, startled, then placed the photo on the shelf carefully, next to the other one.

"Yeah," he croaked; his voice had almost finished changing, but not quite. Dudley shook his head, turning to go.

"Idiot..." he heard his cousin muttering as he left the room. Harry fingered the basilisk around his neck and looked again at the picture of Hermione on the beach, her glowing skin, her hair a riot of shining curls, brown touched by gold, unmistakably now a woman and no longer a girl. He thought of her going to Bulgaria, and suddenly he understood Ron's annoyance with Viktor Krum.

After he and Dudley went running, Dudley let him have the first shower. Harry was taking the day off from gardening after that, though. He sat down to look at the books from Sirius and Hermione, and he let Dudley try some of the Every Flavor Beans Ron had sent (Dudley was fine when he got blueberry, treacle tart and even fish and chips, but recoiled when he got one that tasted unmistakably like furniture polish).

Periodically through the day, Harry looked up at the photos on his shelf, hoping Hermione was okay, and touching the amulet Ginny had sent, silently wishing for Ron and Ginny and the rest of the Weasleys to be safe, too.

At dinner, Dudley sounded rather pointed as he asked Harry whether he had had a happy birthday, and whether he'd had a chance to try out his tape player. "If you want a different tape, just look in my room and take whatever you like," he added.

Harry thanked him and said that he hadn't tried it yet, but he thought he would tomorrow, while he was working in the garden. He didn't know yet quite what was coming. Now Dudley turned to his parents, saying, "So! What did you get Harry for his birthday?"

Harry's Aunt Petunia looked up from her plate, startled. His uncle Vernon stopped with a piece of meat he'd been chewing stuck in his left cheek pouch. They both looked at their son as though they'd been hit by the strongest stunning curse there was.

"What?" his dad exploded after a minute, not having moved the half-chewed meat, so it went flying out of his mouth into the middle of the table. He reached for it, picked it up and put it back in his mouth. Harry recoiled, grimacing. "We never get him anything, you know that!"

That wasn't strictly true, Harry thought. For his tenth birthday he'd received a pair of his uncle's old socks and a wire coathanger.

"Exactly!" Dudley shot back at his father. "What if something had happened to you when I was little, and Harry's parents had taken me in? Would you want them to treat me the way you've treated him all these years?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" said Aunt Petunia. "If anything had happened to us, you've have gone to Aunt Marge's"...

"That's not the point!" Dudley sputtered. "What if I'd gone to her and she treated me the way you treat Harry?"

"Well, that would never happen, Duds, because she loves you".

"I'm saying 'what if,' you gits!" Dudley exploded at them, shaking his head. His parents looked at him perplexed, not understanding the source or content of his teenage rebellion.

"Don't you talk to me that way, young man!" his father yelled, after a moment of shock.

"I'll talk to you any way I damn well please," Dudley informed him, getting up and leaving the room. Harry sat uncomfortably, still chewing a carrot, trying to do it quietly, and looking back and forth between his aunt and uncle, who were now glaring at him, clearly blaming him for Dudley's behavior. Then it all came out.

"This is all your fault. You've--you've bewitched him! We'll tell that school of yours you're doing magic, and then you'll be kicked out!" said Aunt Petunia. Harry shook his head innocently, his eyes wide. He knew he wouldn't be kicked out; the Ministry of Magic could perform the Priori Incantatem on his wand and easily ascertain the last spell that had been performed by it; they wouldn't just take the word of a couple of Muggles.

He swallowed his food and excused himself, feeling their eyes boring into his back as he ran down the hall to the staircase. As much as he appreciated Dudley being on his side, he had been treading lightly with his aunt and uncle all summer, and he didn't need them blaming him for Dudley's change of heart and accusing him of breaking the law against underage wizards performing magic outside of school.

He went up to his room and sat down on his bed to read more of Sirius' book, when it occurred to him that he hadn't had any birthday cake yet. He got up and opened the box on his desk, immediately smelling the rich chocolate and cream emanating from it. Then he had an idea, and he crossed the hall and knocked on Dudley's door.

"Hey, Dud," he whispered loudly, sticking his head around the door. "Want some cake"?

Dudley had sat down to play a computer game. "Well, okay. But only a small piece. I'm in training, you know".

Harry smiled. "I know." They went into his room and sat down on the floor, but suddenly Dudley got up and ran back to his room. He returned with plates and forks and a cake server. Harry was perplexed as to why these things were in his room.

"When they put me on the diet, Mum cleaned all of the food out of my room I had stashed there, but she didn't care about this stuff. I have a service for eight." Harry smiled and sliced some cake for them both. "Happy Birthday, Harry," Dudley said with his mouth full.

Harry swallowed a bite of Mrs. Weasley's delicious birthday cake and smiled at his cousin. "You know, Dud, I actually think it is".

They each tucked in two pieces of cake and said goodnight. Harry took off his shirt, followed by the rest of his clothes, except for his drawers. He lay back on the bed with his hands behind his head, gazing across the room at the cards and photos on the shelf, especially the photo of Hermione on the beach. He fingered the amulet around his neck for a moment; somehow, the idea of sleeping with it around his neck didn't bother him the way a shirt did. He took off his glasses and turned out the light. His birthdays were definitely getting better.

* * * * *

Chapter Three: The Houseguest

The following week was uneventful. Harry and Dudley rose early each morning to go running, and Harry spent each day after that working in the garden, often wearing Sandy and talking to her. In the evenings, he read his new books or did summer homework. He had taken to bringing Sandy in with him at night; he even slept with her on his arm now. At the times she wasn't on his arm, it felt strangely light.

The first time he brought her up to his room, she was rather alarmed at the sight of Hedwig.

"Did you bring me here to kill me?" she asked. Harry looked down at her.

"No, that's my pet owl, Hedwig. She delivers mail. She can find someone anywhere in the world and deliver a letter to them, even if I don't know where they are. All post owls can".

"Impressive," Sandy hissed, sounding unconvinced. "So. You already have a pet." She sounded a little hurt.

"Well, Hedwig performs a service for me, and I take care of her and feed her. So, I guess she's more of a servant than a pet." It suddenly occurred to him that it wasn't a very different arrangement than house elves, who Hermione insisted were unjustly enslaved. "I thought you didn't want to be my pet".

"That is true. Nor do I fancy being a servant. So what am I"?

Harry looked at her thoughtfully. "How about my roommate"?

"What is roommate"?

"It's just a term for people who share living quarters. They're usually friends".

"What about friend"?

“What about it”?

“Why did you suggest roommate first, instead of friend”?

“I--I don't know. Are you my friend Sandy? I'd like that”.

“Yes. I am your friend, Harry Potter”.

* * * *

About a week-and-a-half after his birthday, Harry was preparing to go upstairs after dinner when the doorbell rang. Not thinking twice about it, Harry called, “I'll get it!” and went to turn the knob.

It was Snape.

Harry immediately screamed and recoiled; Snape was the last person he had expected to see on Privet Drive. He was attempting to dress in Muggle clothes, something Harry had never seen him do. But the clothes were somewhat out of place in Surrey (except for the eccentric retired colonel two streets over); he was clad as someone on safari in Africa, from his bush boots to his pith helmet with mosquito netting. He even had a machete hanging on his belt, although Harry noticed his wand in a holster on the other side. Where his knees showed between his khaki shorts and his knee socks, was deathly pale, betraying the fact that he had never been on a safari in his life. His lank black hair was pulled back in a pony tail under the helmet. Harry stood staring at him in disbelief.

“Nice to see you too, Potter,” he growled. Harry stepped back abruptly as Snape moved forward, looking around suspiciously, as though expecting an ambush from the light fixture on the ceiling or the flower arrangement on the hall table. Then a large black dog followed him in, and Harry sighed with relief.

“Sirius! Thank goodness!” But his godfather did not transform into his human self; he also sniffed about the hall suspiciously, then seemed to nod at Snape, who went back outside and summoned some other people who had been standing just outside the circle of light spilling out into the night from the hall.

The people stepped into the house. It was Hermione and her parents. Harry was as shocked as he'd been when he'd seen Snape. “Hermione!” was all he could say. The entire Granger family looked like they'd been through the ringer. They all staggered under the weight of their luggage, which they'd presumably been lugging from England to the Greek Islands to Bulgaria. He thought Hermione looked especially exhausted, although he couldn't see her eyes; she had on dark glasses. She wore denim shorts that were just above her knees. A large white T-shirt with a blue and white Greek flag on it was tucked into her shorts and on her feet she wore rugged-looking hiking sandals. They all looked a bit dusty, as though they had walked there from Bulgaria.

Harry ushered them into the living room and shut the front door. Dudley and his parents were now standing in the hall, staring incredulously at the odd party that had invaded their house.

“See here, now--” Harry's uncle began as he came into the living room with Aunt Petunia and Dudley close behind. Suddenly, Sirius changed from a large black dog into a human, and Aunt Petunia crouched behind her husband and screamed. Sirius brushed some dust from his black robes and smoothed his dark hair back.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” he said, extending his hand to Vernon Dursley. “I am Sirius Black, Harry's godfather. We haven't met at last”.

Vernon Dursley cowered back against his wife, refusing to touch Sirius' extended hand. Suddenly, Dudley stepped up and grasped his hand, saying in an authoritative voice, “Dudley Dursley,” and shaking Sirius' hand firmly. Sirius smiled at Dudley and Harry gave Dudley an appreciative nod. Then he noticed Dudley looking at Hermione.

“We are sorry to arrive unannounced like this, but this is an emergency. While the Grangers were in Bulgaria, there was an attempted abduction. Dark wizards tried to kidnap Hermione.” Harry looked in shock at Hermione, who was sitting, stony faced, still wearing her dark glasses. “Viktor Krum managed to thwart the abduction, but not before Hermione heard them talking about receiving their instructions from someone named Lucius.” He paused, to let this sink in. “I think we all know who that is”.

The Dursleys shook their heads dumbly, having no idea what Sirius was going on about, just looking like they wished he and the rest of them would go away. Hermione's mother sat next to her and put her arm around her, tried to get her to rest her head on her shoulder. Hermione would have none of it, sitting up again pointedly, refusing to be coddled.

"I was traveling with the Grangers from Greece to Bulgaria, but I had gone to meet with Professor Snape here when the abduction occurred. We talked to the headmaster of Hogwarts, who felt that this would be the safest place for Hermione until school starts. Her parents will go into hiding for their protection; arrangements are being made." The Grangers looked grim about this.

"We--we have a check we can give you. For Hermione's room and board for the rest of the summer," Hermione's mother told the Dursleys. Harry saw his aunt's eyes light up. Aunt Petunia rarely turned down money, and the Grangers looked pretty normal, except for traveling in the company of Sirius and Snape.

"Can she stay?" Sirius asked the Dursleys. They seemed afraid to refuse him. Vernon Dursley gave a very small nod, and Mr. Granger took out a checkbook and started writing a check. He handed it to Harry's uncle, who opened his eyes wide and suddenly seemed to wake up.

"Harry!" he barked. "Take your friend's luggage up to the guest room!" He practically grabbed the check from Mr. Granger, who looked taken aback. Harry picked up Hermione's bags and said, "Your room's upstairs." She nodded and followed him out into the hall. Sirius changed back into a dog, prompting another scream from Aunt Petunia. Snape and the Grangers moved into the hall with the large black dog.

"Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley," Snape said in an oily voice, as though speaking to Muggles were extremely distasteful to him. "We will leave now".

After the front door shut, Harry and Hermione continued up the stairs. She was still holding her head up stoically. Harry put down the bags to open the door, then reached in and turned on the light, letting her go first. He followed her in, placed her luggage on the bed and then standing, watching her carefully. The room seemed very quiet.

Suddenly Hermione whispered, "Close the door".

Harry closed it, and immediately, Hermione took off her dark glasses, revealing eyes red from crying. "Oh, Harry!" She went to Harry and flung her arms about his waist, sobbing into his chest. Harry slowly put his arms around her, his cheek on the top of her head (he was surprised to find that he was now several inches taller than her; they used to be the same height) and he brought up one hand to smooth her hair, surprised at the soft texture of the curls. She had last hugged him on the train platform at King's Cross at the end of June, and given him a kiss on the cheek that surprised him; she had never done that before. But this wasn't like a brief goodbye hug; they had never held each other like this while she cried into his chest. They stood that way for what seemed a long time, then, when she had been simply sagging against his chest for a while and had stopped crying, he lifted her face to look at her and kissed her gently on the forehead.

"You're tired. Get some sleep".

He went to the door and opened it. She looked at him like a deer caught in the headlights.

"Good night, Hermione".

"Good night, Harry".

Harry closed the door gently, finding Dudley in the hall with a questioning look on his face. Harry shook his head firmly. "She needs to rest." Dudley nodded and went to his room. Harry went into his own room and shut the door. He undressed for bed, but paused before getting in and went to the shelf above his desk and took down the picture of Hermione on Corfu, carrying it to the bed and sitting on the edge. Then he propped it against the lamp on his bedside table and looked at it for a long minute. Finally, he took off his glasses and turned out the light.

* * * *

Harry felt his bed bounce. Startled, he opened his eyes. The sun had come up, but only just. There was a pale, grey light outdoors and a slight apricot tinge at the edges of the sky. He squinted down at the foot of his bed, finding Hermione sitting there. She was wearing what he supposed were summer pajamas, some light blue cotton shorts and a matching button-down shirt with a pointed collar and a pocket. She sat with her arms around her legs, her knees pulled up to her

chin, staring into space. He rubbed his eyes and fumbled for his glasses. When he had put them on, he pulled himself a sitting position, the sheet falling to his waist. She was looking at him strangely, he thought.

"Hermione?" he ventured, hoping to bring her out of her catatonia. She looked him in the eye now.

"You look different," she said simply.

"I've been doing manual labour all summer," he told her, holding up his hands. "My calluses have calluses." But he felt eyes on his torso, not his hands.

"Your voice is lower, too".

"Yeah, but my singing voice hasn't improved any. Right now I'd say I'm a tenor, but I may wind up a baritone".

She didn't say anything for a few minutes. Harry wasn't used to her being so quiet; she was usually talking unless her nose was in a book. She had positively gabbled at him and Ron on their first train ride to Hogwarts. Her eyes moved around the room. He saw her look at the photo of herself on the bedside table; he wished now that he'd put it in a drawer or something. Then she seemed to be looking at Sandy on his arm, and the basilisk amulet that rested on his sternum.

"You haven't met Sandy," he decided to say, to break the silence. He leaned down to speak to the snake. "Sandy? Are you awake"?

Sandy raised her head. "I am now".

He looked at Hermione, who now had her mouth open. "You know," she now said, "I've only heard you speak Parseltongue one other time: in the Dueling Club second year when you were telling the snake Malfoy had conjured to leave Justin alone, and everyone thought you were egging it on".

"Until I heard Sandy talking in the garden, I forgot I could do it. She's with me a lot now. It's nice to have her to talk to".

"It is nice to talk to you, too," Sandy told him. "I have learned much about humans".

"What did she say?" Hermione wanted to know. Talking about Sandy seemed easier for her than what Harry really wanted to talk about: the attempted abduction.

He smiled. "She said that she likes talking to me, too, and she's learned a lot about humans".

For a moment, he considered telling her about snakes having the Sight. But then he remembered that he had thought about what it could do for him to have Sandy with him in school for his fifth year, especially in Divination, telling him what was going to happen in a few minutes...Hermione would probably consider this cheating, and not worthy of a prefect, or more importantly, not worthy of him, and he decided not to mention it. He still hadn't decided whether he would go through with it. It did smack of cheating, he supposed.

"What's that?" she said after a prolonged silence, pointing to the amulet. Harry reached down and fingered it. "It's a birthday present. From Ginny".

"Ah," Hermione said, understanding the connection. Harry thought Hermione probably wouldn't have chosen to give him the basilisk amulet if she had been the one down in the Chamber of Secrets, like Ginny. As it was, Hermione had figured out first that the denizen of the Chamber was a basilisk, and had looked at it using a mirror. But that didn't offer her enough protection, and she had been petrified. She was in a near-death, open-eyed coma, broken only by a potion made from mandrake root. Hermione didn't have any romantic ideas about basilisks.

Suddenly, she looked shrewdly at him. "Are you hiding under those covers for some reason? Sleeping in the buff"?

Harry was shocked. "No! But--well, close. Just my drawers. Could you--excuse me while I get dressed? Dudley and I go running every morning".

She smirked. "Boxers or briefs"?

"Boxers".

“Color”?

“Black”.

“How wizard-like. Come on, it sounds about the same as swim trunks”.

“Hermione, please”...

“All right, all right, I’m going.” She got up and went to the door, looking pointedly again at the photo of herself on the bedside table, but not saying anything. When he had gone, he swung his legs out of bed and went to his wardrobe to get some running clothes; he had been able to do some shopping with the money he was making from working in the garden and for simplicity’s sake as much as anything else, he had bought virtually all black clothes: black shorts and singlets for running, along with black socks and running shoes, plus black jeans and turtlenecks and button-down shirts for wearing with his school robes in the fall, plus a few black sweaters and T-shirts. He’d even, as he’d already told Hermione, bought black boxers.

After he’d gone to the wardrobe, his bedroom door opened again. It was Hermione. She stood with her hand on the knob for a moment, smiling at having caught him in just his drawers.

“Can I go running with you two? I’ve got some appropriate clothes. And after what happened in Bulgaria--let’s just say I’d like to be in better physical shape, for times when I can’t use magic, you know”?

Harry stood his ground, refusing to hide or blush. “Sure. Meet us at the front door in five minutes.” She nodded, not moving, and he felt her eyes on him again. They looked at each other for a long minute before she left. Harry looked at the photo on his bedside table, thinking, Oh, well. Fair’s fair. I’ve seen her in that....

The three of them met in the front hall, Harry in his black running clothes with Sandy around his arm still (Dudley had gotten used to it, but Harry had avoided letting his aunt and uncle see the snake), Dudley in his running clothes and Hermione in a grey running bra and very tight royal blue bicycle shorts. Dudley goggled and Harry tried not to; she didn’t look like she was out of shape to him, but if she wanted to come along, he was fine with that.

They all had some water and Harry led them in doing stretching exercises on the front lawn after he’d taken Sandy off his arm and put her under a bush to await his return. Hermione wasn’t used to the warm-up routine, but she caught on fairly quickly. Harry tried not to look at her any more than was absolutely necessary.

Dudley was making no such effort to avert his eyes, however, and once they started running, he seemed to purposely position himself behind Hermione for the view. They went back and forth to the park three times, and Hermione never fell back or seemed to be straining.

After breakfast, Hermione came out to the garden with him to watch him work. She was dressed in a simple green checked sleeveless blouse and white cotton shorts and sneakers. Her brown curls were still slightly damp from her shower, and her tan made the whites of her eyes look very bright. Harry was in his usual black clothes, a sleeveless T-shirt and shorts and black work boots he’d gotten because the steel toes would protect him if he dropped any stones on his feet (which he’d done several times). She sat against the wall of the house in the position she’d taken that morning in his bedroom; arms around her legs, knees drawn up to her chin. It occurred to Harry that she was trying to be invulnerable to attack; she was a fortress under siege. He wondered exactly how traumatic the attempted abduction had been, and what Lucius’ thugs had done to her...

She watched him all morning, silently. He had been wearing his tape player from Dudley to while away the time while working, or sometimes talking to Sandy, but he had left the gift inside today, and when Sandy lifted her head and spoke to him, he hissed back softly, “Sorry, Sandy. We’ll talk later. This isn’t a good time.” The snake accepted this without comment, resting her head on her tail again and going to sleep.

They ate their lunch in the garden, and as had been his wont, Harry removed his shirt afterward and leaned back on the grass to get some sun. As the sun beat orangely against his eyelids, he was vaguely aware that Hermione had moved, then he felt her recline beside him, mere inches away, and after a few minutes, eyes still closed, he said her name. He got no response at first, so he said it again. Before he’d gotten the second syllable out, however, she said slightly impatiently, “I heard you”.

He was silent again for a half-minute, then said, "Sorry. I wasn't sure. I just wondered whether you felt like talking yet. About Bulgaria." He stayed on his back, eyes closed, hoping that if they didn't have to look at each other it would be easier for her to talk. She sighed, as though she were going to tell him again that it was too soon, but instead, she plunged right in.

"We were in the marketplace. Viktor's mother and my mum were looking at bread at the bakery, Viktor and my dad were buying some chicken, and I was supposed to be getting the vegetables. It seemed pretty safe; the vegetable stall was just two away from the chicken vendor, and I was just going to get some onions and peppers...But then I suddenly felt all lightheaded and floaty, like I was under the Imperious Curse. I tried fighting it, but there was nothing to fight, I wasn't being told to do anything I didn't want to do. I decided that I had an incredible urge to buy vegetables, but that's what I was already there for. I remember being very confused, like I was waiting for instructions, but they didn't come.

"I remember reaching for a red pepper like I was in a trance, and I tried to ask how much it was, using a phrase Viktor's mum had taught me. But when it came out, it didn't sound like my voice. The woman who was running the stall said I didn't look well--she sounded very far away--and I thought, maybe I'm not under the Imperious Curse, maybe I'm just ill. I'm in a foreign country, I've gotten ill on unfamiliar food and water before, I had some Muggle medicines in my purse, I could just take something to feel better. She brought me round to the inside of the stall where she sat, and she was so nice, she was just patting me and talking to me in English--and now that I think about it, she shouldn't have been speaking to me in English, should she? She didn't even have a Bulgarian accent.

"Then I just--stopped. I absolutely stopped. It was like I was a light that had been switched off. I don't remember hearing any incantation. I don't remember being given a potion--nothing. When I--started again, it was dark out, and on either side of me were two men in grey wizards' robes, both with their wands pointing at me. My head felt all right again, but I forced myself to look kind of spacy, as though I weren't really with it, because they were talking and I wanted to hear what they were saying. The woman who had been running the vegetable stall had disappeared. The marketplace was empty.

"One of them said, 'Lucius will be very pleased.' They spoke English. The other one said that the four others were taken care of, three other girls from Hogwarts and a Muggle boy who had still been at his Muggle school in June when they'd done it--whatever it was. Then they talked about me, about the way I looked, and about whether they should do anything extra"--

That's what he was afraid of. It was an effort for Harry to remain where he was with his eyes closed. After another beat he said, "Go on".

She took a deep breath and said, "Well, as far as I know, they didn't do anything--extra. Then they both pointed their wands at me at the same time--I felt like I couldn't move--and they both said an incantation which I can't remember. It's possible that they put a memory charm on me after that, which might be why I can't remember. You know I only need to hear an incantation once, and I can usually remember it"...

"I know," Harry said softly.

"Then--I stopped again. And when I started once more, it was daylight, and I opened my eyes, and I was lying on the couch in Viktor's house, and he was lifting me up and calling to my parents, telling them that I was back, that it was all right"...

"But you're not convinced of that".

"Well, it's not that; it's just that I don't know. I've got--all this lost time. Who knows"?

Harry reached out his hand blindly, found Hermione's and laced his fingers through hers. He felt her grasp his hand almost spasmodically and he squeezed back. They didn't talk anymore, and when the alarm on his watch went off, he opened his eyes and got up to work as though nothing had happened. He let go of Hermione's hand and put on his shirt. He looked down at her, still lying on her back, her eyes closed against the sun, tears running out from under her eyelids. He ached so for her; if there was one thing she needed, it was certainty.

Suddenly she sat up and shook her head impatiently. She wiped her eyes quickly, as though the tears were merely an irritation, and then got to her feet briskly and said, "Right, then. No point to me just sitting about and watching you do all the work, is there? What do you want me to do"?

Harry looked at her, amazed. Was she just going to pretend that she hadn't been discussing what happened in Bulgaria and what could have happened, that she just didn't know about? Apparently she was. "Well," he started, hesitating, "we have to plant these rose bushes near the wall here; they're climbers, and eventually they'll cover the trellis. It's all just Herbology, but without the bubotuber pus making your hands swell up".

Hermione laughed; it was such a relief to hear it. "Oh, that howler! And the other letters! All those people who believed Rita Skeeter when she said that I was toying with you and Viktor!"

Harry had to smile too. "By the way," he said. "Whatever happened to Rita Skeeter"?

Hermione looked like she had just forgotten to tell him that she'd won the lottery. "Oh! Harry! Rita Skeeter! Wait till you hear!"

"I am waiting!" Harry replied in falsetto, imitating her. She threw a clod of dirt at him.

"Don't mock me. When we got to London, I took Rita home with me, but I didn't let her out yet. I wrote to Professor McGonagall and explained to her about Rita. Since she's a registered animagus, she doesn't hold much with those who want to skirt the law. Anyway, she talked to Dumbledore, and they both Apparated to my house. Mum and Dad didn't know what to think; McGonagall made like that was always how they told students that they were going to be prefects, person. Anyway, when mum and dad had left the room, I took the Unbreakable Charm off the jar I'd been keeping Rita in and I let her out of it. She was reluctant to become her human self. I think maybe she hoped that if she stayed a beetle McGonagall and Dumbledore would think I was daft and making it all up. Finally, they threatened to force her to reveal herself--you know, like Sirius and Lupin did to Wormtail--so she decided to give in, and the next thing we knew, there was Rita, sitting in my living room, looking at me. And boy, if looks could kill"...

"You did keep her in a jar eating leaves for about two weeks".

"And she maligned my and your and Viktor's good names, not to mention Hagrid. No more than she deserved; quite a little less, I think".

Harry tried not to laugh; funny, he could laugh about Rita Skeeter now. During the Triwizard Tournament he never would have believed it. "Anyway--" he prompted her.

"Anyway," Hermione continued, as though he hadn't just said the same word, "McGonagall immediately started in on her about the reasons for all Animagi to be registered, but Dumbledore stopped her and said that in covert work, having an unregistered animagus on your side could be very advantageous".

"Well, he was referring to Sirius, obviously".

"Yes. But he was also making a proposal to her; he said, 'If you don't mind taking orders from an obsolete dingbat, I've got a job for you.' She didn't want to get fined or even jailed for the unregistered Animagus business, so she listened to what he had to say, and"--

"And what? What's he having her do"?

Her face fell. "That's just it. I don't know. He made me leave the room with McGonagall, so she could keep an eye on me and make sure I didn't find some way to eavesdrop. When we went back to the living room they were already gone, and then McGonagall said congratulations on being a prefect, I'd get an official letter, and she'd see me in the fall".

"Then what"?

"Then nothing. She was gone. Poof".

Harry frowned. "And how does Dumbledore know that Rita Skeeter will do the right thing? That she's not an unregistered Animagus so that she can work for Voldemort"?

"Well, I think she just did it because it makes it possible for her to get all those scoops. It's a great way to be a fly on the wall--or beetle, rather. And I don't know how Dumbledore knows what her loyalties are. We keep wondering why he trusts Snape, but that hasn't blown up in his face".

“Yet”.

“Oh, Harry. You have no idea. Snape was actually very--nice when he came to Bulgaria. He seemed very concerned about me. I half expected him to take points from Gryffindor for me being stupid enough to get myself kidnapped. But he didn't ream me out at all. He really let Viktor have it for not keeping an eye on me, though”...

“And why did Sirius say Viktor thwarted the kidnapping? It sounds like you were returned. Like they kidnapped you and then changed their minds”.

“Oh, Viktor said that he was in the marketplace waiting outside the vegetable stall just when those two wizards aimed their wands at me. He did a very fast stunning spell on both of them, and then put a full-body bind on them both and left them there. He took me back to his parents' house, but it took until morning before whatever they'd done to me wore off. When Sirius got to the vegetable stall, they were gone, though”.

“Or at least, that's Viktor's story”.

She nodded grimly. “Or at least that's his story. Don't think I haven't thought about that, Harry. I mean, I was having a good time with Viktor in Sofia, he was...” she looked down and colored, “...sort of...you know, my first boyfriend...” she avoided looking at him. “But I suppose I don't...I don't really feel about him the way he feels about me. It's just a--” but she turned even redder and didn't finish.

“Just a what?” Harry suddenly very much wanted to know. Hermione looked up at him.

“It doesn't matter. What does matter is that I've got a real problem now”.

“More of a problem than almost being abducted by dark wizards working for Lucius Malfoy”?

“It could be all the same problem. Like you said, Viktor's version of how things went--that's his story, and no one can corroborate it. Maybe they meant all along for me to be returned. Maybe even now I'm under some kind of spell and don't know it. I don't feel like I am, but you never know...The problem I'm talking about is how to get rid of Viktor”.

“You want to kill Viktor?” Harry said, shocked.

She threw another clod of dirt at him. “No, you stupid--I mean, he thinks of us as girlfriend and boyfriend now. He's going to come to Hogsmeade when we have weekend visits. And I can't break up with him and I can't stay with him”!

“What?” Harry sputtered, confused.

“See, if I break up with him, he might be angry. I've seen him angry. And he was trained in the Dark Arts, don't forget. I hate to think what he'd do if I broke up with him and he became--agitated. But I can't just stay with him because I'm afraid of how he'll respond if I break up with him. That'd be daft. But if I broke up with him and someone like Lucius Malfoy wanted him to work for him, he might be angry enough that he wouldn't need to be coerced. Plus, as we've already seen, he's not at all able to fight the Imperious Curse. You told me how Moody--I mean Crouch--put the Imperious Curse on me in the maze, and he turned right around and put the Cruciatius Curse on Cedric. He was very easily manipulated. And although I don't have any proof, that could have been what happened in Bulgaria, as well. At least, I'd rather believe that he did that while cursed than voluntarily, if he did cooperate with Lucius' underlings. Let's just say that being with Viktor doesn't exactly make me feel safe and well-protected. Here I feel safe”.

“Here?” Harry was mystified.

She looked at him with her eyes narrowed. “You don't know, do you? Ever since you were a baby, there have been charms protecting your house for several blocks around. It's impossible to Apparate in and out, or even to use a Portkey. Snape had one we used to come back to your village, but we had to land about a mile away. I'm not convinced the protection reaches that far, but he wanted to play it safe. That's why we were knackered when we got here last night--it was late, I was hauling my trunk, and Snape wouldn't let Sirius put a spell on it to make it lighter”.

Harry was puzzled. “Once, the Weasleys came by Floo Powder. They got the living room fireplace temporarily added to the Floo Network, got special permission from the Ministry of Magic. Of course, it didn't work too well, since the fireplace is boarded up..”.

"But, see? They had to get special permission to do that. There are also Dark Magic detectors all over the place here. Why do you think Voldemort or his Death Eaters haven't just come here to get you"?

Harry pulled a face. "I guess I always thought they were repulsed by the prospect of meeting the Dursleys." They both laughed then, and decided to finally get to work.

* * * * *

It was nice to have someone to work with again, after Dick, and Hermione wasn't afraid to get dirty or do heavy lifting, although he tried to spare her the worst of it. For the rest of the week, Hermione went running with them in the morning and worked with Harry in the garden the rest of the day. After the second day, Dudley noticed Hermione on her hands and knees in the garden, and volunteered to come help them. Harry understood why, but he didn't mind. He couldn't blame Dudley, really. Although it was more than a little disturbing when Hermione got rather--flirty with him. He'd never seen her do that. She'd gotten rather silly at times when she was around Gilderoy Lockhart, during second year, but she'd only been twelve then.

With all three of them working, the garden was soon done, and Harry collected his last five pounds from his aunt. Now, after morning runs, he went into the garden to do some basic watering and weeding, but otherwise had the rest of the day free. He and Hermione worked on some summer homework, sitting on benches under the new arbor, while Dudley sat nearby, playing video games on a small hand-held unit. Sometimes he let Harry or Hermione use it when they were tired of working; he seemed to feel it was quite necessary to hang over Hermione's shoulder when it was her turn.

At the end of the third week of August, Aunt Petunia was being quite petulant at dinner. She started muttering under her breath about cooking for an extra person, pointedly looking at Hermione. Figuring that he'd made all the money he was going to from the garden (and having spent most of it) Harry felt compelled to defend Hermione.

"She cleans her own room and does her own laundry. Plus, her parents gave you a pretty hefty check"...

But suddenly, Dudley was shouting hotly at his mother, "You leave Hermione alone! She's the most--the most"--

"Dudley!" his mother exclaimed reproachfully. His father glowered at him.

"Don't forget, boy!" he growled. "She may look normal, but she's a--a--one of those!" his father sputtered.

"Say it, Dad! Just say it! She's a witch! A witch! Why won't you just talk about it normally? Harry's a wizard and Hermione's a witch, and they call us Muggles! They fly around on broomsticks and--and--at least she's not something beginning with a B that rhymes with witch!" he finished, looked pointedly at his mother before storming out of the room.

"Dudley!" both of his parents exclaimed.

After Dudley left the room, it was very quiet. Harry and Hermione glanced furtively at each other, continuing to eat their food quietly. The silence was deafening. Harry was reminded uncomfortably of his birthday. What had gotten into Dudley lately? he wondered. It wasn't just Hermione's arrival, either; this had been going on all summer. Oh, well, Harry thought, suppose most fifteen-year-old boys rebel against their parents in some way. He tried to imagine what he would have been like if he'd been raised by his own parents, how he would relate to them now that he was in his mid-teens. Try as he might, he couldn't imagine being anything but relieved to have parents. Perhaps that was the problem, he thought. Most teenagers just didn't know what it was like to not have parents at all. Although in Dudley's case, in Harry's opinion, he'd have been lucky to know what that was like. He tried then to imagine the scenario that Dudley had raised before, Harry's parents living and taking in Dudley in the event that something happened to Petunia and Vernon. He couldn't imagine anything better than he could imagine rebelling against the parents he had never had a chance to know.

Perhaps because they had a guest--even though his aunt was already being rude to her--Harry's aunt and uncle didn't say another word. Before they had a chance to rise from the table, however, Hermione spoke.

"Don't worry about the clearing up, Mrs. Dursley. Harry and I will do it. And I would also like to make a special dinner for my last night here, as a thank you for letting me stay. I took a course with this amazing chef in Athens while we were in Greece in July...please say yes," she said sweetly, looking at them both placatingly. Harry's uncle squirmed uncomfortably and looked at his wife.

"All right," he said, rising from the table. Petunia Dursley followed him out of the room, looking rather hurt still about Dudley's outburst. Harry and Hermione cleared the table and stood together at the sink to wash and dry the dishes. Harry heard the television come on in the living room.

"Cooking class while on vacation? Are you never not going to school?" he asked her. She laughed and splashed him with some suds. He splashed her back, and it threatened to become a free-for-all, but Sandy (under his shirt sleeve, where his aunt and uncle had been unaware of her) said that his aunt was coming into the room, so Harry stopped abruptly and whispered to Hermione, "Aunt Petunia's coming".

She looked at him quizzically, then turned and looked at the doorway. Nothing happened. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"Give it a minute," Harry whispered, wiping dishes. Hermione counted to sixty under her breath, and when she reached sixty-one, Aunt Petunia came into the kitchen. She looked at Harry again, almost scared.

"How did you know--" she started to whisper, but Aunt Petunia had other ideas.

"The two of you had better not break anything!" she exclaimed shrilly, her hands on her hips. They looked at her, wide eyed, assured her that they would be careful, and she turned and left again.

Hermione looked at Harry. He avoided her eyes, wiping dishes and glasses, thinking, I've got to keep her from knowing that Sandy has the Sight...that was a little close...

The next day, after their morning run and showers, Hermione and Harry sat under the arbor in the garden while Dudley sat nearby, playing his portable computer game. Hermione had brought her notebook from the Greek cooking class and was paging through it, looking for the right recipes for the meal she was planning to serve before they left for the Burrows. She made notes on a piece of lined paper with a ball-point pen; it struck Harry that this was the first time he'd ever seen her not writing on parchment using a quill and a bottle of ink. Sometimes he forgot that she'd had a Muggle upbringing, like him.

At one point, Dudley got up to go in and get a different game, and Harry leaned back contentedly, considering the summer. "You know," he said to her, "With you here, and with Dudley being friendly to me now, it's almost like having a brother and a sister. It's nice".

He was perplexed to see the expression of appalled dismay on Hermione's face. "Sister?" she said softly. "Sister?" she repeated. Harry didn't know what to think. When Dudley returned, Hermione closed her cooking notebook and rose, saying she was going inside to read.

Harry watched her go, wondering what he'd said wrong...

After lunch, Dudley had to go shopping for his school things with his parents. As they were leaving, however, Harry's uncle suddenly looked at Harry and Hermione shrewdly, suspiciously. "I don't know whether we can trust you two here alone together..." he started to say. Hermione looked up at him brightly.

"Oh, don't worry, Mr. Dursley. We're both prefects. And we know how serious it would be to break the law against underage--you know"--

He looked at her through narrowed eyes. "That wasn't what I was talking about," he said through his teeth. Harry noticed that Hermione was flushed under her tan before she abruptly left the room. "You!" his uncle suddenly barked. "What are you going to do?"

"I was going to weed in the garden. Should take a while; dandelions are all over the place, trying to take over," Harry told him.

His uncle looked somehow unconvinced. "All right," he grumbled, and soon the Dursleys were off to buy Dudley his new Smeltings books and uniforms (the old ones would be far too large after the running he'd been doing).

Harry changed into his work clothes and went to the garden shed for a trowel and a kneeling pad. Hermione came to the back door. "Do you mind if I get some sun while you're working? I haven't been able to for a while, and I may not again since the summer's almost over".

Harry shrugged. "Sure. I don't need help with the weeding." She went back inside and Harry picked a spot to start, kneeling on the pad, pulling on gardening gloves and starting to dig out dandelion roots. (He didn't like the idea of using weed killer). A short while later, he heard the kitchen door open again and Hermione came back out. He wasn't facing the door, he was bent over a particularly annoying dandelion root which seemed to be the source for all of the weeds in the garden. Then he looked up and goggled at the sight of Hermione.

She was wearing the bikini. She spread a towel on a patch of grass and sat on it, then picked up a bottle of sunscreen to protect her skin. He tried to look away, but he always seemed to see her out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't tell where she was looking; she had her dark glasses on again. If he thought the picture in his room was amazing, it was nothing compared to live-and-in-person.

When she was done, she lay down on her back and seemed to have her eyes closed. Her arms were by her sides, her whole body seemed to glisten in the sun, and Harry felt his mouth go dry. He dragged his eyes away, looking down at the dandelion root again.

He tried to concentrate on his work, but it wasn't easy. Several times he pulled out small flowers instead of weeds, and tried to unobtrusively replace them, in case she was watching him. After a while, she sat up and then put her sunglasses up on top of her head. "Harry? Do you suppose you could help me put some sunscreen on my back?"

Harry looked at her, terrified. "On your back"?

She nodded. "I can't reach." And with that, she rolled over onto her stomach and pillowed her head on her arms. Harry took off his gardening gloves and walked over to her cautiously. He knelt by her side and picked up the bottle of sunscreen, put some on his hand, and began to rub it into the skin of her back. He sucked in his breath as he worked, trying to keep his breathing even and measured, trying not to think about how her skin felt. It was an effort not to give a sigh of relief when he was done, although he in fact felt tremendous relief. He rose to go, but she said, "I need help with the back of my legs, too".

Harry looked down at her legs, starting to feel like his head was swimming. Maybe I could fake my scar hurting right about now, he thought. That might get me out of it. But he obligingly knelt down next to her again, putting sunscreen on the backs of her legs. When he touched his fingers to the back of her left knee, she flinched and sighed. Harry drew back in alarm.

"Go on," she whispered.

"Are you okay?" he ventured.

"The backs of my knees are just--sensitive".

He tried to quickly apply sunscreen to the rest of her legs, trying to cloud his mind and ignore the sounds she made when he touched the back of her other knee, trying not to look at her at all, or linger over her skin...

He was glad to finally be done, and went back to his weeding, but it went slowly; the hot sun made him feel lightheaded and stupid, and so did the sight of Hermione, lying on the towel in her small bikini. He avoided looking at her, he thought, and yet it seemed that he spent quite a lot of time looking at her.

Finally, he was able to put away his weeding supplies, having rid the garden of dandelions once more. "I'm going in," he said when he'd locked the potting shed. He opened the kitchen door, to escape into the house, but when he looked behind him, she had already risen and wrapped the towel around her waist, carrying the bottle of sunscreen and padding after him. Her short curls looked like they'd been touched by the sun too, golden highlights glistening here and there amidst the brown. In the kitchen, they both tried to get a cold drink out of the refrigerator at the same time, and Hermione wound up standing very close to him when they'd closed the door. Her face mere inches from his, Harry looked down, then jerked his eyes back up to her face guiltily. Her eyes seemed very close to his, the whites so white they looked tinged with blue at the edges.

"Still thinking of me as your sister?" she said almost in a whisper. She turned to go then, not seeing Harry's jaw drop, as he stood there, frozen in place, trying to figure her out.

He sat down at the kitchen table, hearing the shower turn on upstairs, and then trying not to think about that. He drank several glasses of water, to avoid dehydration, trying not to think about anything at all, and succeeding in thinking of

nothing but her. When she came back downstairs, she was wearing some jeans and a simple blue blouse, looking very much like the school-year Hermione except for the new haircut and the deep tan. Her skin glowed, her hair shone, and Harry thought, why did I ever think Cho Chang was pretty? But then he was disturbed again by something: why had she flirted with Dudley?

She sat down next to him at the kitchen table, and almost before she was settled, he found himself blurting it out: "Why have you been flirting with Dudley"?

She smiled and looked down at her hands. "Only to make sure that he's another ally. When Snape told me that Dumbledore wanted us to come here, I figured it would be a good idea to--cultivate him".

Harry nodded, then couldn't stop himself as another question came bursting forth. "You do realize that Ron is very jealous of Krum, don't you?" Not that I am, he said in his head. Not that I am, not that I am...

She smiled ruefully. "Ron is an immature git. Don't get me wrong; I love him like--"and she looked pointedly at Harry-- "brother. But if he's jealous of Viktor, well...I just cannot believe the way he acted about the Yule Ball, even now. The way he finally asked me--if that could be called asking me. Hermione, you're a girl... How flattering for him to notice! At least you actually walked up to the girl you liked and asked her, and then you managed to get Parvati to go with you and fix up Ron with Padma...He didn't even get his own date! I don't think he's going to have a girlfriend for a long time....He's such a big baby, and won't say how he feels..." she trailed off, as though this were upsetting to her, but she was trying to think about it.

Suddenly she looked up at him. "Do you think you'll ever try asking Cho Chang out again"?

Harry grimaced. "Are you kidding? When I've thought about her this summer, all I can see is the way she was crying during the feast at the end of term, when we were toasting Diggory. Just buckets of it, streaming down her face. And I even had a dream that I was on a date with her; and she was saying things like, 'Oh, Harry, isn't it a good thing you got Cedric killed so we can be here like this?' So, no, I don't think I'll be asking her out again until this massive wave of guilt over Diggory passes--which will probably be never".

Hermione nodded. "I wondered whether you were convincing yourself you were responsible. Believe me, Harry, no one thinks you're to blame, not even his parents"--

He put his hand on her arm. "Save your breath, Hermione. I'm going to feel guilty about him for the rest of my life, and that's that. End of story".

She swallowed and put her hand over his. "You're still letting that eat you up, then?" He nodded, looking at the table. "Well, we need to find a way for you to think about other things, like helping me get rid of Viktor--or at least making sure we're not alone together. I know! You could go out with us in Hogsmeade"!

"You want me to go on your dates with Viktor?" He was appalled.

"Well, that might seem odd. Ron could come too. And Ginny. Maybe Parvati and Lavender, and George and Fred. We could make it a big group thing. He has a very hard time saying no to me; if I tell him that's how it's going to be, that's how it's going to be."

Harry promised to come along, and she leaned over suddenly and kissed him on the cheek, thanking him. Their faces were very close together. Suddenly, Harry stood, nearly knocking his chair over. "I--um--need to take a shower. Gardening--sweat and grime--you know--" He practically ran from the room, while he tried to convince himself he wasn't an immature git like Ron for having done that.

Just as he was passing through the front hall, the Dursleys returned. Harry told them he was about to take a shower before dinner, since the gardening was done, and Dudley said, "Does that mean Hermione's not doing anything? Hermione! Want to play Space Wars on my computer"?

Hermione came into the front hall and smiled at Dudley warmly. "I'd love to".

They all three went upstairs, Dudley and Hermione into his bedroom, and Harry into the bathroom. Standing under the spray, Harry thought again of Hermione sunning herself in the bikini, touching her skin while he was putting the sunscreen on her...But then he realized that even if Hermione were interested in him (and it was certainly starting to seem that she

was), if she was already in danger merely for being his friend, how much more dangerous would it be for her to be his girlfriend? And there was Viktor Krum to consider. And there was Ron...Hermione thought he was annoying and immature, but he could turn into quite a formidable enemy if he were angry about Harry and Hermione being together--Harry suspected he would be, if that were to happen and he found out. Then Harry would go from having two friends to having a girlfriend and yet another mortal enemy...

Harry got out of the shower with his head whirling. He dressed and went to Dudley's room, sitting on the bed and watching Hermione and Dudley at the computer, not saying anything. He felt like he was in a trance, trying to sort out his feelings and his desires, and trying to figure out if any of it was worth putting her life at even greater risk than it already was. He went down to dinner when it was time, and then he volunteered his and Hermione's services for clean-up duty again, so he could talk to her, but he couldn't seem to say anything to her that wasn't related to dishwashing and drying. She didn't talk much either, except for one time when she suddenly said, "You know, Harry, I never told you how proud I was that you stood up to Voldemort. So many adults wouldn't--or couldn't." She sounded a little like she was quoting Sirius' letter to the Dursleys--Sirius had probably said the same thing to Hermione, he supposed. He got the impression that she, however, was speaking of Viktor as one of those who couldn't or wouldn't.

They played chess in the living room after cleaning up, while the rest of the family watched an American comedy on the television, the laugh track filling the empty spaces in conversations so that no one felt compelled to talk. It was strange now, Harry thought, to be playing chess and not having the pieces moving of their own volition...

After they finished the game (Harry won; he played a lot of chess with Ron, so he was used to having to work hard at it but not used to winning) they said goodnight to the others and went upstairs. In the hall between their rooms, Hermione suddenly leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek again. Harry swallowed, looking at her in terror, then tentatively leaned over and also kissed her on the cheek. She sighed.

"I suppose that if you want to think of me as your sister..." she trailed off. Harry grinned at her and whispered, "Too late" then forced himself to go into his room, after seeing her smile and blush in a satisfied-looking way, forcing himself not to step across the small hall and behave toward her in a far less brotherly fashion...

The next day would be their last before going to the Burrow. After the morning run, Hermione, Harry and Dudley went to the store to buy the ingredients she needed to make dinner. She wanted their help carrying it all back to the house. After lunch, she shut everyone out of the kitchen and started working on the meal. When it was close to time, Harry and Dudley moved the table and chairs out into the garden for the al fresco meal, per her instructions. When Hermione finally called them all to dinner, they were stunned. She had made sautéed mushroom caps with roasted peppers, olive tapenade, pesto and melted Gruyere cheese; a salad of wild greens with a balsamic vinaigrette; leg of lamb with sautéed spinach and truffle risotto; and chocolate gâteau with Turkish coffee for dessert, plus fruit and cheese besides.

It was by far the most elegant meal any of them had ever eaten. Petunia and Vernon seemed to have forgotten who had made it and went into raptures over every mouthful; Dudley was thrilled to be rid of celery and lettuce; and Harry thought she should teach the house elves at school how to make this...then tried not to laugh at the thought of the house elves allowing themselves to be taught recipes by the mad reformer, Hermione Granger, who scandalized them every time she called their situation enslavement.

After dinner, Harry and Hermione cleaned up again. It seemed that she had used every pot in the kitchen. When they were done, it was only just getting dark, so they went out to sit in the garden, settling on the bench under the arbor. It seemed natural for Harry to put his right arm along the back of the bench behind her shoulders, then to bring his hand to rest lightly on her bare shoulder, stroking her soft skin lightly, moving his fingers in circles. Hermione leaned her head on his right shoulder, resting her left arm on his leg, as they listened to the symphony of the crickets and watched the pink glow fade from the sky and become sapphire velvet. Harry wasn't sure how long they were sitting like this when he looked down at her and saw her looking up at him. He couldn't think of anything to say; he didn't want to talk, and he hoped she didn't either. Then he knew what he wanted to do, knew it more clearly than he'd ever known anything before. Their mouths gradually grew closer and closer; he could feel her warm breath, smelling of chocolate and coffee, and he felt his lips begin to brush hers.

"A large black dog is coming".

Harry started, pulling away from her. Sandy had spoken under the loose sleeve of his T-shirt. He looked around the garden, left and right, and over his shoulder. Then he looked back at Hermione, who seemed more than a little annoyed.

“What is it?” she said, an edge to her voice.

“Sirius is coming,” he said simply, still looking around, trying to see his godfather, wondering whether he was already there and had seen them. He removed his arm from around her and crossed his arms over his chest. Hermione crossed her own arms, frowning; he thought it was possible she assumed he was just making excuses. But then, after another minute, glittering eyes appeared around the corner of the potting shed, and a large black dog came padding over to them quietly. Hermione looked at Harry again, annoyed and perplexed.

“You keep doing that”!

* * * * *

Chapter Four: Padfoot and the Knight Bus

Sirius sat down next to the bench, letting Harry and Hermione pet him. Hermione still looked at Harry with suspicion, he thought. Suddenly, the human form of Harry’s godfather stood next to them. Sirius sat down on the bench next to Harry.

“Are you both ready to go? I’ve been to the Burrow--Ron and the rest of his family are fine. Bill and Charlie are still there.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “We know. Ron’s not too happy about it”.

“Yes. He feels like they’re babysitting him”.

“So he’s just feeling like they’re treating him like a baby?” Hermione asked. “He’s just fine?” She didn’t sound happy about this somehow. “I wrote to him while we were traveling--but he never wrote back, not once”.

Sirius looked at her levelly. “Well, he asked me about how you were doing. Not in the friendliest of ways, mind you. So I told him about the abduction. Then he seemed very concerned”...

Hermione looked very interested in this. Harry sat back and frowned. “Really? What did he say?” she wanted to know.

“Say? He didn’t say anything. But--I could tell he was concerned, all the same”. Sirius looked at her again, then at Harry who grimaced. Sirius looked perplexed. He decided to change the subject.

“As you know, I’ll be coming with you on the Knight Bus--they allow pets--so you won’t be traveling alone. However; we’re going to have to walk nearly a mile away to get it. The protective charms around here have been enlarged. The bus apparates; it won’t be able to get any closer than that”.

So Snape wasn’t just overcompensating by setting them down in the village, Harry thought. Just a couple of years ago, he was able to get the Knight Bus over on Magnolia Crescent, a few blocks away...

Sirius changed back into a dog and went into the house with them. Dudley was in the kitchen, looking guilty about having his face in the refrigerator.

“Oh, hello, just looking to see if there was more of that chocolate--I mean, more fruit”...

Then he saw the large black dog with them. “Oh! Your godfather’s here already”.

Harry put his finger up to his lips. “Shhh! We’re going to get our trunks. We have to go”.

“I’ll help you with yours, Hermione!” he said enthusiastically. Hermione smile at him, and they left the room. Harry patted Sirius on the head.

“Wait here”.

Sirius seemed to nod. When Harry had thumped his trunk down the stairs, and gone back to get Hedwig in her cage, he waited in the hall. Dudley was carrying Hermione’s trunk down, looking as though he were going to pitch down the stairs at any second. Harry’s aunt and uncle stood in the living room doorway, looking as grumpy as ever, despite their good dinner.

“Can I come with you?” Dudley asked Harry.

His parents cried together, “Dudley!”

“I don’t mean go to his school”--

Sirius came padding down the hall from the kitchen and changed into his human form, making Petunia scream and hide again. “I think what he means is he’d like to see them off. That’s fine, but we have to walk about a mile away first”.

Hermione looked down at her trunk uncertainly. “It was awfully tiring to drag this here when I came, Sirius. Do you think you could”--

Sirius smiled at her. “All right. We’ll do it here, instead of outside. Wingardium Leviosa,” he said softly, tapping each of the trunks lightly. Petunia screamed again, not knowing what to expect; magic in her house! But all that happened was that each trunk now levitated about an inch off the floor, as though on very small wheels that couldn’t be seen.

Hermione nodded to the Dursleys. “Thank you for having me, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley”.

Harry nodded curtly at them. “Bye,” was all he said. Sirius changed into a dog again; Petunia screamed again. Dudley frowned at his mother.

“Get a grip,” he said to her, then opened the door. The four of them left, Harry and Hermione pulling their gently floating trunks behind them easily, Sirius padding before them. After about twenty minutes, Sirius sat down suddenly and looked at Harry and nodded. Harry took his wand out of the holster on the belt he’d gotten from Ron and put his arm out as if to hail a cab.

There was a very loud, abrupt BANG and a glaring light seemed to come from nowhere. Dudley and Hermione both screamed; neither of them had known what to expect. Dudley pulled Hermione’s trunk up a dark driveway, and Hermione followed with it, since she was still holding onto the other handle. There appeared before them all, in the middle of the quiet suburban street, a triple-decker, very purple bus, where there had been nothing a moment before. Over the windshield gold lettering proclaimed The Knight Bus.

Harry and Sirius walked calmly up to the bus, and after a moment, feeling a bit ridiculous, Hermione took her floating trunk over to where they stood, this time dragging Dudley reluctantly with her. He was shaking.

The conductor stepped off of the bus, his uniform as violently purple as the vehicle, and began his usual speech: “Welcome to the Knight Bus, emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard. Just stick out your wand hand”--

“Hello, Stan,” said Harry with a smile, having heard his spiel before. Stan Shunpike stopped talking with a look of recognition.

“Harry! Harry Potter, as I live and breath”!

“Shhh!” Harry swiftly silenced him. “Quiet, or I may not go on living and breathing”.

Stan winked at him. “Oh, I see. Traveling incognito again, are we? Being Neville Longbottom again, are we?” Another wink. “I’m with you. Hello, Neville Longbottom,” he suddenly said very loudly. “And who is this with you”?

“This is my cousin Dudley. And this is--Lavender Brown”.

“Come on aboard!” Stan exclaimed.

Hermione looked at him quizzically. “Neville? Lavender”?

“Yeah, I thought I told you, a couple of years ago”...

“Haven’t got all night, Neville and Lavender,” Stan said even louder than before, winking very broadly and smiling conspiratorially. “You goin’ to London”?

"No. To the Burrow. That's near Ottery St. Catchpole." Harry opened his trunk and removed his money bag. "How much did you ask for?" Harry asked Stan.

"Right. Let me take your trunks on board and check the rate schedule." He took out his wand and waved it carelessly toward their trunks and Hedwig's cage. "Second level all right?" Harry nodded. While the trunks moved up into the bus on their own, Dudley goggled and Stan consulted a small booklet he pulled out of his pocket. "Here we are: fifteen Sickles for the trunks but for seventeen you get 'ot chocolate, an' for nineteen"--

"That's okay Stan. That comes to thirty silver Sickles for the two of us, right? Here's two Galleons," and he handed two large gold coins to Stan.

"Your change," Stan said, taking the Galleons and returning to Harry four silver Sickles, which Harry put into his money bag.

"My--dog can come, right?" He looked at Sirius. He didn't notice Dudley trying to see what else was in Harry's money bag.

"Sure. All aboard!" Harry and Sirius climbed the steps, but Dudley put his hand on Hermione's arm.

"Write to me?" he asked her throatily. She nodded at him and leaned in to kiss him on the cheek.

"Of course, Dudley. Good bye." And she turned to go up the steps. Harry leaned out one of the curtained windows on the second level.

"What about your parents, Dud? They'll freak about the owls".

"Write to me at school; they'll never know".

"Bye!" Harry called to him, feeling for the first time in his life that he might actually miss him.

"Bye!" Dudley called, waving. Stan Shunpike stood next to the brass bedstead Harry had chosen. Hermione had placed her trunk at the foot of the bed next to his, and Sirius had lain down on the floor between the two beds.

"Harry--I mean, Neville--is that bloke a Muggle? Is he okay"?

"He's fine, Stan. A couple of months ago, I wouldn't have said that, but yes; he's fine".

Stan went back down the stairs to sit in an armchair next to the one the driver, Ernie Prang, was seated in. There was another earthshattering BANG and Harry and Hermione both found themselves on the floor, narrowly missing Sirius, thrown by the speed of the Knight Bus.

Outside in the street, Dudley fell backward onto a very green lawn, and somehow triggered the automatic sprinkler system. He sat, sprawled, oblivious to being watered along with the rest of the grass, saying only, "Wow"....

* * * * *

Harry and Hermione recovered from the bumpy start and lay down on their respective beds. Harry reached down his hand to idly pet Sirius. Hermione looked out the curtained windows, fascinated by the landscape going by; one moment they seemed to be in Manchester, the next in Edinburgh, then Bath....Harry smiled, watching her face. Here she was, having known for four years that she was a witch, and these things still amazed her. But then Harry had to smile to himself. With all her reading, she probably knows about more amazing things than I do. Then he thought about other things he knew that she didn't, like what it felt like to have Voldemort put the Cruciatus Curse on him, and he looked up at her again at her innocent enjoyment of the passing scenery, her shock each time the bus made a leap. I hope she never knows the kind of pain, he thought. Or Ron.

Harry put his head down on his arms and closed his eyes. It seemed that he'd hardly been lying there like that for a moment when he heard Stan Shunpike come up the stairs bellowing, "Next stop: the Burrow"!

"That's us! Hermione said excitedly, jumping up and grabbing her trunk, not even bothering to ask Sirius to float it again. "Oh, Harry, you never told me what this was like! It's incredible"!

With a BANG! the bus was driving along a quiet, dark country lane, then came to a halt. Harry smiled at her. "We should go." He picked up Hedwig's cage and dragged his trunk to the stairs. When Stan saw them coming, he levitated the trunk again, and they were able to just walk calmly down the stairs, following their belongings. Sirius padded after them. Harry checked his watch; it was only eleven o'clock at night. He looked up and saw one of the most comforting sights he knew of: the Burrow, home to the Weasley family. It looked like it ought to by rights be falling down, but Harry knew that magic prevented that, and that it was much larger on the inside than it looked from the outside.

Lights still glowed in most of the windows, and the Weasleys had probably not been able to ignore the noise of the bus arrival. Sure enough, the kitchen door opened and Ginny came out into the garden, breaking into a smile when she saw Harry.

Harry immediately got his own smile upon seeing her; she had become so tall and beautiful! he thought. She was wearing a simple summer dress, blue with a fitted waist and bodice, modestly covering her knees. She ran across the grass barefoot to greet him, and he ran to meet her halfway, still smiling, and surprised her by throwing his arms around her in a greeting hug, and twirling her around while she put her arms around his neck and laughed. He put her down, grinning at her--she was just slightly taller than him, now--thinking, It felt wonderful to hold her! Even in the moonlight, he could see that Ginny's face was as red as her hair. Over her shoulder, he saw Hermione climbing down from the bus, frowning at them. He looked back to Ginny.

"Hello, Ginny! It's wonderful to see you. Thank you for my birthday present," he added, taking the basilisk amulet out of his shirt to show her. She smiled, looking thrilled.

"Well, you know, Ron said you'd gotten a snake"--

"Oh, right! This is Sandy." He took off his black denim jacket; he was wearing a black T-shirt from which he'd removed the sleeves, and showed her the small green garden snake curled around his upper arm just above his elbow. Ginny stepped forward tentatively and stroked Sandy.

"She feels nice," she whispered. Then she moved her fingers up to Harry's upper arm, above where Sandy was coiled, tracing the outline of the newly-visible muscles there, but she abruptly pulled her hand back guiltily and looked up at Harry. Their faces seemed very close together, and his skin was tingling where she'd stroked his arm.

What is this? Harry wondered. Earlier, Hermione and I almost--and now Ginny looks so nice, and I really enjoyed holding her, and--

The door opened again and Ron Weasley came into the garden. Both Harry and Ginny jumped, and pointedly separated themselves. Hermione walked over to them and nodded at Ginny, not smiling.

"Hello, Ginny".

Ginny looked perplexed by the cold greeting and said hello in return. Harry greeted Ron, who responded normally enough, but then there was another cold, awkward greeting between Ron and Hermione, who could best be described as grunting at each other. Ginny looked at them quizzically, then at Harry, who raised his eyebrows and shrugged. He was playing dumb; he knew perfectly well that Ron was still seething about Hermione going to visit Viktor Krum, especially since she was almost kidnapped. Snape may not have lectured her for what happened, but Ron probably would, Harry thought.

He turned to say good bye to Sirius, but he'd gone already. Then, without warning, the Knight Bus went BANG! again and disappeared from sight. The four of them turned and walked through the kitchen garden, Ginny and Ron carrying Harry's trunk and Harry and Hermione carrying hers. When they were inside the house, Harry was immediately hugged by Mrs. Weasley, and thumped on the back in turn by Mr. Weasley and his sons. Bill was every bit as cool as Harry remembered him, from his long red ponytail and fang earring to his ripped rock-star clothes and dragon-skin boots.

"Hello, Harry. How's it going? And--" Bill suddenly stopped. "Hello, Hermione," Bill said slowly, drawing it out, looking her up and down in a way that Ron and Harry didn't like. She smiled at him and tossed her short curls.

"Hello, Bill. How're the goblins"?

“Oh, annoying as hell. But what you gonna do?” They smiled at each other, and Harry followed her eyes; she was now looking appreciatively at Bill the way he’d looked at her. He wanted to find some way to break this up, but this was so unexpected he was at a loss. Suddenly, Fred and George came bounding over.

“Hey, wow, Hermione! Do you look great!” George said brightly, and Fred gave a loud wolf whistle. All three of them laughed. Both Fred and George didn’t mince words; nor did they skulk around making eyes at girls. They were as straightforward as they came.

Hermione laughed. “Thanks. How’ve you been”?

“Oh, sod us. What’s it like being the girlfriend of a world-famous Quidditch player?” Fred wanted to know. At the mention of Viktor, Ron’s face went very dark and he mumbled something and left the kitchen.

“Oh, um, it’s fine,” she stammered.

Charlie came over to Harry and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “But,” he said to the twins, “did Viktor Krum think to fly get past his dragon? Did Viktor Krum win the Triwizard Tournament”?

Everyone was silent. Then Harry said quietly to Charlie, “I’d rather not talk about that”.

Charlie backed off. “Oh, sorry, I’ve really put my foot in it”...

“Open mouth, insert foot!” Fred and George howled in unison.

“Now, now,” Mrs. Weasley said, trying to get her sons to settle down. “Don’t pester Harry and Hermione. Let them get settled in their rooms.” She turned to Hermione. “And you might not see Crookshanks until the morning, dear. He’s out hunting. But he’s been good as gold all summer.” She levitated the trunks again. “There you go, dears. They’ll just about fly up the stairs with you”.

Ginny walked up the stairs and Hermione followed with her trunk. Ginny looked over her shoulder at Hermione, making a puzzled face. Ron led Harry up the stairs, glaring at Hermione’s back and muttering. Well, thought Harry, so far no one mad at me. He watched Hermione go into Ginny’s room and the door close. He and Ron continued up to the top of the house, to the slightly cramped space that Ron had completely plastered with posters featuring the Chudley Cannons, Ron’s favorite Quidditch Team, giving the room a distinctly orange hue.

“Where’s Percy?” Harry thought to ask when they were in Ron’s room with the door closed. Ron flopped on one of the beds. “On a date. Should be back soon, too, or he’ll catch it. Even if he is out of school, Mum says as long as he’s still living under this roof—you remember Penelope Clearwater? She was a Ravenclaw prefect”?

“Sure”.

“Well, she’s in an entry-level position at Witch Weekly, editorial assistant or something. I think her job consists of fetching pumpkin juice for meetings and helping vote for the most charming smile prize; did you notice Gilderoy Lockhart is still winning that every year? They stopped going out for a while after they finished school, but then they ran into each other at a party and they’ve been together again ever since. She’s got her own flat in a village in Dorchester; makes Mum very antsy”...

Harry had been sitting on the other bed quietly, trying to pay attention to Ron, but his mind was wandering....

“So what do you think, Harry? Harry”?

“Huh?” Harry said in confusion. “Sorry, I must be tired”...

“I said, are Hermione and Krum still a couple? She told me about his job with the Cannons. Can you believe it”?

Harry considered his words carefully. “Well, she doesn’t want to stay with him. She says she doesn’t feel about him the way he feels about her.” Ron looked pretty happy about this, but like he was trying to hide it. “And she said she doesn’t feel safe with him. You know, the whole abduction thing”.

"I know!" Ron exclaimed, springing to his feet and pacing back and forth as well as he could considering that he had to stoop over half the time; he was now over six feet tall, and the slanted ceiling sloped down to four feet at the exterior wall. "He should have been taking better care of her! After all, he's of age, he can use magic any time he wants, she can't! What was he thinking"?

Harry didn't tell him that Hermione thought it was possible that Viktor Krum had actually been cooperating with the kidnappers. "Yeah, well, she said that Snape reamed him out about that already".

"Snape"?

"He was meeting with Sirius in Bulgaria. And he brought Hermione and her parents to my house. You should have seen me jump when I opened the door and saw him there".

Ron laughed. "Yes! I wish I could have seen your face!" He held his stomach and rolled onto the bed, then sat up and looked at Harry again. "So, she's going to break up with him".

He explained Hermione's predicament to him, and the plan for the dates to become more like group outings. "I told her to go in. Do you think you and Ginny can come too, and maybe Fred and George"?

"Probably. Except for George. He's going with Angelina now".

"Angelina? Didn't she go to the Yule Ball with Fred"?

"Yeah, and they went out a little after that, but then one time the two of them swapped--you know, a twin thing, just to be funny--and it turned out she liked George better. Fred was cool about it".

"Do they still--swap"?

"Don't know. Angelina would know, though. She obviously saw some kind of difference between them, to decide she liked George better".

Harry suddenly felt very tired. "Are we leaving early for Diagon Alley?" He undressed and got into his bed. Ron did likewise.

"Right after breakfast. Floo powder. But it shouldn't take too long. When we get back, let's play some Quidditch; with Bill and Charlie here, we can have four to a side, if Hermione plays".

"You think she will? She hates riding on broomsticks. And wouldn't Ginny have to play, too"?

"Oh, Ginny'll play. You've never seen her play, have you?" Harry shook his head. Ron grinned, but immediately looked like he was trying hard not to. Harry wondered why. "Well, good night," he said abruptly, switching off the light.

* * * * *

Chapter Five: The Ringer

The next morning, they all kept bumping into each other while preparing to go to Diagon Alley. After they'd eaten, they each had to step into the kitchen fireplace one by one after Mrs. Weasley had thrown in a pinch of floo powder, then they had to yell loudly, "Diagon Alley!" and make sure they got out at the right grate. Mrs. Weasley was staying at home with Charlie; Bill was accompanying them on their shopping. He went first, followed by Ron, Ginny, Harry, George, Hermione and Fred. Mr. Weasley and Percy had already apparated to work at the Ministry of Magic; they'd had to walk out to the back lane to do it, though, since the house was now an apparition-free zone.

They all landed with a thump in Madam Malkin's robe shop. Hermione was the only one who didn't need all new robes; she just wanted one nice one for feasts and dates.

"I haven't grown any taller in the previous year," she sighed. "I guess I've just stopped"...

"You look fine to me," Bill told her smiling. Hermione turned away, reddening. Harry got a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach and felt, for the first time since he'd known him, an almost irresistible urge to kick Bill in his dragon skin boot-covered shins.

George and Fred were going into their seventh year. "We should look really naff, last year," Fred said. "Go out with a bang." They had the Triwizard Tournament winnings Harry had given them, and they'd invested some of it, to make sure they wouldn't spend it and it would be there for them when they finished school (their father's idea). But some of it they just want to spend. Fred and George started looking at the nicest robes in the shop, and Harry joined them, thinking that would look better for his prefect badge to be on some really nice robes...He hadn't mentioned being a prefect--nor had Hermione--since arriving at the Burrow. After the way Percy had behaved while a prefect, he didn't want the Weasleys to think he was full of himself. Harry felt Ron's eyes on him while he and Ginny sorted through the second-hand robes; both of them had grown quite a bit in the previous year. Ginny towered over Hermione.

But first, Harry needed to get some money out of the bank. He told Bill he was going to Gringott's, and Bill started to come with him. Harry stopped him. "Shouldn't you stay with them?"

Bill looked back and forth between Harry and his siblings, torn. "Listen," Harry said. "I'll be at Gringott's. You work there with the Goblins all over the place. I'll be fine. Stay with them," he said, nodding at Hermione and the others. Bill relented and nodded at him.

"Hurry back".

He did, and then stood for what felt like an excruciating length of time having his new robes measured. These were by far the nicest robes he'd ever had; looking at himself in the mirror, he felt strangely grown up, and realized he looked even more like his father than ever. I really need that haircut, Harry thought, so I'll look like me instead. The mirror yelled back at him after a time, "All right! All right! You look gorgeous! Sheesh, give it a rest!"

After robes, they went to Flourish and Blotts for their books. In addition to *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5*, and other fifth-year versions of books they'd already been studying for the previous four years, Harry and Hermione also needed *Taking the O.W.L.s: Preparing Yourself for the Worst Experience of Your Life*, by Eglantine Etude. Fred and George gave Ron the copy they'd used (they had shared it) and this year they were going to share Percy's old copy of *Taking the Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests (N.E.W.T.s): And You Thought the O.W.L.s Were Bad*, again by Eglantine Etude. Harry also noticed that the Sweetbriar Publishing Anthology of Muggle Literature was on the fifth-year list, and he picked up a copy. It had quite a lot in it: plays (Shakespeare, Shaw, Chekhov), some short stories, (*The Lottery*, *Gift of Magi*) and even entire novels (*Lord of the Flies*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*). He wondered what class it was for; it would make good reading, in any case, Harry thought. It was like a whole library by itself, somehow magically packed into one average-sized book. He noticed that Ron crossed it off his list, but didn't buy it.

When they had replenished their potions supplies at the apothecary, they decided to get lunch at an outdoor cafe. But on the way, they passed Quality Quidditch Supplies. Fred and George stopped, their faces glued to the window glass, then they turned to look at each other, nodded, and told the others to wait for them.

"We'll be right back," said George.

About ten minutes later, Fred and George emerged from the shop carrying four long packages. They handed two of them to Ron and Ginny. "Belated birthday presents! From your loving brothers!" Fred told them.

"My birthday was three-and-a-half months ago," complained Ron. "And you forgot it entirely!"

"I hope it's better than my not-belated birthday present..." Ginny began.

"That's what you get for having April Fool's Day for your birthday, Gin," George said. "Open it!"

She and Ron tore the paper off their packages. Inside were brand new, shining Nimbus 2001 brooms. Ginny exclaimed over hers. "The top of the line is the Nimbus 2003 now. And the Firebolt, of course. But these are a damn sight better than what you've been riding," said Fred. "Don't worry; we didn't get ourselves Nimbus 2003's or Firebolts. Ours are the same as yours. Otherwise we couldn't have afforded four of them. These are marked down now".

Ginny hugged Fred and George in turn. "Oh, it's beautiful! Thank you! Thank you!" Then she paused. "Do you have any money left now?"

Fred and George looked at each other. "Actually, no. But we could wait until we get home to have lunch"...

"No need," Harry said magnanimously. "Lunch is on me"!

Ron was still staring at his unwrapped Nimbus 2001, open mouthed. "I've never had a new broom before"...

Fred came over to him. "Well, like I said, it's not top of the line, but"--

Ron looked up, his face shining. "I don't care. Thanks, Fred! And you, George".

His brothers looked at his face and laughed. "You're welcome, Ron," Fred said. Ron was still gazing rapturously at his new broom. Fred cleared his throat. "You sure you two wouldn't like to be alone? A little soft music, some wine"...

They all laughed and Ron coloured, putting the packaging back on the broom to protect it. He cradled it in his arms like was a baby as they walked to the cafe.

They spent a good deal of time at lunch, the seven of them laughing and talking, several overlapping conversations going on simultaneously while they ate. Harry almost didn't notice a very pretty girl with chin-length shining black hair standing next to his chair until he rose to throw out his trash and almost knocked her over.

"Oh! I didn't see you there!" he said to her, trying to recover his balance. It was Cho Chang, the sixth-year Ravenclaw Seeker. Harry recognized some other Ravenclaws, holding shopping bags from Madam Malkin's and Flourish and Blott standing a few yards away. "How are you?" he asked her, trying to shut out the feeling of overwhelming guilt again, the image of Cedric's lifeless body....

"Can I talk to you alone for a minute, Harry?" Cho asked him. He looked uncertainly at Bill.

"I'll stay in sight," he informed Bill, and he led her over to an empty table out of earshot of the others. He noticed Hermione and Ginny watching them. "What's up?" he asked her when they were at the empty table.

She took a deep breath, as though what she were going to do took a great deal of courage. "Harry--on our first weekend trip to Hogsmeade, would you like to go out with me"?

Harry groaned inwardly; a year ago, he'd have given anything to hear her say those words. Then came the Triwizard Tournament....He drew his mouth into a line, trying to think of the most painless way to let her down, other than the truth. "Sorry, I can't go out with you because every time I see you I suffer from crushing, paralyzing, debilitating guilt on account of it's my fault your previous boyfriend is dead.

He cast about for some excuse, some way out of this extremely awkward situation, when he had a sudden brainstorm. "Sure," he said to her. "Only, could we double-date with Viktor Krum and Hermione? Her folks are a little nervous about her dating someone who's already out of school, and this way they won't be alone"....

"Double date?" she echoed, considering this proposal. "Well, all right. I suppose so." She looked over at the other Ravenclaws, who were waving her on. "Oh, I have to be going now. I'll see you on the train"?

"Probably," Harry replied. "Until tomorrow"!

She smiled shyly at him. "Until tomorrow." She rejoined her friends, who huddled around her, obviously getting the lowdown on what happened between the two of them. Harry returned to the table and picked up the bill, getting out his money bag to pay it, since he'd already promised he would. He calmly gave the waitress five gold Galleons; he wanted to leave her a generous tip after what Fred and George had put her through. Bill, meantime, had gotten her name so he could owl her.

Hermione couldn't take it anymore. Finally she burst out at him, "Well? What was all that about"?

Harry smiled at her. "That was me being sneaky. She was asking me out. And I was trying to figure out how to tactfully turn her down"--

Bill was floored; he'd seen how pretty she was. "Why"?

Harry sighed. "Because of blinding guilt. Cedric Diggory was her boyfriend." Bill nodded; Harry went on. "Anyway, I got a great idea then, and I told her I would go out with her, if we double-dated with you and Viktor. You see? You see?"

Hermione frowned. "No".

"We'll fix them up! We'll arrange for them to be alone together a lot--they're both Seekers, they have that in common--and we'll be beastly to them, without actually breaking up with them, and before you know it, Viktor's going to be looking pretty good to her, and Cho's going to be looking pretty good to him, and Viktor will break up with you instead of you having to break up with him, and they'll be together and your problem will be solved!" Harry stopped, breathless.

George had his mouth hanging open. "Did I actually hear you say that Hermione doesn't want to be with Viktor Krum anymore?"

"Yes," Harry hissed at him. "But keep it quiet, all of you. If Cho finds out that's why I said I'd go out with her--my name would be mud, and so would Hermione's". Ginny was perplexed.

"But, Hermione, when you wrote to me when you first arrived in Bulgaria, you said"--

"Not now, Ginny!" Hermione whispered, running her finger across her throat. Ginny still looked confused. She turned to Harry.

"So," she said softly, "you don't like Cho Chang anymore"?

"I don't dislike her, but I don't want to go out with her".

"And yet you are".

"Just until we can get her and Viktor thrown together enough times"...

Ginny nodded, but looked unconvinced. Their conversation had gone largely unnoticed except by Hermione. George and Fred were deciding who was going to be on whose team when they returned to the Burrow to play Quidditch after lunch.

"Ron will be a Keeper and Harry can be on his team as Seeker," George said. "They can have Bill for their Chaser and Hermione can be their Beater." Hermione turned her head suddenly when she heard this.

"Hold on, George, me and broomsticks"--

"You'll be fine. You can use Ginny's old Cleansweep. It's slow as molasses. And as Beater, all you have to do is whack the Bludgers"--

"So I have to fly with one hand?" she said, horrified.

"Anyway," Fred interjected before she could raise any more objections. "That means I get to be Chaser on our team, George can be our Beater, and we'll take it easy on you gits; it wouldn't be fair for Charlie to play Seeker, so he'll play Keeper and we'll put in Ginny as Seeker." George and Fred exchanged mischievous looks. What're they up to? wondered Harry. Ginny herself looked like she was bursting, too. Charlie must be an unbeatable Keeper, thought Harry. Well, it all comes down to who gets the Snitch...

* * * * *

"One-hundred to nothing!" Bill cried triumphantly as he put the Quaffle past his younger brother Charlie for the tenth time. Then he screamed and swerved out of the way as a Bludger came hurtling at him from Hermione's paddle.

"Dammit, Hermione!" he hollered. "For the last time, we're on the same team!"

"Oops!" she yelled from the other end of the field. "Sorry!" She had been blindly whacking Bludgers all game, most of the time in the direction of Harry, Ron and Bill, it seemed, although Fred and Ginny had had some near misses. Harry flew circles near where Ron was playing Keeper, hovering in front of the middle of the three hoops. He scanned the field, looking for the Snitch. Ginny didn't seem to be paying much attention at all. She was laughing at something George had

said, and the two of them were chiding Charlie. To Harry's confusion, it turned out that Charlie was a terrible Keeper. And Ron was a great one. Granted, Fred was playing Chaser for them, and he didn't do that on the school team; he usually played Beater, alongside George. But Fred had gotten off some nice shots that looked guaranteed to give the other team some points, and Ron had intercepted every one of them. Harry was impressed. He was starting to wonder at the way that Fred had distributed the players, however. Hermione was a menace, mostly to her own teammates, but Bill was quite impressive as a Chaser and Ron seemed to be unbeatable as a Keeper. Meanwhile, every Quaffle got past Charlie, George was a good Beater, but having to spend half his time ducking wild Bludgers coming from Hermione, and Fred wasn't up to getting a Quaffle past Ron at all. That left Harry as Seeker on his team, and Ginny on the other team. Why didn't Fred claim me for his team? he wondered...

And then he blinked, and suddenly, there was Ginny, flying around the field, holding the struggling Snitch over her head in triumph, her face glowing, and Fred, George and Charlie hooting with delight.

"That's one-fifty to one-hundred, our game!" cried Fred, laughing.

Harry stared at Ginny. Her long red hair flew out behind her, she looked like she couldn't stop smiling if she tried, and he felt a grin creeping over his own face somehow, even though he wasn't used to losing at Quidditch. Hermione looked at him with narrowed eyes.

They played three more times, and each time, although Harry's team was up by more than one-hundred points, Ginny grabbed the Snitch and won for the other side. Harry never saw it until it was clutched in her hand.

It was almost time for dinner, and they would have to get up early the next day to go to London (Ministry cars were being provided), so they decided to stop playing. George, Fred, Charlie and Ginny couldn't stop laughing. Bill clapped Harry on the shoulder. "I should have warned you," he said to Harry. "Or I should have insisted on changing teams"...

"What?" Harry was confused.

"Well, I figured, it was you, Harry. If anyone could beat her, I thought you could, after seeing you get past that dragon last year. And I knew Ron was unbeatable as a Keeper"...

"You mean"--

"Ginny's a ringer!" Fred howled with glee.

"Sorry, Harry. It was too funny seeing the look on your face--" Charlie guffawed.

George put his arm around Harry's shoulder. "You see, Harry," George started to explain in what Harry thought of as his spiffing-wot-wot imitation-Percy voice, "Ginny is a ringer. A natural Seeker, like Charlie. She can do it with her eyes shut and in her sleep. You never had a prayer".

"What do you mean, like me?" asked Charlie. "I've never beaten her." Ginny blushed. "But she's not interested in playing at school".

"All those people watching..." she whispered shyly, not looking at Harry.

"Oh!" yelled Fred, sounding like Hermione when she was trying to get a teacher to call on her who was ignoring her (usually Snape). "Oh, oh, oh"!

"What's with you?" Bill snarled at him.

"I just realized; Oliver's out of school now, and with the Triwizard Tournament last year, there wasn't any Quidditch, so we didn't have to think about it, but we need a new captain and a new Keeper for the Gryffindor team"!

"Yeah," Harry agreed. "I forgot all about that"...

"And you can be the new captain, Harry!" Fred cried triumphantly.

"Me? What about you"?

“Oh, I don’t want the responsibility. Rousing people out of bed for early morning practice, boring people silly with strategy sessions”...

“And you think I’d be any good at that? I never even gave much thought to strategy; I usually just keep an eye out for the Snitch”...

“But, Harry, you have clout! We’d have for our captain Harry Potter, who defeated You-Know-Who! Harry Potter, winner of the Triwizard Tournament! Come on, Harry”--

“Okay, okay. But--who actually decides who’s captain of the team, anyway”?

“The other players. George and I will vote for you, and we’ll tell the others to. I don’t think Alicia wants it; she’s Head Girl already has enough to do. And Angelina and Katie probably wouldn’t want it, so that leaves you”.

“Of course, we still need a Keeper”--

“As captain, you can pick who the new Keeper is”.

Harry smiled at Ron. “Then I pick Ron. How about it, you want to? Of course, it won’t be official until I’m elected captain but it sounds like Fred and George have thought of everything”.

Ron didn’t jump immediately at the chance, though. “Well--it’s not that I don’t want to be the Keeper, but when I play, I also like to be Chaser. I’m also pretty good at that, not to brag”--

“Well then,” Harry thought fast, “you can be Keeper, but you can also be a reserve Chaser, in case anything happens to one of them. Then--I can be reserve Keeper and--” he trailed off, trying to flesh out the playing roster in his mind. Then he had a sudden inspiration. “And Ginny can be the reserve Seeker”!

Ginny jerked her head up, opening her mouth to protest, then catching sight of the pleading look on Harry’s face. She closed her mouth, and she and Harry looked at each other; he didn’t mind looking at her for as long as it took to get her to say.--

“All right,” she said softly. “I’ll do it”.

Harry threw his arms around her and picked her up in a twirling hug, like when he’d gotten off the Knight Bus the previous evening. When he put her down, she was redder than he’d ever seen her, trying hard not to look deliriously happy, and failing horribly. Hermione looked like she had steam coming out of her ears. She turned her back on them all and trudged back to the Burrow without speaking to anyone.

“What’s with her?” Ron said, watching her go.

* * * * *

Chapter Six: Hermione’s Reputation

The next morning, they piled into the Ministry cars and were driven to King’s Cross station in London. One by one, they casually walked through the barrier between platforms nine and ten in order to reach the magically hidden Platform Nine and-Three-Quarters. Harry, Bill and Hermione were the only ones who still needed to go through when suddenly, a tall figure appeared as if out of nowhere, walking flat-footed and stoop-shouldered.

“Viktor!” Hermione exclaimed in surprise, trying to look pleased. She looked sideways at Bill and Harry as though begging them to save her.

“Herm-own-ninny, there you are! I came to see you off”...

“Oh, how nice...” she stammered. “Well, I was just about to go through the barrier. I suppose we could both do it.” Viktor Krum took her hand and they calmly walked toward the barrier, then vanished. Then Harry and Bill walked forward together, Harry hauling his trunk on a station trolley and carrying Hedwig’s cage in his other hand.

Then suddenly they were all on the platform, where the Hogwarts Express sat waiting, gleaming in the sunshine, beautiful and regal. The train platform was swarming with students in their robes, hauling trunks and owl cages and cat carriers, being hugged and kissed by their parents. Fred and George found their friend Lee Jordan, and disappeared into his compartment. Harry and Hermione claimed a compartment with Ron and Ginny, all of them dragging their own trunks except for Hermione, whose trunk was being handled by Viktor Krum. Then they all went back out onto the platform again to say goodbye to Mrs. Weasley and Bill and Charlie. Mrs. Weasley hugged and kissed Fred and George, who slipped away from her as soon as possible (this was embarrassing when you were seventeen) and then Ron, who had to stoop quite a bit for his small mother to reach his cheek, then Ginny, who didn't have to stoop as much as Ron. She gave Hermione a hug and kiss, too, and finally turned to Harry.

"You look so much like your father--" she started to say, and Harry saw there were tears in her eyes. "If only your parents could see you, prefect and all--" Harry leaned over and hugged and kissed her quickly, to prevent her saying any more. He felt tears prickling behind his eyelids himself. He often thought of his parents at times like this, but didn't like to talk about it. When she had released him, Bill shook his hand and Charlie slapped his back.

"Be safe," Bill told him, suddenly looking very serious. Harry nodded at him.

Charlie smiled at him. "Would have been nice if one of my brothers had become Gryffindor Quidditch captain, followed my footsteps, but--I can't very well complain if it's Harry Potter instead, can I?"

Harry laughed. "I'll try to do a good job".

"No you won't. You'll get the damn Quidditch Cup!"

"No pressure, though," Bill said, elbowing Harry in the ribs. Harry smiled at them, then turned to get back on the train. Hermione was still further down the platform, talking to Viktor Krum. Harry stepped onto the train and stood in the corridor looking out the window at the Weasleys and waving.

"Potter!"

He turned; Draco Malfoy was striding down the corridor toward him, wearing robes even nicer than the nicest ones in Madam Malkin's shop, which Harry and the twins had bought. Must be custom tailored, he thought. Figures. Pinned to Malfoy's robes was a silver badge with a P on it for prefect; Harry's was still in his trunk with his new robes. Harry folded his arms across his chest and glared at Malfoy. For once, Crabbe and Goyle weren't with him.

"What're you doing here? The prefects are up front, four private compartments. Get with the program! You're a disgrace to the other prefects!"

"What, because I'm not snooty enough? I'm fine where I am".

Then he felt Malfoy's eyes on his arms; Harry was wearing yet another black sleeveless T-shirt, Sandy curled around his left upper arm. "What have you been doing, lifting weights or something"?

"Just honest work".

"Hmm. Manual labour. How Muggle!" Then he pointed to Sandy. "What's that"?

"Ever heard of a snake, Malfoy? It's only the symbol of your house".

"I mean, is it a pet"?

"No. Sandy is my friend. You don't make a pet of someone you can have conversations with." He let this sink in.

"Oh, right," Malfoy finally said. "Parselmouth. Hmm. You-Know-Who has his own snake, I've heard. Bit bigger than that puny thing, of course..." Suddenly he stopped and looked out the window onto the platform. Ron and Ginny had come into the corridor, too, and they also looked out the window.

"Blimey," was all Ron said. They all stared. Hermione had started to leave the platform to board the train again, but Viktor Krum had caught her hand and pulled her to him. He put his arms around her and leaned over her, tilting her head up and then joining his mouth to hers. She seemed like she was trying to get away at first, but then she appeared to relax into

kiss, putting her arms around his neck, clearly opening her mouth as Viktor held her face up to his, kissing her deeply. Harry's mouth went dry, and Ron's and Malfoy's mouths were hanging open stupidly. Only Ginny looked unsurprised.

Then the train started to move, and Hermione broke the kiss, running to hop on. Viktor Krum stood, holding his hand up for a goodbye wave, looking very much stricken at the sight of her leaving. When Hermione stumbled into the corridor, she froze, meeting the gaze of perhaps a dozen students who had beheld the dramatic goodbye kiss between her and the winner of the most recent Quidditch World Cup. Her mouth worked soundlessly and she reddened. Finally, it was Malfoy who spoke.

"It's a definite improvement, Granger," he drawled, looking her pointedly up and down. Ron started to pull out his wand but Harry decided that something else would be faster than magic, and he turned to Malfoy and pushed him down onto the floor of the corridor, kneeling on his chest and putting his right arm across Malfoy's neck. Malfoy gasped.

"You're cutting off my air," he wheezed, trying to reach his wand, but giving up and then just trying to remove Harry's arm from his throat and failing. The other students in the corridor pressed against the wall to let someone pass. It was Alicia Spinnet, wearing her Head Girl badge on new robes, looking very stern.

"Potter! Malfoy! Break it up!" Harry removed his arm from Malfoy's throat and rose, generously extending a hand to help Malfoy up. He ignored it at first, but then after struggling unsuccessfully to rise, took it reluctantly and let go of Harry's hand as quickly as possible once he was on his feet. He clutched at his throat. Alicia stepped closer to them so she could speak more quietly; but it was a scary sort of quiet. "You are both prefects!" she whispered fiercely. "You are supposed to set an example!" She sounded frighteningly like Professor McGonagall. "Malfoy!" she barked. "Get back to your compartment!" She stepped aside so he could go past; he looked over his shoulder at Harry, resentment smoldering in his eyes, still with his hand to his throat. Alicia saw. "Go!" she said again, and Malfoy picked up speed this time, rudely pushing aside other gawkers still in the corridor and not looking back again (between the platform kiss and the brawl, many of them seemed to have become planted where they stood).

Alicia looked a little less stern now, but only a little. "Harry, do I already have to take points from my own house?"

Harry had the good grace to look abashed. "No, Alicia".

"Right, then. Are you and Hermione coming? We have private compartments up front for prefects. One for each house."

Harry turned and looked at Hermione, who was still standing in the corridor. "Um, no, I don't think so. We're fine back here".

"Oh. Well, maybe it's just as well. Keeping you away from Malfoy, I mean. Our first meeting is Sunday night at eight-thirty in the anteroom just off the Great Hall. Don't be late!" She was standing very close to him; Harry looked down into her face; she seemed to be trying to talk with her eyes, they looked--pleading somehow. Then she shook herself, as though waking from a dream, and turned and swept down the corridor toward the front of the train, again looking every bit Head Girl. What was that? Harry wondered. The remaining gawkers moved out of her way, then turned to stare at Hermione again. Hermione coloured once more and ducked into their compartment. Ron, Ginny and Harry followed.

Ginny and Hermione sat on one side of the compartment, Harry and Ron on the other. Hermione took Crookshanks from his carrier and settled him on her lap, stroking his orange fur and looking like she was trying to calm down.

"I wish he hadn't done that," she said quietly.

"Do you mean Viktor or Malfoy?" Ginny asked slyly.

"Well, both," she replied, still petting Crookshanks, not looking up.

"I suppose," said Harry looking at her shining brown curls and her tan limbs protruding from her close-fitting blouse and skirt, "Coming from Malfoy, that was something of a compliment".

Hermione grimaced. "Malfoy is the last person I want to be getting compliments from. And I still need to get rid of Viktor, remember?"

Ginny smiled slyly. "You didn't look too eager to get rid of him just now on the platform -- and you did say in your letters what a good kisser he is...#148;

"Shut it, Ginny!" Hermione hissed at her, her face red. Ginny was stunned and hurt, her face crumpling, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"Well, maybe you should sit up front with the prefects! You wouldn't have to put up with me then!" And she turned from Hermione and looked out the window at the passing landscape without seeing it. Hermione immediately looked very so

"Ginny, I'm sorry, I..." she trailed off, seeing that Ginny was having none of it. They're not getting along too well lately, Harry thought. Hermione sighed.

"Maybe I'll just take a little nap," she said quietly, leaning back with her eyes closed and continuing to idly pet Crookshanks. Harry looked at Ron, who was gazing at Hermione with such an unmistakably vulnerable look in his eyes that Harry was shaken at seeing it. Maybe he'll finally say something to her, he thought. How do I feel about that? He didn't know. Then he looked at Ginny, and his heart turned over. Poor Ginny; how do I feel about her, now? He wasn't sure.

It seemed like it was going to be a very confusing fifth year.

* * * * *

When they finally reached Hogsmeade Station, they had all calmed down considerably. They'd had a chance to visit with some other friends on the train--fellow Gryffindors Neville Longbottom, Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnigan and the Creevey brothers--as well as some students from Hufflepuff they knew from Herbology class, and the other members of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. But because he hadn't gone up to the prefects' compartments, Harry hadn't run into Cho Chang, as they'd discussed the day before (she was a sixth-year prefect for Ravenclaw). They all bought way too many sweets and pumpkin pasties, but still left room for the feast that was waiting for them in the Great Hall at the castle.

Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Harry shared a horseless carriage up to the school. Harry entered Hogwarts castle for the first time feeling like he was indeed coming home. I'm more than half done school, he thought. After this year, it's just two more, and then--And then what? he wondered. Become an Auror? Play Quidditch professionally? That's if he lived long enough to finish school; now that Voldemort had come back...He tried not to think about all that. One thing at a time. This year I've got the O.W.L.s. That's enough to think about for now.

They entered the Great Hall and settled down at their house tables. Harry felt quite conspicuous in his new robes with his silver prefect badge. He had changed on the train, as had Hermione. Ginny and Ron wore their second-hand robes; Ron's were fraying at the cuffs.

Hagrid brought in the first-years, stopping to discreetly wave at Harry, Ron and Hermione (well, not that discreetly; Hagrid was huge). After all of the students were seated except them, the sorting began. The sorting hat sang a new song yet again, which had once impressed Harry until it was pointed out to him that it had all year to think of a new one, and precious little else to do. One by one, rather small-looking boys and girls around eleven years old stepped forward when their names were called, placed the hat on their heads, and were proclaimed Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs or Slytherins. It seemed a very long time since his own sorting.

Crabbe evidently had a little sister--if little could be used to describe Wilhelmina Crabbe, who was the largest eleven-year-old girl Harry had ever seen. She was put in Slytherin; no surprise there. A rather small thin boy with curly blond hair had the unusual name of Flitwick; Harry wondered if he was related to the Charms teacher. Flitwick became a Gryffindor, causing the table to cheer as it had for the previous new members of their house.

In the end, there were eight new Gryffindors, four girls and four boys. In addition to Will Flitwick, they now had Andy Donegal and his twin sister Amy (Muggle-born), Dean Thomas' younger sister Jamaica; Barry Bagshot, Peggy Patrick and Jules Quinn, from old wizarding families; and Gillian Lockley, another Muggle-born. The newly-sorted students joined their house tables and squeezed in at the benches, looking up at the head table, where Dumbledore now stood.

"Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts, everyone! I hope all third-year students have turned in their permission slips, or at least visits to Hogsmeade! Now, I don't know what your parents have told you, but--" and here, Harry caught his eye and tried to keep his breathing even. "Hogwarts is one of the safest places you can possibly be. We are here to train you to be the finest witches and wizards anywhere, and we are not in the habit of losing students. That said, I must admit that we did lose a student last year who was competing in the Triwizard Tournament, but his death was not directly connected to the tasks he was required to perform for the competition. He was killed by Lord Voldemort".

The first year students who were from wizarding families erupted with a loud gasp as though uttered by one throat; the Muggle-born first-years looked quizzical. "As I said, Hogwarts is one of the safest places on earth. We ask that you be especially careful, however, when visiting Hogsmeade, and I reserve the right to cancel Hogsmeade visits with no notice whatsoever and no explanation. If this occurs, please just assume that it is for everyone's safety and don't go trying to go around it," he said, staring at Fred and George, who looked down at their feet. "Also, the Forbidden Forest is still forbidden, hence the name. Don't forget it!"

"Now! Let's sing the school song and then eat!" he finished. Everyone stood and prepared to sing. Harry had been practicing to "Londonderry Air" with his new tenor voice, having abandoned "Loch Lomond;" Ron used his quavering baritone for the tune to the national anthem, Hermione was doing "Candle in the Wind," of all things, and George and Fred were loudly singing in unison to the tune of "Waltzing Mathilda," so that theirs was the theme that came through the polyglot of noise most prominently; a lucky thing, since it turned out to work with the words surprisingly well.

When the last few singers had finished (there were always some who had to choose a slow ballad) the food appeared on the tables and they all fell to with gusto, despite the sweets many of them had consumed on the train. Young Will Flitwick was seated across from Harry and Ron, and between Hermione and Ginny. "Are you Harry Potter?" he asked, awestruck, looking at the scar on Harry's forehead. "Are you a prefect?"

Harry looked kindly at him. "Yes and yes. Are you related to Professor Flitwick?"

"He's my uncle. Great uncle, actually. My granddad's big brother. Don't see him much, since most of the year he's here teaching." The idea of tiny Professor Flitwick being called "big" was making Harry's mouth curl up at the edges. He tried to suppress this.

"Bet you'll do well in Charms".

"Oh, I doubt it. It's just not my bailiwick. I'm much more interested in Transfiguration; perhaps I'll become an Animagus one day".

Harry and Ron looked at each other, trying not to smile; an eleven-year-old using words like "bailiwick." Young Will Flitwick promised to be an interesting first-year.

After dessert, they rose to go. Harry wanted to talk to Ron about having a Quidditch practice the next day, which was Saturday; classes wouldn't actually start until Monday, they had a free weekend right at the start of term. But, it turned out now that he was a prefect, Harry had other responsibilities.

"Harry, Hermione," said Alicia, striding over to them. "Please take the first years up to Gryffindor Tower and make sure they're settled in their dormitories. Answer any questions they might have. McGonagall wants to see me." She turned and walked off to the head table, where Professor McGonagall was still seated, talking to Professor Vector, Hagrid and Dumbledore. That's when Harry noticed that Snape hadn't been at the feast.

He didn't have time to ponder this, though, as he had to herd a bunch of first-years upstairs. When they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady in the pink dress which obscured the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, Harry suddenly realized that he didn't know the password. He turned helplessly to Hermione. She sighed and gave the password to the Fat Lady.

"Crenellation".

The portrait swung open and they all scrambled into the common room. It looked as cozy and inviting as Harry remembered it, with overstuffed armchairs scattered all around and a blazing fire in the hearth. He noticed for the first time the rampant Gryffindor lion on the keystone of the arch that formed the fireplace opening.

Hermione took the first-year girls up the spiral stairs leading to the girls' dormitories, and Harry led the boys up the stairs to their dorm. Once they arrived in the room that had been vacated by the seventh-years who had finished school the previous year, there was a sudden frenzied rush to claim the four-poster beds. Harry had to break up a fight between Andy Donegal and Barry Bagshot, who both wanted the bed farthest from the door. He awarded it to Will Flitwick instead, unsure of whether he was really being fair, but he had been unable to figure out any other way to settle it. Then there was a fuss over Jules Quinn's cat, because Andy was allergic and Jules would insist that it had to sleep with him. Maybe I'm not cut out to be a prefect, Harry thought. He didn't realize it would involve what amounted to babysitting. He couldn't

remember being quite so immature as a first-year. He told Andy to go to the hospital wing in the morning for a magical analgesic to prevent him having an adverse reaction to the cat.

When it seemed that they'd finally settled down, Harry left them, pointing his wand at the candles to extinguish them one by one, looking at the exhausted boys lying tucked up in their beds by the light of the last candle. Then Harry heard Winky say softly, "Harry? Could you--just leave that one lit?" Harry nodded and quietly closed the door.

When he returned to the common room, Hermione, Ron and Ginny were sitting in three of four armchairs gathered near the fire; they'd saved him a seat.

"What took you so long? The first-year girls were good as gold for me".

"Well, I had first-year boys, so there you go. There was a fight over who got which bed, over Quinn's cat... you name it. Plus, I've just felt out of sorts all day--can't put my finger on it".

They sat silently for a minute, staring at the fire in exhaustion. "I know," Hermione said suddenly.

Harry had his eyes closed. "What do you know?" he asked lazily, thinking that she was probably going to propose an O.W.L. revision session.

"Why you're feeling out of sorts. You didn't go running today".

Harry opened his eyes and thought for a moment. "You know, I think you're right. It's a bit late now, of course, but I can get up before breakfast tomorrow and do it".

"All right, then. I'll meet you here in the common room at seven for stretching exercises".

"Oh--" Harry began, surprised that she still wanted to do it, but remembering how she looked in the running bra and bicycle shorts, he didn't object. "I suppose," he said, "we could use that sandy path around the Quidditch pitch. Probably be easier on our joints than the pavement back home".

Ron made a face. "Seven in the morning! On a Saturday! You're mad!"

"Just be glad I'm not holding Quidditch practice at that hour! That won't be until after breakfast. You and Ginny'll both come, right?" He looked hopefully at them both. They nodded. "Good, because Fred and George are free--I talked to them on the train--and they said they'll get Alicia, Katie and Angelina there. We'll meet down at the pitch." Suddenly he had to stop talking and gave a tremendous yawn. "Oh! Those first years were tiring. I think I need bed. Good night".

"Me too," said Ron. "Night, Ginny, Hermione".

The girls said goodnight and then headed toward their own staircase. Harry and Ron went up to their room at the top of the tower, which now had a sign on the door saying "Fifth Years." Neville was already in his bed, snoring, and Seamus and Dean were sitting on Dean's bed looking at Seamus' vacation photos from Australia. Ron glanced at them for a moment, then changed into his pajamas and climbed under the covers. "Seamus got to go to Australia," he said softly, with an edge to his voice.

Harry had changed into pajama pants, but above the waist wore only his basilisk amulet and Sandy wrapped around his left arm. He glanced at Ron as he got into his own four-poster, muttering, "Sorry." Ron shrugged, trying to act like it didn't matter to him--but clearly it did. He closed the curtains of his bed. Harry closed his own curtains and lay back with his hands behind his head, feeling guilty because Ron was trapped in his house all summer just because he was Harry's friend. And Hermione had almost been kidnapped. When would it end? Harry wondered. But he knew the answer: when Voldemort is dead, or--when I am.

* * * * *

Harry and Hermione staggered up the steps to the Entrance Hall at eight o'clock the next morning, having spent forty minutes running and ten minutes stretching before and after. Harry had left Sandy under a rose bush in the gardens when they were running, and had collected her again, wearing her wrapped around his arm once more. They dragged themselves up to the third-floor hall and Hermione waved exhaustedly at him, heading toward a portrait of a girl in a very large skirt who had a shepherd's crook and a flock of sheep around her.

"Lemon fresh," she said to the shepherdess, gaining entrance to the prefects' bathroom for girls.

Harry trudged up two more flights to the fifth floor, where he headed for the statue of Boris the Bewildered (hopeless during the Goblin rebellion of 1510, Hermione had informed him) and counted four doors to the left of Boris. At that door he said, "Pine fresh," and the door swung open.

As he remembered it, the bathroom was as opulent as a Roman bath, with marble everywhere. Unfortunately, it was not as empty as he remembered it; Draco Malfoy was in the large pool-sized sunken tub, swimming in celadon-green bubbles, his pale hair clinging wetly to his scalp.

"Malfoy! What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? I'm a prefect too, remember. What're you looking so grungy and sweaty for? Was it that hard to get here? Lost your way in the castle after four years of school? You'll be really helpful to the first-years, won't you? They'll be giving you directions, probably".

"I was out running, for your information. With Hermione," he added; he was unsure why.

Malfoy smiled lasciviously. "Granger? What, are you thinking of trying to steal her from Viktor Krum? That was quite a show yesterday." He looked at Harry, who was still panting from running; Harry felt adrenaline running through him from the exercise and felt he could actually squeeze the life out of Malfoy today with his bare hands, if he wanted to. "What's the matter; don't I get threatened with bodily harm today? Too tired after running around like a Muggle?"

"Wanting a shower too much, more like," he panted, heading toward the marble partition that separated the showers from the tub area. "And you're just boring me, anyway. Can't you think of an insult worse than 'running around like a Muggle'?"

"It's early. I just woke up. Let me get breakfast, first." He laughed. Harry placed Sandy carefully in a corner, then stripped and got into the shower. The warm spray was like a blessing, and he lifted his face to it gratefully, as if in prayer. He wondered how Malfoy would have reacted if he could have seen Hermione in her bikini, and then that thought made him see Hermione in her bikini, in his mind, and soon he felt like he might need to turn off the hot water and have just a cold shower.

When he was done, he dried off, put Sandy back on his arm, and walked with the towel around his waist to the large wardrobe near the tub. He felt Malfoy's eyes on him again, and wondered if he'd make any more annoying comments about manual labour. At least I'm not a pale, skinny git--anymore. In the wardrobe there were green, blue, yellow and red robes. He removed a fluffy red robe with the Gryffindor lion embroidered over the heart and then put on a pair of the standard - issue black shower shoes kept on the bottom of the wardrobe. He felt like new; all pink and humid, his hair curling on his neck. Haircut, he thought again, must get a haircut. He carried his clothes to the door of the bathroom with him; Malfoy still hadn't gotten out of the tub.

"Careful, Malfoy," he said before leaving, "You'll never be able to unshriveled your skin. Not that anyone would notice the difference". Malfoy made a face and moved to pick up his wand, at the side of the tub, but Harry laughed and ran out the door. He walked back up to Gryffindor Tower, smiling and shaking his head. At least Malfoy being a prefect meant that was with Crabbe and Goyle less often; on his own, he was really quite manageable, Harry thought.

He gave the password to the Fat Lady and climbed into the common room. Only Parvati and Lavender were there; since it was Saturday, they were in jeans and T-shirts, rather than black Hogwarts robes.

They looked up at him and stared. Parvati in particular looked flabbergasted.

"Harry," she said. "You look like you had a good summer." He realized after a second that she was looking down at his legs (the robe only came down to his knees), which had been strengthened by the running, and were now quite muscular. Then he noticed that Lavender was staring at what was visible of his chest where the robe opened.

He tried to be casual. "Yeah, I guess. Wish I'd had time for a haircut, though. I feel like I need a different look"...

"Oh!" Lavender suddenly said. "Parvati can cut your hair! She's really good! Does her own dad's hair!"

Parvati was looking at him as she had when he'd picked her up for the Yule Ball the previous Christmas--before he trod on her feet during the dancing and ignored her, spending the rest of the ball watching Cho Chang with Cedric Diggory.

"Yes," she said slowly now, squinting her eyes at him, as if trying to see a vision of him with his new haircut. "And it's a good thing your hair's already wet. Sit down here," she said, pulling a wooden chair out from one of the tables they use for schoolwork. He sat down obediently, clutching his sweaty running clothes. He tried to explain what he wanted, and nodded and said, "That's exactly what I was thinking. I always thought that would be a much better look on you..." making Harry wonder how many girls at Hogwarts had been expending mental energy thinking about giving him a makeover.

"Incisio!" she said, holding up her wand, which suddenly sprouted scissors at the tip. As she worked, Harry watched his hair fall to the floor around him, remembering the times during his childhood when the Dursleys had tried to cut his hair and how he had magically willed it to look the same again (not yet knowing he was a wizard). He had been as surprised as the Dursleys that this happened, and had been baffled by receiving punishments for it, as though he'd done it intentionally.

When she was done, she waved her wand again, saying, "Finite Incantatem!" The scissors disappeared. "Imago!" she said next, and now a mirror sprouted from the wand tip. She handed it to Harry so he could inspect himself. It was exactly as he'd described it to her; short on the sides, but that was okay because he didn't have big ears; oddly small ones, round with lobes that went straight into his head, instead of hanging down pendulously; shorter on top, too, pushed back and so that his forehead was bare, the scar no longer partly hidden. It was front and center now, for all the world to see, and his vivid green eyes seemed more in evidence too, somehow. He put his glasses back on, running his hand through his hair, making it stand up even more.

"Thanks, Parvati! It looks just like I wanted!" He stood and smiled at her, confused by her reaction, which was to blush furiously. She usually giggled--but not now. He suddenly felt that he needed to say something else--something long overdue. "Listen, Parvati, I'm sorry about the way I behaved at the Yule Ball. I was a total prat, and you didn't deserve it. She really had looked beautiful that night, he thought. She smiled and looked at him now with her large dark eyes shining in her flawless coffee-with-cream face.

"That's all right, Harry. I got to go to the Yule Ball with Harry Potter, one of the Hogwarts champions and winner of the Triwizard Tournament. It's something I can tell my grandchildren"...

He looked down at the floor, abashed by her response, then noticed his hair all over it. "Oh, what a mess! Is there a broom?"

"You are so funny sometimes, Harry. But then, you spend each summer with Muggles, so--Nonhirsutum!" and with that she waved her wand and the hair clippings disappeared from the floor, chair and from Harry's shoulders and the running clothes he was holding. He smiled at her again, wondering how he had not noticed before how enormous her eyes were, and then climbed the stairs to his dorm, remembering Cho Chang asking him out and Alicia standing very close to him in the train corridor the day before, and wondering whether the girls at Hogwarts had now decided that it was open season on Harry Potter. It certainly seemed that way.

* * * * *

Harry threw on a sleeveless black T-shirt and black jeans, put on the basilisk amulet and Sandy and went down to breakfast carrying his Quidditch robes and Firebolt. Everyone else was already gone, and when he reentered the common room, even Parvati and Lavender had left. He virtually skipped down to the Great Hall; going running in the morning made him feel normal again.

But when he arrived in the Great Hall, he felt anything but normal; as he started to stride over to the Gryffindor table, he felt rather than heard (the vibrations seemed to come through the floor) the murmur of what seemed to be mostly high-pitched voices--female voices--saying, "Look at Harry Potter--what's Harry Potter done--doesn't he look--oh, my god, do you see Harry Potter--" and he furrowed his brow, sitting down between Ron and Hermione and finding himself facing an amazed-looking Ginny. Next to her George laughed and stuck a piece of bacon in her open mouth, making her sputter and spit it out onto her plate.

"George!"

He laughed. "Sorry, Ginny. But you should have seen your face! And your mouth was hanging open, so"--

"I don't get it," Harry said, looking around the room at the girls craning their necks, even at the Slytherin table. "Hasn't anyone ever heard of a person getting a haircut"?

"Oh," said George casually. "Have you cut your hair, Harry"?

Harry threw a muffin at George, who laughed and ducked. "Actually, Parvati did it. She did a pretty good job, I think".

Ginny nodded dumbly, blindly taking a bite of toast. Harry thought her large brown eyes looked slightly unfocused. Next to him, Hermione said, "She did a fantastic job..." looking at him and reaching out to touch his hair dreamily.

"Hermione!" Ron yelled, irritated. She jumped, as if waking up.

George laughed, until Angelina, next to him, agreed with Hermione, saying emphatically, "That is an understatement".

"Hey!" George responded, making Angelina laugh now.

Harry felt himself redden as he reached for some toast. "Man, did it look that bad before?" He glanced at Hermione, who looked away, colouring, then at Ginny, who was staring at her plate.

"Well, it's not hard to see your scar now," Ron said in a flat voice.

"And it's not hard to see your muscles, with that shirt..." Angelina added helpfully. George turned and glared at her, then at Harry, but she smiled and leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Oh, you're just too easy, George. And you're terribly cute when you're jealous"...

Breakfast was somewhat uncomfortable for Harry because of the stir he was causing--was it that bad before? he wondered. Hermione mumbled something about the library before running off, looking at him over her shoulder for a second. Ginny avoided meeting his eyes during the rest of the meal, and Harry avoided looking at any other house table including while he was leaving the hall, pretending to be rather fascinated with his feet on the way out.

After breakfast, the Gryffindor Quidditch team gathered in the changing rooms next to the field, and officially elected Harry to be their new captain, whereupon, Harry introduced Ron as new Keeper and reserve Chaser and Beater ("What do you think's gonna happen to us?" Fred and George wanted to know), and Ginny as reserve Seeker. "And I'll be reserve Keeper, when necessary," Harry told them. He wanted to put breakfast behind him and be as businesslike as possible. Angelina was treating him normally again (he assumed that a lot of her comments at breakfast had been to needle George), but Katie Bell and Alicia Spinnet looked a little distracted. "All right, we all need to practice--and some of us need to practice more than one position. Since there's eight of us, we'll divide up into two teams. The Chasers will have to take turns playing other positions, since we only need one on a team. You'll be one of the Seekers first, Katie, while I play Keeper, Alicia will be your Chaser and Fred will be Beater. Ron, you and Ginny will be the Keeper and Seeker on the other team with Angelina and George. Let's go"!

Once they were playing, having to concentrate on not falling off broomsticks or getting hit by Bludgers, everyone seemed more normal again. Ginny caught the Snitch before Katie, then she caught it before Angelina and then Alicia. Alicia, Katie and Angelina were a bit surprised, but obviously putting it down to the fact that Ginny wasn't competing against Harry. Then he had each of the Chasers take a turn at playing Keeper for the sake of the practice, and now Ron could practice being a Chaser while Harry played Seeker. Still, Ginny caught the Snitch first every time.

After some more practice games with Ron as Beater and Fred and George taking turns as Keeper and Seeker (Harry seriously wondered whether George might need glasses; the Snitch had hovered about a foot in front of him, whereupon Ginny swooped down and grabbed it), Harry ended the practice. As they all left the field, Alicia and Katie looked strangely at Ginny, as though she were an intruder. Angelina put her arm around her and said, "Don't you mind them. George tipped me off how good you are; now I know he wasn't exaggerating! In fact, I think he underplayed it." Ginny smiled gratefully at her, then watched as Angelina and George joined hands and left the rest of the group, walking down toward the greenhouses, smiling at each other and swinging their hands vigorously.

"Where are they going?" Harry asked Ginny as they all continued toward the castle. Ron looked like he wondered too. Fred was up ahead with Alicia and Katie, trying to get them to laugh with very bad puns.

"Where do you think?" Ginny said, frowning.

Harry and Ron simultaneously let out an “Ooohhhh,” as it dawned on them, causing her to shake her head.

“Honestly,” she muttered, picking up speed and passing them.

Harry looked at Ron; when had Ginny become so worldly-wise? he wondered. Ron wouldn't look at him. She almost sounded jaded, Harry thought. He remembered how she had giggled about catching Percy kissing his girlfriend Penelope when Harry was in second year and Ginny was in first; but then, she was only eleven at the time. Three years have made quite a difference, Harry thought, watching her walk ahead of him and Ron toward the castle. Quite a difference.

* * * * *

After lunch, Harry, Ron and Hermione went down to Hagrid's cabin to see how he was doing. “Maybe we can find out what he did in Ukraine,” Harry said on the way.

“How do you know that's where he was?” Hermione wanted to know. “That was supposed to be a secret”.

“He told me--in not so many words,” Harry answered.

“I just hope the giants don't take You-Know-Who's side,” Ron intoned with an air of doom.

“Well, I think Hagrid was the perfect ambassador to send to them--and didn't he also take Madame Maxime? I mean, she's headmistress of a very well-regarded school of witchcraft and wizardry. She's got clout,” Hermione stated with authority.

Harry looked grim. “I hope you're right”.

Hagrid was pleased to see them when they knocked on his door, but all through tea, he managed to deflect any questions about the giants, or even what they'd be studying in Care of Magical Creatures. They came away feeling somewhat flustered but when they'd reached the castle again, Hermione reminded the two of them that they hadn't gone to see Hagrid just to pump him for information--they'd gone to see him because he was their friend.

“And anyway,” she went on, “nothing could be any worse than Blast-Ended Skrewts. Right”?

“Right,” said Harry and Ron feebly; that's what they'd thought about the baby dragon, too. They just hoped she was right.

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“So,” Roger Davies said unctuously, standing at the desk where he and Alicia were presiding over the prefects' meeting, “does everyone understand where all of the steps are that need to be skipped and how to extract the feet of students who forget to skip them?” The prefects all groaned assent, dying for the meeting to be over. Even gung-ho Hermione looked like she was flagging after the two-hour meeting. Two hours? Harry thought. We've been discussing trick steps and how to change passwords to restricted areas and how to take points from houses based on certain infringements of the rules for two hours? Actually, they'd discussed more than that, but it was all starting to blur for Harry now. Personally, he thought Roger was just a bit power hungry, and in particular, enjoying the power he had over the prefects to bore them silly for as long as he wanted to. Even Alicia and his own brother, Evan, looked like they wanted to put a hex on him.

“Good,” Alicia said quickly. “Do we have a motion to table any further business until the next meeting”?

“So moved!” came the swift reply from Ernie MacMillan, of Hufflepuff.

“Second”?

“Second!” responded a sixth-year Slytherin prefect.

“All in favor”?

“AYE!” replied twenty-two exhausted voices.

“Opposed”?

"But I--" Roger began. Alicia cut him off.

"The ayes have it. I move to adjourn the meeting".

"Second!" came the unexpected voice of Draco Malfoy.

"All in favor"?

"AYE"!

"All right. The meeting is adjourned." She tried to pry the gavel out of Roger's hand to pound it on the desk, and wound having to put her hand around his and pound it that way. Roger looked deeply offended. Alicia collected the notes from Hermione, who had volunteered to be the recording secretary; Alicia had offered to get her a Quick-Quotes quill for the purpose, but Harry suggested that they weren't very accurate or reliable and tended to embellish a great deal (remembering a particularly disastrous interview with Rita Skeeter), so Hermione opted to do it the old-fashioned way.

As the prefects prepared to leave, Harry noticed Mandy Brocklehurst gazing fixedly at him, and he realized that she played Chaser on the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. She had wavy chestnut hair, a sprinkling of freckles over a small nose and large dark blue eyes which regarded him closely. He looked away, into the gaze of Alicia Spinnet. He was vaguely aware of Hermione and Cho Chang looking at him, too. Okay, he thought, this is getting creepy. He had spent much of the previous day (after returning from Hagrid's) and all of the earlier part of Sunday, except for mealtimes, holed up in his room; at times, even closing the curtains of his four-poster and reading his O.W.L. book by wandlight. Well, he thought, I have to spend this much time avoiding leering girls, maybe I'll at least get top marks on my O.W.L.s.

"Harry," Alicia said. "Could you stay for a moment after the meeting"?

He nodded, not trusting his voice, in case what came out was, "Could you all please stop staring at me"?

Hermione said casually, "I'll meet you in the entrance hall," and left. Cho Chang and Mandy Brocklehurst also left, somewhat slowly. Alicia sat down in the chair next to him that Hermione had been using. They were the only ones left in the room.

"So, Harry," she said, smiling, sitting, Harry thought, entirely too close. "How's it going so far"?

Harry leaned back in his chair, so that it was on the back two legs, trying to be casual. It helped put distance between him and Alicia. "Oh, you know, first year boys are still pretty young--" and he was forced to stop as the chair tilted too far back, skidded on the smooth stone floor, and sent Harry crashing in a heap, his feet narrowly missing kicking Alicia in the jaw the way down. She jumped up with a cry, trying to help him up, but he brushed her off, although it became worse in a moment when Hermione, Cho and Mandy came running back into the room, all trying to help him up at the same time. This was more hindrance than help, and he finally had to yelp, "Geroff!" They stepped back somewhat alarmed; he got on his feet, set the chair right and brushed off his robes, trying to maintain some shred of dignity. Then he nodded at them and said, "Good night, ladies." He turned to leave, his new robes billowing out behind him as he took the largest strides he could to escape them.

Hermione caught up with him in the entrance hall. She fell into step beside him as he ascended the stairs, two at a time (she had to move quickly to keep up). He thought, I'm probably going to put a foot right through a trick stair tread. He wasn't paying attention at all. He didn't look at Hermione or speak to her. When they reached the portrait, Harry didn't say the password, instead he turned to her and said abruptly, "Why are all of the girls in this ruddy place suddenly acting so strangely?"

Hermione smiled at him, but looked as though she hadn't really heard what he'd said, reaching up to touch his jaw. "You're going to have to shave soon, Harry," she said softly. She traced his jawline with her finger, saying, "You have no idea how attractive you are, do you?" She was practically whispering now. Harry felt his heart beating very loudly, it seemed; he shivered involuntarily at the feel of her finger brushing the new growth along his chin. Suddenly she said very loudly, "Crenellation!" and the portrait swung open. She entered the common room with more dignity than he felt he'd mustered after falling to the floor after the prefects' meeting. She went up to the girls' dormitories without looking back.

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Chapter Seven: The Real Moody

When Harry met Hermione in the common room the next morning, she acted as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened the night before. You have no idea how attractive you are, do you? seemed to echo in his head, but Hermione unconcernedly stretched and drank water preparatory to their running. Although it did seem to Harry that she avoided looking him in the eye. Maybe he was just imagining it.

After the morning run, he was actually starting to feel like his life was back on track again. He showered in the prefects bathroom (ignoring Malfoy in the bath this time, and for once, Malfoy ignored him), then he dressed and ate breakfast. While he ate, he looked furtively around the Great Hall, but by now, people seemed to have gotten used to his new haircut, and he felt able to eat in relative peace and quiet.

Next to him, Ron said, through a mouthful of porridge, "You ready, Harry"?

Harry frowned. Now what? "Ready?"

"For Snape. I've heard he's brutal to fifth years. O.W.L. preparation and all that. We've got him first thing every Monday Wednesday and Friday".

Harry groaned; he'd forgotten that Potions was first thing after breakfast. "And I thought it was bad to have Double Potions last thing on Friday, before being able to begin the weekend"...

"Yeah, it always seemed to take forever to end. Well, now we get to begin our classes every week with the lovely visage of Severus Snape"...

"Careful, Weasley," came a drawling voice behind them. "Prefects are supposed to report insubordination to the professors. Aren't you taking notes, Potter and Granger"?

"We'll let you do that, Malfoy," came Hermione's indignant reply. "And if that's really what you want us to do, I can take very detailed notes on every time you badmouth Hagrid, who is also a teacher, remember".

"In name only," came Malfoy's reply. Harry and Ron rose together at this insult to Hagrid's teaching ability--although they secretly agreed, they were Hagrid's friends. They tolerated the way he ran Care of Magical Creatures out of staunch loyalty, but neither of them would have minded if Hagrid had suddenly become obsessed with kittens and puppies.

"Harry! Ron!" came Hermione's dangerous voice, as though she were prepared to announce that she was taking points from Gryffindor for their behavior. Harry picked up his bulging bag.

"Don't worry, Hermione," he told her. "We should be getting down to the dungeons, anyway. And he'll get his when we play Slytherin at Quidditch". He smiled at Ron, who nodded in agreement. Then Harry turned to go, catching Ginny's eye and winking at her, making her turn as red as her hair and look down at her plate.

* * * * *

Harry's first Potions class as a fifth-year was a complete disaster. Everything he'd been reading about during the summer seemed to have left his head, and Snape made a joke that the Slytherins (the males anyway) greatly appreciated, about whether some of Harry's brains had been snipped off along with his hair. Harry had to remind himself of the ludicrous image of Snape in safari clothes standing in his front hall just to keep from getting angry enough to put a hex on him. As Hermione had said he'd reamed out Viktor Krum for not taking better care of her...Oh, well. Anyone who didn't like Viktor Krum couldn't be all bad, he had to keep reminding himself. On the other hand, he had noticed, but had not mentioned to Ron and Hermione, that Snape hadn't been at the staff table during a single one of the meals they'd had since arriving back at school Friday night. Where had he been? Harry wondered.

When they were leaving the dungeon to go to Charms, Harry said, "I've made a decision." This sounded very official, so Hermione and Ron stopped and listened with puzzled looks on their faces. "I refuse to let that man humiliate me in class one more time. I am going to practically live in the Potions dungeon if that's what I have to do to get full marks in Potions on the O.W.L.s".

Hermione smiled and nodded. "Good for you, Harry! I mean to do a lot of extra work myself to prepare".

Ron made a face. "That's all right for you two. I'm never going to beat Percy and Bill each getting twelve O.W.L.s, so there's not much point in trying. And I could probably beat Fred's and George's pitiful showing with what I know now, so I've decided not to put too much pressure on myself. It's just not worth the insanity".

Hermione scowled at him. "You have no ambition, Ronald Weasley. You should be ashamed of yourself! Fat lot of good it's done Percy, even being Head Boy, when he couldn't recognize that his own boss was under the Imperious Curse and he was being sent instructions by a dark wizard! You know as well as I do that Percy's just a sycophant, and that you're worth a dozen of him!" Hermione's face was flushed, and she stomped up the steps ahead of them, leaving Harry and Ron to stand looking after her with their jaws on the floor.

"What was--" Ron began. But Harry shook his head.

"Don't ask. You wouldn't believe the things that have been coming out of her mouth lately"...

Ron looked as though he thought this was some kind of double-entendre (which maybe it was, thought Harry). "Like what?" he wanted to know.

"I already said: don't ask". And Harry followed Hermione up the steps leading out of the dungeon, a puzzled Ron following closely behind.

Professor Flitwick was delighted to see the fifth-year Gryffindors; he was usually pretty jovial, and seldom looked irritated, even when Neville Longbottom had repeatedly sent the tiny wizard sailing across the classroom while learning Banishing Charms. He outlined for them a long list of charms they would be learning, plus reviewing all of the work they'd done the previous four years, for it would all be on the O.W.L.s. Five years of work, thought Harry. It was a lot to be tested on all at once.

It was a relief to relax at the Gryffindor table and eat lunch, but it seemed to end all too soon, and then they were off to Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall. They knew they could count on her being very stern about the upcoming tests, and she did not disappoint them. Stalking around the class, warning them of what they would have to remember from this and the previous four years, Neville looked practically in tears, and even Hermione looked nervous and unsure of herself, and she'd been the top Transfiguration student from the first day of their first year.

When class was over, Harry opted to stay behind. "Can I talk to you a bit, Professor"?

She looked a bit less stern now that class was over; after all, she was his head of house, and had selected him to be a prefect. She had also been glad to hear that he was now the captain of the house Quidditch team. "Yes, Potter"?

"I was wondering--when did you become an Animagus? Were you still in school"?

She nodded. "As a matter of fact, I was in my sixth year. I was tutored by the headmaster himself--although he was not the headmaster, yet. He was our Transfiguration teacher. Why"?

"Well, I was wondering--I was considering whether to try to become an Animagus myself, someday". Was he? He wondered. Or was it that hearing young Will Flitwick talking about it got his mind working?

"Were you, Potter?" McGonagall's eyes flickered with interest. "Fascinating. I would have thought perhaps Miss Granger would be interested, but you"!--

"Well, I don't remember whether Professor Dumbledore said you knew this or not--and it's not like he can get in trouble now--but, were you aware that my father was an unregistered Animagus"?

She pursed her lips. "Yes. I know about that. And I know why. And although he was obviously very talented at it, that doesn't make it right"...

"I know, I know," he interrupted her, before he got an encore of the performance Hermione had told him about, her explaining to Rita Skeeter the reasons for Animagi to be properly registered. "That's why I'm coming to you. I want to do everything right. I want to find out--how soon I could start learning. Do I have to wait for sixth year? Or seventh? Do I have to be of age"?

“Although it is usually recommended that a student have a little more magical education than you currently possess, I admit this is you we are talking about, and you managed to win the Triwizard Tournament as a fourth-year...” she looked at him thoughtfully. “And, I suppose that with your father’s history, you may turn out to be a natural, plus you do have a compelling reason for wanting to cultivate this particular skill,” she added, without saying Voldemort. Harry could tell she was thinking it. She regarded him silently for another minute.

“Very well,” she finally said. “I will discuss it with the headmaster. I will let you know what he decides. You’d better go, Professor Moody won’t appreciate you being late for class”.

“Yes, Professor. Thank you”, he said, nodding at her. She almost cracked a smile and looked at him with an affection in her eyes she had not meant to show but could not disguise.

He ran through the corridors, light-hearted; he hadn’t even known before he’d asked her that that was what he was going to say, it was as if it had come up out of his subconscious and burst upon his lips, an idea that was fully born. But no, he thought. That’s not true. I’ve really been thinking it for more than a year, ever since I conjured that Patronus that looked like my dad as a stag. Ever since then, I’ve wondered whether I could do the same thing.

He quickly reached the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. This would be his first class with the real Mad Eye Moody. The other fifth-year Gryffindors were still standing in the corridor, for some reason. They seemed nervous about entering. After all, during the entire previous year, they’d been taught by a dark wizard in disguise and had not suspected a thing. Dumbledore had not suspected a thing until the man they had all thought was Moody had taken Harry to his office after he returned to Hogwarts with Cedric Diggory’s body, going on about Voldemort being back, having his body back, Wormtail resurrecting him, the Death Eaters being called to him....

Harry peeked around the doorway into the classroom. Moody had his back to them, sitting at the teacher’s desk, his hands folded, seemingly staring into space. Then he growled, “Are you all going to come in or am I going to lecture to an empty classroom?” Harry realized he’d probably seen them through the back of his skull with that eerie magical eye, and then Harry remembered that the eye could not only see through many, many solid objects, but also through invisibility cloaks.

They filed in then and took their seats, taking out textbooks they had on the Dark Arts and parchment and quills and ink bottles. Moody seemed to be examining the empty desktop in front of him and did not look up at them--at least, with his normal eye. There was no preamble.

“Many of you,” he growled--he always seemed to growl--“May be under the impression that you know me because you think I taught you last year. WRONG!

“You may or may not know that that was an impostor, whose real name was Bartemius Crouch, Jr. Most people in the world thought he had been dead for the last thirteen years, but his father and his house elf knew better. His father--who was killed by his own son--thought he could oversee his imprisonment better than the dementors at Azkaban, kept him under the Imperious Curse, made him hide under an Invisibility Cloak. But it didn’t work, DID IT?”

Every student in the class jumped in his or her seat. Moody finally looked up from the bare desktop. Harry realized he was probably reading notes for the lecture in the top drawer of the desk, which he was now able to follow with his magical eye. One by one his normal eye lit on each student.

“Can anyone tell me WHY it didn’t work?”

Hermione and Harry and Ron raised their hands, joined timidly by Neville.

“Longbottom!” Moody cried.

Neville swallowed. “Because you can learn to overcome the Imperious Curse, with practice”.

“EXACTLY!” Moody now positively bellowed. Harry, Ron and Hermione lowered their hands again. Lavender and Parvati moved their chairs back from their desks several inches. Although they all had had their quills poised over their parchment, ready to take notes, no one had as yet written a word.

“So--if the Imperious Curse can be overcome with practice, why put it on someone to begin with, why use it to control someone? Why do it at all?”

Was he kidding? Harry thought. He was asking them why someone would use one of the three curses that were guaranteed to give a person a life sentence in Azkaban? Silence reigned in the room.

“Come on!” Moody bellowed. “Why do it? Why control someone, making them torture and kill Muggles, why do it? Why do dark wizards do it? WHY?”

They all looked at him, and at each other. Finally, Neville timidly raised his hand again.

“Longbottom!”

Neville looked like it was taking every ounce of bravery he possessed to answer. “Because they can”.

“BECAUSE THEY CAN!” Moody cried, smiling. He looked extremely unnatural, smiling. It passed mercifully quickly. “Because they can!” he repeated at a lower volume. “Ten points for Gryffindor!” Neville tried not to look pleased, and failed. He looked sideways at Hermione, who smiled at him. He averted his eyes quickly, looking terrified again.

“Is that a good reason?” he demanded of them. No one answered again. He waited what he felt was a reasonable amount of time, then said, “NO! There IS no good reason! Because you can! Any one of you could fly on your broomstick around Buckingham Palace and scare the living daylights out of the queen, but does that mean you should? NO! I could turn every one of you into newts, but does that mean that I should?” This time he did not answer his own question. Silence. He smiled again. “Well. That all depends on how you do on your assignments.” He was still smiling; the students all looked at each other with alarm. “JOKE!” he shouted suddenly, giving a brief cackle.

Harry started to laugh, then caught himself. Ron was looking like his cheeks hurt from stifling a smile. Hermione frowned at them. Moody strode over to Harry and Ron. “Go ahead! Laugh! It’s all right, Potter and Weasley. You too, Granger. I’ve heard about you three; you’ve seen more than your fair share of evil close up. It’s not just boggarts can’t stand laughter. You have to be able to look evil in the eye sometimes and laugh!”

Suddenly he was abruptly sober. “But some things are NOT funny. Take Muggles; who do you feel is more powerful, wizards or muggles?”

Seamus Finnigan raised his hand and Moody nodded at him. “Wizards,” he said confidently. Moody walked around his desk, nodding and rubbing his chin, then turned on Seamus and bellowed, “WRONG, Finnigan! You come from a wizarding family, don’t you?” Seamus nodded. “Thomas! Granger! Potter! You grew up in the Muggle world, didn’t you?” The three of them nodded. “Name me some things Muggles have done over the centuries to torture each other and make each other miserable!”

Harry knew that Dean Thomas’ family had come to England from Jamaica about thirty years earlier; presumably, sometime before that--probably hundreds of years before--they had come from Africa.

“Slavery,” Dean said evenly.

“Oppressing women,” Hermione said, not without indignation.

“War,” Harry ventured.

“Nuclear war,” Hermione added.

“Drugs”.

“Automatic weapons”.

“Chemical weapons”.

“Concentration camps”.

“Ghettos”.

“Apartheid”.

“Ethnic cleansing”.

“The Cold War”.

“Genocide”.

“Yes,” Moody said. “Genocide. Killing an entire race. Or what passes for race on this planet. In truth, there is one race: the human race. The genetic variations between people of different ethnic groups across the world are negligible. Even those of us who are born with some magic in us aren’t appreciably different from those who aren’t. It’s just another characteristic like hair or eye color, right or left handed.

“But no matter what atrocities dark wizards have visited on this world, I am here to tell you that none of them--NONE-- have even approached the number of casualties that were suffered by those who were at Agincourt--and I’m talking about the French, who experienced REAL losses. And THAT was hundreds of years ago. There has never been a wizarding equivalent of Waterloo, of the American Civil War, of the Boer War, of World War I or II, of Vietnam or any of the conflicts in the Middle East, or Northern Ireland. All of the goblin rebellions combined didn’t have the carnage experienced by the Anzacs who went over the top at Gallipoli. Worse than decimation. Losing only ten percent of the men would have been a vast improvement. Do you know how many humans have died in these conflicts, and more”?

No response. Moody paced back and forth for a couple of minutes, staring at the floor. Then he erupted into questions again. “Just because Muggles can blow up the entire planet, does that mean that they should? Just because they have antibiotics to fight disease now, does that mean they should use them for everything? It turns out they shouldn’t--strains of diseases that are resistant to all known antibiotics have mutated and are proliferating around the world.

“JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN DOESN’T MEAN YOU SHOULD”.

They all jumped in their seats. Moody stomped up the aisle between the desks, his wooden leg very loud, looking at each of them as though he were surprised they hadn’t all flunked out of school by now. “What,” he finally went on, “have you learned in your last four years in Defense Against the Dark Arts”?

“Grindylows”.

“Boggarts”.

“Hinkypunks”.

“NO!” he barked. “You haven’t learned ANYTHING! What you need to learn now--before you sit for your O.W.L.s--is that fighting the Dark Arts does not mean fighting the darkness OUTSIDE of you, it means fighting the darkness INSIDE YOU”.

He went back to his desk and stood beside it, surveying them all with his magical eye. “What is the purpose of the Cruciatus Curse?” he said softly.

Hermione immediately raised her hand. “To hurt someone, of course”.

“WRONG!” He had turned the volume back up. Ron and Harry looked at her, alarmed. Hermione wasn’t accustomed to this kind of reaction from a teacher. She sank down in her chair somewhat cowed, and Harry wouldn’t have been surprised if she didn’t say another word in Defense Against the Dark Arts all year.

Neville timidly raised his hand and Moody nodded at him. “To break someone and make them do what you want them to do”.

“To control someone,” Moody said, nodding, speaking in a normal (for him) conversational voice, as though he hadn’t just shouted at Hermione loud enough to wake the dead. “In some ways, it is not as sure as the Imperius Curse, but in some ways it’s stronger. A person who is really concentrating, who has an extremely strong sense of self, can withstand the Imperius Curse. But the same person may cave in seconds of experiencing the Cruciatus Curse. Most people would turn around and put the same curse on another person in a heartbeat if they were promised that they would not have to feel that pain again. THAT’S THE DARKNESS INSIDE YOU”.

Hermione turned and looked at Neville, giving him a little smile to show that she was impressed. Neville blushed deeply and looked down at his blank parchment.

"I'll wager," Moody went on, "That none of you has ever experienced the Cruciatus Curse. First you feel"--

But Harry had slowly raised his hand. Moody stopped and stared at him. "Really, Potter? Was the person caught"?

"No, sir".

"Does the Ministry know about this"?

"Yes, sir".

"Well? I'm out of the loop these days".

"Voldemort".

A couple of people had gasped, but the rest of the class was otherwise silent when Harry said the name. Moody nodded at Harry. "Good. You said it. Say it again".

"Voldemort".

"Again".

"Voldemort. Voldemort. Voldemort!"

Moody walked around the room, his wooden leg clunking, his normal eye looking at the ceiling. "How many times"?

"Twice".

"What happened"?

"Well, first he did it just to show the Death Eaters that I wasn't more powerful than him. I couldn't do anything; he had taken me to a gravestone. Then he gave me back my wand and we dueled." All of the other students besides Ron and Hermione gasped. "First he told me to bow to death, to bow to him, but I wouldn't do it. Somehow he made me bend in the middle anyway. And then before I could do anything else, he put the Cruciatus Curse on me the second time. Then he wanted me to beg him not to do it again".

"Did you"?

"No. So he tried to make me with the Imperious Curse".

"Did it work"?

"I told him I wouldn't do it".

"And"--

"He tried to curse me again. But--I ran. I hid behind a gravestone." Harry's voice shook, telling about his cowardice.

"And then"?

"And then I stood to face him and I used the disarming charm at the same moment he used the killing curse. But somehow--the spells collided and canceled each other out. Then, something weird happened...he got distracted and I was able to get back to the cup--" and Cedric's body, he thought, but he didn't want to say it. "It was the portkey that had taken me there. It brought me back here to Hogwarts." Somehow, Harry had not wanted to tell about his wand and Voldemort's wand being brothers, about the dome of golden light and the sound of phoenix song, about the Priori Incantem and the shades of the people Voldemort had killed-- including his parents and Cedric Diggory--interceding for him, making it possible for him to get away.

All of the other students were silent with shock. "You were lucky," Moody told him, then turned to the rest of the class. "Odd as it sounds, when Voldemort feels he has a worthy opponent, he likes to give him a sporting chance. That said, only know of two wizards who have dueled with Voldemort and lived to tell about it. Potter here is one. The other one y are accustomed to calling--Headmaster.

"Others have been less fortunate. Those who have been tortured by Death Eaters using the Cruciatus Curse, for instance. You see, the Death Eaters had orders, and they knew what would happen to them if they did not follow orders, if they did not succeed. In some ways, they were even more ruthless than Voldemort himself-- HE didn't feel threatened by anyone. Each Death Eater has probably felt the Cruciatus Curse at least once in his life--because I know that Voldemort always wanted them to be mindful of what would happen to anyone who displeased him. Do a good job--and you would never have to experience it again. Slip up--and you took your chances. That's why the Death Eaters were--and are--so unrelentingly cruel. Self-preservation. THE EVIL INSIDE".

Lavender Brown timidly raised her hand and he nodded at her. "How is self-preservation evil"?

"By itself, it's not evil. It's what people do to achieve it that often turns out to be evil. If they feel that anything is worth doing to achieve it. Anything"...

Neville was staring down at his desk with a strange expression on his face. Moody noticed and came over to him, leaning over slightly. "Have you been to see them lately, Longbottom?" he asked gently. Neville nodded, still not looking up. "I've been to see them myself from time to time. Do they recognize you?" Neville shook his head. "Ah, well. They were really put through the ringer--finest Aurors I ever knew, your parents".

The rest of the class, except for Harry, was looking at Neville in amazement. Neville looked up now and met Harry's gaze. Harry nodded grimly, to let Neville know he'd already known.

"Your parents had more pain coursing through them than I've ever heard tell. Of course it fried their brains. Because what you all may not know is that YOU CAN beat the Cruciatus Curse. It takes an even stronger mind than to fight the Imperious Curse, but the reason it can be beaten is that it's just pain. JUST PAIN. And pain is ALL IN YOUR MIND".

The fifth-year Gryffindors all had very perplexed looks on their faces. "Now," he went on, "that sounds like I think it's not real, I know. Let me explain." He stomped his wooden leg on the floor. "See this? I won't tell you how I lost my leg; you not ready for that, trust me. Do you know why I regularly still experience pain in a leg I no longer have"?

Hermione looked around furtively before raising her hand slowly. "Phantom Limb Syndrome," she said shakily.

"Exactly!" Moody responded, making her give a quiet sigh of relief. "But what does that mean"?

Hermione took a breath and went on. "Your brain is still receiving signals from the leg"--

"Is the pain real? No! It's all in my head! Every time you bark your shin on a chair or put your hand in a flame, your body sends a message to your brain to feel pain. Interrupt the communication between the body and brain--no pain".

Hermione had apparently forgotten about being worried about being snapped at. "But pain serves a purpose--it protects us"--

"Yes, when it is a PHYSICAL pain, something you have come into contact with. But the Cruciatus Curse--" He looked at Neville. "--does not serve any purpose but to destroy the mind by overwhelming it with pain. Do it enough--and insanity is the result. Usually, it doesn't happen that way, usually--the victims crumble and give in, agree to do just about anything. But sometimes, sometimes--" He walked over to Neville and clapped his hand on his shoulder. "--you find someone so principled that he or she is willing to endure the suffering rather than inflict it on someone else. That's why the destruction of the mind of such a person is so tragic." Neville was crying now, tears running silently down his face. Moody took a handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to him without comment. The rest of the class was quiet and shocked.

"Now--you're not ready yet to learn to disconnect your brain from your body in order to beat the Cruciatus Curse--but you will be, before you're in sixth year. Unless--you just can't do it. It's not easy. Not everyone can do it. And although I want you to learn this, and we will work on it quite a lot this year, we won't begin until after Christmas break".

He walked back to his desk and leaned heavily on it, looking at each of them in turn with his normal eye. "Until then--we will analyze the nature of darkness. What makes a person turn dark? What makes another person decide not to? When that crucial moment? Have you all got your copies of the Sweetbriar Publishing Anthology of Muggle Literature"?

Hermione and Harry nodded and leaned down to get the books from their bags; Neville and Seamus also had it. Ron raised his hand.

"Please--it was on the reading list for fifth years, but I thought it was only needed for Muggle Studies"--

"No. It's for this class. Those who don't have it had better write home for it. While you wait, there are copies in the school library you can borrow. Your assignment is to read one of the Shakespeare plays in the anthology--Lear, Hamlet, Othello or MacBeth (ignore the witch stereotypes)--and write me an essay--I won't tell you how long. Make it as long as it needs to be--about a character or characters who succumb to the darkness, and why, and someone--could be more than one person--who doesn't, and why. The essay is due in a month, and then you will each read your work to the class. On Wednesday you must each tell me what play you are doing. Also, read The Lottery and be prepared to discuss it. DON'T pick The Tempest for your Shakespeare--that's more complex--you'll all be reading that one and writing a long parchment about it at the end of term. DISMISSED!"

And he clumped out the door without looking at any of them. The fifth year Gryffindors all looked at each other. Harry checked his watch. "There's still more than an hour left in the class..." he said lamely, as though it were his job as a prefect to point out something a teacher had done wrong. Hermione shrugged.

"Well, then we should go and start reading one of the plays, or at least decide which one to read. Let's go back to the common room".

But as it was the end of the day, and dinner wouldn't be served for three more hours, the rest of the class had already decided that it was free time; they were going back to the common room too, but Seamus and Dean were discussing playing Exploding Snap, and Lavender and Parvati were planning to do Tarot readings for each other. Neville was very quiet, packing his bag and standing up slowly.

Harry remembered the way, a year earlier, Neville had clutched the desk spasmodically when the fake Moody, who was really Barty Crouch, Jr., had demonstrated the Cruciatius Curse on an enlarged spider. Hermione had screamed for Crouch to stop, seeing how distressed Neville was. Afterward, he had taken Neville up to his office for tea and given him the book. Harry wondered now whether Crouch was just trying to do a very convincing job of being Moody, or whether he was genuinely sorry for having effectively orphaned Neville, as much as Voldemort had orphaned Harry.

He also remembered being in Dumbledore's pensieve, seeing the trial of Barty Crouch, Jr. and the three other people who had tortured the Longbottoms; he remembered Crouch, a mere nineteen years old, screaming, "Father! I didn't do it!" and Barty Crouch, Sr. had his son sent away to Azkaban and Mrs. Crouch collapsed in grief. When he'd seen it, Harry had assumed that it was the elder Crouch who was in the wrong; now he knew that he had had the measure of his son, who was merely a very good actor. Well, they'd all seen during the previous year what a good actor he was.

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked at each other and at Neville. Harry took a deep breath and spoke first. "I found out by accident, Neville. Dumbledore didn't want me to say anything; he said you'd say something when you were ready"...

"Moody shouldn't have done that, then," Hermione said indignantly. "It wasn't his place to"--

"No," Neville said suddenly, sharply. He looked at the three of them with glistening eyes. "I'm glad everyone knows. I'm glad....excuse me. I have to go decide which play to read." He calmly picked up his bag and left. The three of them stood looking at each other awkwardly, then Ron said, "Why didn't you say anything, Harry"?

"You heard him," Hermione said. "Dumbledore didn't want him to".

"He can speak for himself, Hermione".

"Don't you snap at me, Ronald Weasley! You need to go to the library and find a copy of the Anthology of Muggle Literature"!

She shouldered her bag and left without looking at either of them. Ron looked at Harry, perplexed. "Who's snapping? I seem to be getting called Ronald a lot lately. First that scene after Potions, now this. What's her problem"?

Harry also stared after her, then turned back to Ron. "Oh, you know her. Probably still shell-shocked because Moody yelled at her".

Ron grimaced. "Yeah. She's so perfect..." he said in a mocking tone.

Harry felt like hitting him; it was a great effort not to. "I'm going to the common room. See you later".

"Okay. What play you going to read"?

"I don't know. Maybe Hamlet. That's supposed to be good, right"?

"I'm leaning toward Othello. He strangles his wife--I can identify, just now," he said, looking at the doorway where Hermione had disappeared. Harry shuddered. Hermione thought Ron was immature, Harry remembered, but it was possible that he was also just plain dangerous. Harry looked at his friend, wondering what was going through his mind.

"Well," he said finally, unable to comment on the wife-strangling statement. "See you".

* * * * *

While he was eating dinner, Alicia Spinnet tapped him on the shoulder and said, "When you're done, Professor McGonagall wants to see you." Harry looked up at the staff table. Professor McGonagall was drinking from her goblet and not looking at him. He glanced at Dumbledore, who met his eye and nodded with a slight smile at the corners of his mouth before putting his fork into it. Harry took that as a good sign. Maybe they'll let me start next year after the O.W.L.s, he thought. Or maybe they'll make it contingent on the O.W.L.s, in which case I had really better work hard to get good marks...

When he was done, he stood, explained to Ron and Hermione that he had to see McGonagall, and walked toward the staff table without letting Hermione finish asking why. Both Dumbledore and McGonagall had risen and were heading toward the anteroom where he'd attended the prefects' meeting the previous evening, the same anteroom where he had gone to wait with the other champions after his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire.

He closed the door after himself and walked over to the large fireplace where Dumbledore and McGonagall were standing, waiting for him. Their faces were in shadow with the fire behind them, but what expressions Harry could see looked very serious. Dumbledore spoke first.

"Somewhat against Professor McGonagall's better judgment, I have recommended that not only should you receive Animagus training from her, but that it should commence immediately. You have a mortal enemy who is targeting your friends and their families, and trying to build his power and his supporters in the wizarding world. You have a number of excellent skills, and a strong mind Harry, and I feel that adding this skill to your arsenal will make you even more of a formidable opponent for Voldemort".

McGonagall looked at him evenly. "It will not be easy, Potter. It may even not be possible for you. But we need to know that sooner than later".

"I know it can take a while--it took my dad three years"--

She brushed this off. "That is because he was not properly supervised. If you have the aptitude for it, you could do it in months".

"Six months!" Harry was floored; he had not expected that.

"Or less. A year at most. If you are suited to it. We will begin immediately".

"I know. The headmaster said"--

"No. You don't understand," Dumbledore said to him. "Right this minute".

Harry looked back and forth between the two of them. "Right now"?

McGonagall stepped forward. "First, tell me, Potter, have you ever done magic without a wand"?

"Without a wand? Of course not".

"Think, Potter. There's a kind of magic you do without a wand every time you play Quidditch"...

"You mean flying a broomstick"?

"Do you think a Muggle can fly a Firebolt? There's no magic in the person for it to respond to".

"I'd never thought about it"...

"Can you think about any other times you've done magic without a wand"?

"Well--does speaking to snakes count"?

She considered this. "That's more like an innate ability that you have no control over. Think of when you were younger, before you knew you were a wizard".

Having just thought of talking to snakes, Harry's mind immediately went to the time he had inadvertently released the black constrictor he'd been talking to in the zoo; he had somehow made the glass disappear that was holding the snake prisoner. He told them about this.

"That's closer, Potter, but let me ask you this: have you ever altered your body magically in any way, without using potions, magical plants or a wand? Just your will"?

Harry ran his hand through his hair, thinking, then did it again and stopped with his hand half-way through and pulled his hand out of his hair and stared at it. "Yes," he realized. "You wouldn't know it now," he said, "but when I was younger I hated to get my hair cut. Every time my aunt and uncle cut my hair, I was so angry, I just spent the night in my cupboard under the stairs seething--and when I got up in the morning, it was always just the same as it had been, as though it had never been cut".

Dumbledore and McGonagall smiled and nodded. "Excellent!" she said. "That's the kind of thing I'm looking for, that indicates that you might have a knack for this. It takes a special kind of concentration and control over and awareness of one's body to accomplish the Animagus transformation".

"Do you need me for anything else, Minerva?" Dumbledore asked her.

"No, Headmaster".

"Then I have some letters to write. Good night. Good luck, Harry!"

"Thank you, Professor," he said a little nervously. Dumbledore made long strides across the room and left.

Harry turned back to Professor McGonagall. "So because I didn't like haircuts I might be able to become an Animagus"?

"It's not as simple as it sounds, Potter," she said, and then without warning, she disappeared and in her stead was a dignified, aloof-looking cat with marks around its eyes that looked rather like Professor McGonagall's square-shaped eyeglasses. It seemed that Harry blinked, and she was human again. "An Animagus can change back and forth in a second--in less than a second. Let's practice something. You'll do this repeatedly until you have complete control, and then we'll move on to something else. First, hold up your hands in front of your eyes, palms out, like this." Harry imitated her. "Look at your fingernails," she instructed him. "Stare at them, notice how each one looks, think about how they feel going into your skin. Look at them for as long as it takes to become an expert on them".

Harry stared at his fingernails, wondering vaguely what this had to do with becoming an Animagus. He didn't speak. The cat went on for ten minutes.

"Now," McGonagall said at last, "close your eyes. Can you still picture them"?

"Yes".

"Keep your eyes closed. Think about your fingernails the way they are now. Now think about what they would look if they were longer, and then want them to be longer, will them to grow"...

Harry thought about having longer fingernails, wondering if perhaps they should have measured them first, so they'd be able to tell whether there was a difference of any kind; suddenly, he felt a pain in his fingers and a sensation of the bones in his hands becoming liquid...

"Aaaah!" he screamed in alarm. He looked at his hands; the last joint on each finger was elongating slowly, so that his fingers were now an inch longer each, now two inches, now three...while his fingernails at the end of the stretched fingers looked exactly the same.

"Finite Incantatem!" McGonagall said quickly, tapping Harry's hands with her wand. His hands stopped growing and they shrank back to normal.

"Concentrate, Potter, concentrate. You need to focus more. Spend more time contemplating your fingernails." Harry could think of plenty of times when teachers had told students--not usually him, true--to stop contemplating their fingernails, but this was the first time he'd ever heard a teacher tell a student to do more of it.

He did as she said, losing track of time; he forgot to blink for a time, and then was forced to do quite a lot of blinking; then when it seemed he'd been holding his hands in front of him and staring at them forever, he decided to close his eyes and think grow.

He didn't feel anything. Then he opened his eyes and looked into the smiling face of Professor McGonagall, who was looking at his now eight-inch long fingernails. He felt like laughing, but her face became serious again.

"Now, Potter," she said, "make them normal again".

He looked up at her and suddenly panicked. Uh, oh, he thought. I knew there was a catch. But he held up his hands before his eyes again and contemplated his fingernails once more. He felt like he was getting double vision by the time he closed his eyes and thought about his nails being normal. When he opened his eyes again--his hands looked as they had when he had entered the room.

"Excellent, Potter!" McGonagall praised him, something rare for her. "That's enough for tonight, I think. We'll practice this every night after dinner, in here, until you build up your speed. You should go back up to Gryffindor Tower now. I have a meeting. Good night!"

Suddenly, he heard Sandy hissing under his robes, saying, "A cat will meet with a beetle".

Harry stopped and turned, "Professor," he said, "by the way, speaking of Animagi and all--what exactly is Rita Skeeter doing these days"?

McGonagall looked shaken, as though he had read her mind about what she was about to do. "Why--I can't discuss that with you, Potter. The fewer people who know about that, the better".

He'd thought he'd gotten one over on her. Oh well... "Good night, Professor".

"Good night. Oh, and Potter? Have you given any thought to what animal you'll be choosing? You'll need to do a great deal of research on your animal of choice, learn everything you possibly can about it".

"Er, no. I'll start thinking about it. Good night".

He passed out into the Great Hall again, checking his watch--he'd been contemplating his fingernails for an hour-and-a-half, apparently--and went back up to the Gryffindor common room. As he entered, Colin Creevey put a camera in his hand and took his picture with a blinding flash. Harry threw up his hand before his face, too late, groaning, "Colin--" Great, he thought. Colin was doing the whole Harry Potter Fan Club thing again.

"He's been taking pictures constantly," Lee Jordan explained from one of the tables; he was writing out pithy comments for the first Quidditch match.

"I've got a penfriend at a wizarding school in America, and I'm sending him pictures of all my house mates. But I'm also giving copies to whoever wants them. I got a good one of George and Angelina I'm giving them".

Ron and Seamus and Dean were ignoring Colin when he took their picture, sitting at a table with copies of the Anthology of Muggle Literature open before them, but they were actually playing Exploding Snap. At another table, some first years were being told horror stories by some second years about the castle ghosts. Hermione and Parvati and Lavender were sitting by the fire discussing the witches in MacBeth, and Ginny was sitting cross-legged in a corner reading a potions text. In another corner, George sat in an armchair talking to Fred, who was on the floor, while Angelina sat draped across George's lap also casually talking to Fred. They seemed so natural and easy with each other, Harry thought. They made a good couple. When Colin took their picture again, they ignored him.

Harry sat on the floor next to Ginny, looking around the room, feeling pleased with himself, then wondering what animal he would become. A stag like his father? No, that wasn't right somehow. Think, think...

"What are you thinking, Harry?" Ginny's voice came suddenly. He jerked his head up, having forgotten about her.

"Oh, something for Transfiguration..." he said lamely, but truthfully. "What animals do you like? If you could--become one, what would you choose?"

"You mean like an Animagus? Oh, I don't know--" her face lit up suddenly. "There are so many good ones. A bird, maybe like a hawk or an eagle. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to fly like that? Or perhaps a horse; running with four legs looks so wonderful. Why, what would you choose?"

Then he looked up and the first thing that met his eye was the lion above the fireplace opening, on the keystone. "What about a lion?" he said, turning to look at her.

She regarded him shrewdly. "You mean like the Gryffindor lion? With a mane and everything? That'd be really beautiful," she trailed off, looking at him. Their eyes were locked somehow. Suddenly a bright flash went off out of the corner of Harry's eye, and he realized Colin had taken their picture. He turned away from Ginny and rose.

"Well," he said abruptly. "Gotta study. Bye," he said heading for the stairs. On the way, he noticed Hermione looking at him oddly. When he reached the fifth-year dorm room, only Neville was there.

"Oh," he said stiffly, "Hello, Harry".

"What are you reading, Neville?"

"King Lear".

Harry nodded, not wanting to have a more protracted conversation with Neville at this point. He sat down and got out some parchment and a quill and ink, writing down, Hawk, Eagle, Horse, Lion. He looked at the list. Surely he could think of more possibilities than that. He pictured Ginny's face when she'd talked about flying--but then, he kept coming back to the lion...

He lay back on the covers, trying to picture his father as a stag, and him running beside him as a lion...but a lion would hunt down and kill a stag...He shook his head. No; as far as he knew, he'd still be intelligent enough to be able to control his animal instincts and avoid hunting like a real lion, or hawk, or eagle...The horse was the only animal on his list that was more prey than predator, he realized. He needed to consider this choice very carefully. He changed for bed and closed his curtains, lying back in the darkness, picturing his fingernails...

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Chapter Eight: Divination with Sandy

The next morning after breakfast, the fifth-year Gryffindors headed down to Hagrid's cabin for their first Care of Magical Creatures class. It turned out to be somewhat tamer than they had come to expect however; Hagrid had built what looked like a chicken yard, but pecking around it was a flock of geese. Hermione asked him what the geese were for.

“Ah,” said Hagrid. “Each o’ yer is goin’ ter have yer own goose ter take care o’, see, and we’ll see who gets the Goose what Lays the Golden Egg.” Harry had to admit that it certainly seemed safer than Blast-Ended Skrewts, but somewhat boring as well. Then Draco Malfoy pointed to the fenced-in paddock beside the lake.

“What’re those for?” he wanted to know. In the paddock were a dozen beautiful golden bulls, the biggest bulls they’d ever seen. Their horns looked made of gold too, and they pawed the ground and snorted between pausing to eat grass.

Hagrid smiled. “Sun bulls. Now, now, I know yer want to be challenged, but those’re for the seventh years. Part o’ their takin’ the N.E.W.T.s. If I got them all worked up by the likes of you, I’d be in a heap o’ trouble”.

“Sun bulls?” said Hermione. “What do they have to do with them”?

“They have to harness’em and plow a field with’em. Without getting hurt”.

“But how?” Ron wanted to know; Harry thought he was probably considering whether Fred and George might be in quite a bit of danger. The Triwizard Tournament seemed safer.

“Now, now; each boy will have a girl for a partner. They’re supposed to figure it out together. Don’t worry about it; you’ll have yer O.W.L.s ter worry about, so I didn’t want to make life too difficult fer yeh”.

They spent the rest of their class time choosing and feeding the goose of their choice. Lavender Brown and Crabbe were each nipped by theirs; Malfoy laughed at them both until his goose came running at him with her wings flapping, making a strange crying sound, and he went scrambling over the fence out of harm’s way. The entire class laughed at this, even the other Slytherins, and Malfoy went off in high dudgeon. Hagrid didn’t stop him. Then Harry heard Pansy Parkinson saying to Goyle, “Serves him right, too. Bigheaded prefect...I am so over him”...

It seemed that even the other Slytherins couldn’t stand Malfoy these days, Harry thought. That explained why he hadn’t seen him around Crabbe and Goyle much. Malfoy seemed to be taking a page from Percy Weasley’s book of how to be the world’s most obnoxious prefect.

After Care of Magic Creatures, they headed for the greenhouses for Herbology with the Hufflepuffs. Professor Sprout was waiting for them outside one of the greenhouses with trowels and burlap bags, telling them to put on their dragon-hide gloves and weed the vegetable beds. They looked at each other uncertainly. Some professors had clearly decided to put more work on the fifth-years; others had decided to take it easy on them. Oh well, it kind of balanced out, Harry thought.

The students all removed their robes and rolled up their sleeves--those that had sleeves to roll up, which Harry did not. A couple of Hufflepuff girls who hadn’t seen Sandy before screamed when she was revealed wrapped around Harry’s bare arm, but he encouraged them to come over and stroke her, and once they had done that, they started in with a load of questions that Harry was unprepared for (Not to mention, some of their hands were straying off onto his arm when they were supposed to be stroking the snake. (Professor Sprout ordered them to get back to work, and Harry knelt down in the dirt, pulling weeds, feeling quite at home after the summer, getting the same satisfaction out of it he’d had at home (Although many of the weeds here were far worse than dandelions--hence the dragon-hide gloves).

When they were walking up to the castle for lunch, Hermione had a distant look on her face, and Ron asked her what she was thinking. She looked startled and then said, “Oh, I was just thinking back to the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg. I was trying to remember where it came from, some fairy-tale or other”...

“It’s not from a fairy-tale; it’s real. You saw them,” said Ron.

“You know what I mean. All those fairy-tales were written by Muggles who still had some contact with the world of magic before the wizarding world started getting so insular and protective of itself. I mean, when I was little and my parents would read to me about ogres and trolls and giants and elves and leprechauns and witches and wizards, they always assured me that of course it was made up. But it wasn’t; it turns out I’m a witch, and I’ve since seen most of those creatures and more. I know that the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg is real; I also think it would be helpful to find which fairy-tale it appeared in. After I eat I’m”--

“Going to the library,” Harry and Ron intoned in unison, then laughed. Hermione pouted at first, then laughed with them. She linked her right arm through Ron’s left, and her left arm through Harry’s right.

"You two know me too well," she smiled, and they went off to lunch in high spirits, arm in arm. It had been a good morning. When they reached the entrance hall, Colin Creevey took their picture as he was getting ready to go into the Great Hall. That'll be a good one, thought Harry. Must remember to ask for a copy.

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The day went rapidly downhill after lunch, when they had History of Magic with their only ghost teacher, Professor Binns. Usually attentive in this class (Being the only student Harry had ever known who had memorized *Hogwarts: A History*) Harry was shocked to realize that Hermione had chosen to sit in the back row so she could leaf through a book of fairy tales she'd borrowed from the library. He scribbled a note on a corner of parchment. *Find anything?* it said.

She shook her head and mouthed the words Not yet.

She kept her head buried in the library book all during the class. By the end, practically everyone was virtually comatose. Harry stared stupidly out the window; Seamus had his head down on his desk and was audibly snoring; Ron was reading *Othello* and making notes; Dean and Lavender and Parvati looked listless and limp. Neville was still taking notes, but more and more slowly, as though he were a clock that needed to be wound.

They all dragged themselves out the door afterward and headed off for Divination, except for Hermione, who had Arithmancy. Harry and Ron trudged up to Professor Trelawney's tower, then climbed up the silver rope ladder to the high, dark, airless circular room where she liked to predict Harry's death in a variety of creative ways.

Today, she paired them up to do Tarot card readings. Harry was stuck with Parvati; Ron was with Neville. Professor Trelawney paired with Lavender, while Dean and Seamus were put together. Harry was supposed to do a reading for Parvati first.

"Now," she said in a bossy tone, "I was born under Pisces with Venus rising, understand? Now start".

One by one, Harry laid out cards and Parvati corrected the way he positioned them or his interpretation of them.

"No, no, that's not the Death Card," she said when he'd held up the Prince of Cups and talked about someone close to dying. This was harder than making up star charts, he thought. And Sandy was being no help. Except that suddenly, she was; he heard her hiss, "A fish will burn".

"A fish will burn?" Harry repeated in English. Parvati stared at him.

"Why are you saying that? Where in the cards does it say that?" She stood and looked down at the array of cards on the table. It was almost a full minute before either Harry or Parvati noticed that she'd put her sleeve in the candle, and her robes were smoldering, then a flame rose up and started licking the rest of her robes. "I'm on fire!" she screamed.

Harry pulled out his wand, pointing it at her and shouting, "Pluvius!" But as soon as he said it, Harry realized it should have been an F, Fluvius, so a stream of water would come out of his wand, not Pluvius, for rain; the entire ceiling of the divination classroom was now raining on everyone. They were all soaked in seconds, and the soggy cards were being blown off the tables by unseen winds. All of the candles had been extinguished by the wind and water and it was very cold. The water was icy cold.

"Dessicatio!" Neville shouted, pointing his wand at the ceiling. The rain stopped, and all of the water in the room seemed to have instantly dried up.

Professor Trelawney was brushing down her robes, glaring at Harry, and said, "Thank you, Mr. Longbottom," without actually looking at Neville. Harry looked with respect at him; he was having a good start to the year, thought Harry. Moody and Trelawney liked him, and Professor Sprout always gave him full marks. Even Snape hadn't been too hard on him in Potions the previous day. He'd grown taller and was less round than he used to be, and his voice had deepened as well. Harry thought it was even possible he was growing a pale mustache--but perhaps it was too soon to tell.

"So!" Professor Trelawney said. "If Mr. Potter is done dousing us all"--

"But Professor!" Parvati cried excitedly. "He predicted it. I looked--it wasn't in the cards. He just--said it. Like a question"

"Really?" Professor Trelawney looked interested. "What did he say?" He, thought Harry. He was getting tired of being discussed as though he weren't in the room.

"He said, 'A fish will burn?' Like he didn't know what it meant. And I'm Pisces with Venus rising, and"--

"The Sight." Trelawney came over to peer closely at Harry.

"Well, I don't know--it just occurred to me to say it," Harry said weakly. The other students were staring at him. Then he heard Sandy say, "Don't light the black candle." Harry suddenly scrambled for some parchment and a quill and wrote the cards down. Then he folded the parchment in half twice. Professor Trelawney looked excited.

"What are you doing?" she wanted to know. Harry shook his head, handing her the parchment.

"Don't look at that for a few minutes," he told her. She looked perplexed.

"Very well. Mr. Finnigan, could you please get the lights?" One by one, Seamus pointed his wand at the red candles that they had been working by, and the flames sprung into life once more. Then he pointed at a black candle on a shelf and that one before Professor Trelawney noticed. She had been waving her wand at the spilled cards, making them leap back up onto the tables. However, as soon as the black candle was lit, a cold wind seemed to whip through the room, scattering the cards again and making them all shiver as though they had just drunk ice water. Trelawney whirled around, her teeth chattering, as she saw the flame sputtering on the black candle. Pointing her wand at it, she extinguished it.

"Don't you know," she said to Seamus, quite irritated, "that you never light a black candle without lighting a white candle first, to balance it?" She pointed her wand at a white candle on the mantle, which sprung to life, and the chill air seemed to be sucked out of the room, and Harry felt like there'd been a dementor there who'd left, and almost started to feel like someone had put a cheering charm on him. Professor Trelawney extinguished the white candle. "That's quite enough," she said. "Any more euphoria and you won't be able to concentrate. Back to work!" And now she took out the slip of parchment Harry had handed her, he saw her lips moving, reading the words but making no sound, and suddenly, she stood in the chair Parvati was about to use and told her brusquely, "I'll partner with Mr. Potter. You go with Miss Brown." Ron looked at Harry quizzically; Parvati looked miffed.

Professor Trelawney swept the cards back onto the table with a swish of her wand, and had Harry cut the pack. "Your birthday?" she asked. Harry couldn't believe how she kept forgetting; once she had insisted that he had been born during the winter. The other partners were dealing out cards and beginning their readings, oblivious to Harry and the professor.

"July thirty-first," he replied. She started placing the cards on the table before her, nodding and gasping as she saw various messages in their arrangement.

"You had a mortal enemy," she told him, as she had many times before. Harry groaned inwardly--everyone knew that. Then he realized that she said had. "He no longer wishes to be your enemy," she said, tapping a card with a snake on it. "This is you," she said, tapping a card with a winged lion. "He has seen your power and--he wishes to recruit you." Harry looked up, his eyes wide. "But he has withdrawn from you--he will send his servants to you instead." She turned over another card. "A man who betrayed your family." Wormtail, he thought. She turned over another card. "A man whose son is also your enemy." Malfoy? Crabbe? Goyle? All possibilities. "But the son--" she tapped a card with a dragon on it "--may not be your enemy for much longer." That was surprising, thought Harry. "And--" she paused after turning over another card. "You will be your mortal enemy's heir". Heir? Voldemort had an heir? The card depicted some sort of raptor, a huge bird of prey.

She turned over more cards. "There are three women in your life." Harry thought of all the girls who'd been making him feel like an animal in the zoo. Only three? "One is an older woman, but there is much guilt in that...you once desired her but you are no longer interested." Well, that was true of Cho, he thought. "Two others: She--" Trelawney tapped a card with a picture of the winged messenger of the gods on it. "--is torn between you and--" Flip! went the card. "--your brother." "I don't have a brother, Harry thought irritably. This is a such a load of dung. "--who will turn on you for taking her from her." "But she--" Trelawney held up the lovers card. "--she is your true love, a warrior woman, your soul mate--although you must wait for her...she will be with another for a while, but remain pure, waiting for you. Only together can you defeat your mortal enemy".

Did that mean Voldemort? He could be defeated? That was good news. Harry stared at the cards before him, trying to remember everything she'd said. "Is that all?" he asked anxiously, forgetting that he'd thought it was ridiculous a moment before.

"Well, there are other connections. See, the woman you lust after--" Harry was jolted as she tapped the messenger card again. "--is linked with the heir of your foe. She is being held prisoner by him." What? Harry thought. I don't know anyone being held prisoner...and as for lust... "And the older woman is connected to your enemy's servant--" she pointed to the card that was not Wormtail. Was that Malfoy's dad? he wondered again. What could Cho have to do with him? Then she pointed out that the card that was the son (the one with the dragon on it), the one who would not be his enemy for long was connected to the lovers card. "Your true love will be torn--but when she finally comes to you, he will turn on you--and yet, he will also be needed to help you defeat your foe".

She stopped and Harry felt his head swimming. Too much information, too many people to keep track of... "And now, the last two cards." She put another card on what he thought of as Wormtail's card (he now noticed that it in fact depicted a large rat). "Another brother," she said. How many brothers am I supposed to have? Harry wondered. "And for him, at the hand of the traitor..." and she turned over the last card. It was the Spectre of Death.

"Death?" Harry whispered, then tried to remind himself that he didn't have one brother, let alone two.

"Not necessarily. This--" she tapped the deadly-looking card, "--can just mean a change, a transition." She opened her eyes wider. "Ah--" she said, "and your mortal enemy will tempt you with your most deeply-held desire--it is a fourth woman--you love each other"--

But she's not my true love? Harry thought. Then how can she be my most deeply-held desire? And what about the one I'm lusting after?

"You will be confronted with a choice. And if you do not choose wisely--" suddenly, her voice caught as she gazed at the cards. "The world as we know it will end," she said softly.

Harry looked up at her enormous eyes behind her glasses. "What?" he heard himself saying, as though it were someone else. "I have to make a choice that could end the world as we know it?" He stood up, running his hands through his hair. He pointed down at the cards. "This is ridiculous. I don't have any brothers. You tell me I have both a true love and another woman is my most deeply-held desire--make up your mind! And nothing I decide could end the world as we know it. Nothing!" He suddenly swept the cards off the table with his arm, then stood again, panting, looking at her defiantly. He was a prefect; he wasn't supposed to be speaking to teachers this way. Well, at this rate, he wouldn't be a prefect much longer...

The whole class was watching. Trelawney calmly magicked the cards back into a neat stack on the table with a sweep of her wand. "You may go. This has been a stressful class for you. But I forgive your outburst, because you have the Sight," she said placidly.

Harry turned to go, shouldering his bag, but before his head disappeared from sight down the ladder, he said loudly and firmly, "I do not have the Sight!" Then, he heard Sandy say, "A flame-haired man will fall off a ladder..." He thought of going back and warning Ron, but inasmuch as he'd just denied having the Sight, he thought better of it and just kept going.

He walked down the many stairs and then through winding passages to Gryffindor Tower. He entered the common room, passed through it without seeing it, and went up to the dorm. He was done for the day, thank god. It was still hot, so he opened a window and took off his shirt, lounging on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. Then he felt like he wanted some sound other than the rushing in his ears, the sound of Trelawney's voice saying The world as we know it will end. He took his portable tape player out of his trunk and put on the headphones, made sure the tape was rewound, and pressed play. He could see the parts that moved the tape going round and round; he could hear a kind of hissing noise (But not Parseltongue), but no music. He pressed the stop button. Oh, well. Hermione was always telling him that there was too much magical interference around Hogwarts for these kinds of things to work. Magnetic tape, he realized. And batteries. More magnetism. He knew that magic and magnets did not mix well. He put the tape player away and leaned back against his bed with his hands behind his head, then looked down and watched the basilisk amulet rising and falling on his bare chest.

Why me? he thought. Why is it always me? Because deep inside, he knew that he really did believe that he could be in a position to make a choice that could change the world. Was the choice to join Voldemort or to fight him? He heard Moody's voice in his head now: What makes a person turn dark? What makes another person decide not to? When is it a crucial moment? When indeed? But, Harry thought, he would never do that. Voldemort wanted to recruit him now, did he? He'd heard about Voldemort and the other Death Eaters torturing people's family members to coerce them to be Death Eaters also. Is that what he was after, coming after Ron and Hermione? Forcing me to become a Death Eater? Harry Potter, Death Eater. It was too preposterous...Unless, Harry thought, the choice not to be one is what would end the world.

as we know it...He closed his eyes and tried to imagine that his tape player worked, tried to block the Tarot card reading out of his brain before it drove him crazy.

* * * * *

He must have dozed off from the heat of the late summer afternoon. When he woke, Hermione was sitting on the bed next to him, shaking him. She was carrying her robes; she was obviously hot too, her short curls were clustered around a face that looked damp and humid; her blouse had damp wet spots under the arms and she wiped some perspiration off her forehead and spoke in a tired voice. "Come on, Harry. We have to go to the hospital wing." She stood to go and he saw that there was also a damp spot on her blouse in the small of her back. "I'm just going to change my clothes first. Why do they have to make these robes so hot and heavy?" she said wearily, heading for the door.

"Is Ron all right"?

She turned at the doorway. "Yeah. He broke his leg, but Seamus, Dean and Neville got him to the hospital wing okay, and Madam Pomfrey should have him mended by the time we get there. You should know; you've broken your leg before." Then she looked like she woke up.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"How--how did you know"?

Harry still felt like he was asleep. He pulled himself up and swung his legs over the side of the bed while saying, "Well, I fell off the ladder leaving Trelawney's, didn't he"?

She still stared at him. "Yes," she said slowly. "But you weren't there".

Now Harry felt as though he'd thoroughly woken up, too. "Oh, um, but I had trouble with the ladder when I was leaving. I figured that thing was just an accident waiting to happen"...

She looked at him through narrowed eyes. "But how did you know the one who fell was Ron"?

He shrugged. "You wouldn't be here to take me to the hospital wing if it were Seamus, Dean or Neville, or Lavender or Parvati, either. Well, you might if it were Neville. But then Ron would have come to get me himself, probably." He looked at her levelly, daring her to refute his logic. She looked dissatisfied by this explanation, still, but also looked like she'd decided she was fighting a losing battle.

"I know it's hot," she said, "But you'd better put on a shirt. Not that any of the female students would mind if you walked around like that..." She smiled at him, looking a little as she had on Sunday night, when she stroked his jaw as they stood outside the common room. She turned and left without another word.

Harry put on a clean shirt and pinned his prefect badge to it and left Sandy curled up on his bed--it was plenty hot, she didn't need to be on his arm--and went down to the common room where Hermione was waiting. She had also pinned her prefect badge to her clean blouse. They walked through the corridors to the hospital wing without speaking; once, while they were swinging their arms, their hands collided, giving Harry a shock, and he thought about reaching out to take her hand, but then changed his mind. He increased his stride instead, and Hermione increased her speed to keep up with him.

"Harry," she complained, "it's too hot to run." She jogged for a few seconds to catch up to him, then reached out and grabbed his hand, lacing her fingers through his. He let her, remembering how they had held hands when she'd told him about the abduction. It seemed like another lifetime that they were there in the Dursley's garden, lying on the grass and talking. He slowed down and they walked together, their hands linked, up to the infirmary. Harry opened the door with his left hand and they entered still holding hands.

Ron was lying back on a bed, propped up by many pillows but with his eyes closed. His left leg was covered with bandages that were protecting the magical poultices that were healing his broken bone. Harry remembered that Dick had also broken his left leg when he had ignored Sandy's warning about the rocks falling. Harry had wished that he had access to magical medicine to help Dick. Now Ron had a broken leg because Harry had ignored Sandy again. Ron opened his eyes and started to smile until he saw their linked hands.

"I found Harry taking a nap in the dorm," Hermione told him.

"You two took a while," he said flatly. "And you changed your clothes".

Hermione pulled her hand out of Harry's and went to stand on the opposite side of the bed from Harry. "It's hot, we were all sweaty..." she began, then stopped. That didn't sound good, Harry realized.

"Anyway." Harry tried to sound brisk. "I'm sorry about all this".

"All what? I was a great prat and fell and broke my leg. What are you sorry about"?

"Um, er, well"...

"Tell him, Harry," Hermione said sternly. Harry looked at her.

"Tell him what"?

"All right, I will. Harry knew you were going to fall, Ron".

"Hermione"--

"What?" Ron said, incredulous. "You knew, and didn't tell me? Wait--how did you know? Oh, god, is that why you were screaming I don't have the Sight when you were leaving"?

"No, I was saying that because *I don't have the Sight*!" Harry said irritably. "Hermione, stop doing this"...

"You knew," Hermione said. "I'm sure of it. I don't know how you knew, but you knew"...

"You should have heard him before Trelawney dismissed him," Ron told her. "He was all, I don't have any brothers. How can I have a true love and a woman who is my deepest desire! And how can I end the world as we know it? Or something like that".

"What were you doing"?

"Tarot readings. I'll have to tell you two about mine later; Neville was too funny"...

She looked at Harry again now. "What did Trelawney say to you"?

Harry grimaced. "Oh, come on, Hermione, you know her. It's all bunk. That's why you left Divination"...

"What did she say"?

He sighed. "She said that I had a mortal enemy who no longer wants to be my enemy".

She looked puzzled. "Well, that's good, isn't it"?

"Yeah, it's great. See, he no longer wants to be my enemy because he's decided I'm a pretty powerful wizard, so he wants to recruit me instead".

Ron and Hermione stared at him. "What?" they both said at once.

"Yeah, so I figured, a Death Eater tattoo would look pretty cool with all of my new robes, and I could maybe get an earring like that too, perhaps grow a ponytail like Bill"...

"Harry, stop! You would never do that!" Hermione said, exasperated.

"Why not? Because I want everyone who's close to me to be tortured and murdered while I make up my mind?" He looked at the two of them grimly. "She said he has withdrawn from me and is sending his servants. You remember what Moody said about the Death Eaters, don't you? About how they're afraid of the Cruciatus Curse, so they can be even more ruthless than Voldemort himself? Do you think I want you two being tortured"?

"But Harry, if you were--hypothetically--to become a Death Eater, what if you were told to torture people? If you didn't do it, you'd be tortured instead"...

"I don't care about that. That's just my own pain; I've coped with it before. I can do it again".

"But you see, Harry," she said pleadingly, tears starting to form in her eyes, "that's why you can't be a Death Eater. Because you'd rather suffer yourself than see anyone else suffer. You're just not cut out for it".

"She said I have to make a choice," he said softly, looking at his hands. "I have to choose wisely, or the world as we know it will end"...

She went round the bed and put her hands on his. "You will make the right choice, Harry, you will. But you're not going to become a Death Eater to protect us. I'd rather die first than have that happen".

Ron looked at him earnestly. "Me too".

He looked back and forth between them. "Problem is, I'd rather be a Death Eater if it meant that you two didn't have to be tortured or die, so I guess we're just not going to agree about this".

They looked blankly at him. He turned and strode toward the door of the infirmary, but as he opened the door, he heard Hermione's light steps behind him. He didn't look back. When he tried to close the door, she was there, slipping through. She closed the door and then turned and threw her arms around his waist; he didn't hesitate before putting his arms around her, pillowing his cheek on the top of her head, feeling the tears escaping from his eyes into her hair. He felt his shirt grow wet from her tears. It felt like they stood there what way for a long time, and then finally she separated herself from him, stood on her toes to kiss his cheek, and went running off, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands.

* * * * *

"Okay, now Fred and George are getting some food from the kitchens, and Parvati and Lavender are asking Hannah if she can borrow her Wizarding Wireless for music, and--what about something like balloons? Or streamers?" Ginny was ticking off a list as Harry entered the common room. Hermione was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Hermione?" he asked her. "And have you even been to see your brother, who's lying in the hospital wing with a broken leg"?

She frowned at him. "What do you take me for? Of course I have. And Fred and George are there with him now. Do you want to handle decorations"?

"Decorations? For what? And I asked you where Hermione is".

"Neville asked her for help with his Transfiguration homework. They went to the library. He's the diversion. Do you think you can plan Hermione's surprise party with her sitting right here? I mean, she's had a rough summer, and I thought"--

"Surprise party"?

"Harry, her birthday is on Saturday. Did you forget?" Frankly, he had forgotten that her birthday was September ninth. "Can you handle decorations"?

"Yeah, sure, sure," he said distractedly, walking toward the stairs to the boys' dorms.

"Harry"!

"What?" he said distractedly, turning.

"I thought you were looking for Hermione".

"Oh, well--it sounds like she's busy helping Neville. It can wait".

She looked at him with concern. "Are you all right, Harry"?

No, I'm not all right, he thought. I just found out that I'm being recruited to be a Death Eater, and you could be targeted and Hermione, and Ron, and your other brothers, and your parents, and all of my teachers...

"I'm okay," he croaked; his throat felt very dry suddenly. It was somehow painful to look at her, so he went up the stairs to his dorm and lay down on the bed, closing the curtains, despite the heat. He desperately had wanted to talk to her, or to Hermione, someone, but everyone was so busy, too busy to be concerned about whether Voldemort had another Death Eater or not.

He picked up Sandy from the bed and hissed at her, "What should I do, Sandy"?

"Do, Harry Potter"?

"I don't want to be a dark wizard. But I don't want to put my friends in danger".

"Then don't look for it. It will come to you".

"That's what I'm afraid of. If only I had some way to go after the Death Eaters myself; then if Voldemort didn't have any more servants, he'd have to deal with me directly"...

"Then do that".

"It's not that simple!" She was being frustrating again, making her facile statements, giving advice as though she knew anything at all about it...

I'm really cracking up now, he thought. I'm getting ready to lash out at a garden snake for not understanding my ridiculously complicated life. He remembered holding Hermione, and all he could think was that he wanted to hold her again, wanted to just hold her and forget about the rest of the world....

* * * * *

Harry pushed the Tarot reading out of his mind. On Saturday after dinner, Harry and Ron were supposed to convince Hermione to take a detour to the library so Ginny and the other Gryffindors had a chance to get the common room ready for the party. When the time for the party came, they both claimed to have all of the research they needed for their History of Magic homework, and dragged her back up to the common room, confused, because they'd actually stopped in the middle of the assignment. A week later, the password to the common room had been changed.

"Yorkshire pudding," Hermione said to the fat lady.

"Sounds scrumptious!" came the reply before the portrait swung open, followed by all of the Gryffindors, including Professor McGonagall, crying, "Surprise"!

Hermione looked like she was going to faint. Ron and Harry had to help her through the portrait hole, and then she hugged Ginny, and Parvati, and Lavender, and everyone, until she came back round to Ron and Harry again, and hugged both of them at once. Then someone turned on the wireless for music, and started passing around butterbeer and plates of cake. Everyone seemed to be laughing and talking at once. Harry watched her face; she was totally floored, had not suspected a thing. He came up behind Ginny, putting his arm around her shoulder and whispering to her, "Good job, Ginny. She looked at him and smiled. Why was it so hard to look away from Ginny these days?

She leaned close to him and asked, "What did you get her"?

He'd almost forgotten. "Oh! I have to go get it!" He went dashing up the stairs; in a minute, he was back with a wrapped package. He pulled Ron away from the punch and over to where Hermione was sitting by the fire. He presented it to her saying, "Happy Birthday, Hermione. It's from both of us".

She grinned, ripping the paper apart with abandon, then opened her mouth in surprise. "Oh--it's wonderful! Everybody, look--" and she turned a picture frame around so that everyone could see the moving photograph of the three of them, walking with their arms linked, laughing freely, Hermione looking back and forth between Harry and Ron, her hair blowing in a slight breeze, Harry and Ron looking cheerfully at her, all three of their robes billowing out behind them, a view of the forest in the background. "You took it, didn't you, Colin? It's really good".

“What about us?” Ron said indignantly. “We’re in it”.

She laughed, looking even more radiant than she did in the picture, Harry thought. “Well, now I have photographic proof that my two best friends are the handsomest men at Hogwarts,” she said smiling at them both. Ron’s ears went quite red. Harry ran his fingers through his hair.

“I’ll have to try to undo that haircut. You’re going to give me a swelled head, Hermione”.

“Oh, no you don’t, Harry Potter!” Parvati said suddenly. “You’re my masterpiece. Don’t you dare”!

Everyone laughed. “Evidently, it’s not up to you,” Hermione said with difficulty, through her laughter.

The party went on into the night; McGonagall left, having put a soundproofing charm on the tower so that they wouldn’t disturb anyone else-- “And I’m trusting you to make sure things don’t get out of hand--” she said to Alicia before leaving. When the portrait closed behind McGonagall, Alicia promptly cried, “She’s gone!” and Katie turned up the volume on the wireless as a particularly raucous song came on. Harry remembered how crazy some parties in the common room had been in the past; when his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire as the second Hogwarts champion, the party had gone on into the wee hours.

Parvati steered Hermione to a table for her birthday present: a Tarot card reading. “Actually, Parvati,” Hermione was telling her, “in my Arithmancy class, I discovered that the numbers connected with my birthday are very interesting. I was born at exactly nine o’clock in the morning, you see. Ninth month, ninth day, ninth hour. Which adds up to twenty-seven, which is three cubed. A number raised to the power of itself. It’s a very powerful set of numbers”...

“But, Hermione, you should get a reading on your birthday, to get ready for a new year of your life.” Harry had had quite enough of Tarot readings lately, so he went to get something to eat and drink, watching Fred and George dancing what seemed to be some sort of fertility dance, and laughing with everyone else.

After a while, Harry herded the first and second-year boys upstairs, who were looking pretty sleepy, and Alicia took the first and second-year girls. When he returned to the common room, he discovered that a number of the third years had also decided to retire, so that there were considerably fewer people left lounging about. Angelina and George were dancing very closely to a slow ballad on the wireless, and Fred and Katie rose to do the same; there were some sixth-years in a corner, playing Exploding Snap, and Colin was photographing Ginny and some of their fourth-year classmates for his penfriend.

As Harry stepped back into the room, Hermione suddenly grabbed his arm, saying, “You can’t get out of it; you have to dance with me now, Mr. Potter. Birthday girl’s prerogative.” This was nothing like the Yule Ball, Harry decided immediately; she slid her arms up around his neck and pillowed her head on his shoulder. He put his hands on her waist and his cheek on her hair, reeling with how strange this was. He remembered holding her outside the infirmary while they both had cried, how private that was; it was disconcerting to suddenly have her pressed against him in a room with other people. They moved their feet only slightly, he was hardly aware of the music having words or a rhythm or tune, it was a roaring in his ears as he held her and felt her heart beating against his chest and he breathed her in.

“Hermione,” he whispered. She looked up. “I have another present for you.” She widened her eyes, looking frightened and hopeful at the same time. “I’ve decided not to become a Death Eater.” She smiled, her look of apprehension evaporating.

“I never seriously thought you would,” she whispered back, pillowing her head on his shoulder again. As the song ended, he felt her trembling, and he didn’t want to let her go, but he was suddenly aware of Ron and Ginny standing nearby, clearly paying close attention to them but trying to pretend that they weren’t. Another slow song began. Harry knew what he had to do. He took her by the hand and led her over to Ron, saying, “Now, the gift was from both of us; I shouldn’t be the only one to get a dance out of it.” He put her hand in his, and Ron and Hermione looked at each other awkwardly, before Hermione smiled in a resigned way and dragged him out to the middle of the floor. Ron’s leg was mostly healed, he was only limping a little.

Then Harry put his hand out to Ginny, smiling at her. “And you,” he said, “planned a great party.” He took her out onto the floor too, pulling her too him. She chose to dance in a style more like what they’d all done to open the Yule Ball; she kept her hand in his and put her other hand on his shoulder, while he put his other hand in the small of her back. But after less than a minute, he took his hand from hers and put that one on her back too, forcing her to put her other hand on his

shoulder too. She was about an inch taller than him, so they were dancing pretty much eye to eye during the entire song and Harry found himself with the problem of not being able to look away from her again.

She finally was the one to look away, staring down where she could see the basilisk amulet resting on his shirtfront. "Do you decide what animal you want to be?" she whispered to him.

He had been practicing controlling his fingernails with McGonagall every night after dinner, until the party (she had given him the night off), and he'd told her his decision. "Yes," he said softly. She shivered at the breeze his breath made with his mouth so close to her ear. "Lion." She nodded.

"You're training to be an Animagus, aren't you?" she said softly next to his ear. He looked at her in surprise. She smiled slyly. "You've been disappearing with McGonagall every night after dinner. She's an Animagus and the Transfiguration teacher, and you were asking me about animals...it wasn't hard to figure out".

"Sssh!" he said quietly, near her ear again; she shivered again in his arms, but she didn't seem to mind it. "Don't tell anyone. It's meant to be a surprise".

Suddenly, Harry was aware that the music had stopped, and that people were looking at them. Hermione and Ron were touching. Hermione was peering intently at the two of them. "What are you whispering about?" she asked, trying to sound casual. Harry reluctantly let Ginny go.

"Nothing," he said with as blank a look on his face as he could muster. He looked at Ron, who seemed to be trying to edge away from Hermione; when Harry had glimpsed them dancing, there had been quite a lot of air between, more so than with any of the dancing couples he'd seen all night. He remembered Hermione calling him an immature git. Harry knew--or thought he knew--how Ron felt about Hermione. What was he afraid of? Harry wondered. But at this moment, having just been dancing with him, she looked like the thing she wanted most was to get away from him. Maybe I'm wrong, thought Harry. Maybe he doesn't feel that way about her at all, I've nothing to worry about.

Except that he did have something to worry about; she wouldn't be so annoyed with Ron if she didn't have feelings for him. He was just making her miserable. Harry fought the urge to hit him, as he'd wanted to when Ron had made the Othello comment. He strode over to Hermione and quickly kissed her on the cheek.

"Well, happy birthday. I'd better go up the beanstalk here and get some sleep so I can be awake for you to run rings around me in the morning," he said, moving toward the stairs.

Suddenly, she was crying, "Oh! I almost forgot!" Harry turned around, wondering what was going on. She motioned for Harry, Ron and Ginny to follow her over to the armchairs near the fire. No one else was nearby, and the music had gotten loud again, although no one was dancing now.

"I found the right fairy-tale!" she said in an excited whisper. "When I was in the library with Neville and you nefarious types were planning this party." She smiled at Ginny, who looked confused.

"What fairy-tale?" she asked Hermione.

"Aren't you doing the geese in Hagrid's class"?

"No, we're doing baby unicorns. He's afraid that not all of the older girls will be able to--get near them," she said, blushing and Harry remembered that only girls who were virgins could approach unicorns. "He said the geese were for the fifth-years. So what's with the geese? How are they magical creatures"?

"One of them is the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg".

Harry was going to lose it in a second, plus he was very tired. "So? Which fairy-tale is it"?

Hermione looked triumphant. "Jack and the Beanstalk"!

The three of them looked at each other and then at her. "So?" they said at the same time.

"So? I told you that fairy-tales were based on fact; Jack and the Beanstalk is practically a primer on how to get over on a giant. There were a number of magical things that the Jack character stole from the giant's home, and one of them was

the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg! I think Hagrid must have made contact with the giants, and he was given the goose as a kind of goodwill gesture”...

“Like giving a gift to an ambassador?” Ginny ventured.

“Exactly! I think it means that the giants will be on the right side; that they won’t go over to You-Know-Who! I think Hagrid did it!”

They were all silent. Then Ron said, “What if he stole it”?

Hermione glared at him. “What”?

“What if he did what Jack did, and stole it? What if it doesn’t mean anything at all”?

They were all silent. “We do what we usually do,” said Hermione. “We confront him about it. That’s how we found out how to subdue Fluffy”...

Ron gave a great yawn. “Well, I vote that we do it after having a long lie-in on Sunday morning. Oh, that’s right, you two are insane,” he said, pointing at Harry and Hermione. They all laughed.

“Actually, I will probably have a lie-in tomorrow,” Hermione said wearily. “What is it, about two o’clock?” Harry nodded, checking his watch. When they looked up, they were surprised to find that no one else was still in the room. They went to their respective staircases and up to bed, all hoping that Hermione was right about Hagrid and the giants--but not necessarily believing it.

* * * * *

Chapter Nine: The Date

Harry was not looking forward to the first Hogsmeade weekend, two weeks after Hermione’s birthday. That meant, of course, that the day seemed to zoom at him with alarming speed. Schoolwork, prefects’ meetings, O.W.L. preparation, Quidditch practice and Animagus training seemed to have little effect on how rapidly the dreaded day approached. He remembered his third year, when he hadn’t officially been allowed to go to Hogsmeade because the Dursleys hadn’t signed his permission form and everyone was worried about his godfather, Sirius Black, the only escapee from Azkaban ever, possibly lurking around the village waiting to kill him. He had longed for nothing more that year than to be able to go to Hogsmeade, even if he had to wear his Invisibility Cloak and use secret passages out of the castle to do it. Now, Hogsmeade was the last place he wanted to go, especially on a double date with Viktor Krum, Cho Chang and Hermione.

He wished he had progressed further in his Animagus training so that he could just transform into a lion and run off to hide in the Forbidden Forest. He had advanced to being able to grow and shrink his nails (on both his hands and his feet) in the blink of an eye, and also growing and ungrowing his hair (if he’d known it was that easy, he never would have put off the haircut). Professor McGonagall had been impressed by his rapid progress; he wondered whether he might be able to become an Animagus in less than six months.

Harry also had gotten to the point where he definitely needed to start shaving, but he decided to try to control his facial hair using the Animagus technique, too, and found that this worked quite well, and he was able to avoid being cut. No one questioned him about this. Ron used his wand, when he saw enough reddish growth on his chin and upper lip to warrant giving himself a shave. Hermione had suggested he try growing it, as Charlie had done; red beards looked really nice, she told him, colouring. This had greatly annoyed Harry.

That Saturday morning, Harry and Hermione went running as usual. When they were doing the warm-down stretches on the dewy grass of the Quidditch field, Hermione suddenly stopped, then sat down, staring into space. When Harry saw her sitting as if turned to stone, he crept over to her and touched her shoulder.

“Hermione?” he whispered. She looked up at him and he could see the fear in her eyes. “What is it”?

“Harry?” she said, as though she weren’t sure of his name. He put his hand to her cheek and she put her hand over his.

“You’re worried about Viktor,” he stated. She nodded. “Don’t be. You won’t be alone.” She nodded again.

"But--" she hesitated.

"Yes"?

"This thing with fixing up Viktor and Cho. Should we--should we do that to her? What do we really know about him? Maybe I should just break up with him and take my chances"...

"Do you want to do that?" he said gently, moving his hand to her shoulder. "I could cancel the date with Cho. We'll do whatever you want".

Suddenly, Hermione shook herself, as if trying to wake up. She rose gracefully to her feet and continued the stretching exercises. "I'm sorry, Harry. I'm just worrying needlessly. We've got a plan; we'll stick to it. Hold my ankles?" He nodded, crouching down to grip her ankles while she did some sit-ups. He watched her closely, the way her face was scrunched up in concentration, the perspiration beading on her brow. Everything she did, she was so serious about it. Except Divination, and that had shocked everyone. He tried not to think about Divination; he'd been leaving Sandy in her room for Divination class ever since that first day, and he'd managed to avoid anyone else giving him a Tarot reading since then. He felt like he'd actually gotten better at doing them, though. He had performed one for George which had predicted some behavior of Angelina's that he hadn't suspected in the least. Of course, they hadn't known until afterwards that that was what the reading was pointing to. Still...

"Harry"!

"Wha"?--

"I've been sitting here shouting at you. You can let go of my ankles now. I think five thousand sit-ups is pretty much my limit for one morning. It's your turn, now".

"Oh, right." And now she held his ankles while he did sit-ups. He took his shirt off first, wiping some sweat off his brow, then bundling it up to make an ad hoc pillow to put behind his head. He was about half through his sit-ups, counting in his head, trying to block out other thoughts, when a sudden shadow darkened the area of the field where they were. Harry stopped, panting, and looked up--

Into the pale, pointed, and extremely smug-looking face of Draco Malfoy. "Looking good, Granger," he drawled, "for a Mudblood." Harry saw Hermione colour. She stood, as did he; he looked up at Malfoy (who was slightly taller than him now). He and the other six Slytherins with him were in their green Quidditch robes and carried what looked like brand new Nimbus 2003 broomsticks--probably courtesy of Lucius Malfoy, thought Harry.

Harry's angry face was very close to Malfoy's. "Language, Malfoy," Harry said in a low, dangerous voice. He clutched his sweaty shirt in his left hand, wishing he had his wand in his right. Malfoy looked down at him.

"Sorry, are you trying to tell me what I'm allowed to say? You're sweating all over our Quidditch pitch, and my team needs to practice".

"Your team"?

"Yes," Malfoy replied, his smugness increasing by the second. "I'm the new captain of the Slytherin team. How do you like that?" Well, that explains all the new broomsticks, Harry thought.

Hermione had come over and stood next to them. "Well, isn't that a coincidence. You see, Harry's now the captain of the Gryffindor team." Malfoy's face lost what little colour it had. "Yes," Hermione went on. "You are both prefects and you are both captain of your house team. Can you give it a rest, already? What are you going to compete over next?"

They both turned to look at her, glowing and tan in the morning sun, her running bra and bicycle shorts making it completely unnecessary to use any imagination in picturing the shape of her body, her short curls clustered around her face. Not wanting to hear what might come out of someone's mouth next, she announced loudly, "I have to go get ready for my date with Viktor Krum!" And she turned and stalked back toward the castle.

Harry thought Draco Malfoy looked slightly dazed, watching her walk off; Harry had to admit, the view was quite nice... Malfoy turned back to him after a second. "So," Malfoy sneered at him. "The great Harry Potter lost out to Viktor Krum".

"I wasn't--" Harry began, then shook his head, smiling. "You can't get to me, Malfoy. Not today." He tried to look happier than he felt. "I'm going along with Hermione and Viktor with my own date: the Ravenclaw seeker, Cho Chang".

He wished he could have had a camera to record Malfoy's stunned expression. "But she's a sixth year!" sputtered Malfoy.

"And she's really pretty," said Zabini, awe in his voice.

"Shut up!" Malfoy lashed out suddenly.

"I know," Harry said, sounding like he was mulling it over. "She is really pretty. I was thinking that when she asked me out in Diagon Alley"...

"She asked you out?" Malfoy was incredulous. Harry was trying not to laugh at his expression. He turned and walked away from Hermione, calling over his shoulder, "Have a good day, Malfoy! I know I will!" He turned back in the direction he was walking, wishing that what he'd just said were true, not just a really good way to needle Malfoy.

As he walked away, he heard a Slytherin say, "Every girl in school is slobbering over him these days"...

"Well, look at him. He'll probably cause a riot, walking into the castle with no shirt on"...

"Shut up, will you?" he heard Malfoy explode again. Harry smiled and kept walking.

The second Slytherin was just about right, however; the moment Harry walked into the entrance hall, he regretted not putting his shirt back on. He thought it was quite possible that Madam Pomfrey would be busy much of the morning from minor injuries to girls who had stumbled on steps or walked into walls because of him. On the third floor, just as Hermione was going into the girls' prefect bathroom, Cho Chang was coming out. She stopped dead when she saw Harry.

"Harry--" she said softly, staring at him. Harry felt himself reddening,

"Good morning. We were just out running," he said, gesturing toward Hermione, who smiled at Cho and slipped past her into the bathroom. Cho didn't look at Hermione.

"Uh-huh," she said, still gazing at Harry.

"I'm going upstairs to shower now. We'll go after breakfast".

"Okay," she answered, looking a bit glazed-over. Harry continued on up to the fifth floor, wondering whether it was going to be possible to get her to notice that Viktor existed. I hope I'm not getting a big head, he thought.

The ceiling in the Great Hall was the same brilliant, cloudless blue they'd seen while running around the Quidditch pitch earlier in the day. When the post-owls came, a letter to Hermione from Viktor Krum confirmed that he would be meeting them at Honeydukes. After breakfast, Harry looked at Hermione sitting next to him at the Gryffindor table and said, "Ready?"

She sighed deeply. "As ready as I'll ever be." Ron and Fred looked at each other and nodded for some reason.

Harry and Hermione rose and went over to the Ravenclaw table. Harry tapped Cho on the shoulder and she turned around, smiling broadly when she saw him. He had put on his nicest black robes with his prefect badge, and he wore a simple black button-down shirt under it and black slacks and his black boots he'd worn for gardening, but newly shined and polished. With his newly cut black hair and black glasses, set off by his bright green eyes, he looked every inch a Triwizard Tournament winner.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked her. He tried to ignore the twitters of the other Ravenclaw girls, the elbow nudges being exchanged as Cho's housemates saw who her date was.

"Yes," she said simply, evidently not one for banter. She stood and took the arm he offered her--it was old-fashioned, but he felt oddly appropriate to him, at this moment. They walked out to the entrance hall, all eyes at every house table following them.

As they walked down to the village, Harry tried to engage her in conversation, but every topic he introduced resulted in making monosyllabic responses that frustrated his attempts. So he tried to make sure they were walking close enough to Hermione so that he could converse with her, and Cho seemed to be perfectly happy to walk along gazing up at him (she only came up to his shoulder) and listening to them talk (although Harry wasn't convinced she really was listening; he and Hermione had each laughed at things the other had said, but no laughter was forthcoming from Cho).

When they reached the village, they walked up the High Street to Honeydukes Sweets Shoppe. Viktor was waiting outside, and kissed Hermione on the cheek when she was close enough. He actually looked like he'd been aiming for her mouth, but she had turned her head and presented him with her cheek at the last second. They bought a few sweets and then strolled through the village streets for a while; Harry was getting more and more tired of trying to talk to Cho, especially now that Hermione was with Viktor. It didn't sound like there was much conversation going on there, either, in as much as his English was still heavily accented and there seemed to be a bit of a problem for him with British colloquialisms.

"I learn English from American television programs," he explained to Hermione.

"But you don't have a television," she remembered. "You don't even have electricity".

"Oh, no. I go to the store in Sofia that sells televisions and I stand there and watch until they tell me to go. They don't like people to stay too long who are not going to buy".

That's scintillating conversation, thought Harry, compared to what I've got here. He had thought perhaps of asking her whether she'd seen the Quidditch World Cup the previous summer, but since that was a whole year ago, and Viktor had played in the World Cup and he didn't want to make it seem that he was gushing over Viktor, he couldn't very well use that topic. He tried to ask her how bad the O.W.L.s really were, but she said, "Oh, they're as bad as you've heard," and would not elaborate. He tried to ask her what one could expect to cover in sixth-year classes, and she said, "Oh, pretty much what you learn in fifth-year, only more so." I could have a deeper conversation with a lamppost, Harry thought.

Finally, when it was close to lunchtime, they opted to go to the Three Broomsticks. It was already pretty crowded with students who'd come down from the castle for the day, but they got a table in the corner--which just happened to be next to a table with Ron and Fred Weasley, who seemed determined to pretend they didn't recognize their housemates. Harry and Hermione told Viktor and Cho that they would get them all some butterbeers and order some food at the bar.

While they were waiting at the bar for Madam Rosmerta to notice them, they looked over their shoulders at their dates, who didn't exactly seem to be talking up a storm together.

"Hermione, are you sure that love potions are illegal? Because I am dying to put something in Cho's and Viktor's drinks right now to speed up this process. I have never been more bored in my life"!

"Really?" Hermione said, her brow furrowed. "But she's very pretty"--

"Oh, cut it out. You know that's not all I'm looking for"--

"It was last year when you asked her to the Yule Ball".

Harry grimaced. "I am obviously never going to live that down, am I"?

She smiled merrily at him. "Not for the next hundred years, anyway. Oh, come on, it can't be that bad. Surely there's something you two can do together"...

He didn't take her meaning at first, then as it dawned on him, he exclaimed, "Hermione! How can I go from not even being able to talk to her to kissing her"?

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I think when people have too much to talk about, it can keep them from kissing..." She looked at him very pointedly, and he remembered that moment in the Dursleys' garden when they'd almost kissed, before Sandy had told him that Sirius was coming. He had no answer to this. He glanced back over his shoulder.

"They're moving their lips a little. Maybe an actual conversation is imminent," he said hopefully. Hermione placed an order for four butterbeers and fish-and-chip platters and indicated which table should get the food order. They each carried two

mugs of butterbeer back to the table, moving slowly through the crowd more to prolong their absence than because they thought they would spill the beverages.

Harry thought that it was possible now that there was something in the world more boring than one of Professor Binns' classes: a date with Cho Chang. This experience should be bottled and sold as a sleep aid, he thought. Meanwhile, he was acutely aware of Ron and Fred at the next table, trying to hear what little conversation was taking place among them on the date.

Once their food had arrived, at least they had the excuse of having full mouths to avoid talking. Harry had never even experienced such a quiet meal even at the Dursleys, where he routinely got the silent treatment (when he wasn't being given the opposite, the yelling treatment). Even Ron and Fred were starting to look bored, he thought. When Spies Get Bored, Harry pictured the headline in *Witch Weekly*. By Rita Skeeter. If she were still writing.

After they were done eating, he decided he couldn't take it any more. "Well," he said briskly, "this has been fun, but Hermione and I have a load of homework to do. I have to put in some hours in the Potions dungeon, and didn't you say Professor Vector had given you a ton of Arithmancy homework, Hermione?" His eyes looked pleadingly at her.

"Oh!" she said suddenly. "Yes. So much work. Unbelievable." She nodded vigorously. Viktor and Harry paid the bill (Hermione argued with Viktor about paying her way; Cho did not say anything about Harry paying for her, despite having been the one to ask him out). They all rose to go, and as they reached the door, Harry saw out of the corner of his eye that Ron and Fred were also rising to leave.

As they were walking back to the castle, Harry with Cho and Hermione up ahead with Viktor, Harry simply decided to stop even trying to talk with Cho, and she seemed perfectly happy to just walk along, arm in arm, enjoying the spectacle of the autumn colors. Ron and Fred were skulking about forty feet behind them.

When they reached the entrance hall of the castle, Harry extended his hand to Cho, shaking it vigorously, thanking her for a lovely day, and saying that they would have to do it again the next Hogsmeade weekend, but thinking: That's five hours of my life I'm never getting back. As they were shaking hands, Ginny emerged from the stairs to the Potions dungeon. She stopped dead when she saw Harry and Cho, frowning at first, then looking happier as she saw that no kissing was following the hand-shaking. Actually, she looked like she was going to laugh, thought Harry, who sincerely hoped she wouldn't. Then he saw Viktor and Hermione over Cho's shoulder, and groaned inwardly; this plan wasn't going well at all.

Their kiss in the entrance hall made the one on the train platform look sick. When they separated, Harry thought Hermione looked like she was having difficulty standing up. Cho went up the stairs toward Ravenclaw, seeing the end of Viktor's and Hermione's kiss and giving Harry a bit of a hurt look as she left. Viktor departed, and Hermione stood looking out the open door, her brow furrowed, pulling at her lower lip with her right hand.

Ginny started to come toward Harry and Hermione, but suddenly, Draco Malfoy emerged from the same stairs Ginny had ascended. "Ginny!" he called as he climbed the stairs. "You forgot your mortar and pestle..." He handed it to her and whirled. Harry and Hermione whirled in surprise.

"Were you both in the Potions dungeon?" Harry asked suspiciously, just as Fred and Ron entered from the outdoors.

"Yeah. So?" Malfoy said, coming closer to him.

"So what were you doing down there?" Ron wanted to know.

"Potions homework," Ginny informed him stiffly.

Ron regarded Malfoy through narrowed eyes. "And I'm supposed to believe that?" Harry felt rather than saw Ron and Fred come and stand on either side of him, facing Malfoy.

"Yes," Malfoy said as Harry and the Weasley brothers presented a united front. "I do work for my grades, I don't just depend on the goodwill of my head of house. I mean, I believe that Potter and the Mudblood aren't shagging on the Quidditch pitch every morning"...

Simultaneously, Harry and Ron grabbed Malfoy's arms and pinned him to the stone wall; they both quickly whipped out their wands and pointed them at Malfoy's throat. "You stop calling her that, Malfoy," Ron hissed at him. Malfoy grinned evilly at them.

"Ron! Harry! Let go of him!" came Ginny's unexpected voice. "He's my friend!"

"Your friend?" squealed Harry, Ron and Fred. "Hermione is your friend," Harry reminded her.

"Let go of him," she said firmly, and Harry had a sudden vision of her someday being Head Girl. Alicia Spinnet probably couldn't have mustered as much authority, he thought. They released him and Ginny strode over to him. "You know I don't like that word..". she said to Malfoy quietly but sternly.

For the first time since Harry had known him, Draco Malfoy looked abashed. "Sorry"--

"Nope. Not to me. To Hermione." Harry tried to suppress a smile; she was so in charge.

Malfoy walked over to Hermione and looked her in the eye sincerely. "I'm sorry I called you--that, Granger".

"And--" Ginny prompted him.

"And it won't happen again".

Hermione crossed her arms and looked at him, expressionless. "Apology accepted. Excuse me," she said, going up the stairs toward Gryffindor Tower. Harry, Ron and Fred were not going anywhere until Malfoy left; none of them wanted him to be alone with Ginny again. She turned to him once more. "Thank you for my mortar and pestle, Draco". Draco ? Harry thought. She was calling him Draco?

"You're welcome," he smiled at her, and Harry was shocked to see that he could actually produce a smile that wouldn't better be described as a smirk or evil grin. He then shot daggers from his eyes in the direction of Harry and the Weasley brothers before going down another staircase leading to Slytherin house.

Just then, Neville Longbottom emerged from the stairway to the Potions dungeon, carefully carrying a glass beaker which was steaming and obviously hot; he was handling it with dragon-hide gloves. He stopped short when he saw Harry, Ron and Fred standing around in the entrance hall.

"What's up?" he asked, cautiously eyeing his potion; it looked as though it might have been considering overflowing its container.

"Were you down in the Potions dungeon with Ginny and Malfoy?" Ron wanted to know.

"Yeah. We all had stuff to do. Malfoy was dead useful, actually. Helped me finally get this memory-enhancing potion looking right..." He continued up the stairs, holding it out carefully in front of him.

Fred looked accusingly at Ginny. "Well, why didn't you say you weren't alone with Malfoy"?

She looked incredulous. "Why didn't I--what am I, on trial here? Did you ever bother asking? And what if I had been? What would that mean that we were doing anything other than Potions work? It just so happens that he helped me with my potion, too." She looked challengingly at Harry and her brothers.

Harry leaned toward Fred and Ron, whispering, "Why don't you two clear off--let someone who's not her brother talk to her for a minute, all right?" Ron looked like he wasn't sure that was such a good idea, but Fred nodded and motioned for Ron to follow him. He did so, looking over his shoulder at them.

Harry and Ginny walked up the stairs more slowly. "Sorry about all this Ginny. Ron and Fred spent the day spying on our date, and I had to actually be on the ruddy stupid date--and I suppose we're all on edge"...

"So, it didn't go well," she said softly.

"That's an understatement. I won't bore you with details; I'm already bored enough. No point in doing it to you, too." He smiled at her, and she gave a feeble smile back. They continued walking upward, slowly and steadily. "But, I suppose it was a bit of a shock to hear you calling Malfoy by his first name"...

She stopped. "Really? I suppose it's just because--I've always thought of him as Draco. It's his father I think of as Malfoy since his father"...

"Gave you Tom Riddle's diary," Harry finished for her, also stopping. She nodded grimly, then started moving again.

"When he's not showing off, when he's not around a lot of people, he can be okay, you know. Actually, he seems a bit lonely these days. Not even many friends among the Slytherins".

"Some of them must be his friends. The Quidditch team just voted him to be their new captain." But then Harry remembered the new broomsticks they'd all been holding. He didn't have to wonder why they'd voted for him.

"I suppose. But think of this: he helped Neville, which you'd probably never expect, and he helped me, and I'm Ron's sister, and you know what bad blood there is there".

"So--I'm supposed to believe Draco Malfoy's turned over a new leaf"?

"You're supposed to give him the benefit of the doubt".

"That was the second time today he called Hermione a Mudblood. That's not helping me give him the benefit of the doubt".

"Well--I have my theory about that"...

He stopped. "What"?

She also stopped. "I think he might have--just possibly--a little crush on Hermione".

"What? So he insults her with the rudest possible name he could call her"?

"It's just--I think he knows she'd never give him the time of day. So he tries to convince himself she's beneath him, or something, because she's not pureblood"...

He looked at her levelly. "You're pureblood".

Then she surprised him by blushing. "Don't be ridiculous, Harry. I'm also a Weasley....That would be...it would be...Don't be ridiculous," she repeated, finishing lamely. She walked up the stairs ahead of him, moving more quickly this time, and Harry wished he had Moody's magical eye, so he could see her expression.

* * * * *

Chapter Ten: The Top of the Beanstalk

It had been more than two weeks since the date, and Harry was relieved that he didn't have to worry about another date until almost Halloween. In the meantime, he'd been practicing enlarging and shrinking his hands and feet. It was strange to watch, and required a lot of concentration. He was still quite slow at it.

He had run into Cho Chang a couple of times since the date, but each time she looked the other way, and Harry was starting to wonder if he'd blown it. How could they fix up Viktor and Cho if she wouldn't go out with him?

It was Wednesday, and they had just finished their Defense Against the Dark Arts class. It had been Harry's turn to read his essay on Hamlet; he had been quite nervous about it, but Moody seemed to think he'd done well. Hermione had smiled encouragingly at him, all the while, but then, she'd already read it three times, not to mention five earlier drafts. Ron had yet to do his Othello essay; it was written, but he had refused to show it to Harry and Hermione. "You'll hear it when everyone else does," is all he would say.

When they were back in the common room after class, Harry said to Hermione, "I have to talk to you." He walked over to the fireplace and Ron started to follow, but Hermione put her hand out to stop him.

"He said he wants to talk to me, Ron".

Harry looked back and forth between them. "Oh--don't worry, Hermione. Ron can hear. It's not--well, anyway, come over here, both of you." Once they were in the armchairs near the fire, Harry looked down at his hands, unable to look at Hermione. "I'm afraid I've botched it all up. With Cho. So we're going to have to come up with a different plan to deal with Viktor because I'm a stupid prat." He looked up at her, into her extremely surprised and confused face.

"Harry--what are you on about?"

So he explained that Cho was giving him the cold shoulder, and Hermione asked, "When did it start? How often have you met with her since we went out? Did she seem distant when you kissed her at the end of the date?"

Harry looked stunned by the barrage of questions. "I--I--" he stammered. "I haven't gotten together with her at all since the date. And--we didn't kiss after the date. I shook her hand".

"WHAT?" Hermione cried, making everyone else in the common room look at her. Hermione cleared her throat and tried to calm down. Ginny came over and sat in the fourth chair.

"What's going on?"

"Ginny--good, we need another woman's point of view. If you went on a date with Harry, and instead of kissing you when it was over he shook your hand, and then he didn't talk to you for more than two weeks afterward, what would you think?"

Ginny looked at Harry, then away. He couldn't help thinking that he would never behave that way toward her--

"Well," she said softly, "I suppose I'd think that he thought I had some sort of disease".

"Thank you!" Hermione was triumphant.

"What I'd think if you went out with Ginny and did that is that maybe you'd decided you wanted to go on living after all," said Ron in a snarl. Harry scowled.

"We're getting off track," Hermione sounded irritated. "Be the overbearing big brother some other time, Ron. Right now we have to repair the damage Harry's done." She looked thoughtful for a moment, perplexed. "I can't understand why I never noticed you two didn't kiss"...

"Well," Harry said, clearing his throat, "you and Viktor were somewhat--preoccupied".

"Are you sure you want to break up with Viktor Krum?" Ginny said with a smile curling around her lips; Harry thought Hermione might be trying to kill her just by glaring at her.

"Yes," Hermione said emphatically. "I needed to make sure he wouldn't suspect anything yet. But--next time, Ron if you could be waiting in the entrance hall, and look really frantic when we come back, and say the headmaster wants to see us immediately, then we could both make a clean getaway--and then the two of them would be left alone"...

Ron nodded and saluted. "Aye, aye. Will do." Harry held in a comment about how eager Ron was to perform this service.

"And you," she said to Harry, still very much in charge. "Come with me." She went over to an empty table and took out parchment, a quill and an ink bottle. Ron and Ginny followed. "Now," she said once he was seated and holding the quill poised over the parchment. "Write what I say." And so he wrote:

Dear Cho,

I'm sorry I've been such a prat. I really enjoyed our date and I'm looking forward to the next one a great deal. I've never dated before and I was extremely nervous. I kept meaning to talk to you since we went out, but the words I want to say always seem to leave me as soon as I see you. Most of all, I'm afraid that my behavior at the end of the date might have given you the impression that I'm no longer interested in you. Quite the opposite.

I know you'll be pretty busy during the next few days getting ready for the Quidditch match with Hufflepuff, but perhaps after you win the game (as I know you will) we can meet in the stands and pretend we're at the end of our date again, and do it properly this time. Again, I hope you'll forgive my stupidity; when I'm around you, my brain doesn't seem to work quite properly.

Affectionately,

Harry

“Do we have to put that bit in about ‘stupidity’ and me being a prat”?

“Hey, those are your words; just a minute ago you said, ‘I’m a stupid prat.’ And the answer is yes, it’s endearingly self-effacing.” Hermione sounded very official. Harry grimaced.

“And what does this bit here mean about doing it properly this time”?

She looked at him with one eyebrow raised. “What do you think?” She watched his face as he furrowed his brow. Then suddenly his bright green eyes went wide and she laughed. “There it is”...

“NO”.

“Harry! You have to”.

“Hermione! You are having me write a note to her saying, ‘Meet me after the match to do some snogging”’.

She shrugged. “So”?

“SO”?

“Harry--this is the plan. Remember”?

He looked down at the parchment and sighed. He thought of her being abducted in Bulgaria, wondering about the lost time, wondering whether she could trust Viktor at all. “I suppose I should take this up to Hedwig,” he said heavily.

Hermione nodded, having won. “Good. I’m glad you see it my way. Now, I have some Arithmancy work to do,” and she took out her books and sat down at the same table. Harry rolled up the parchment and turned to go. Ron went up to the boys’ dorm, looking over his shoulder at Hermione once before ascending the stairs.

As he was climbing out of the portrait hole with the letter, he heard footsteps behind him. It was Ginny. She didn’t say anything, and neither did Harry. They walked silently up to the Owlery together. Ginny still said nothing as he grimly tied the note to Hedwig’s leg and watched her fly out the window. However, as soon as she was irretrievably gone, Harry was at the window, yelling, “Hedwig! Wait! Come back!” But it was too late.

“Oh, Ginny, what have I done?” he cried, anguished. “I don’t know anything about dating, let alone a girl who’s older than me. I can’t do this, I can’t”--

“Harry! don’t worry”--

“Don’t worry! How can I not worry? She’s already thinking I’m a rude, insensitive git, and writing her a letter is supposed to fix that? Not to mention, I’m going to have to pretend I want to kiss her, when it’s pretty much the last thing in the world I want to do, other than kissing Snape or Malfoy”--

“HARRY!” Ginny yelled, grabbing his wrists. He looked dazed, tried to focus on her. “Harry,” she said, smiling now, looking almost like she was trying not to laugh. “I’ve never heard you babble before”.

“Yeah, well, it’s my new language. Babblish.” Then, in spite of himself, Harry cracked a smile, and then laughed outright. Ginny laughed now too, letting go of him and putting her hands up to her mouth. Harry leaned against the wall and just kept laughing so hard that his eyes started watering. Ginny held her stomach, laughing breathlessly, then tried to talk, panting.

“Oh, oh, I’ve got a stitch in my side--” she said, leaning against the wall next to him. Gradually, they both quieted and just stood against the wall beside each other, staring into space. Harry had a sudden vision of grabbing her and spinning her around, as he’d done before, then doing something he hadn’t before, bringing his lips to hers...

"You know," Ginny said suddenly (at least it seemed sudden to Harry), "you look really nice when you're laughing like that".

He turned and looked at her. "You look nice all the time," he said softly, moving his eyes over her thin face, the sprinkling of freckles over her nose, her deep brown eyes, her beautiful flaming hair framing her face...

Ginny's eyes went very wide, and she looked almost frightened. After a prolonged silence, she said quietly, "Well, Harry, don't think you have to worry about Cho." She walked toward the door. "I think she knows that almost any girl at Hogwarts would want to be in her shoes"...

Harry didn't move. "Almost?" he smiled. Ginny blushed.

"You know me. I like to be original. Don't go along with the crowd." He got her meaning, but it made him feel as though there were a hand crushing his heart.

"Well. That would explain you calling Draco Malfoy your friend." He went past her, toward the door. His voice sounded rather harder than he had meant it to.

"Harry--" he heard her say in a conciliatory tone behind him. He stopped and spoke with his back to her still, not wanting to look at her.

"I don't trust him Ginny. Remember--because of his father, you almost died, and I had to kill a basilisk at the age of twelve".

"He's not his father".

"We'll see," was all he trusted himself to say, before he left, walking away from her as quickly as he could. So, he thought. She's over me. Figures. Just as I notice how beautiful she is, what a great person she is...

He tried to shake his head, put her out of his mind, but it seemed that the more he tried, the more he thought of her, so that even when he closed his eyes, what he was most likely to see was Ginny Weasley's face.

* * * * *

Harry received no answer to his letter to Cho Thursday morning when the post owls came flying into the Great Hall at breakfast. He glanced over at the Ravenclaw table, but neither Cho nor any of her friends took any notice of him.

Hermione was sitting between Harry and Ron. Speaking in a low voice, between bites of toast, she informed them, "We need to confront Hagrid today about the geese. We've put it off too long." They were scheduled to go to Care of Magical Creatures right after breakfast.

"What if he doesn't want to tell us?" Ron said. "What if he just refuses"?

Hermione shrugged. "We've gotten information from him before without his meaning to give it; remember Nicolas Flam"

They finished breakfast and shouldered their bags, leaving the castle and walking down to Hagrid's hut on the edge of the Forbidden Forest with the rest of the fifth- year Gryffindors and Slytherins. When they arrived, Hagrid was very excited.

"One o' the geese has laid the golden egg!" he informed them all once they'd assembled. "Now, each o' yeh look and see whose it is"!

One by one, they picked their way through the fenced-in yard, practically carpeted with large flattened, smelly piles of goose dung (which not everyone managed to avoid) and inspected their geese and the straw bed each one habitually used. No one seemed to have a goose that had laid an egg at all, let alone a golden one. Finally, Malfoy, grimacing distastefully the entire time, reached his surly goose, picked her up awkwardly to look under her, and then almost dropped her in shock when he found her sitting on a large, blindingly gold egg.

"I've got it!" he yelled triumphantly. "I've got the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg!" However, just at that moment, his goose got tired of being held in his untutored grasp and started flapping her wings in his face, causing him to lose his g

but not before she let fly an impressively-sized collection of goose droppings all over his shoes and the front of his beautiful robes with their silver prefect badge.

The goose droppings were not made of gold.

“Don’t drop ‘er!” bellowed Hagrid, striding over to Malfoy and seizing the goose. “Ye’ll hurt ‘er”!

“I’ll hurt her?” Malfoy replied, incredulous. Harry had to admit, he looked a lot worse off than the goose. Malfoy never seemed to do well in Care of Magical Creatures; Harry strongly suspected that he regarded it with the same distaste with which Harry regarded Potions. His robes and shoes were probably completely ruined.

Irritated, Hermione picked her way through the goose dung. She waved her wand casually at Malfoy’s robes and shoes and said tiredly, “Purgario. Honestly. Doesn’t anyone around here know a simple cleaning charm?” Malfoy’s clothing was pristine once more, he saw with shock.

“Um, thanks Granger,” he said awkwardly. He’d actually managed to be fairly civil to Hermione since the Hogsmeade date, and Harry had wondered about Ginny’s theory about why Malfoy seemed to usually go out of his way to insult Hermione. Now in her debt, he looked even more ill at ease than when he’d been covered with goose droppings.

“Right!” Hagrid bellowed, coming over to take the gold egg. “And as the winner, ye get a gift certificate fer a free lunch at the Three Broomsticks--not including butterbeer,” Hagrid told him, handing him a piece of parchment with the Three Broomsticks logo prominently displayed at the top.

“What?” Malfoy sputtered. “That egg’s got to be worth more than a bloody lunch”!

“It was just the luck of the draw, Malfoy. Be grateful fer what ye got. Now, you lot, clean up this yard, feed yer geese, and yeh can go early. Next we’ll be starting in on two creatures which each have ter do with yer houses; we’ll do one in honor of Slytherin first, and then Gryffindor”.

“Well,” Ron said in an aside to Harry as they used Hermione’s cleaning charm to remove the goose dung from the yard. “it’s obvious what that’ll be, isn’t it? First a snake, then a lion”.

“I suppose,” Harry said, “but how is the lion going to be magical? I mean, I’ve read a good bit of the book Sirius gave me about snakes and magic, and I can see the point of that--although all of the spells I’ve seen so far seem like borderline dark magic--but, a lion?” Harry was especially curious about this since he’d decided to choose a lion for his Animagus transformation.

While the others were cleaning up the yard using Hermione’s cleaning charm and caring for the geese (who were busily trying to cover the ground with goose droppings again) Harry, Ron and Hermione came over to Hagrid.

“So,” Hermione began in a low voice, “where’d you get the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg, Hagrid”?

He looked shifty-eyed. “On me summer travels”.

“Get anything else? A harp? Some magic beans, perhaps...?” Hermione went on fishing. Hagrid smiled.

“Ye’ve figured it all out, have ye Hermione?” She blushed and looked down. “Well, you three stay when the others are done, before yer next lesson. There’s someone I’ve been meaning fer yeh ter meet.” He disappeared around the back of his hut, and they returned to the yard to help with the cleaning.

When the Slytherins and the other Gryffindors moved off to have some free time before Herbology, Harry, Ron and Hermione stayed behind with Hagrid. He took them around behind his hut, then told them to leave their bags there before going into the Forbidden Forest. This wasn’t the first time Harry and Ron had been in the forest; they’d had a harrowing encounter with Aragog, a giant spider who was actually friends with Hagrid (although he was still planning to eat them until they were rescued by Ron’s father’s magic car, which had gone into the forest and become wild). Harry had also been in the forest once with Hermione and Neville Longbottom and Draco Malfoy when they’d all had detention during their first year. Harry never exactly looked forward to going into the forest; he felt it was forbidden for many excellent reasons.

Hagrid walked ahead of them with his boarhound, Fang, while Harry, Ron and Hermione followed, wands out (Hagrid didn't notice this). They walked far enough into the forest that when Harry looked behind him, he had trouble seeing through the trees to the rest of the school grounds. Looking ahead, he wondered where Hagrid could be taking them. Since they were being taken into the forest by a teacher, they couldn't technically get into trouble for breaking the rule against going into the forest, but they could get into trouble by running into some of the more unpleasant residents of the forest.

Finally Hagrid stopped. "Here we are. Yeh can finally meet 'er".

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked around at the trees that were still everywhere. Her? Her who? Then Hermione, shaking her head, put her left hand on Harry's right arm and her right hand, still holding her wand, on Ron's left arm. "Look up," she whispered.

Harry and Ron tipped their heads back, as Hermione was doing, and realized that what they had thought were two very sturdy, large trees were actually a person's legs swathed in a rough brown material that was serving as a kind of hose; the legs disappeared into a greenish knee-length dress (the hem was about seven feet off the ground) and the head of the person in front of them had to be a good twenty feet off the ground. Oddly, when he looked up into her face, Harry saw what Hagrid had looked like as a child (he'd seen a picture), without his whiskers, but with longer hair and a slight feminine softening of the features, now rather wrinkled and lined.

"Meet me Mum, Fridwulfa!" he declared gleefully, waving his large hands. Standing about ten feet tall, Harry had always thought that Hagrid was plenty big, but now, meeting his full-giant mother, Harry thought of 'big' in a whole new light. "Mum--meet"--

"Oh!" his mother cried, hurting their ears. Hagrid shushed her, so she whispered after that (whispering for her was louder than shouting for most people). "You must be the little girl my Rubeus said figured it all out! Dead smart, 'e says you are..." And with that, she reached out and picked Hermione up around her middle, making her scream shrilly, with a pitiful cry and a longing for the longevity that Harry had never heard from her before. He was afraid that rather than being just 'dead smart' Hermione would simply wind up dead.

"You put her down!" Ron screamed, brandishing his wand at her. "I'll--I'll--" but Ron seemed to be at a loss for the right hex to put on someone holding a human being fifteen feet in the air; he didn't want her to drop Hermione.

"Oh," she said again, softly (for her). "Sorry." She set Hermione down again slightly in front of Harry and Ron; she sagged and Ron picked her up quickly, scooping one arm underneath her knees and the other around her back, cradling her; Harry was surprised, he made it look so easy. Ron usually looked rather lacking in muscles. Hermione pillowed her head on his chest, looking shell-shocked and as if she were on the verge of gibbering.

"Don't do that again!" Ron yelled up angrily at Hagrid's mother, holding Hermione closely.

She frowned, which worried Harry, as he felt her behavior to be a bit unpredictable. He remembered Ron telling him at the Yule Ball the previous year that giants were just vicious. They just liked to kill. He thought a little diplomacy couldn't hurt.

"Uh, what he meant was, it's polite to ask someone first if they want to be picked up".

"Oh, look at you! I bet I know who you are..." and here came her hand again. Harry braced himself, his eyes closed, but then nothing happened. He opened them again and looked up at her. She was leaning over, her hand poised to pick up Harry. "May I?" she asked extremely politely. Harry was unsure whether she was mocking him. He nodded and steeled himself for being tightly squeezed around the middle. But she was actually quite gentle with him; she had him straddle her index finger somewhat like a broomstick, holding onto her thumb to keep his balance.

"Those eyes, that scar--you must be 'Arry Potter"!

He tried to feebly smile while simultaneously trying to keep his balance and not spew his breakfast all over her hand. "I must be..." he trailed off feebly.

"Rubeus 'as told me so much about you!" Harry had gotten slightly gushy responses before from people in the magical world who knew who he was, but never anyone quite so intimidating as Hagrid's mother.

"She was mighty impressed, mum was, when I told 'er what good friends we is," said Hagrid.

"Yes, well," Harry said articulately. He looked down; the earth seemed a long way down, and he felt his stomach move uncomfortably inside him as she moved her hand casually. He never felt sick when riding a broomstick, but then he was the one in control of his Firebolt. "Actually," he said, trying to keep his voice even, "if it's all the same to you, I think I'd like to go back down now." He swallowed a mouthful of stomach acid.

"All right, dear. 'Ere ye go." And she lowered him gently to the ground again. Hermione had convinced Ron that she could stand up again, but she was white as a ghost; all signs of her summer tan were gone. When Harry arrived back down on the ground again, she gave an inarticulate cry and threw her arms around him, burying her face in his neck. He patted her back quickly.

"I'm all right," he said softly. "It's okay." He saw Ron's face and swiftly took her arms from around him and looked her in the eye. "Get a grip," he whispered.

She looked at him, actually starting to smile a little. "You should talk. Your face is green".

He swallowed again. "I was starting to relive my bacon and eggs from breakfast".

Ron came over then, and Hagrid spoke again. "Mum has convinced about 'alf o' the British expatriate giants to come over ter our side. The goose was a goodwill gesture from their leader-in-exile".

Hermione looked pleased at having guessed correctly on this. But Harry was concerned about something else. "Only Hagrid? What about the rest"?

"Oh, well," Hagrid's mother hesitated. "The rest of the ex-pats are still a bit upset about their exile. But I don't think they want ter support You-Know-Who. They just want to stay in the mountains o' Georgia an' Ukraine an' not be bothered w' what's happenin' in the rest o' the world. Well, most of 'em, anyway..." And did they want to support Voldemort? Harry wondered.

"Mum's goin' ter stay 'ere fer a while. Dumbledore figured the forest at Hogwarts'd be a pretty safe place for 'er. Plus some friends of 'ers'll be showin' up soon".

"Um," Ron started, "how many friends"?

"Oh," she said thoughtfully, "six or seven".

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked at each other with alarmed expressions. Six or seven giants would be living on the grounds of Hogwarts? That sounded like possibly more trouble than Hagrid trying to raise a dragon in his one-room wooden hut.

"Well," Harry said, checking his watch, "it was nice to meet you, but we'd better be getting to our next lesson. I'm sure we'll be seeing you again".

"All right. You run along now and be a good girl and boys. Listen to yer teachers"!

"Yes ma'am," they mumbled, raising their hands in a farewell (they finally decided to put away their wands). Hagrid led them out of the forest once more; they were all still a little shaky in the legs from the encounter with his mother. Harry had had no idea what it would be like to confront someone that large. And she was friendly. Confronting an unfriendly giant was something he didn't even want to think about.

* * * * *

At breakfast on Saturday morning, Harry finally got an owl from Cho with a note:

Harry--

I will meet you in the stands after the match.

--Cho

Ron sat between Harry and Hermione, reading over Harry's arm. "Not exactly a mushy gushy love note, is it?" Ron said.

"Why would it be? He's been beastly to her. That was supposed to be the latter part of the plan, Harry," Hermione informed him, just a little snidely.

"Yeah, yeah. I screwed up. Are we done with the Harry-bashing now"?

"Just make sure you two have a good snog," Ron told him. "And then tell me all about it." Harry and Hermione each punched him on his right and left arms at the same time. "Hey! Ow! Just kidding"!

"A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell," Hermione began, but Ron interrupted her.

"Well, since this is Harry we're talking about, I thought--hey!" he yelled as they both punched his arms again.

Harry laughed. "C'mon. We need to get our Quidditch practice in this morning, since the match is after lunch." He rose, picking up his Quidditch robes and broom, as did the other members of the Gryffindor team. Hermione walked with them to the entrance hall and then went up the steps towards the library. Harry started out the door with the others, then threw his robes and broom at Ron, saying, "I just remembered something. Take my stuff. I'll be right there." Ron took Harry's things and left with the others.

Harry sprinted up the stairs, catching up with Hermione easily. "Hermione! I have to talk to you"...

She turned with a surprised look. "Oh! Well--let's go in here," she said, leading him into the Charms classroom. Harry paced back and forth, unsure of how to start. After a few minutes of this, Hermione was getting impatient. "Is there something you actually wanted to talk about, Harry, or was I just supposed to watch you pace all morning"?

He finally stopped and faced her. "I can't go through with it. Cho. This afternoon. I can't. I have no idea what I'm doing. It's just be worse than before. She'll think I'm a complete idiot".

Hermione smiled at him; great, he thought. She thinks this is funny.

"Oh, Harry. You're just nervous. Here: I'll show you everything you need to know".

Hermione walked up to him and stood a mere inch away. Harry could feel the warmth of her body. She was wearing a very form-fitting blue sweater and some jeans. She took his left hand and moved it to the small of her back, making him think this was some kind of dance lesson, then she put his right hand behind her neck. She slid her hands up around his neck and said, "Right. Now you want to tilt your head a little to the right--or if she's already tilting to the left, do it to the right. You don't want colliding noses. Now, don't press too hard at first, you're not trying to put a wax seal on a letter; it's a kiss. Now, if it seems like she's okay with all that, you can carefully and slowly open your mouth," but now Harry's mind was reeling, and the rest of what she was saying was just rushing wind and noise. Was she really talking about tongues? he wondered for a moment. His mind was spinning. He was only vaguely aware of the fact that he was still holding her.

Then it was quiet again and she was staring at him. "Harry? Harry! Have you been listening to me?" He nodded dumbly, hoping she wouldn't start quizzing him on what she'd said. "Okay, then. I'm Cho. Kiss me".

He goggled at her. "Excuse me"?

"Pretend I'm Cho. Kiss me".

Harry thought he had stopped breathing. He looked down at her. He remembered how much he had wanted to kiss her in the garden on Privet Drive, before Sirius had arrived. Had that really been two months ago? he wondered. He hadn't remembered feeling anxious about kissing her then; he had just felt compelled to do it (at least, until it seemed that there might be an audience). Why had that felt so natural, why did this feel so different? Because, he realized, she's just being a teacher right now, it's so that I can kiss another girl.

Harry leaned closer and closer to her mouth. Just get it over with, he thought. So he finally did it; he pressed his lips against hers, feeling an equal pressure coming from her as he used his hand behind her neck to hold her face up to his. Then it seemed that she was trying to draw a breath, and she opened her mouth. Harry did the same, and then the world dropped away from beneath his feet, and he was drinking her in, her hands had entwined themselves in his hair, he felt

her tongue flick at his teeth and her body mold itself to his. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more in the world but to go on kissing her like this forever...

She moved her hands to his ears, tracing them dreamily while they continued to kiss; the tickling sensation electrified all of Harry's senses and he clutched her even more tightly. Then she brought one of her hands down and found the hem of his shirt; she wormed her hand underneath it and slid it up between his shirt and his skin, making him gasp against her mouth. Then he lost her mouth, and he felt bereft, but she had clamped it on his neck, producing new amazing sensations there with her lips and tongue, and he bent over to kiss her neck, making her produce a gurgling in her throat that sent a thrill of power through him, as he moved his left hand to the hem of her sweater and up her back, caressing the smooth skin there, feebly realizing after a minute that there was no bra strap. Oh, Hermione, he groaned inwardly, what are you doing to me...

He captured her mouth again with his, trying to get up the courage to move the hand that was under the back of her sweater to the front, when suddenly, a whoosh of cold air entered the room and a familiar voice started crying, "Students snogging in the Charms classroom! Snogging in Charms!"

It was Peeves the Poltergeist. His arrival was like twenty cold showers to Harry. He separated himself totally from Hermione, trying to catch his breath. She was glaring at Peeves as though she would kill him again, if she could.

She pulled out her wand from a long, thin pocket in her jeans, below the knee. She strode over to Peeves and pointed saying sternly, "Anima tua; anima mea!" Peeves froze in the air where he'd been hovering over Professor Flitwick's desk. She said to Peeves, "You didn't see anything. You were on your way to the Great Hall; you were asking us whether we'd seen Nearly Headless Nick, and we said no. Understand?"

He nodded. "I understand," he said in a monotone Harry had never heard him produce before. Usually he was incapable of not sounding like he was singing mockingly.

Hermione pointed her wand at him again and cried, "Anima tua!" Peeves seemed to wake up and shook himself.

"Are you sure--" he started to say.

"We haven't seen Nearly Headless Nick," Harry said. Peeves went whipping out of the room. Harry looked at Hermione. "Where did you learn that? That was amazing!" He hoped she realized that he meant the incantation to control Peeves; although he thought what they'd been doing before that had been amazing, too.

"I found it in a book at Viktor's. Truthfully, it's some mild dark magic. Anything to control ghosts is. It's something like an Imperious Curse that works on spirits, but I can't get in trouble for using it because he's already dead. It's like putting him under hypnosis, basically. His will becomes mine for a short time".

Harry gazed at her, more impressed than ever. She was becoming a very powerful witch, he realized. The desire to kiss her again was almost overwhelming, but she had moved to the door of the classroom. "Well, you'll--you'll be fine later, sure," she said, losing a little of her composure for a moment. "You'd better get down to the Quidditch pitch for practice since you're the captain".

No, thought Harry. I want to hold you again...

When he went out into the corridor, she was gone. He went back down the stairs again to the entrance hall and into the brisk autumn sunshine, but for the rest of the morning, in his mind, he was back in the Charms classroom holding her in his arms.

* * * * *

After Quidditch practice, it would have been time for lunch in the Great Hall, but Hermione had a surprise for the team. She showed up with levitating picnic baskets full of food at the end of practice, and they were all able to eat outdoors together. Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan had helped as well, and they were all merrily anticipating watching the match to be played after lunch.

"Well, you know the house elves," she said to Fred and George as they chewed their sandwiches. "Can't wait to give them away".

"Given up on spew?" Ron asked her.

"I've decided to take a different long-term approach. Any enslaved group must want to be liberated. In fact, I've already talked to Professor Dumbledore about a plan of mine, and he's on board with it; he would like the elves to want to be freed as much as I do." Ron looked dubious about any plan to propagandize the house elves, but didn't say anything, just took a big bite of his sandwich.

Harry couldn't take his eyes off Hermione during the picnic; he thought it was possible that Ron and Ginny had noticed too, but he was beyond caring. The important thing was that Hermione didn't notice; she seemed to be studiously ignoring him, chatting up everyone there except him, as though he were less than a ghost.

Harry technically watched the match, but he really was seeing it through a fog. He was sitting between Ron and Fred. George and Angelina were on the other side of Fred; Hermione was sitting in front of him with Ginny and Parvati and Lavender. Colin Creevey was taking pictures of all the Gryffindors again. Harry had a feeling that he would turn out looking pretty surly in these pictures.

He was finally able to focus at the end of the game. Quite suddenly, it seemed (although the match had been going on for an hour and a half), Cho had captured the Snitch and was flying a circuit around the field with it held above her head. Harry noticed for the first time that the new Hufflepuff Seeker was Justin Finch-Fletchley. Cedric Diggory had been captured and Seeker for the Hufflepuff Quidditch team before he died. No, Harry told himself sternly. I will not think of Cedric right now.

He stood and clapped with the rest of the Ravenclaw supporters. The Gryffindors were supporting Ravenclaw on this day; on his behalf, he knew, since they now thought of Cho as his girlfriend (the ones who didn't know about the plan to fix her up with Viktor Krum). He still had his Gryffindor Quidditch robes with him from the morning's practice, as well as his Firebolt. One by one, the other people in the stands left and Cho managed to separate herself from the ecstatic Ravenclaws and climb the steps to where Harry was sitting, waiting for her.

She sat down next to him, still glowing from the match. The wind stirred her hair and she smiled at him. She really did look pretty, he thought. But she's not Hermione...

"Hi," he said. He knew that being a person of few words wasn't a problem for her; she'd hardly spoken at all during their date.

"Hi," she said. She edged closer to him. She still wore her blue Quidditch robes, but she put her broomstick on the seat in front of her.

"Good game," he said, smiling at her. She still smiled back.

"You said something in your note about pretending it's the end of our date"...

Harry goggled; not only was this the longest sentence he'd ever heard her utter, but she was getting right to the point.

"Well," he hesitated, "first, I hope you've forgiven me"...

She was smiling even more broadly. "Apology accepted." She leaned in toward him, and he tried to remember everything that Hermione had said, and instead wound up thinking about kissing Hermione again...

But now her lips were pressing against his, so he decided to just surrender, closed his eyes and kissed her back, daring after a moment to open his mouth slightly. She responded enthusiastically, sliding her arms around him and also opening her mouth, and now Harry tried to imagine that she was Hermione, but although it was nice, it just wasn't the same. In fact, he was getting rather bored. He opened his eyes, looking over her shoulder, still kissing her, and noticed a red Gryffindor Quidditch robe that someone from the team had left in the stands.

Then he moved his eyes up to the sky and saw that Ginny Weasley was flying back to the Quidditch stands; she didn't have a robe with her. It must be hers on the seats there.... Then Harry saw that she'd seen them, and the look on her face made his heart stop. He pushed Cho away from him as Ginny, stricken-looking, turned her broomstick sharply and sped up to the Astronomy Tower. And she'd as much as told him that she was over him. She must have been trying to convince herself.

He looked back at Cho, who was none too pleased. "Sorry," he said breathlessly. "Gotta run. Just remembered something I--forgot," he finished lamely. He grabbed his and Ginny's robes and leapt onto his Firebolt, speeding up to the Astronomy Tower after Ginny. He was sick at heart that she'd seen him kissing Cho, although he knew that Ginny knew about the plan. He didn't even like Cho, she meant nothing to him.

But when he landed, Ginny was no longer on the top of the tower. Harry ran down the steps, clutching the robes and his Firebolt, wishing he dared ride it inside the castle in order to reach Gryffindor Tower more quickly. When he finally stumbled in the portrait hole, only Dennis Creevey was in the common room; everyone else was probably outside enjoying the beautiful autumn day. Where had Ginny gone?

"Dennis, have you seen Ginny Weasley?" he panted, looking around frantically as though it were possible for her to be in with the upholstery with that flaming hair of hers.

He looked up from his reading, surprised. "Funny you should ask. She came tearing in here a minute ago, then went tearing out again".

"Did she say where she was going"?

"No, but it looked like she had her cauldron and mortar and pestle with her".

The Potions Dungeon, thought Harry. That would require some delicacy, in case she wasn't alone. Without saying anything else to Dennis, he bolted up the staircase to the boys' dorms, threw his and Ginny's Quidditch robes and his broom on his bed and grabbed his Invisibility Cloak from his trunk, stuffing it under his shirt to hide it. He went bolting down the staircase again and practically leapt out the portrait hole while Dennis yelled after him, "You're welcome"!

As soon as he could, he ducked into an empty classroom and put the cloak on, then proceeded to run as fast as he could down to the dungeons. Luckily, he met no one on the stairs on a Saturday afternoon, since anyone who had been around would have wondered how the sound of rapidly running feet was being made. Harry was grateful to Sandy that she had given him the idea to take up running.

He tried to slow down in the passage outside the potions dungeon, to catch his breath, so he wouldn't be heard. Luckily the door to the room was open. Harry crept in and went to the front of the room, since Ginny was working in the back, near the door to the corridor. He didn't want her to hear him breathing slightly hard still from all of the running. But she was actually making quite a racket, her fire under her cauldron crackling away while she crushed beetles with her mortar and pestle, sniffing loudly, her eyes wet with tears. She was alone. He decided to leave, take off the cloak and return to talk to her. But just as he reached the door, he risked running straight into someone and had to back up suddenly so that they wouldn't know he was creeping around under an Invisibility Cloak.

It was Draco Malfoy.

* * * * *

Chapter Eleven: The Potions Dungeon

Malfoy saw that Ginny was in distress and immediately strode over to her, dropping his potions equipment on the floor noisily.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, but not in his usual imperious way.

"Oh, Draco!" she sobbed, throwing her arms around his neck, crying onto his shirt. He didn't hesitate for a moment, but gathered her to him, stroking her hair. Harry itched to take the cloak off so he could tear them apart, but he managed to restrain himself. Malfoy held her for quite a while, until she cried herself out. As her breathing returned to normal and she let out a great, tired sigh, he kissed her on the forehead and held her at arms' length.

"Feeling better?" he said quietly.

She hastily separated herself from him and smoothed down her clothes, clearly embarrassed. She wiped her eyes and said shakily, "I have a lot of work to do".

Malfoy looked as Harry had never seen him, genuinely concerned and caring. "What happened?" he asked her.

"I--I saw--saw Harry. Harry kissing Cho Chang. In the Quidditch stands," she said brokenly. Then in a rush: "And even though I know that he doesn't really care about her, even though I know he and Hermione are just trying to fix her up with Viktor Krum so Hermione can be rid of him, that doesn't mean--that doesn't mean--" she looked like she might break down again. "That doesn't mean he has to look like he's enjoying it so much"!

Enjoying it? Harry thought. Hardly.

Malfoy nodded. "Ah. This is about Potter".

"Harry," she corrected him.

"Okay--Harry." Even to Harry's ears, it sounded unnatural for Malfoy to call him this. He could tell it felt extremely unnatural to Malfoy. "And--did you say he and Granger are trying to fix up Krum and Cho Chang"?

"Oh!" Ginny was distressed for yet another reason. "I shouldn't have said anything--don't tell anyone I said that, please"

"It's all right, it's all right," he said, trying to calm her. "I won't say a word." Harry thought, Yeah, right. "So what, Potter and Granger will be free to be together then"?

Ginny looked up at him, stricken. Harry groaned inwardly; sometimes Malfoy was too smart for his own good. "I--I don't know. Maybe"...

"Well, good riddens to him, I say," was Malfoy's hard reply. Ginny looked like she was about to argue, but he went on, "Look, he's just not worth getting so upset about. How could he be? He ignored you for three years. How could he know how you felt about him all that time and not care? How could he not--see you?" he ended softly, lifting up her chin and kissing her on the lips briefly, softly.

Harry was going crazy, dying to spring across the room, throw off the cloak--but again not daring to. Mostly he didn't because he hated the fact that Malfoy was right; he deserved for Ginny to forget about him and move on. He didn't deserve for her to go on mooning over him, she didn't deserve for him to go on taking her for granted. Somehow, he managed to forget that he had spent much of the day thinking about kissing Hermione.

Ginny ducked her head and said softly, "You're supposed to be tutoring me in potions." To Harry's relief, she didn't throw her arms around Malfoy and enthusiastically return the kiss. The tentative delicacy of that kiss had surprised Harry.

"Right," Malfoy said reluctantly, turning to retrieve his potions supplies from where he'd unceremoniously flung them down when he'd entered.

Harry decided to stay and keep an eye on them while they worked; Malfoy gazed at her and touched her hand quite a bit for Harry's taste while they were working, but nothing else untoward happened; they neither kissed nor hugged again.

Then after they'd all three had been in the dungeon for about an hour, Snape entered and stopped abruptly, obviously surprised to see them there.

"Good afternoon, Miss Weasley, Mr. Malfoy," he said stiffly once he'd recovered. "I didn't expect to find any students down here at this time." He looked nervous, as though he were up to something he shouldn't be. Why would he look like that entering his own classroom? Harry wondered.

"Draco's tutoring me, Professor. He's been very helpful," Ginny volunteered.

"Tutoring, Miss Weasley? You're at the top of your class; in fact, I am to understand from your other teachers that you're at the top of all of your classes." Harry felt his jaw drop from shock. He could see some surprise on Malfoy's face as well.

"Well, I thought it couldn't hurt to get a start on the O.W.L.s. I'll be in fifth year before I know it"...

"Highly commendable. And you know, Gryffindor and Slytherin cooperation has been known to happen before. Carry on," he said, looking at them kindly. Harry was shocked; he'd never known Snape to be nice to a Gryffindor student. But if Ginny was at the top of all of the fourth-year classes, she would command a certain respect even from him. Hermione

didn't, but then Ginny obviously wasn't as--obvious as Hermione was when it came to her grades. Harry had had no idea that Ginny was the best student in her year, and he thought that most other people were also ignorant of this.

Now Snape was heading toward the door to his office; Harry decided to follow him in if he could. Snape unlocked the door and walked to his desk, leaving the door open. Harry slipped in, relieved, but then Snape waved his wand at the door and it closed and locked, panicking Harry; he was stuck in Snape's office now until he opened the door again. He hoped that Snape didn't have some device for detecting the presence of people wearing Invisibility Cloaks.

Snape now pointed his wand at the fireplace, lighting it, and settled heavily in a wing chair by the hearth. Harry almost cried out and gave himself away when Sirius' face appeared in the flames half a minute later.

"Hello, Snape," was Sirius' cautious greeting.

"Black," was Snape's even briefer reply. Sirius grimaced.

"If we're going to be doing this, perhaps we should try Severus and Sirius," Harry's godfather suggested.

Snape looked like he'd eaten an Every Flavor Bean that tasted like ear wax. "Sirius," he said slowly, carefully.

"That's better. So, Severus, How soon will the Polyjuice Potion be ready"?

"Four weeks, technically. But I won't be able to get their hairs for another two weeks after that, at the Quidditch match the first weekend in December. We can use it any time after that. My sources tell me that there will be an important meeting just after the winter solstice, on Christmas night." Polyjuice Potion? thought Harry. Sirius and Snape were going to use Polyjuice Potion? Who were they planning to impersonate? he wondered.

"Christmas?" Sirius looked concerned. "I just hope that's not too late. Death Eater activity has been spotted around Ottery St. Catchpole in just the last few days".

Ottery St. Catchpole! Harry thought. That's the village near the Burrow! Oh, God, he thought, if anything happened to the Weasleys...

Sirius went on. "I've been unable to convince Molly and Arthur Weasley to go away on a holiday for a while. Fortunately, Bill and Charlie are still on hand to keep an eye on things, but"--

"What?" Snape was impatient.

"I think we have a weak link. Percy Weasley".

Snape sat up. "How so"?

"Well, he's been transferred to his father's department at the ministry so Arthur can keep an eye on him. Fudge is concerned that Percy was so blind to his boss' problems last year; Percy had no clue that Crouch was in his son's thrall and oblivious then to the fact that he was receiving instructions from a dark wizard. It's not clear that Percy himself was under the Imperious Curse as well".

"Plenty of people find it difficult or impossible to resist the Imperious Curse," Snape said quietly, looking uncomfortable and making Harry wonder.

"Yes, but Percy just--he reminds me uncomfortably of--another former Head Boy who was so brilliant in his classes and ambitious"...

"You think Percy Weasley is another Tom Riddle?" Snape asked him.

"I think--he's easily manipulated and ambitious. I think he could be ripe for recruitment to the Death Eaters. If someone offered him the kind of power he craves"...

"Now, now, Black," Snape seemed to have given up on calling Sirius by his first name. "His brother was also a top student and Head Boy. Do you think he's about to become a Death Eater, too"?

"Bill's not a sycophant," Sirius told him. Harry remembered what Hermione had said to Ron outside the Potions Dungeon. "Percy's been bothering other department heads at the ministry ever since he was transferred to Arthur's department, trying to get a job elsewhere. There's obviously no opportunity for advancement in his own father's department, not without displacing Arthur. I've heard people say that Percy Weasley's goal is to be the youngest ever Minister of Magic."

"That doesn't mean he would betray his family and become Dark".

"No, it doesn't. But it does mean he could be targeted for recruitment, and even if he resists, that means trouble. So now we have to find out about both him and Harry when we use the Polyjuice Potion".

Find out what about me? Harry thought.

"I find it hard to believe that Voldemort would be having such a change of heart concerning Potter," Snape said.

"But Percy and Harry are exactly the sort of wizards that Voldemort always targeted for recruitment." Harry remembered the Tarot reading he'd been trying to put out of his mind; so Sirius was also worried about Voldemort recruiting him. "He's seen now how powerful Harry is--Harry dueled with Voldemort and walked away. The only other living wizard who's done that is Dumbledore. Voldemort always wanted the best and the brightest. Very few Death Eaters--I'd say Peter Pettigrew is the exception--weren't outstanding students in school. That's one of the reasons he went after Lily and James".

"Well, that and the prophecy. Once he'd worked out who two of the three people in the prophecy were"...

"He tried to recruit their parents to raise their children to be his servants, so his potential enemies would be under his control"...

"But the Potters didn't cooperate as the Malfoys did"...

What? Harry thought. I'm in some prophecy? And so is Malfoy?

"Speaking of which," Sirius said, "we never did work out who was going to be who when we take the potion. I thought I would be him, and you could be her"...

"Not so fast, Black. I am the one going to all this trouble to make the potion, and getting their hairs for the final touch. P... I need to be him because I have the Dark Mark on my arm still; she is not a Death Eater. When Voldemort summons the Death Eaters, a Mark that is only appearance, as yours would be, would not behave the same as the real thing. And you will have to make sure that he does not go to Voldemort when summoned".

"True. If two of them showed up, that would ruin everything. All right. I just hope they're not planning to recruit Draco already. I mean, he's only--what? Fifteen? He's a few weeks older than Harry. They can't want someone so young, can they? I mean, Harry is one thing, he's Harry Potter"...

"Quiet! Even as we speak, Draco Malfoy is right here in the Potions Dungeon, working with the Weasley girl"...

"What?" Sirius cried, not heeding Snape's suggestion that he be quiet. "Is it possible that his father is already grooming him? Do you think Lucius put him up to it"?

The Malfoys, Harry realized. They're going to use the Polyjuice Potion to impersonate the Malfoys.

Snape rose and went to his office door. Harry pressed himself into the bookcase to prevent Snape coming in contact with him and detecting his presence. Snape lifted the black curtain over the small window at the top of the office door. He smirked, and walking back to his chair by the hearth, said to Sirius, "I think his hormones put him up to it"...

Sirius didn't say anything and Snape sat again, staring into space as if in a daze. "She looks strangely like Lily..." he said quietly, as though he forgot he were having a conversation with someone.

"Now, now, Severus, she's a student..." Sirius chided him with a smirk.

Snape rounded on him, furious. "How dare you! She's only fourteen! I would never"--

"All right! All right! I know. Can't you take a joke?" There was an awkward pause, then Sirius said quietly, "You know, we were all in love with her. Even though I--went with other girls. Even Peter, although he wouldn't have admitted it. I could see it when he looked at her. Remus, too. And James, naturally. We were just livid that she had a boyfriend from Slytherin"...

It took Harry a minute to make sense of all this. Snape had been talking about Ginny looking like his mother, and Sirius was talking about the entire Marauder Gang being in love with his mother--Sirius, Remus Lupin, Peter Pettigrew (also known as Wormtail) and his father, James Potter. But who was this Slytherin boyfriend? he wondered. Then, with a shock he knew. That was the Gryffindor-Slytherin cooperation Snape had been talking about...

"It wasn't you," Sirius went on. "It wasn't personal. I think we all thought if she was going to go with anyone, it would be one of us".

"So that's why you pushed her away? Made her feel excluded? Why do you think she turned to me"?

"We were protecting her, you know that. James and Peter and I were learning to become Animagi so we could accompany Remus when he changed. We didn't want Lily to get hurt. Plus--you know how she was. So by the book. She would have tried to talk us out of doing it. She would have told us it was wrong".

"It was wrong. Just as it was wrong not to tell her"...

"Why are you complaining? She became your girlfriend because of it".

"Yes, but it was also because of you that she left me".

"Because of me? You were the one snooping around trying to find out what was going on every month during the full moon".

"Didn't you ever wonder why I had such a need to know? It was Lily; she came to me in tears, wanted me to find out what was going on. She felt her friends didn't trust her, didn't want to confide in her. You cut her off and didn't expect her to react? She wasn't made of stone, you know." Snape sounded more human than Harry had ever heard him; listening, he found himself taking Snape's side, unexpectedly. When he was in third year and found out about the Marauder's Gang had never occurred to Harry to wonder where his mother was during all this, since he knew that she had been friends with all of them as well. "And then you thought it would be so funny to get me killed by Lupin"...

Sirius grimaced. "I've said I'm sorry about that. But James saved you, so"--

"So I lost Lily".

"Is that why? How did that work exactly? You almost died, so she didn't want to be with you any more"?

"I don't want to go into it now. Evidently, she had only been with me because Potter had been unable to say how he felt. He got over that and told her, and she left me for him. End of story." But Harry somehow got the impression there was just a little more to the story than that.

"I'm sorry to bring up the past, Severus," Sirius said quietly, sounding genuinely sorry. "Losing Lily--it must have devastated you"--

"It's not the past," Snape replied briskly, annoyed. "It's very much the present. It was after Lily that I--I was recruited. Without her, I didn't see any reason why not. And then when I learned about the prophecy, about Lily and Potter being targeted--I became a Ministry spy. But it was too late; I couldn't save her." Harry noticed that he didn't seem concerned about not saving his father. "The work I do now I do in honour of her memory. Why else do you think I would put up with you, Black?" Snape finished with a snarl that nonetheless seemed to have a slight smirk behind it. Maybe they're actually becoming friends, Harry thought. That would be strange.

Sirius laughed. "But why, then," he asked Snape, "do you give Harry such a hard time"?

"A hard time? Is that what he tells you? Someone around here has to do something other than coddle him, like McGonagall and Flitwick. It's to make him strong. To make him angry enough to want to do well just to show me." Harry was surprised; and even more so that it had worked. "Lily wouldn't have wanted me to be soft on him. You said yourself

that he stood up to Voldemort. I understand he withstood the Imperious Curse and experienced the Cruciatus Curse twice. I also understand that he used the disarming charm he learned from me in dueling club several years ago”...

Sirius was smirking again. “You almost sound like you’re taking a fatherly pride in Harry, Severus”.

Snape sneered this away. “Potter would never give me credit for teaching him anything useful--or even for saving his life which I’ve done more than once.” Suddenly, there was a knocking at the door. Snape hissed at Sirius to leave, and Sirius’ head disappeared from the fire almost instantaneously. Snape pointed his wand at the door saying, “Alohomora!” It leapt open.

Malfoy stood in the doorway. “Sorry to disturb you professor. I didn’t bring all of my supplies with me, and we’re running low on ladybugs for this potion. I don’t suppose I could--borrow some? I’ll replace them immediately. It’s just that we have to add them in the next two minutes...” Snape waved at the shelves of jars next to the door.

“Take them, take them,” he said distractedly, then moved his eyes to the doorway to look at Ginny, working in the classroom still.

Harry took this opportunity to slip back out the office door. Ginny was bent over her potions book, frowning, while the cauldron bubbled. He wondered what he should do about her and Malfoy. Ron would want to know, and George and Fred. On the other hand, if they killed Malfoy, they’d all wind up in Azkaban. Well, he thought, maybe we just need to wait to see what happens to the Malfoys; if they go to Azkaban, and it’s partly because Lucius Malfoy was going after Ginny’s family, they’re not going to be friends for long.

Finally, after agonizing over what to do and watching Malfoy return with the ladybugs, Harry decided that they probably wouldn’t be kissing again or anything else with Snape right there in his office. Harry crept to the door to leave.

He would just have to wait and see.

* * * * *

Hermione avoided Harry during the rest of Saturday; she wouldn’t even look at him at dinner, and went up to her room right afterward, instead of lounging about the common room with everyone else, or even going to the library. Sunday morning, Harry hoped to talk with her about what had happened in the Charms classroom, but when he arrived in the common room to meet her for their morning run, Ginny was there. Harry stopped short, surprised, and a moment later, Hermione descended the stairs, dressed in her usual running clothes, but carrying a hooded sweat jacket, since it was getting colder now. Ginny also seemed to be dressed for running, in a sleeveless form-fitting ribbed top and very tight spandex pants. She also carried a hooded jacket and her red hair was corralled in a bun.

Harry didn’t speak, waiting for one of them to say something. Harry was feeling just as awkward about seeing Ginny as he was about seeing Hermione, but she didn’t seem to be the least bit awkward; then he realized that of course, she didn’t know that he’d been in the Potions Dungeon and heard everything she’d said to Malfoy.

“Ginny asked to come today,” Hermione offered as a brief explanation. “Well,” Hermione said to Ginny, “we’d better get started now.” She began showing Ginny the stretching exercises they were accustomed to doing, and Harry couldn’t refrain from glancing surreptitiously at the two of them.

They both looked spectacular. He’d grown so accustomed to seeing Hermione, day in and day out, that he realized he hadn’t really seen her. Having been kissing her the day before, he very much wanted to look at her now, memorize her features. She had definitely acquired a classic hourglass figure, her running bra just barely being adequate to the job of keeping her chest still during exercise. And he--and Malfoy--had already noted how aesthetically pleasing the view of her walking away was.

Ginny, on the other hand, was about four inches taller than Hermione, willowy and lithe, her long legs emphasized by the dark stripe down the outside of her tights. Her curves were slighter than Hermione’s, but undeniable. Her top seemed to be rather low--Harry tried not to look like he was staring while he did his own stretches. Something about her exposed neck was attracting his attention; he realized he just wasn’t used to seeing it. It seemed very long...

Are they just doing this to torture me? he wondered, as he followed them out the portrait hole. No, he assumed it was just Hermione trying to avoid being alone with him. But it was torture, just the same, walking down the stairs behind them.

Before they went outdoors they all put on their jackets, then went down to the Quidditch pitch. Next thing you know, Ginny'll be asking Malfoy to run with us, Harry thought. Like I need to see what he would wear to go running.

Ginny kept up with them pretty well, but felt winded about two thirds of the way through their usually workout. She sat down on the grass and watched them finish, then they walked back up to the castle to do their warm-down exercises in the entrance hall. They all took off their jackets to do the stretching and sit-ups. Harry held Ginny's ankles while she did her sit-ups and Hermione stretched. Suddenly, Malfoy appeared at the top of the stairs that led up from the dungeons where Harry knew the Slytherin common room to be. Malfoy stopped abruptly when he saw Ginny, Harry and Hermione looking at all three of them with a smirk, but his glance at Ginny also seemed to reveal some concern.

"Didn't think you'd go in for a menage a trois, Potter," he drawled. But despite his mocking tone, Harry could see where his eyes were straying: the neckline of Ginny's top, the long stripe down the side of her tights. But then, however, he turned his attention to Hermione. "You know, Granger, I'm glad you were here this morning. It reminded me that I'd like to have lamb for dinner".

Hermione was perplexed. "Lamb"?

"Yeah, you know. Rack of." He looked pointedly at her running bra. And, grinning broadly, he turned and went into the Great Hall. Hermione coloured and looked down at her rather generous chest, then put her jacket back on and mumbled that she needed to go shower (even though she hadn't finished the warm-down). Ginny, on the other hand, was looking at Hermione in a less than friendly way. First they were mad at each other because of me, and now it's because of Malfoy thought Harry. There's a disgusting development.

* * * * *

It seemed that Hermione was doing her best to assure that she was never alone with Harry. All during the rest of the day she went to great lengths to assure that she was never alone, and therefore not open to being preyed upon by him. He felt like he'd been labeled as some kind of stalker, and wondered if this was how Sirius had felt when he'd first broken out of prison. It had been Hermione who had insisted on "tutoring" him for his meeting with Cho, he thought, feeling the injustice of it all.

Then, finally, she had no choice but to be alone with him. Since the Sunday night prefects' meeting was running late, Alicia suggested to Roger that they continue without the fifth-year prefects, and instead send them back to their houses to check on the first and second years and make sure everything was under control. Alicia was very much a control freak. Harry decided; she seemed to assume that every time there was a prefects' meeting, the other students were taking the opportunity to have wild parties or something. And yet, he remembered that she had been quite the party girl on Hermione's birthday.

So he and Hermione were walking up to Gryffindor Tower alone, since the other houses were in very different directions. But when they reached the Charms corridor, he pulled her into the classroom again, where they'd been the day before, and without preamble, he pulled her to him and looked down at her. There was moonlight streaming in the windows, silvering her brow and cheeks. He wished he could see better what expression was in her eyes as he leaned down slowly and pressed his lips to hers. He had wanted to move slowly so that if she really wanted to, she would have had plenty of time to escape, to prevent it.

But that didn't happen; instead, she immediately opened her mouth under his, entwining his tongue with hers, moaning against the back of her throat. Harry slid his fingers into her curls, holding her face up to his, feeling a warmth travel through his entire body that made him feel on fire. Her trembling fingers went from his face to his arms, then to the clasp of his robes which were now gone, now to the buttons of his shirt, then to his chest, roaming over his sensitive skin, the changed to what she'd first noticed the morning after she'd arrived on Privet Drive, and he found her sitting on his bed. It suddenly occurred to him to wonder how long she'd sat there that morning, watching him sleep.

But then she broke the kiss and he felt her lips on his neck again, like the day before, then her tongue making an agonizing, wet trail down to his chest, as her fingers brushed lightly over his nipples. He felt like he needed to sit down, fall down, or explode, or something. This was so--amazing. Why had she been avoiding him? She wasn't pulling back now, she was taking the lead, if anything. What was with her?

He held her head as she turned her mouth to his right nipple, making him draw in his breath and say her name.

"Hermione," he breathed softly. "Hermione, why were you avoiding me all day?" His voice was still a whisper.

She brought her head up, no longer in contact with him in any way. She was crying, he saw. Crying? Why? he wondered.

Then, without warning, she broke from him and ran for the door of the classroom, crying harder now. But Harry was too fast for her, reaching out and grabbing her wrist.

"Hermione," he said more loudly now, and she shushed him.

"Harry," she said in a thick voice, through her tears. "We can't do this now. It's too dangerous. Until the whole Viktor and Cho thing is over, we can't risk it. If anyone caught us together"...

"We--we can be discreet," he said, pulling her into his arms again. She raised her tear-streaked face to him in the moonlight.

"No, we can't. I can't. I--have no self-control when I'm alone with you. I--I want this too much"--

"And you always have to be in control, don't you"?

She pushed him away angrily. "Don't make fun of me. But, yes. I need to be in control of myself, and you--you make me feel anything but".

His chest felt tight upon hearing this. I make her feel out of control, he thought. I do that. He felt happier than he ever remembered feeling during his entire life.

"I need your help in this, Harry," she said softly. "If you don't help me--I'm lost"--

"Of course," he said quickly. "Of course"...

She separated herself from him again, but did not run; they stood not touching a mere three or four inches apart, but to Harry, it felt like a gulf a mile wide. "And sometimes," she said, "maybe sometimes, we can--be together. But we have to be careful. We can't be thoughtless and careless. No one can know about us yet".

Harry nodded, unable to speak, in case he said other things besides Of course I'll stay away from you, of course I'll refrain from kissing you, touching you...

She raised herself on tiptoe and put her hand on his bare chest; his shirt was still unbuttoned to the waist. "Don't think that means I don't want you," she said even more softly, and quickly kissed him, her lips soft and moist and gone too soon. Hermione turned and left the classroom, no longer running, but purposeful. Harry stood there for a moment, in agony, remembering her hands, her lips and tongue...

He slowly buttoned his shirt and stooped to pick up his robes, then trod heavily up the stairs to the common room, having sentenced himself to hell.

* * * * *

In Defense Against the Dark Arts, they'd finished their discussions concerning Lord of the Flies and were supposed to start reading Tess of the D'Urbervilles. On Friday, it was finally Ron's turn to do his Othello presentation. Harry didn't know what to expect, and neither did Hermione, since he'd refused to show it to either of them. The two of them had tried to keep Ron with them as much as possible all week, so they wouldn't be tempted to go off alone.

He went to the front of the classroom when Moody read his name, and while he started out reading in a monotone, he could not maintain his initial passive demeanor as he progressed through the essay:

"Rather than taking Othello's character in an unnatural and opposite direction, his worst potential was realized and brought to the surface by Iago. This is not the same as corrupting someone; if Othello had truly been corrupted by Iago we should have gotten the impression that without his help, it would have been absolutely impossible for him ever to behave in such a judgmental and violent manner.

"It is Othello's facade that Iago topples, rather than just his own at the end. Othello is not guiltless. Hate and love are very closely allied, and if he did not kill Desdemona out of hate, it was more out of love than honour (he claims he killed out

honour). More accurately, he killed Desdemona out of both love and hate. He killed emotionally, without thought for consequence or determining whether he was doing the right and just thing.

“He is no better than Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, who first tries to plant a seed of doubt in Othello by telling him, “She has deceived her father, and may thee.” Brabantio is like those fathers in fairy tales and myths who have such a deep love for their daughters that the idea of any other man loving them drives them crazy. They lock up their daughters in towers, dungeons, which are symbols of both the womb and tomb; it is a symbolic death. Brabantio boasts that Desdemona has repudiated all of the most eligible suitors in the city, but it could be that he has done this for her to keep her manless; since it would be a crime for him to have her, he is determined that no man will.

“This is why, when Desdemona confirms her allegiance to Othello in her father’s presence, he declares that she is dead to him (she has cheated, been unfaithful). He is not a violent man, like Othello, and so he kills her only symbolically.

“Othello is also determined that he should be the only man for Desdemona, and that she is better off dead if this is not true. He is as selfish as Brabantio in this. But Brabantio at least wants to hear from Desdemona’s own mouth what the truth is; he has enough faith in her to continue to believe she has been “faithful” until she herself disproves it. Othello may have been deceived, but he did not lack the means to determine who was telling the truth.

“We perhaps most readily believe what we most fear to. This is why Othello immediately credits Iago’s insinuations. The question of whether Othello acted honorably is most easily answered if we imagine that Desdemona was guilty of dalliance with Cassio. Assuming that she did this, would we then blame Othello? Yes, we still would. Again, using the example of her father, he could have killed her symbolically by divorcing her, something that would have been within his rights if she had been unfaithful.

“But simply because Othello is guilty of acting without thought does not let Iago off the hook. He acts with full thought and premeditation when avenging his wife’s suspected infidelity, but cares as little as Othello to find out whether the accusations are grounded in any truth.

“Furthermore, Iago kills the most honourable man in the play, Roderigo, who is prepared to kill himself when he has lost Desdemona to Othello. Roderigo is not determined to kill her, to keep other men from her; he does not even attempt to kill Othello. Roderigo is guilty of nothing more than being lovesick and gullible; does no one serious harm and bears no one malicious thoughts. When Othello kills himself, at the end, doing what Roderigo only considered, he is finally acting honourably”.

The class clapped hands politely; Moody stomped his clawed wooden leg on the floor in lieu of applause. Ron sat down. Hermione looked at him strangely, and Harry started to reconsider whether Ron would be dangerous to him and Hermione once he found out about them, or only to himself. Could Ron possibly be suicidal? Harry wondered. Then something else stuck in his brain: She has deceived her father, and may thee. She was deceiving Viktor Krum, and to a lesser degree, Ron (since he wasn’t her boyfriend); could she ever deceive him, Harry? He tried to quickly suppress the thought, but now Moody was speaking.

He took Ron’s parchment from the desk, where he’d left it, and read from it. “We perhaps most readily believe what we most fear to”.

He looked at the class, his normal eye narrowed and his magical eye seeming to be focused on the wall to his left. “We humans jump to conclusions. We make assumptions. And sometimes, we open ourselves to darkness by doing this. We aren’t being infiltrated by it; we bring it out of ourselves, we let it rise to the surface, we stop stopping it”.

He had been speaking very softly, but somehow, it now seemed like he was shouting, the room was so quiet. “Do you know what happens if someone is placed under the Imperious Curse, and then told to do something they wanted to do anyway? Something they were preventing themselves from doing, but something they wanted very much, nonetheless? That’s when it becomes damn near impossible to fight the Imperious Curse. When it takes away your inhibitions. ‘Inhibition’ is a word that’s gotten a bad reputation, when it’s our inhibitions that help us to maintain a civilized society. What would happen if every time one of us had an impulse of any kind, we simply obeyed it? CHAOS! Just pure chaos would result!

“When someone under the Imperious Curse is told to do something against their nature, that’s when it’s easiest to fight because they stand a chance of being able to distinguish in their mind between their will and the will of the person who has cursed them. But if they are told to do something that is a deeply suppressed longing - TROUBLE”.

With a jolt, Harry remembered Hermione describing her abduction in the marketplace in Bulgaria: I suddenly felt all lightheaded and floaty....I tried fighting it, but there was nothing to fight, I wasn't being told to do anything I didn't want to do. I decided that I had an incredible urge to buy vegetables, but that's what I was already there for. I remember being very confused, like I was waiting for instructions, but they didn't come.

Had the instructions come from within herself? Harry wondered. Was it something against her nature they were urging to do--or were they removing her inhibitions? Which inhibitions? he started to wonder, but then he immediately stopped wondering, and remembered her saying I want this too much. She was normally so in control, but now he made her feel out of control, she had said. Did he make her feel that way, or was it a curse? Would she have done any of what she had done of her own volition, if she were fully able to govern her own actions, to decide which impulses to bury and which to give to?

He was suddenly so full of doubts, it seemed that his head was spinning. He sat through the rest of the lesson in a fog, at the end hearing vaguely Moody growling to Ron, "Oh, and Weasley: twenty-five points for Gryffindor. Best damn essay I've gotten all term".

He saw Ron's ears go red as he tried to hide how pleased he was. Then, without warning, when they were out in the corridor, Ron stopped Harry and Hermione.

"Hey, you two. Wait a minute".

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, then Ron. Did Ron already suspect something?

"What's up with you two?" He turned to Hermione. "Ginny said you've been begging her to come running with you, when she hates getting up early." Aha, thought Harry. She told me Ginny asked to come. "And all week, at breakfast and in each class you've been trying to put me in between you. Don't deny it, I can tell. Did you two fight or something? Because I hate when these things go on and on. Just kiss and make up already".

Harry winced. It's just an expression, he reminded himself. Just an expression.

"Well, to tell you the truth," Hermione was saying shakily, "we did have a disagreement. And--it's not going to be solved anytime soon, so you'll just have to deal".

"What?" Ron said, not having gotten any real information.

"We've agreed to disagree," Harry said vaguely, before Ron could ask more questions. But this did not end it.

Ron leaned in closer to Harry and said quietly, "This isn't about being a Death Eater, is it?"

"No. I'm not going to become a Death Eater. I promise. Can we just go to Transfiguration now?"

Ron looked at the two of them, dissatisfied with their answers; he looked like he could tell they were hiding something. He turned without a word and strode away from them, his red hair like a flame lighting the corridor, his lanky six-foot-two frame moving easily, his slightly frayed robes billowing out behind him with a dignity Harry had never seen him muster before. He felt his stomach clench. I'm lying to my best friend. Then he looked at Hermione.

Is she under a spell?

He tried to shrug nonchalantly at her and turned to follow Ron.

We have to stay apart.

We have to stay apart.

* * * * *

Chapter Twelve: The Ram and the Dragon

As promised, Hagrid had brought snakes to their Care of Magical Creatures classes after the geese. Harry was disappointed though; they were about the same size as Sandy, and about as informative. They could all predict what was going to happen in the immediate vicinity in the next few minutes, but precious little else. As this usually consisted of what was going to speak, or sometimes what they were going to say, Harry disregarded it for the most part, but a couple of times he had a fun time making Draco Malfoy think he could read his mind. The look on Malfoy's face had been priceless, but Hermione was looking at him suspiciously again, and he stopped before she once more started asking about the Sight. Ron seemed to have forgotten about it after his leg healed, and had mercifully not brought it up again.

A week later, though, Harry was pleased to see a really large snake as they approached Hagrid's hut for class. They had moved on from very small snakes to very large; evidently, Hagrid did not believe in medium-sized snakes.

"Come on!" he said to them as they approached what appeared to be a large glass-walled room with no roof in what had been the goose-yard. "Professor Dumbledore made this for me to keep the boa constrictor in, so's it can't hurt no one."

Malfoy looked skeptically at the glass enclosure. "And we're supposed to learn about the care of this snake by looking through glass, hmm?" he drawled.

"Well--" Hagrid hemmed and hawed.

"Can I go in?" Harry asked. "You know--to talk with it"?

"Well--" Hagrid said again. Malfoy looked annoyed that Harry might seem to be braver than him, volunteering to go into the enclosure with the boa constrictor. Harry assumed that Hagrid was reluctant because another thing Harry had done with the smaller snakes was ask them how they liked it at Hogwarts, and they'd all been unanimous that they hated it; it was too cold, they didn't like the food and the owls flying about gave them the willies. Harry had suggested to Hagrid that he change their diet and find a way to keep them warmer and also to shield them from the owls, and Hagrid had been rather annoyed about all of the extra work that this created for him. Now Hagrid seemed worried that Harry was going to find a way to make still more work for him to accommodate the whims of this snake. As much as he liked Harry, he didn't seem very happy to have a Parselmouth in the class.

"Please let him, Hagrid?" Hermione pleaded with Hagrid. "What if he finds out something really interesting"?

Hagrid grimaced; between the two of them he was hard pressed to refuse. "All right', all right'. Fer jes' a minute".

Harry looked over at Malfoy and gave him a smirk before going to the door, which Hagrid unlocked for him. He stepped slowly, not wanting to alarm the snake. Harry remembered the very civilized conversation he'd had with a boa constrictor in the zoo when he was not quite eleven, before he knew he was a wizard. The snake had told him it had never been to Brazil. Then Harry had unintentionally made the glass disappear that confined the snake, and it had seen his cousin Dudley. Dudley looked like lunch. Harry had tried many times since then not to wish that Dudley had been the boa's lunch that day, but it was sometimes difficult. Harry realized that he hadn't had that thought for some time, now that he and Dudley had become friends--and then he remembered that he was going to write to Dudley at school, and he'd been at school for seven weeks without once writing to him. He should do that later.

But right now, he wanted to pay close attention to the snake. When he entered the glass enclosure, it lifted its head and looked at him, expressionless, and Harry tried not to think how much it looked like Voldemort. He was aware of the Slytherins and the other Gryffindors watching through the glass. His heart began to thump very loudly in his chest; he realized that he'd never actually been near a snake this large before, other than Voldemort's snake; it was even bigger than the one Malfoy had conjured during the dueling club in second year (although, come to think of it, Snape had whispered something in Malfoy's ear right before he'd conjured the snake...). Harry shook his head. He needed to concentrate.

"Hello," he hissed at the snake. It still gazed fixedly at him. "My name is Harry Potter. Do you have a name"?

"What is a name?" the snake hissed back, uncoiling and advancing across the enclosure toward him.

Great, thought Harry. I have to explain this again. He'd already explained it to all of the other snakes Hagrid had brought to class. It was getting a bit old.

"Nevermind. Listen, I have a snake who's a friend of mine, and she told me that snakes have the Sight. Have you had any glimpses of the future"?

The snake stopped moving toward him, for which Harry was grateful. It looked like it might be thinking. "Many will go, but few will stay," it hissed.

"Many will go, but few will stay," Harry whispered to himself. What did it mean? And how far into the future could a snake of this size see? He asked it.

"Moons..." it hissed as though sleepy. Harry decided that it must mean months.

"How many moons?" he wanted to know.

But it merely said, "Moons..." again, over and over. Well, thought Harry, that must mean more than one. So, a minimum of two months. Then he asked it about how it liked Hogwarts, as he had done with the other snakes. He'd done this so that he could tell Hagrid and the others something that had been said; he still wasn't interested in divulging that snakes had the Sight. He preferred it to remain his secret.

He stepped out of the enclosure when Hagrid had unlocked it again and informed Hagrid of what the snake said it wanted to eat. When they were on their way to Herbology afterward, Hagrid called after them, "And exactly where, Harry, am I supposed to get an ocelot?"

* * * * *

Harry tried to ask the boa about the future again on Thursday when they once more had Care of Magical Creatures. The snake seemed to be a little more informative than the smaller ones, but he would have liked knowing how many months into the future it was seeing, and what it meant by Many will go, but few will stay. The second time he tried getting something out of the snake it gave him a different prophecy.

"The masters will be servants and the servants will be masters".

Harry repeated what it had said, and wrote it on all of his notes in every class he had for the rest of the day. What did the things mean that the snake had said? he wondered. He could hope that perhaps the first prediction meant that Hagrid's mother's friends would come initially, but most of them would go. Then he realized that their going might mean their joining Voldemort--okay, so he didn't hope that. This was confusing. Snake predictions were so strange and vague. So the Sight, Harry thought. They all needed spectacles for their Inner Eye, he decided.

Ginny had stopped coming running with him and Hermione in the morning. It was getting colder as Halloween approached, and they had taken to doing their running around the large Great Hall early on, before breakfast. They didn't really talk at that time, and when they were with Ron (which they were at all other times) they tried to be normal with each other, but Harry could tell that Ron still was on edge about their friendship being so changed.

Harry had been doing extra work on potions, as he'd said he would, and when he did, he frequently encountered Draco Malfoy and Ginny there, and sometimes Neville, too. He tried to keep an eye on Malfoy and Ginny without making it seem that that was what he was doing. Their interaction (when he was around, anyway) seemed fairly innocuous, but he was still suspicious of what might go on when no one else was in the dungeon. He tried to ask Colin Creevey about Ginny, in an oblique way, so he wouldn't get suspicious. He learned that Ginny was always with the other fourth years, when she wasn't in the common room or the potions dungeon. There didn't seem to be any times when her whereabouts were unaccounted for, times when she could possibly be meeting Draco Malfoy on the sly. Harry hoped Colin was right. He dreaded something happening between her and Malfoy, and then Ron finding out that Harry had known something. He would be liable to kill Harry first before going after Malfoy...

On Saturday he and Hermione would be having another date in Hogsmeade with Viktor Krum and Cho Chang. He had also had to make time to spend with Cho Chang, walking through the corridors holding her hand, as he'd seen her doing with Cedric the previous year, or, a few times, meeting down at the greenhouses to kiss a little. He tried to cut these sessions short as much as possible, feeling guilty for several reasons all at once: he didn't want to lead Cho on any more than absolutely necessary; he felt (although she had pushed him into it) that he was being unfaithful to Hermione; and, sometimes, he found himself actually enjoying it a little, making him think of what Ginny had said. I'll be glad when this is over, he thought repeatedly. They were going to an opera performance in the village on Saturday. Viktor had gotten tickets to a matinee of Dido and Aeneas, performed by a company of witches and wizards that were evidently world famous. It was a traveling production. Hermione informed him excitedly that there were witches and wizards in it

(characters), and that he needn't worry about not being able to understand, although it was an opera. It was written in English.

She told Harry some more about it while he and Ron played chess in the common room. "It's got some really beautiful arias and choruses. When Queen Dido sings her death aria"...

"Hermione!" Harry groaned. "You've just told me that one of the title characters dies".

Ron shrugged. "It's an opera. Probably everybody dies".

"No," said Harry, thinking of the essay he'd written for Moody. "That's Hamlet. In operas, I thought it was just the people you like best who die. To punish you for going".

Hermione scowled. "I saw a really amazing production of Aida in Greece last summer"...

Ron rolled his eyes. "Just when we thought you couldn't get nerdier. Prefect and opera buff..." but he stopped short when he saw the hurt look on Hermione's face and made a hasty move that resulted in Harry taking his bishop (Harry's knight clubbed the bishop on the head and dragged him off the board).

Before class on Wednesday Harry had sent a letter to Dudley by owl post, and when he went upstairs to the common room after classes were done for the week on Friday, Hedwig was waiting for him with a reply.

Dear Harry,

Thanks for writing. But next time, send Hedwig at night. I'll keep my window open. My roommate doesn't mind. Hedwig showed up in the middle of my biology class. We were getting these white mice to run through this big cardboard maze and seeing whose mouse would get to the cheese in the middle first. Mine was pretty lame. Then when Hedwig came flying in, she thought it was a buffet or something. All those mice! You should have heard the screaming and seen the blood flying. She was cool, man! I acted like the big owl-expert and led her out of the lab. The professor never noticed. I had a letter attached to her leg. I took her up to my room and gave her another mouse I nicked on the way out. She seemed pretty happy.

How's Hermione? When's she going to write? I included a letter for her too. DON'T OPEN IT! I'm still running. I've started lifting weights, too. Everything's okay, but I think my roommate's stealing from me. I haven't caught him yet, though.

Tell Hermione to write to me!

--Dudley

Harry gave Hermione her letter while Ron frowned and tried to read over her shoulder. She held it against her chest, not letting him. Ron went off in a huff, and Harry asked her what was the big deal. She laughed.

"Nothing. I'm just trying to wind him up".

Harry looked at Ron's retreating back. "It's working." What, he wondered, would have happened if Ron had caught them in the Charms classroom--either time? Then he decided he didn't want to think about that after all. He remembered when Ron wouldn't talk to him, almost exactly a year ago, after his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire. Ron had refused to believe that Harry hadn't put his own name in until after the first task, when he had flown on his broom to get past the Hungarian Horntail, the most fearsome of the four dragons selected for the champions to face. He didn't want to lose his best friend again. Maybe Ron was the one they should be fixing up--but then he remembered what a disaster it had been to fix him up with Padma Patil for the Yule Ball. All Ron had noticed that night was Hermione. Hermione with Viktor Krum. Hermione looking more beautiful than she'd ever looked before. And although Harry knew this, at the time he had taken it as merely an academic interest in it; his main focus had been Cho Chang, much to Parvati's chagrin. He was glad he had finally apologized to her.

Harry wrote another letter to Dudley, asking Hermione whether she wanted to send a letter of her own along with it.

"Sure. I've got some Arithmancy to do, but I can write a short note to Dudley first. Sounds like Hedwig made quite a splash in his biology class." Harry smiled and agreed. Then he realized he'd been looking fixedly at her for a full minute and looked away, reddening. He glanced back at her, seeing a rosy glow on her cheeks as well, as she dug in her bag

a blank piece of parchment. He knew he'd been thinking about those two times in the Charms classroom; he she been thinking about that, too? he wondered.

After dinner, the common room emptied out a little at a time. Finally, only Harry, Ron, Ginny, Hermione and the twins were still in the room. The twins were discussing future plans for the half of the Triwizard Tournament money their dad had invested for them. Ron and Ginny were playing chess, with Harry watching. She was the only one he'd ever seen beat Ron at chess, and he was determined to figure out how she was doing it. He watched her as she played, her glowing hair falling in her face at times, which she pushed impatiently behind her ears. A determined look was in her deep brown eyes, two little lines forming between her brows when she was frowning, deep in thought. After a while, Harry forgot he was trying to discern her chess strategy, he was so fascinated by looking at her. But then she looked up and caught his eye. She got an angry scowl on her face, her lips went into a straight line. Harry looked back at the board. Why should she be mad at him for looking at her? he thought. He didn't dare look up at her again for a while.

Hermione had a sudden thought, and looked up from her Arithmancy work. "Harry! Look at the time. Weren't you going to send that letter to Dudley?"

He walked over to where she was working. "Yeah, but I thought I'd do it later. I can just use the Invisibility Cloak to avoid being caught by Filch. I don't want Hedwig showing up at Smeltings again when there are a lot of people awake to see her".

She nodded. "Good idea".

Just then, Ginny cried, "Checkmate! Good try, Ron. Better luck next time".

Ron stared at the board. "But how--what"?--

Ginny pointed. "Your king is stuck, see? If he stays there, my rook gets him, and if he moves to any of the spaces around him, he's caught by my queen, bishops or knights. And your lot can't get any of mine." Ron still stared, dumbfounded. Harry wished he'd seen the last few moves she'd made to accomplish this rout. She just amazed him more every day.

Ron began putting the chess pieces away, then failed to stifle a huge yawn. "I think I'd better get upstairs before I fall asleep on the chess board and wake up with angry pawns stuck to my face." Ginny said goodnight to them all and went up the stairs. She gave Harry a funny look just before disappearing. What was that? Harry thought. Had she gone completely in the opposite direction, from having a crush on him to hating him? Had Draco Malfoy poisoned her mind against him?

The twins and Ron both went up the stairs, and Harry followed them, saying good night to Hermione, still bent over her work.

"Good night," she said distractedly, not looking at him. He went up to his dormitory and changed into his pajama pants and laid down on top of his covers, pulling the curtains closed around him. As he waited for the time to pass, he fingered the basilisk amulet resting on his bare chest, wondering what exactly he would do if Ginny turned against him and her whole family and...became Dark. It gave him a dreadful, empty feeling in his chest, like when he first saw Cedric after he was killed, feeling responsible, feeling helpless and alone...

Finally, Harry felt it was late enough. He had dozed off for a little while, then jerked himself awake, continuing to wait. He heard Neville snoring, and Ron mumbling in his sleep. Seamus and Dean were pretty quiet sleepers, but he thought he heard rustling as one of them turned over in bed. He opened his bedcurtains and went to his trunk, removing his invisibility cloak. He put on his dressing gown and tied the belt, carrying the cloak under his arm and remembering to slip his wand into his pocket, as a safety measure. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he was momentarily taken aback; there was someone in an armchair near the fire.

"Took you long enough, Harry," Hermione said, peering around the wing of the chair, smiling. He sighed with relief. She stood. "How exactly were you going to mail your letter and mine when I've got both of them still?" she said, not making eye contact with him exactly, but coming pretty close, Harry felt. But then she smiled again, and Harry had to smile too. She was dressed for bed, in a knee-length night shirt that buttoned down the front and a pink chenille dressing gown and matching fuzzy slippers. He had simply slipped his feet into his sneakers without socks, not owning a pair of slippers. The Dursleys thought of such things as frills (as far as he was concerned, not for themselves) and he frankly hadn't thought of purchasing such things when he'd actually had a few pounds for doing the landscaping.

"I supposed you want to come along," he said lightly.

"Well, it has been a while since we've been skulking around in the middle of the night. And now that we're prefects, we could claim to be patrolling or something".

"Yes, patrolling without being asked, and wearing an Invisibility Cloak. That's really plausible".

She walked toward the portrait hole, laughing. "Come on. Before I lose my nerve." They climbed out and closed the portrait, then put the cloak over themselves. They walked closely together up to the Owlery, Harry trying not to think about how they'd been avoiding being alone. They'd gone around together under the cloak loads of times in the past, and for reasons that were far more dangerous than mailing a couple of letters. But now they'd had the Charms classroom encounters....

They reached the Owlery without incident. Harry took the cloak off the two of them and tied the letters to Hedwig's leg and sent her on her way. He remembered when he had been there with Ginny, sending the note to Cho, how Ginny had tried to imply that she was over him and had then been crying on Draco Malfoy's chest because she'd seen him kissing Cho Chang. He turned from the window to smile at Hermione, somehow feeling that in some ways, she was one of the least complicated parts of his life right now. He felt happy when he was with her, and she seemed to feel the same; he didn't know what he felt about Ginny, or she about him, and he knew unequivocally that he didn't feel anything for Cho. He knew that in some ways the most complicated thing he could do to his life was to be with Hermione, but he tried not to think about Ron and Viktor Krum and Voldemort.

They put the cloak back on to go downstairs. This time, Harry put his right arm around her shoulder to bring her closer to him and, not looking at him, she put her left arm around his waist. Then, they turned a corner and saw--Mrs. Norris. She walked right toward them, her eyes glowing as if she could see them (Harry had yet to determine whether Mrs. Norris could see through Invisibility Cloaks, like Mad Eye Moody). They pressed themselves against a wall and watched her pass, and before she was past them completely, she turned her head and seemed to look directly at them. They started to move again after she was gone around a corner, when, to their horror, Filch appeared at the end of the corridor. He was brandishing a mop, looking as though he was in fact trying to ferret out people wearing Invisibility Cloaks, swinging it around in the corridor wildly. Harry's heart was thudding in his chest so hard that it hurt. If he kept that up, when he reached them the mop would definitely make contact with them. On the other hand, Harry was afraid that moving away from Filch down the corridor would produce noise. He turned and looked down at Hermione, in case she had any brilliant suggestions for what to do now.

Suddenly there was a noise of a suit of armor crashing, most likely falling to bits from the sound of the racket. Filch whirled, brandishing the mop in front of him. He went running, presumably in the direction of the armor-noise. Harry heaved a sigh of relief. He and Hermione were able to proceed to the portrait-hole without further incident.

Once in the common room again, Hermione flopped back in the armchair by the fire where he'd found her. She put her hand over her heart, trying to get her breath. "Harry," she said slowly, "I'm think I'm getting too old for this"...

Harry laughed, sitting on the hearthrug and leaning against the front of her chair. Her legs were beside his shoulder. She kicked off her slippers and held her bare feet out to the fire, warming them. It was getting a bit drafty in the castle to be walking about without socks on at night. He turned and looked, thinking, Even her feet are pretty. He reached out without thought and touched her foot with his hand, stroking the top, forgetting it was attached to her, simply following the line of his finger, up to her ankle and back to her toes. But Hermione was not able to behave as though it wasn't attached to her; she shuddered and leaned back in the chair, closing her eyes and sighing. Harry looked up at her, then decided, Okay she likes that. He used both his hands now, caressing and stroking her feet, while she gripped the arms of the chair and sighed again, her eyes still closed. He smiled. He was driving her crazy and loving every minute of it. She had very sensitive feet...

Then she started moving. She stood up and then took a step forward, sitting down on the floor in the front of the chair, next to him, also leaning against the chair. Harry put his arm around her shoulder again, and she leaned her head on his shoulder, his cheek on the top of her head.

At first, he didn't notice her hand on his leg, tracing lazy circles, then he became acutely aware of it, wishing that she would stop and that she would never stop. He thought he was going insane (clearly she thought it was her turn to drive him crazy). He lifted his head and looked down at her, finding her looking up at him. He remembered being in the garden when Sirius had come, their mouths moving closer and closer, and then Sandy speaking...but this time, Sandy said nothing, wrapped around his arm under his dressing gown, and their lips touched briefly, tentatively, before Harry

spasmodically clutched at her and held her face up to his, and she pulled him to her, her fingers entwined in his hair, both of them forgetting any reason not to do this, any reason to show restraint.

Harry broke the kiss, but only to move his mouth down her neck, to duck under her chin and run his tongue down her throat, to hear that moaning sound again she'd made in the Charms classroom. Her hand went to the belt of his dressing gown, he felt her hands on his chest, then her lips, tracing a moist trail down to his stomach, making his abdominal muscles flinch. He gasped at the sensation, then brought her face up to his again, holding her tightly, desperately. His fingers deftly undid the buttons down the front of her nightshirt, her hand went to the drawstring on his pajama pants. Harry felt he was drowning in her, and didn't want to be saved, couldn't imagine anything more wonderful in the world than to sink down into this whirlpool called Hermione...

"A ram will meet a dragon," said Sandy suddenly. Damn! Harry thought. He was seriously reconsidering the wisdom of having a snake. Harry raised his head and listened; Hermione didn't notice at first, kissing his shoulder, caressing the sensitive skin on his back. What could Sandy mean? he wondered. Who was going to meet whom? But he did know one thing; whatever was going to happen, it was going to be in the immediate vicinity, and if they weren't careful, they would be caught. She finally noticed that he was no longer touching or kissing her; she looked at him, perplexed. He seemed to be listening intently to the large empty room around them.

"Harry? What's wrong"?

He swallowed and looked at her. She was so beautiful in the firelight, her cheeks flushed and her curls askew. "Button your shirt and tie your dressing gown. We need to get into separate chairs. Someone's coming." He rose and put his dressing gown on his shoulders again and seated himself in a chair a couple of feet away from the one she'd been sitting in. She frowned, looking as she had in the garden on Privet Drive again. She buttoned up her nightshirt (Harry's hands had been inside it; he tried not to think about it, with a shiver). Then she tied her dressing gown belt and put her slipper on again, sitting in the chair with her legs drawn up once more. Harry hadn't bothered to tie his dressing gown; he was very warm, and Hermione looked at him, at his bare chest with the basilisk amulet showing, and he thought she made a frustrated noise in the back of her throat.

"Are you going to explain this to me or not, Harry Potter?" Uh oh, he thought. I'm in trouble. Full name.

"Like I said. Someone's coming".

She opened her mouth to say something--probably about him having the Sight, he thought--when Ginny appeared at the bottom of the stairs leading to the girls' dormitories. She stopped short at seeing Harry and Hermione sitting in the armchairs by the fire.

"Ginny!" Hermione said, surprised. Harry was too, but then he thought about it. He remembered George and Fred talking about her birthday being April first; that made her an Aries, the sign of the ram. Sandy had called Parvati a fish because she was a Pisces...But there wasn't any sign of the zodiac that had a dragon for a symbol...

Harry opened his eyes wide. Dragon. He knew who it was. He scrambled to his feet, his dressing gown swinging. "Hermione! Take Ginny back upstairs! Now"!

Hermione furrowed her brow and rose, too slowly for Harry's taste, but he bit his tongue to keep from barking at her, to keep from telling her to get a move on. Ginny protested.

"What? I don't have to"--

"Yes you do," Harry said sternly. "We're prefects. You have to listen to us. Go. I'll talk to him".

Hermione swung her head around. "Talk to who"?

Ginny widened her eyes, panicked that Harry would say. He shook his head at her to reassure her. "Nevermind. Just talk to her. Go. And make sure she can't get downstairs until morning. Use whatever binding spell you have to, I don't care. Do what you did to Peeves"...

"Harry, you know I can't"--

“Just get her out of here!” he finally lost it. Both girls looked at him strangely. Ginny set her jaw defiantly as Hermione grabbed her arm and dragged her back up the stairs with her. When he heard doors closing up in the girls’ dorms, he went over to the portrait hole and opened it, knowing who he would see waiting in the corridor.

It was Draco Malfoy.

“Potter”!

“Malfoy,” Harry said, trying to keep his voice even, to not let rage make his voice shake. “Get in here now, before Filch comes by”.

At the mention of Filch, he scrambled in and Harry closed the portrait again.

“What’s going on?” Malfoy demanded to know.

“You’ve got some nerve, Malfoy. I should be asking you that. I had Hermione take Ginny back up to her room. You’re not meeting her tonight, or any night. Are you out of your mind? Are you trying to get her in trouble?” Harry stopped, wishing he hadn’t used that turn of phrase.

“We were just going to go someplace to talk. We never get to be alone to talk. Whenever we’re in the Potions Dungeon either you or Longbottom or both are there. We haven’t been able to talk alone in a couple of weeks”.

“Why do you need to talk to her alone?” Harry wanted to know. He felt incredibly close to committing murder.

“I don’t need to--well, okay, maybe I do--I--I want to--” he trailed off. He frowned at Harry. “You’re not one of her brothers”.

“No, and you should thank your lucky stars for that, because any one of them would be happy to pull your intestines out through your ears right now. And that’s without knowing that you were planning to sneak around with Ginny in the middle of the night”.

Malfoy’s jaw was set. “Listen, I know that my family and Ginny’s family have bad blood between them, but I would never do anything to hurt her. I--look, I don’t exactly feel comfortable talking to you of all people about how I feel about Ginny. Do you think I planned this? A Weasley? Don’t you think I tried to talk myself out of this? But--” and he looked up at the ceiling, his mouth in a line.

“You don’t have to tell me that Ginny’s a great girl. I know that. She may not think I know, but I do,” Harry said, remembering Malfoy telling her that Harry wasn’t worth her obsessing over since he’d ignored her for three years. “But you’ve got some romantic notion about the two of you being Romeo and Juliet, get rid of it right now. Romeo and Juliet had it easy compared to you two, and look what happened to them.” Malfoy grimaced, silently acknowledging that Harry was right (but not willing to say so). “This isn’t the time or place to discuss it. I want you to promise me that you’ll be content with seeing her in the Potions Dungeon for now. Promise?” Malfoy mumbled a reluctant affirmative. “Good. No wait here. I have to go get something”.

Malfoy frowned but stayed where he was. Harry ran up the stairs to his dorm and then reappeared in a moment with a piece of parchment. He put it on a table, and when Malfoy started to approach him, he pulled out his wand and pointed at him. “Back off, Malfoy. Stay over there. You don’t need to see this. In fact, turn around.” Malfoy stood his ground and they glared at each other. Harry was not going to look away first. Finally, Malfoy grimaced again and turned his back to Harry. Harry waved his wand over the parchment.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good”.

The map of Hogwarts appeared on the parchment, and Harry was quickly able to locate the dots in the Gryffindor common room with the minuscule labels Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy. There were also some tiny dots in the Trophy Room labeled Ernest MacMillan and Hannah Abbott. Harry grinned; All right, Ernie and Hannah! But then he thought of Hermione and shook himself. There; he’d found what he was looking for. In the entrance hall was a dot labeled Argus Filch. He waved his wand over the parchment again, saying, “Mischievous managed,” and rolled it up and put it in the pocket of his dressing gown. He walked back over to Malfoy.

“Here’s the thing,” he said. “When you’re going back, avoid the entrance hall. That’s where Filch is. And also, don’t go into the Trophy Room; you might, ah, disturb some people there”...

"How do you know?" Malfoy said suspiciously.

"I just do. I know you don't want to trust me, but you don't have a choice." They glared at each other again, then Malfoy actually let out a laugh.

"If anyone had told me that I'd ever be standing here talking to you in the middle of the night...All right. Avoid the entrance hall. I almost got caught by Filch once tonight. I totaled a suit of armor on the third floor and I heard him come running."

Harry laughed now. "That was you? I should thank you. Filch had almost walked right into me and Hermione coming back from mailing a couple of letters to my cousin. That collapsing armor created just the diversion we needed".

Malfoy's eyebrows shot up. "Granger? So there is something between you two? Wait--you said that she took Ginny back up to her dorm. You two were down here, weren't you? When Ginny came downstairs." He eyed Harry shrewdly. "Ruining your night, did I?" He looked down at Harry's pajama pants. "Your pants are untied. Did you do it or did she? And did she give you this?" He reached out and picked up the basilisk from Harry's chest. Harry knocked his hand away.

"As a matter of fact, that was a birthday gift from Ginny." He challenged Malfoy with his eyes to say anything about that. "I think you should leave now before Filch moves on to another part of the castle," he said evenly, making a great effort to remain in control. But Malfoy wasn't done.

"You're being so self-righteous, so high and mighty about me and Ginny, and here you are with Granger on the hearthstone in the middle of the night"...

Harry couldn't take it any longer; he pushed Malfoy up against the wall and spoke with his mouth very close to his face. "Nothing happened. You don't know anything".

Malfoy pushed him off. "Harry Potter, hypocrite. Some things never change, do they? Nothing happened because Ginny and I interrupted you, and that's probably the only reason. I can't believe you"...

"This is different," Harry hissed. "And you have to remember: Ginny's a year younger than us. You--you have to have control--" Harry couldn't go on. He was shaking. The thought of Malfoy and Ginny doing anything remotely similar to what he and Hermione had been doing was making him feel ill.

To his surprise, Malfoy nodded. "I know that. I would never...you may not believe me, but she is safe with me. Really." Harry looked at him, never remembering Malfoy sounding so straightforward and sincere.

"All right. Like I said, this isn't the time or place. You'd better go. Avoid the entrance hall".

"Right," Malfoy said, opening the portrait and climbing through the hole. "But not because of Filch. He's a pussycat compared to Snape".

"Snape? Are you kidding? As far as he's concerned, no one in his house can do anything wrong".

"Hmph. That's only how he acts around students from other houses. If any of us gets points taken from our house...You don't want to know. And he's a pussycat compared to my dad".

"Now that I believe," Harry said, shuddering.

"Yeah. I'm glad Moody's planning to teach us how to cope with the Cruciatius Curse. Then maybe when I upset my dad he won't know I can't feel what he's doing"...

Harry dropped his jaw. "Your dad put the Cruciatius Curse on you"?

"No, you idiot. But there are plenty of legal curses that are still--extremely painful." He had been looking at Harry, but now he looked away; he'd said too much. He decided to change the subject. "So; how far'd you get with Granger"?

"Don't push it, Malfoy. I'm not talking to you about Hermione. Do you want me to get all of Ginny's brothers down here? Plus, there's plenty of other guys in Gryffindor who be pleased to scalp you for what you're thinking about Ginny--I didn't say actually doing, just thinking. And if you deny that you've thought stuff, you must really think I'm stupid".

Malfoy grinned. "Nah. That one's too easy. I'm not even gonna touch it. Like candy from a baby." He turned before closing the portrait. "So; we each have a secret the other one knows about".

"Looks that way".

"Well, Potter, I have to admit...Granger. I don't exactly blame you".

Now Harry had to really restrain himself from hitting Malfoy. It took all the effort he could muster.

"And Ginny," said Harry softly. "I don't blame you, either".

Malfoy nodded and closed the portrait; no goodnight, thanks, or anything else. Harry heard his retreating footsteps, then went over to sit in an armchair near the fire again. He looked at the lion on the keystone. In the flickering light it almost seemed to be moving. He closed his eyes and remembered being with Hermione again, by the fire...But that wasn't helping his peace of mind a bit. He fingered the basilisk amulet as he walked up the stairs to his dorm.

* * * * *

Chapter Thirteen: Cats and More Cats

The next day, they went to the opera in Hogsmeade. Harry had never been to the large timbered hall on the High Street that was used for everything from town meetings and amateur theatrical productions to weddings and funerals. He had the opportunity to see a greater cross-section of Hogsmeade residents than he was usually privy to; there were many people there who he was sure would never set foot in Honeyduke's or Zonko's.

Dumbledore was there, to Harry's surprise. Great; how was Ron going to claim that Dumbledore wanted to see them as soon as they got back if he was going to the same opera? Why was he there anyway?

While the chamber orchestra was tuning up, Dumbledore caught his eye and came over. "Harry! And Miss Granger and Miss Chang. Ah, Mr. Krum! Fancy meeting you here. I understand you're working in England now." Viktor grunted. Dumbledore turned back to Harry. "I didn't know you liked chamber operas, Harry. Purcell's my personal favorite, of course--have you heard the Indian Queen?--although I also like Monteverdi, but when most people think of opera, they think in for the big splashy stuff, you know, Puccini, Verdi, Wagner".

And then Harry remembered the Albus Dumbledore Famous Witches and Wizards Card he'd gotten on his very first trip on the Hogwarts Express; in addition to listing Dumbledore's many accomplishments, it had included the information that Dumbledore enjoyed chamber music and tenpin bowling. Harry wondered fleetingly if there was a magical bowling alley in Hogsmeade, or whether perhaps Dumbledore contented himself with going to Muggle alleys.

"Viktor got us tickets, Headmaster," Hermione informed him. "He gets a lot of perks for playing for the Chuddy Cannon".

"Ah! The Cannons! Yes, yes, fine team. Not the Puddlemere United, in my opinion, but then...Well, I shan't keep you," Viktor said, eyes twinkling behind his spectacles, as he made his way back to his seat. He appeared to be attending the opera alone. As the lights went down in the hall and the orchestra began the overture, Harry looked sideways at Cho. She looked back; he turned back to the front. He hoped she didn't expect him to kiss her at the opera, as though they'd gone to see a Muggle film. He especially had no intention of doing anything of the sort with Hermione around, let alone Dumbledore. He felt her hand on his, and he laced his fingers through hers; she'd have to be satisfied with that, he thought. Viktor was sitting to Cho's right; he had put his arm around Hermione and she leaned against his shoulder comfortably. Harry tried not to seethe, but it was difficult keeping his temper. Thankfully, the overture was over and the singing began.

He hadn't had time to consult the program notes and was surprised to learn that it was about Aeneas dallying with the queen of Carthage on the way back from the Trojan War, before going off to found Rome, thus breaking her heart. He thought, frankly, that the witches were somewhat superfluous, serving merely as an excuse for Aeneas' behavior. He was following his destiny, according to other parts of the plot. Well, which was it? Harry thought irritably. He thought again of Ron's Othello report....we should have gotten the impression that...it would have been absolutely impossible for him ever to behave in such a judgmental and violent manner....

It was in his nature. Harry thought about it. But--how does a person really know what's in their nature when they're fifteen when they're still getting to know themselves? He looked at Cho out of the corner of his eye. A year ago, he could not have imagined being in the situation he was in now. As he listened to the beautiful singing, he wondered how they were ever going to get their plan to really work...

In our deep vaulted cell (-ed cell(
The charm we'll prepare (prepare(
Too dreadful a practice (Too dreadful a practice(
Too dreadful
)Too dreadful(
A practice
)A practice(
For this open air
)For this open air(
)

Every other phrase was sung very softly, as though the previous musical passage were echoing down a long cavern. The singers playing the witches retreated to the back of the stage, where they supposedly were going to brew something that would be the undoing of Queen Dido. He assumed that Purcell had not had much contact with magical people, if any, to depict them the way he did. He looked over at Dumbledore; he seemed to be enjoying himself, and he'd said that Purcell was his favorite. Well, thought Harry, if it was good enough for Dumbledore...

The singer playing Dido was a tall, beautiful witch with long dark red hair. Each note she sang rang with a crystalline clarity, like a bell. At the end, after she sang her death aria (Hermione was right; it was quite beautiful), she lay on the stage, her head resting on her arm while her retinue sang a haunting dirge over her and scattered rose petals on and around her.

...And scatter roses,
Scatter roses on her tomb.
Soft, soft and gentle.
Soft, soft and gentle as her heart.

It was really very touching, but suddenly, as he sat watching the beautiful woman with dark red hair who'd just been singing so heartbreakingly, he felt his eyes begin to water. Mum! he suddenly thought. He'd never felt quite like this before; the wave of emotion was unstoppable; it rose up out of him like a tidal wave, and he disconnected his hand from Cho's, choking out the words, "Excuse me. I'll be back".

He edged his way out, blindly finding the aisle and hurrying down it to the large anteroom that served as a kind of lobby. He wasn't aware at first of there being anyone else there. Then he turned and saw Hermione; she'd followed him, leaving Cho and Viktor alone together. She didn't say a word. She simply walked toward him and put her arms around him. He pillowed his cheek on her head. He had actually stopped crying already, but he needed to hold her. He thought of being in the common room with her the night before, and shuddered. Even if they managed to get Viktor and Cho together, could they really be open about being a couple? Did they dare tell Ron? What if Voldemort and the Death Eaters found out? Then he groaned inwardly; Draco Malfoy knew. He was practically in training to be a Death Eater, if he went by what Sirius had said to Snape when Harry had overheard their conversation in Snape's office.

Harry tried to blank his mind, simply be; he held Hermione and watched over her head while the members of the opera company took their bows. They separated and Harry tried to compose himself as the crowd slowly seeped out of the hall. He put on cloaks and prepared to return to the brisk autumn day. No other Hogwarts students appeared to have had tickets to the performance. Dumbledore did not see them in the crowd as he left. Good, Harry thought. Hopefully he'll be back at the castle before us. He checked his watch; it was only three o'clock. They didn't have to be back for two hours. Even one hour should give Dumbledore enough of a lead.

The hall was empty now except for Viktor and Cho and the orchestra members still packing up their music and instruments, waving their wands to make their gear leap into their cases. Then Harry stared; Cho and Viktor were having an animated conversation. Viktor was laughing! He turned to Hermione, excited.

"They're talking!" he grinned, hardly daring to believe that the plan might be working. Hermione looked. Now Cho was laughing, putting her hand on Viktor's arm. She was more alive looking than Harry had seen her since before Diggory died. But now Hermione stopped looking cheerful about it.

"Hmph!" she said, her arms crossed. "Figures. I knew she'd be the sort of person who'd try to steal another girl's boyfriend".

Harry looked at her, his brow furrowed. He wished he could worm out of her what had happened between her and Viktor in Bulgaria, before the abduction. "But that's what we want her to do," he whispered.

"But she doesn't know that"!

Harry sighed; he still felt miles away from understanding girls. He didn't really completely understand Hermione, or Ginny, or Cho, or Alicia, or Parvati...

Now the musicians and singers were also leaving, and the candles that had been lighting the hall were being extinguished one by one. Still, Viktor and Cho talked, not even looking over their shoulders to search for Harry and Hermione.

"We should go back to them," Harry said. "We can go to the Three Broomsticks for a while now, give Dumbledore enough time to get back to the castle".

Hermione nodded. She moved away from him, to go down the outer aisle, while Harry went down the center aisle. Cho looked up, looking slightly surprised upon seeing him, as though she forgot that he was her date. There's something very odd about her, he decided. Asks me out, can't talk to me, now she's all chatty with someone whose grasp of English is spotty at best...

At the pub, Harry and Hermione again went to the bar for the drinks. Viktor and Cho seemed to pick up their conversation where they'd left off. When they returned with the butterbeers and a few packets of crisps, they refrained from speaking, letting Viktor and Cho continue talking to each other without interruption. Harry raised his eyebrows at Hermione. She smiled as she drank. Something was finally going as planned.

When they returned to the entrance, hall, that went smoothly too. Ron met them at the door, informed Harry and Hermione that Dumbledore wanted to see them, and each of them gave their respective date a peck on the cheek and hurried up the stairs; Harry stopped Ron from following them.

"Stay," he whispered. "Watch them. Tell us what happens later, okay"?

Ron nodded, taking his job seriously. "Okay".

Harry and Hermione ran up to Gryffindor Tower and tumbled in the portrait hole ("Portcullis!") and collapsed in armchairs near the fire, smiling at each other as they tried to get their breathing to return to normal. Only a few first and second year students were in the common room, too young to be allowed Hogsmeade visits. Harry still grinned at Hermione and she returned it. He couldn't recall when he'd had a better day. There was somehow something so satisfying about creating a plan and then having the plan actually work. He remembered flying on Buckbeak with her to rescue Sirius (and save Buckbeak simultaneously). She had been almost as petrified about riding a hippogriff as she'd been about being picked up by Hagrid's mother. Suddenly the memory made him laugh. She looked at him, still smiling.

"What's so funny"?

"I was just remembering you flying on Buckbeak, and then when Hagrid's mum"...

She put her hand to her stomach. "Oh, don't remind me. Do you want to know what I was thinking of"?

"What"?

She stopped looking so cheerful; her face was very serious now. "Being here. Last night".

Harry stopped grinning too, and looked away from her, toward the fire. "Hermione," he said softly. "We were really taking a chance. Ginny could have--if she'd come down ten or fifteen minutes later"--

"No she couldn't".

"What? Were you planning to suddenly stop? Because I didn't get that impression".

"No, I mean that whenever Ginny came down, we would have had ample warning".

Harry stared at her, opening his eyes wide. "Oh, is that what this is about? Are we back to that again? For the last time don't have the Sight!"

"Oh, I know," she said calmly. Harry was perplexed, waiting. The silence stretched. Finally, she said, "But Sandy does. He let out his breath in relief; she'd figured it out, then. "Why didn't you tell me?" she whispered fiercely. "I had to go to library and do a lot of reading about people who'd been Parselmouths. Oh, nothing specifically said that snakes had the Sight, but enough weird things happened to them that I was able to read between the lines. And I have heard Sandy hissing every time you come out with something about what's about to happen"...

He smiled at her again. "Dead smart, you are," he said, trying to imitate Hagrid's mother. She laughed. "And before you say anything, I haven't been taking her to Divination. Not anymore, anyway. Not after the first time. I'm not using her to cheat".

Hermione smiled. "Actually, I haven't been feeling 'dead smart.' I've been feeling a bit dim. I can't believe it took me this long to figure it out. Has she predicted anything interesting"?

"Not remotely. But the boa said two things. The second one was very interesting: 'The masters will be servants and the servants will be masters.' I think she can see a couple of months into the future. But I have no idea what she means".

Hermione's mouth curled up at the edges. "I have." She was silent then; Harry waited, but evidently, she wasn't interested in illuminating him. "But I do have another question: who was Ginny going to meet last night"?

"Um," Harry said, unprepared. "I can't tell you".

Hermione drew her lips into a straight line. "I see. And when were you going to tell me what you've been doing every night after dinner?" The Animagus training; she'd noticed.

"Did Ginny tell you?" he wanted to know, alarmed.

"Ginny? She knows? What is it"?

"She--she guessed".

"So? What IS it?" she repeated.

"I--I can't tell you about that either. I'm not supposed to"...

"Harry!" she whispered angrily. "if we are going to be together, we need to tell each other things".

"You didn't tell about the time-turner for our entire third year!" he pointed out to her, exasperated.

"I couldn't"--

"Well, I can't tell you about this either. And anyway, we're not really together, are we?" he said in a whisper, hoping the first and second years hadn't heard anything they'd been saying. "I mean, we can't be. Not yet".

She sat back, looking hurt and dazed. Then she stood up, her eyes glistening, her voice hard. "Fine. If that's the way you feel. I have some studying to do for the O.W.L.s." She rose to go, then came back and leaned over Harry's chair, speaking in an angry whisper. "And for your information, I think I know who Ginny was meeting, but I wanted to give you the chance to tell me yourself"!

She turned and marched up the stairs to the girls' dorm. Harry sank back into the chair, gripping the arms fiercely, his eyes closed. That's it, he thought. Get her hacked off at you. Maybe then we won't risk getting caught in the common room in the middle of the night. Maybe then the Death Eaters won't come after you...

Just then, the portrait hole opened and Ron climbed in. He sat in the armchair next to Harry's, where Hermione had been.

"So?" Harry asked him. "How'd it go? Did they talk much"?

"They're still talking. I thought I had a strong stomach for talking about Quidditch, but those two"--

"So why'd you leave"?

"Well, they looked like they didn't like me lurking around. That's a good sign, huh?" He looked very pleased, as though he were avidly anticipating Hermione and Viktor Krum being a past-tense couple.

"Yeah. Great." Harry leaned back and closed his eyes again.

"What's wrong with you? Where's Hermione"?

He opened his eyes and looked at Ron. "Oh, she went storming upstairs. We had a row".

Ron raised his eyebrows at him. "Now she's getting hacked off at you. Must be that time of mo"--

"Ron"!

He grinned. "Sorry. At home, we've gotten into the habit of explaining Ginny's mood swings that way." Harry shuddered, not wanting to think of Ginny enduring that any more than Hermione. "Anyway, what did you do"?

Harry grimaced; if Hermione knew, he supposed Ron should know too. He stood and took off his robes, then unbuttoned his shirt a little and reached down his left sleeve, withdrawing Sandy carefully.

"It's Sandy. Actually, I named her Cassandra. I call her Sandy because it's shorter. She has the Sight. All snakes do. It's my fault you broke your leg, Ron. Hermione was right. But Sandy was telling me just as I was leaving Divination, yelling 'don't have the Sight!' What was I supposed to do? Come back a second later and say, 'Oh, by the way, when you leave you're going to fall off the ladder. But I still don't have the Sight'".

Ron was looking at him, thunderstruck. "That explains so much".

"Yeah. But you can't tell anyone. Sandy can only see a few minutes into the future in the vicinity right around where she is. And she tends to be somewhat cryptic. And she only gets flashes of the future once in a while".

Ron grimaced. "She sounds as useful as Trelawney." Harry and Ron both laughed.

"Put me back," Sandy hissed at him. "And apologize," she added, sounding slightly hurt.

"I'm sorry Sandy," Harry hissed back, chagrined.

"Was she predicting something?" Ron wanted to know.

"Nah. Just getting hacked off at me, like Hermione." Ron laughed again.

"Want to play Exploding Snap?" he offered. Harry accepted. He needed some fun after the day he'd had. He tried not to picture the woman with the long dark red hair again, singing her death...

* * * * *

The following Tuesday was Halloween. Something started nagging Harry from the moment he woke up in the morning, and after breakfast, he asked Ron and Hermione to give his apologies to Hagrid and Professor Sprout; he thought perhaps a lie-down would help him feel well enough to go to his afternoon classes, History of Magic and Divination. When he'd gone back upstairs, he crawled into bed with his jeans and turtleneck on after throwing his robes with their prefect badge carelessly across the foot of the bed. He curled up in a ball under the covers. Why did he feel like this? His scar wasn't hurting, but somehow he felt a pain inside which would not subside.

Harry closed his eyes tightly, trying to think of other Halloweens at Hogwarts. He thought of going to Nearly Headless Nick's Deathday party when he was in second year, the awful saw-like sounds emanating from the spirit orchestra, the Headless Hunt arriving, Nick's insistence that he was as good as beheaded.

That was it. Nick's deathday. And that wasn't all. It was his parents' deathday, too. Voldemort had killed them on Halloween, exactly fourteen years ago. Harry pictured them, their shades talking to him when they'd emerged from Voldemort's wand in the graveyard in June, after he'd won the Triwizard Tournament and the cup turned out to be a Portkey....

Their images in the Mirror of Erised, waving at him, along with other relatives he did not know...

Their pictures in the album Hagrid had made for him....

Then, suddenly, he knew what he wanted to do: he put his glasses back on and leapt from bed, going to his trunk and getting out the photo album. He sat on top of his robes, cross-legged, opening the album. Then he stopped, surprised; why hadn't he ever noticed that the first page was stuck to the inside of the cover? Actually, it was only stuck in a couple of places. Harry carefully separated the page from the cover and looked at something he'd never seen before.

It was an invitation to his parents' wedding. He stared at it, tracing the raised border with flowers on it (lilies, he realized) with his finger. His parents had been married the summer before he was born. They were so young--only nineteen when they married, only a year out of school.

David Llewellyn Evans and Violet Boothwyn-Evans

request the honour of your presence

at the wedding of their daughter

Lily Gwyneth Evans

to

James Godric Potter

Friday, June 21, 1979

at four o'clock in the afternoon

The Willows

Cardiff, Wales

Reception to follow

The favour of a reply is requested

The Willows, thought Harry. That must be the country inn he'd seen in the wedding pictures. His parents married at midsummer. Eleven months later, he was born. What did they do after they graduated? he suddenly wondered. How did they support themselves? He couldn't remember anyone ever telling him. Was it true, as his uncle had once said, that dad had been unemployed? Couldn't be. It just couldn't be.

He turned the pages, looking at more pictures of the wedding. His parents cutting the wedding cake, dancing...

Wait. There. His mother was dancing with other people. With Sirius, with Lupin, with a younger and less moth-eaten Pettigrew, even. And--

With Severus Snape.

He was looking at his mother sadly, Harry thought. She wasn't looking at him. She seemed to be smiling over his shoulder at his dad, who was standing with Sirius, both of them holding champagne glasses and smiling. Snape actually looked more human in the photo than he usually looked in person.

Then he came to the picture he liked best. When he'd first gotten the album, it was the one he looked at the most. He was one year old. It was his birthday, in fact. He was sitting on his mother's lap to blow out a single candle on a birthday cake that read "Happy Birthday Harry" in green icing that matched his eyes. He wasn't wearing glasses yet, of course, nor did he have a scar. He was a chubby, average-looking baby with a mop of already unruly black hair, laughing up at his mother and reaching for a lock of her hair. His father wasn't in the picture; he must have taken it and then sent a copy to some friend who had responded when Hagrid wrote to people asking for pictures of his mum and dad. He gazed longly at his mother. She alternated between smiling at the person with the camera and looking down lovingly at Harry and trying unsuccessfully to take her hair out of his little grasping fist.

Suddenly, he felt angry. He slammed the book shut and tried to see straight, but the world seemed blurred, he was so angry. That was the last happy birthday he'd ever had, and he was too young even to remember it. The last birthday where he hadn't been scarred, his last birthday with parents. Voldemort had stolen his childhood from him. He felt like throwing something, yelling, screaming, blasting the room apart with his wand...

Then he took a deep breath and sat down with the book again, opening it once more and looking at the picture of himself on his first birthday with his mother. He swallowed and ran his finger over her image. I won't be that sort of person, he promised her silently. That's not why you died. If that's who you wanted me to be, you'd have bargained for my life like Malfoys did with their son...

He wondered whether Malfoy knew about that. He remembered Malfoy talking about being on the right side and the wrong side in the coming struggle when they'd been returning to London on the Hogwarts express last June. By which, Malfoy meant the winning side and the losing side. Harry knew he was on the right side; the question was, would it be the winning side? And was Malfoy stuck? Did he have to become whatever his father wanted him to be? What did Malfoy want? On the one hand, Harry hoped that maybe Malfoy wanted to be with Ginny enough to do the right thing; on the other hand, Harry hated feeling like he was using Ginny as some sort of bribe, to make Malfoy behave. After all, she was his best friend's sister, he said to himself. No, another voice said in the back of his brain. That's not why it upsets you...

He slammed the album shut again and went to the silver pitcher near the window to have a cold drink of water. He'd wallowed enough. He had missed Hagrid's class. He would go down to Herbology now. Yes, it was the day his parents had died. But he would not have that be for nothing. He would not let his grief paralyze him and distract him. He threw some cold water on his face and put his robes on, adjusting his prefect badge and examining himself in the mirror. He tried to picture his mother seeing him like this, being proud of him. And then--he knew she could see him, that she was proud of him.

"Fancy is as fancy does," the mirror told him. He smiled grimly at it and shouldered his bag, ready to join the world again.

* * * * *

The Halloween feast was, as usual, spectacular. Afterward, they dragged themselves upstairs to bed, full of too much good food and without the will to study for a single class (even Hermione). But as soon as they reached the common room, there was a great excitement. Andy Donegal and Barry Bagshot came tearing down the boys' staircase, out of breath and with wild eyes.

"Harry! We need your help!"

Oh, no, Harry thought. It's started--

"What is it?" he said, his voice hard, bracing himself for whatever horrors lay ahead.

"Jules's cat is having kittens!"

Harry stopped and stared at the two eleven-year-old boys. Then he broke into a smile, followed by outright guffaws. He was bent double; he could scarcely breathe. His face hurt from laughing so hard. Hermione and Ron stared at him.

"Let's call St. Mungo's," Ron said, rolling his eyes. "Harry's gone barmy".

Shaking her head, Hermione told the boys that before she came to Hogwarts, she'd had a cat who'd had kittens (and they had run away after they'd given the kittens away, unfortunately). She followed them up to the first-years boys' dorm, followed by Ron and a still-helplessly laughing Harry, who was moving much more slowly than they were, unable to stop the hilarity.

erupting out of him, as though he'd foregone laughter for years and it was forcing its way out now. He was getting as bold as Mad-Eye Moody, he thought. Next thing I'll be drinking out of a hip flask and trying to stun the dustbins.

When he arrived in the first-years' room, Hermione, Ron, Andy and his twin Amy, Barry Bagshot, Gillian Lockley, Dean Thomas, his sister Jamaica and Jules Quinn himself were all clustered around the corner near Will's bed. As Harry approached, he saw that Jules' cat was ensconced on what looked suspiciously like a red robe from one of the prefect's bathrooms. She was stretched out while her five kittens mewed and climbed over each other and finally all managed to get organized, lined up at her teats, eating their first meal of their new lives. Three of them were striped, two were black. Right after he entered, Ginny came through the door.

"Harry, I heard--where--oh!" she cried with delight, coming over to the corner and peering down at the domestic scene. Hermione was cooing at the kittens, as were Amy and Jamaica. The boys were also clearly quite taken with the small balls of fluff, but trying to be a little more dignified than the girls. Ron looked over the younger students' heads with a look of authority.

"Don't crowd her! They're brand new. You don't want to be so overbearing!"

Then, one of the larger striped kittens, apparently having exhausted the milk supply where he was, climbed over his brothers and sisters and tried to push the smallest kitten away from the teat where it had been feeding.

"Hey! Ron yelled at it, picking it up by the scruff of the neck. Barry cried out and took the kitten from Ron.

"He's mine! Jules said I could have him. He's already got such a little roly-poly belly I'm naming him Roland".

"And I'm taking the big black one," Andy said. "I always wanted to have a cat at home, but mum wouldn't let me because of my allergy. Now that Madam Pomfrey has given me that Potion I went for on my second day here, I can have a cat! I'm naming him Beowulf".

"You can't name him Beowulf," his twin sister informed him. "That's a dog's name".

"He's my kitten and I can name him whatever I want. I won't tell you what to name yours".

"I'm naming mine Butch, because he already seems to be pretty tough. He can take care of himself".

Ron looked down at Jules. "So. They're all spoken for already"?

"Just the boys," he told him. "The runt's a girl and so's the other black one".

Ginny cried out. "Oh! Could I have the black one, Jules?" He smiled and nodded at her, then looked away, blushing. He had had the impression that Jules had a bit of a crush on Ginny. The kittens were done feeding now and had separated themselves from the teats. Now their mother was washing each one carefully, her sandpapery tongue grooming the stickiness from their fluffy fur, for they were all long-haired cats. When the mother was done washing the littlest kitten, he leaned over and picked her up gently; she fit in the palm of his hand.

"So, sweetheart," he said to her softly. "Does no one want you, then? Shall you be mine?" he said, his face very close to her. Harry stood stock-still, surprised. He turned and saw Hermione looking at Ron with a heartbreaking look that made Harry's throat feel tight. The kitten yawned hugely, prompting a chorus of, "Aaaawws," from those assembled, and then she curled up in his hands, closing her eyes and starting to purr contentedly.

"I think she likes you," Jules said, smiling. Harry looked at Hermione, looking at Ron, thinking the same thing.

* * * * *

Harry had tired of talking to snakes in Care of Magical Creatures. He attended class but refrained from entering the enclosure. Finally, half-way through November, Hagrid promised them that they would start in on the Gryffindor animal. Sure enough, when they came to class the next time, the snake enclosure was gone. But instead of there being a large metal cage in the yard to restrain the animal, it was simply sitting in the middle of what had been the goose yard, napping peacefully.

It was an enormous tawny lion.

All of the students were taken aback; the fence around the yard was only about three-and-a-half feet high and would present no real obstacle to the lion were he to try to get at any of them. Harry asked Hagrid whether there was magical fencing around it that the lion could not pass through.

"Nah," he said casually. "Don' need it. He don' harm humans. Plus, he jes' ate a hundred an' fifty pound o' raw meat. F tummy".

"What do you mean, doesn't harm humans?" Ron demanded, keeping Hagrid between him and the sleeping lion. The other students were all around twenty feet from the fence, not daring to move closer.

"What I said. If he were a lion, we'd haff ter worry"--

"What are you talking about?" Ron demanded. "He IS a lion"!

"Oh is he? Well, fer yer information, although fer hundreds o' years people 'ere 'ave been makin'the mistake o' calling t Gryffindor house team the lions, an' callin' the pitcher on the coat o' arms a lion, the damn thing AIN'T A LION".

Harry and Ron made faces at each other. "You're mental," Ron said weakly, never having uttered such a thing to Hagrid before, as much as he had thought it many times due to Hagrid's predilection for extremely dangerous creatures.

But Hermione's face had a sudden glow of understanding on it. "Oh! Hagrid! Is it really--but, I thought one of those would look like"--

"Yeah, yeah. But there's more than one kind. This is the Gryffindor kind".

Harry and Ron still had no clue; the rest of the class, Gryffindors and Slytherins alike, looked very close to bolting back to the castle. Even Blast-Ended Skrewts hadn't inspired the kind of mass-exodus that seemed imminent.

"Harry, Ron," said Hermione. "Do you know any French"?

"What?" Ron sputtered. "Hermione, this is no time to be lording your languages over us"...

"No, no, that's not my point. Do you know what 'Gryffindor' means"?

"It was Godric Gryffindor's surname".

"But people didn't actually used to have surnames. They were called Uric the Odd and things like that. Someone who did something interesting would get some kind of epithet applied to them, and then it would stick and become the family name. What's important is what 'Gryffindor' means".

Harry was bewildered. "So what does it mean"?

"Golden griffin. Or rather, griffin d'or, griffin of gold. In *Hogwarts: a History*--" Ron groaned, but Hermione plunged on, ignoring him. "--it says that Godric Gryffindor was an Animagus. Slytherin was the only founder who wasn't, but he could speak Parseltongue, so that was as good as, I suppose. And when Godric Gryffindor became an animal, he became--" she paused significantly, waiting for one of them to realize what she was about to say and say it with her. But there was silence. She finally grew impatient with waiting and shouted, "A golden griffin"!

Hagrid smiled. "Like this one here".

Harry stared at it. "But Hagrid, it just looks like a lion. And it says in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* that a griffin has an eagle's head and wings and feet and the hind quarters of a lion".

"Don' believe ever'thing you read in that thing," Hagrid said moodily. "It says horrible things abou'--abou' a friend o' mine..." Harry could think of about a half- dozen creatures to which Hagrid could be referring.

"Harry," Hermione said excitedly, "that's a griffin that was produced by a union between a griffin and another lion. So it's a three-quarters lion. Its only eagle attributes are its wings".

"What wings?" Harry wanted to know; he didn't see any. Just then, the griffin awoke, sniffed the air and looked around wildly. Then Harry saw that it was looking directly at him. Its nose was moving suspiciously. Harry was already running Hagrid's cabin when he realized that a shadow had passed over him; he reached the door and pulled it open, ran in, and slammed it shut, shoving a long bar of wood into the brackets on the back of the door that were designed to hold it. The door thus locked, Harry went cautiously to the window.

The other students had scattered, and Ron and Hermione were huddled by Hagrid. Circling low over the yard was the griffin, its tawny-golden wings held out in what must be a sixteen-foot wing-span, now landing again, folding its wings once more against its flanks so that they disappeared from view. It settled down once more. Harry wondered what he'd done and why had it come after him?

"Take me off," Sandy hissed at him now.

"What? This isn't a good time for a conversation, Sandy. There's a griffin out there who thinks I'm his lunch".

"No; it is me. He doesn't want you, he wants me." Sandy sounded quite confident.

"Why"?

"Griffins and serpents of all kinds are natural enemies. Griffins and basilisks especially, but a small snake like me has no chance against a griffin like that. Please don't bring me down here again".

He took her off his arm and placed her near the fireplace, where some glowing embers sat in the banked ashes, along with a number of potatoes in their jackets that Hagrid seemed to be slow-roasting. Sandy stretched out in front of the fireplace, warming her belly.

"You're sure it wasn't after me"?

"It does not care about you. You are not a snake".

Harry went to the door of Hagrid's hut and opened it cautiously, then closed it behind him. Everyone was looking at him and Malfoy was incredibly gleeful.

"Hey, Potter. Can't talk to griffins? Maybe you should have been in Slytherin--although we're all glad you aren't. It's bad enough we have to put up with you in two classes and at meals".

"Shut up, Malfoy!" Harry said at the same time as--surprisingly--Neville. Malfoy turned on him.

"Watch your step, Longbottom"...

"You idiot, Malfoy! The griffin was probably reacting to Harry's snake. Griffins kill snakes; they're natural enemies. Did you leave it inside, Harry"?

Harry nodded, impressed both by Neville's standing up to Malfoy and his knowledge of the enmity between griffins and snakes. Harry hadn't known. He'd wondered for some time as to why Neville hadn't been placed in Hufflepuff, but recently he'd stopped wondering. It was as though Neville had--woken up. As though he'd been sleepwalking when he was younger. Harry didn't even recall Neville needing his grandmother to send him things he'd forgotten when school had started in September (usually, during the first week of school, Neville got at least one package a day from his grandmother by owl post). And his King Lear report had brought even more praise from Moody than Ron's essay on Othello. Hermione had been somewhat miffed by his lukewarm reception to her thoughts about Ophelia and Gertrude from Hamlet (she'd changed her mind about doing MacBeth). She had mumbled, "Sexist," when he had waved aside the significance of their characters.

Now Hermione was clearly also impressed with Neville. Harry walked back over to the enclosure. The griffin was no longer growling, and looked like a flightless lion once more. Harry and Neville were the only ones who were interested in approaching the enclosure. The griffin put his front paws up on the top of the fence, looking for all the world like a large dog who wanted someone to play with him. Harry slowly put his hand out to his snout, palm down. The griffin put his large wet nose to Harry's hand. Harry flinched as the griffin moved his nose all over his hand and then reached out its tongue and licked his skin. Harry froze, wondering whether he would need to run back to Hagrid's hut in order to save his hand.

Neville reached out his hand and stroked the griffin's tawny mane. He immediately began to purr loudly and rubbed against Neville's arm. Harry tried moving his hand up to the mane also, stroking it tentatively. He seemed like a very happy cat now, purring and closing his eyes. Harry and Neville smiled at each other and Hagrid was pleased.

"Like ter ride 'im, Neville"?

Neville jerked his head up, his eyes wide. "Could I?" Hagrid smiled at him and Harry stepped back. Neville climbed over the fence and approached the griffin again. Neville bowed to him, and he lowered his head to Neville, then rose regally and slowly spread his wings. They seemed to appear from nowhere, so perfectly did they blend in with his golden flank. They were both gold and yet transparent at the same time. Neville moved behind the wings and carefully swung his leg over his back, then sank his fingers in the mane to hold on. The griffin took a few running steps, then leapt into the sky, gold and flying mane and tail, the huge wings moving slowly as it climbed higher, then remaining motionless as it banked, floating on a thermal, preparing to return. Harry was awestruck, watching. The other students--even the Slytherins--were also speechless, struck dumb by the beauty of the griffin's flight. Harry wished he could have had a photo of Malfoy's amazed expression.

After Harry collected Sandy (while Hagrid held the griffin in check) they walked to the greenhouses for Herbology. Harry made a decision. He didn't plan to learn to become a lion; not anymore. He knew what he wanted to be.

A golden griffin.

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Chapter Fourteen: Gryffindor vs. Slytherin

Harry felt energized again. A golden griffin. He hadn't mentioned it to McGonagall yet, because he wasn't completely certain that an Animagus was allowed to become a magical creature, rather than something that most Muggles wouldn't think twice about if they saw it in their world.

It was getting close to their first Quidditch match, which would be the first Saturday in December. Harry suddenly seemed to be talking Quidditch morning, noon and night, driving the other seven players crazy and making even Quidditch-crazy Ron want to stick Harry's Firebolt in his mouth (or somewhere else, he had threatened more than once). He had them practicing every day between the end of classes and dinner, and several times, they missed dinner and had to go down to the kitchens to get something to eat from the house elves. As Hermione usually came down to the Quidditch pitch to watch the practices (and study for the O.W.L.s), she had also missed dinner at these times.

On the Thursday just before the match, they had all missed the evening meal again and were sitting in the kitchens eating at the large central table where the elves usually took their meals. They'd cleared off and were happy to be waiting on Harry and the rest of them. Harry was sitting between Ginny and Katie, who was nursing a cold and sneezing. She'd been to see Madam Pomfrey for a cold remedy already, but it was wearing off, and flying about in the brisk almost-wintery air had not helped. Hermione was opposite the three of them, between Ron and Dobby, who she had insisted sit down and talk to them.

"I is needing to do my work, Miss Hermione Granger. Headmaster is paying me now, remember. I is having to give him my money back if I is not working"...

"Just for a moment, Dobby! I just wanted to ask you--how is Winky"?

Dobby looked happy and sad all at once. "Well, Winky is much happier than when she was here. Winky is belonging to someone again. Headmaster's brother is owning her now, and she is very happy. But--she is not free." Dobby looked down, and Harry wondered how someone who understood the value of freedom could have survived for so many years being owned by the Malfoys.

"Well, Dobby, I'm sorry Winky isn't free. But perhaps it's best that she isn't here at Hogwarts any more. Especially with her voice dropped "--Boxing Day coming." She looked up at Harry and seemed alarmed that he was listening. "She wasn't--the best example of freedom".

Dobby nodded sagely at her, and then he also saw that Harry was listening to them with a furrowed brow. He jumped up suddenly. "Harry Potter! You is needing more pumpkin juice!"

He knew he'd been caught eavesdropping. "No, really, I'm fine, I"--

But suddenly, three house elves were heading his way with pitchers sloshing from being almost overflowing with pumpkin juice. One of them filled his already-full goblet, spilling juice onto his plate of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, turning everything a muddy orange hue, as well as splashing his robes and glasses. The world suddenly looked like a pumpkin had exploded all over it.

Ron was shaking helplessly from laughter, even though a great deal of pumpkin juice had gotten onto his food as well. Suddenly, an army of house elves had descended upon the table, clearing everything off it and scrubbing it furiously, meticulously replacing everything when they were done. Harry blinked; it was like seeing sped-up film, the way they flew about. When they were done, Hermione was grimacing and Dobby had disappeared. Harry knew how much she disliked the house elves' love of servitude.

Katie left before the rest, so she could return to the hospital wing for more medicine from Madam Pomfrey. As he watched her go, Harry turned to Ginny, speaking softly. "If I need for you to play on Saturday, Ginny, that won't be a problem, will it?"

She frowned. "Why would it be? I've been practicing with everybody else".

"No, I mean--will it be a problem that you'd be going up against Malfoy"?

Now she looked angrier than he'd ever seen her. She seemed to be speaking with great difficulty, in an angry whisper. "HOW can you ask me that? It will definitely NOT be a problem. After all, I didn't have any problem with beating you every time I've played you, did I?" And then suddenly, she seemed to realize the implication of what she'd said, and she fled, her hair streaming out behind her. Harry wanted to follow, but Ron said, "What's going on? Is Ginny okay"?

She'd basically been saying that her feelings for Draco Malfoy wouldn't stop her from doing her duty as a Seeker any more than her feelings for Harry had....Her feelings for Harry. The question was, were those feelings past tense? Harry wondered.

"Harry? Harry!" Ron yelled, waving his hand in front of Harry's face. "Are you on this planet or not"?

"What? Oh. Ginny's fine. Don't worry. She just--hopes I don't have to put her in the game on Saturday. You know how it is about playing in front of a crowd".

Ron shook his head. "Which I absolutely don't understand. Since she's so good, I mean. You'd think--" but he didn't finish. Harry remembered that when Ron had looked in the Mirror of Erised, he had seen himself as Head Boy and Quidditch captain, holding the Quidditch cup...But that image would never be a reality now, Harry thought. Only prefects were eligible to become Head Boy (the other prefects voted) and if you didn't become a prefect as a fifth year, you'd missed your chance. Only one boy and one girl from the fifth year in each house were named prefects every year. And now he was Harry, was the Quidditch captain. He'd stolen Ron's dream. He'd taken what wasn't his, Harry thought. It was not the first time he'd thought it.

He looked back at Ron and Hermione. She'd brought a book to read while she was eating. It had lain forgotten on the table in front of her plate while she'd been talking to Dobby, but now she focused on it again. Ron looked sideways at her while he ate his pudding, as though he thought no one else noticed. No one else did, as far as Harry could tell; except for him.

Harry had been impatient with Ron in the past for his jealousy over things that Harry had which he had no control over: fame, his money, his being put on the Quidditch team in his first year, his name coming out of the Goblet of Fire. But this was different. As much as Hermione said she was out of control around him, Harry knew that when necessary, he was able to control himself with her. He had heeded Sandy twice now when she had warned them of an impending interruption. He could control his urges; Ron would quite rightly feel that he had no excuse, should anything further happen between him and Hermione.

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When he was done eating, he went upstairs to meet McGonagall for Animagus training. Except that McGonagall wasn't there. Dumbledore was. Harry approached him cautiously.

"Professor Dumbledore? Where's Professor McGonagall?"

"Oh, she had some other pressing business. She'll be able to meet with you tomorrow." Harry wondered whether it had to do with Rita Skeeter again. He wished Hermione had been able to hear what Dumbledore had proposed to her. "I want to meet you here to tell you in person. And also to ask--how's the training going?"

It had been three months, and McGonagall had been pleasantly surprised by his progress. He could actually change into a lion now, for a few seconds, before reverting to his human form again. It was painful; all of his muscles and joints ached when he did it. McGonagall said that as he managed to increase the amount of time he could stay in his animal form, the pain would become unnoticeable--or, at least, tolerable. He would become accustomed to it. Harry wondered how Wormtail had remained a rat for twelve years. But then, he considered, if you've been doing it for that long, you would probably just become numb to the pain.

"Of course it's a little painful to be an Animagus," she had told him, as though he were a dim five-year-old. "Haven't you noticed that I'm rather larger than a cat?" Now that he was training to become an Animagus, he understood why Sirius preferred to transform back into a human when he could.

"It's going well," Harry told him. "I can show you, if you like".

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at him. "I'd be delighted".

Harry closed his eyes in concentration. His preparation time was considerably longer than he would have liked. By no stretch of the imagination did he make the change in the blink of an eye. He wondered if he ever would. Harry pictured a lion in his head; he thought about his feet becoming paws, then his hands; his body being covered with tawny fur, his hair lengthening into a mane...

He felt his hands--no, paws, touch the cold stone floor. He opened his eyes. He looked up at Dumbledore, seeing at the edges of his vision his large pink nose, looking down at the huge front paws, feeling his tail swishing, his mane tickling his back--then he cried out. "Aahh!" he groaned, collapsing onto the floor on his stomach, his robes puddling around him, his glasses askew. He was in human form again.

Harry felt like every bone in his body had taken a pounding. It wasn't like the Cruciatus Curse, he knew, and since he was doing it to himself, he was prepared for what it was going to feel like, but he still wished it didn't have to hurt so much. He understood all too well now why there were only seven Animagi registered during the previous century. There were obviously some unregistered Animagi--like his own dad, and Rita Skeeter, as well as Sirius and Wormtail--but he still doubted that there were all that many. Not many people were suited to it to begin with, and of those suited to it, not all of them were probably interested in inflicting that kind of pain on themselves on a regular basis.

Harry groaned and raised himself on all fours, then brought his right foot up and leaned his arm on his knee, panting. He looked up when Dumbledore extended a hand to him to help him stand. On his feet again, the throbbing pain had diminished to a dull ache. He ran his fingers through his hair and looked expectantly at Dumbledore, waiting for him to say something about how stupid Harry had been to think he could become an Animagus.

But Dumbledore was smiling and looking impressed all at once. "Harry!" he said. "Very good! I've never seen anyone advance to this level so quickly!"

Harry couldn't believe it, and tried not to look dreadfully pleased by what Dumbledore had said, but his mouth betrayed him and smiled anyway. "Thank you, Headmaster".

"So, Harry. A lion. I suppose I don't have to ask you why, eh?"

But Harry had been meaning to ask McGonagall about the griffin. He hadn't gotten the nerve up yet. "Well, Professor, actually I've been thinking that maybe I don't want my Animagus form to be a lion after all".

"Oh, really? You'll have to retreat quite a few steps in your training, you know. Although Minerva did the same thing-- Professor McGonagall. Initially, she planned on being an owl. But--tell me. Have you ever seen Professor McGonagall ride a broomstick?"

Harry thought for a moment. "No".

"Neither has anyone else, that I know of. She can't stand flying, or heights. It didn't occur to her that under the circumstances, being an owl wasn't the wisest course of action. And of course, in some ways, cats are merely owls that have fur instead of feathers. They fit into the same spot on the food chain. Although Minerva says she has never hunted her cat form, and I believe her. I just can't picture her eating a mouse".

Neither could Harry, but the thought made him laugh. He tried quickly to stifle it, but then he saw that Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling again. "So, Harry. What animal do you think you'd like to try"?

"Well, sir, the thing is--I don't know if it's allowed. It's a magical creature, not an ordinary one. I don't know if the Ministry of Magic will permit it"--

"A magical creature, eh? Perhaps like one you've been studying in Hagrid's class--? Something that looks at first rather like a lion"?

Harry didn't realize right away that his mouth was open; when he did, he shut it immediately. "How did you"--

Dumbledore smiled, shaking his head. "Whose idea do you think it was to bring the golden griffin here? I thought it might give you an idea".

Harry was dumbfounded. "You--you did it to"--

"It seemed eminently appropriate. Especially since you've already killed a basilisk." Dumbledore twinkled at him again. Harry laughed.

"Just when I thought I was being original"...

"I hope you don't feel manipulated Harry," he smiled at him.

Harry smiled back. "Even though I was".

"Well, you might as well go back upstairs since Professor McGonagall can't meet with you. Have a good night, Harry. Keep up the good work".

"Thank you Professor," he said, turning to go. He couldn't help grinning as he walked through the empty Great Hall and the stairs to the common room. As he walked, he realized that he hadn't had much opportunity in the last two weeks to do extra Potions work, so when he had arrived in the common room, he declined Ron's offer of a chess game and went to his dorm to get his Potions supplies. When he was back in the common room again, he saw that Hermione was at one of the tables, with sheets of parchment around her covered in complicated Arithmancy formulas. She didn't look up.

He left the common room again, relieved that she hadn't noticed him and decided to come along. He was still feeling pretty pleased about the griffin thing, and she was still hacked off that he wouldn't tell her about the Animagus training. Well, he thought, even Ginny would get a surprise when he finally mastered taking on the form of a golden griffin.

And then, there she was, in the dungeon, adding some kind of dried leaves to her bubbling cauldron, while Malfoy checked ingredients off on a list. Harry stopped short, then collected himself. I can behave like a grownup, he told himself. I can.

"Hello, Ginny. Malfoy." She looked up at him, surprised, and turned just a bit pinker than her usual color; perhaps because the last thing she had said to him in the kitchens was that her feelings for him had never gotten in the way of her catching the Snitch first. Malfoy didn't look especially pleased to see him.

"Potter," he said evenly, without inflection. He seemed to be holding himself in check. Good, thought Harry. Maybe if neither one of us sets the other off we stand a chance of both getting out of here alive.

He was planning to make Eutharsos Potion. It was at least three-thousand years old and gave a person courage by making them feel safe whether they were or not. He had heard Angelina and George talking about it; they were going to be partners when George attempted to harness the Sun Bulls. Harry wasn't sure whether this potion was a good idea or

not. (He thought of Hermione saying to Moody, "Pain helps protect us." Fear, he thought, is a kind of protection, too). It had also reportedly been useful for more mundane purposes, such as helping people who had a phobia about public speaking. That's what Harry was hoping. He planned to test it on himself.

He was almost done cutting his roots for the potion when Ginny poured her potion into a mason jar using a special wide-mouthed funnel Malfoy apparently owned. She put the rubber seal on the jar and carefully closed it. Immediately, a purplish mist rose from the surface of the green liquid, making the jar look as though it were filled half-way with something green and half-way with something purple.

Harry looked up. "What's that?" he ventured, hoping she wouldn't lose her temper with him again. But it was Malfoy who answered.

"Euphemos Potion." He glared at Malfoy. Harry knew what that was; when he'd been looking up the Eutharsos Potion, Euphemos had been several pages ahead, and he'd glanced at it while looking for his own potion. (The portion of the Potions book with concoctions from ancient Greece had the titles written in Greek at the top of the page, and therefore they were ordered like the Greek alphabet). It prevented whoever took it from saying anything bad about someone else until it wore off. No matter how hard the person tried, while under the influence of the potion, they could only say nice things about other people. Harry thought of it as a substitute for tongue-biting. He wondered whether Malfoy had tried it.

Ginny and Malfoy packed up their supplies and prepared to go. Ginny looked over her shoulder at Harry. "Good night, Harry",

He looked at her standing there with Malfoy. His throat was tight. "G'night, Ginny." She looked at him for a couple of seconds longer, then turned to go with Malfoy. Perhaps she was a good influence on him. It's a good thing, he had to keep telling himself. A good thing.

When they were gone, he turned back to his potion. He was supposed to boil the roots of *Eupatorium fistulosum* to make the potion. It was actually a weed, and apparently could reach seven feet or more, with flower heads more than a foot across. He made sure he didn't use *Eupatorium perfoliatum* instead; that was a treatment for broken bones. Although, he thought, if you did enough foolhardy things while under the influence of the Eutharsos Potion, you might need a good boneset.

Harry took off his robes to work. No one was around; who cared whether he looked like a proper prefect? But then Snape came striding into the room. He stopped short on seeing Harry. His expression reminded him of when Harry had been in the dungeon under the Invisibility Cloak; was Snape going to be having another talk with Sirius? Harry remembered that Snape was planning to get the Malfoys' hairs on Saturday, when they came to see their son play in the Quidditch match against Gryffindor. Then the Polyjuice Potion would really be ready for use. Nothing had happened to the Weasleys so far. Harry thought thankfully. Hopefully nothing would.

"You're working late, Potter. Seems like you're in here a lot lately. Turned over a new leaf"?

"I plan to do well on my O.W.L.s, sir," Harry said as evenly as he could. Damn! He really needed those roots to finish boiling. The water was just starting to bubble.

"Hmph. Well. I must say I'm surprised that you're voluntarily doing extra work. Your father certainly never did".

He strode across the dungeon to his office door, unlocked it and entered, closing it sharply behind him. Harry seethed; shouldn't let him get to me. I shouldn't let him get to me.

Finally, the roots had boiled long enough. Using cheesecloth, Harry strained the potion into a wide-mouthed beaker. The liquid was murky, with swirls of brown and green. Harry looked in his book again, to check for any side effects. All it said was that depending on the person's weight, the potion was likely to have an effect lasting three days.

Harry stared at it for another minute before picking up the beaker like a drinking glass and raising it to his mouth. He drank it quickly, before he lost his nerve. It tasted like old cabbage, he thought. Should have checked to see if I could have added some mint or something. He put down the beaker, starting to feel lightheaded as the potion started to act on his nervous system. He felt a kind of numbness seep through his body, as, one by one, different parts of him fell asleep. Then, one by one, they woke up again.

He felt strangely alert and determined. He looked around; everything in the dungeon seemed to have an amazing clarity. He felt the same as he did the first time he'd gotten his glasses when he was seven. He'd been having trouble seeing the blackboard at school, and the school nurse tested his eyesight and told the Dursleys that he would need glasses. The first time he'd put them on, he was amazed; the world looked so crisp and clear! The leaves on trees had distinct, individual outlines; they were no longer a mass of green and yellow. It was one of the few times during his early life when he'd been happy about anything. He could really see now.

At least, he'd thought it was a good thing until Dudley and his bullying friends had looked on it as yet another way to torture Harry, to try to take his glasses. At those times, he had unwittingly performed some wandless magic, making his glasses such a part of him that no matter what Dudley and his cohorts did, they would not come off his face. Of course, Harry was the one who'd gotten in trouble. His aunt had screamed at him, "What did you do? Dudley says he can't get your glasses off your face! You didn't do something stupid like glue them on, did you?" and she'd reached over and pulled them off his face easily. Nevermind that Dudley shouldn't have been trying to take his glasses.

Harry swallowed and walked over to the door of Snape's office. He knocked firmly. He felt empowered, fearless. I just hope I don't do something stupid, he thought. Perhaps he should have asked Ginny whether he could take some of her Euphemus Potion, too, so his potion-induced bravery didn't lead him to say something guaranteed to get him a detention.

"Alohomora!" Snape's door opened. He was sitting in the chair near the fireplace again. He had a glass with some amber liquid in his hand and Harry saw that a bottle of Ogden's Best Firewhiskey was on the desk. Snape seemed unconcerned about his seeing this. Harry looked at the fireplace, but he couldn't tell whether Snape had been speaking to someone.

"What is it, Potter?" he said after Harry had been looking around the room for a few seconds.

Harry was surprised at the way his voice sounded when he spoke; not a bit of his usual waver. "Professor, you said that my father never did extra work. I hear you say a lot of things about my father. I never hear anything about my mother. What about her?"

Snape actually looked startled; then he looked down at his glass, raised it to his lips and drained it. To Harry, it seemed a great deal of whiskey to drink so quickly. Snape gasped when he had swallowed, then looked down at his glass again.

"Your mother," he said so softly that Harry had to strain to hear him, "was quite simply the most brilliant potions student that Hogwarts has ever seen".

Harry thought he was going to die from shock. He'd never expected to hear that. Snape still contemplated his empty glass. He didn't say anything else. Harry stared at him for a minute, then turned and left without a word. There was nothing he could say to Snape. Nothing that could penetrate years of enmity and house-wars, plus the hatred Snape had for his father.

Once he was in the dungeon again, Snape muttered something and his office door slammed shut again, echoing in the high-ceilinged room for a minute at least. Harry looked at the closed door. He mused, There but for the love of Ginny Weasley goes Draco Malfoy... But at least Snape was on Dumbledore's side, Harry thought. He became a Death Eater when he lost my mum, but her death brought him back into the fold. Draco Malfoy could help me, Harry thought, if I only knew how to harness what he knows, and to take advantage of the access he has to his father...

And then and there, he began to formulate in his mind exactly how he was going to get Draco Malfoy to trap his own father. Hopefully, he would do it. Harry knew what he'd have to dangle in front of him to get him to agree.

Ginny.

* * * * *

On Friday night, Harry had ordered the team into bed at eight o'clock, as Oliver Wood used to do. Saturday dawned dark and oppressively humid for December. Harry rose early, standing at the window, looking out over the grounds toward the Quidditch pitch. This would be his first game as captain. He wished desperately that Oliver were here. He took a deep breath. He never imagined what would happen that first time he leapt on his broomstick to chase Draco Malfoy and get back Neville's Remembrall...the feeling of exhilaration the first time he soared through the air, robes whipping about behind him. He smiled. Malfoy was sometimes good for something, he thought. Harry would never have been the youngest house player in a century if it weren't for Malfoy.

He'd told the entire team that on Saturday morning he expected them to come running with him. He wanted everyone to have plenty of stamina for the game. And he wanted them to go running outside, rather than inside the Great Hall; they needed to get the cold air in their lungs as early as possible, so it wouldn't be a shock to their systems later in the day when the game started. He dressed in a fleece sweatsuit and laced up his sneakers, carrying Sandy in his hand; he would leave her by the fire in the common room, so she'd be warm. Then he had a sudden inspiration. He crept over to Ron, snoring blissfully. He held Sandy right above his face and said in a sing-song falsetto, "Ro-on! Oh Ron! Time to get up!"

Ron muttered in his sleep; Harry lowered Sandy closer to Ron. Her tongue darted out and touched Ron's chin for a split second. Ron's eyes flew open. He saw the snake an inch away from his face and promptly screamed. Harry was nearly helpless with laughter; Ron pulled himself up in bed.

"Don't do that again!" Ron and Sandy said simultaneously, Ron in English, Sandy in Parseltongue. Hearing their exclamations overlapping but with the same meaning, Harry collapsed in laughter again, pounding Ron's mattress and leaning on one of the posts at the foot of the bed for support. He looked up at Ron, who glowered at him. He wondered he'd done that because he was still feeling the effects of the Eutharsos Potion. It had been funny.

Ron threw his pillow at him.

Still laughing, Harry left the room with Sandy, calling over his shoulder, "Get dressed! You have ten minutes!" He practically skipped down the stairs to the common room. It was going to be a good day; he could feel it.

He carefully placed Sandy on the hearthrug, where she curled into a coil and closed her eyes. Quinn's cat had come downstairs to sleep by the fire also. Quinn had found an old basket which now held the bathrobe on which the mother cat had given birth. The kittens were curled up in the curve of her body, draped over one another, looking to Harry's eyes uncomfortably close, but they all seemed happy enough. They were four weeks old now. It would be at least three more weeks before they could be weaned. Ron's was the smallest, the runt; he had named her Argent, for her silver stripes. The mother was named Bainbridge, for the street Jules had lived on in his town. Ginny had named her fluffy black kitten MacKenzie, because Parvati and Lavender discussing MacBeth had made her want to read it, and then she came to the conclusion that of course a witch should have a black cat with a Scottish name, and MacKenzie was the Scottish name she liked best.

One by one, the team members came staggering down the stairs, in various interesting types of exercise clothing. Hermione also came downstairs to run as usual. After warming up, they all trooped out of the portrait hole and started down the stairs. Suddenly, Harry stopped and looked around.

"Where's Katie?" he wanted to know. Alicia and Angelina looked at each other.

"I thought you were getting her up," Angelina said to Alicia.

"I thought you were".

"All right," Harry said, breaking in. "Could somebody go upstairs and wake her up? The rest of us will have to wait".

Alicia and Angelina shared the seventh-year girls' dorm with two other girls, but Katie wasn't one of them as she was a sixth-year. She was a prefect, too, and Harry had caught her looking at him at prefects' meetings, along with the other usual girls. Angelina went up the stairs again to rouse Katie. They sat down on the steps to wait for her return. When she came back, she was alone.

"She wasn't in her bed. I had to wake her roommates. They said she'd stayed in the hospital wing last night. She has something called mono--mono"--

"Mononucleosis?" Hermione breathed, stunned.

"What's that?" Fred asked. Hermione looked at Harry and coloured.

"It's called the kissing disease," Alicia chimed in. "Usually gets passed on by swapping spit--you know. But sometimes, you're just in close proximity to someone who has it or you share a glass or something, you can also get it. In the Muggle world it's very contagious, and usually means bedrest for a month or more. But Madam Pomfrey should probably have you up and around by Monday".

"Monday?" Harry cried. Then he looked at Ginny in her running clothes, a braided ponytail keeping her hair out of her v
"Well, it's a good thing we have a reserve Seeker." He smiled at her; she gave back to him a frankly terrified look. But t
something else occurred to Harry. "I've got an idea," he said slowly. "Most of you are more experienced than me, so he
me out and tell me if you think I'm crazy..." He licked his lips and narrowed his eyes. Hermione looked at him as though
she were trying to read his mind. "I know that Rule #5 of Quidditch is that there are no substitutions during the game; if
player is injured, he leaves the game and that team plays with one less player, correct?" The other team members nod
in agreement. "But can you switch which players are playing which positions part of the way through the game?" He
looked at them all. Angelina and Alicia looked at each other; so did Ron and Fred, Ginny and George.

"There's no rule against it," said George. "What did you have in mind"?

"Well, I think we'll give Slytherin house a little surprise. When the game starts, we'll say that Ginny is taking Katie's plac
as Chaser"--

"But I've never practiced to be a Chaser!" Ginny said plaintively.

"It's okay. It'll be temporary. Now, at that point, Ron will be playing Keeper, so we know they're unlikely to have scored
all--" he smiled at Ron, whose ears turned very red. "But since Alicia, Angelina and Katie usually work together to score
it's possible that we'll be scoreless too. Unless I see the Snitch fairly early. But--" he paused. "If they start scoring on us
or if their Beaters start really coming after us--I'll call for a time-out and tell Madam Hooch we're rearranging our line- u
We'll resume with Ron as a Chaser--we're bound to score, then, if we haven't already--" Ron was getting redder by the
minute "--I'll go in as Keeper, and Ginny, you'll go in as Seeker. And then Slytherin will be sorry they woke up today".

Harry smiled at them all; everyone but Ginny appeared to be happily anticipating the surprise the Slytherins would get.
Ginny looked rather like she had when she was eleven, and she was afraid Harry wouldn't like her singing Valentine. H
put his hand on her arm.

"It'll be fine, Gin. You'll be fine. Don't worry".

She nodded grimly at him, her eyes very large. She really was scared to play in front of a crowd, he realized. It wasn't j
talk...

After running, Harry used the showers that he used to use before he was a prefect; he didn't feel like running into Malfo
before the game. The Gryffindor team entered the Great Hall in their red Quidditch robes, carrying their broomsticks
(including the four new Nimbus 2001's now owned by the Weasley team members). A cheer went up from the Gryffindor
Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables; no one wanted Slytherin to win except Slytherin. Harry looked over at Malfoy and
grinned; but he could see that Malfoy wasn't looking at him. He was staring in amazement at Ginny. He rose and walke
over to Harry.

"Potter! We have to talk"!

"So talk".

Malfoy looked around; everyone in the hall was looking at them. He spoke in an alarmed whisper. "What's she doing
wearing that"?

"Ginny's playing today. Katie's in the hospital wing. Do you expect us to play with only six people"?

"But"--

"Sit down, Malfoy. Eat a hearty breakfast. It'll be the last good thing that happens to you today".

Malfoy turned and returned to the Slytherin table, steam virtually coming out of his ears. Ron looked at Harry suspiciously

"What was all that about"?

Harry looked at him, hoping he didn't look as guilty as he felt. "Oh--you know Malfoy. Thought we were pulling a fast one
putting in Ginny, like we were going to play eight people or something. I told him Katie's in the hospital wing".

After the Gryffindor team finished, they left the hall to more cheers from all of the non-Slytherin tables, and then the entire population of the school, it seemed, flowed like lava from a volcano toward the Quidditch pitch.

Harry went to see Madam Hooch to check on the possibility of changing player positions during the game. She consulted the book *Quidditch Through the Ages* by Kennilworthy Whisp, and came up dry. "Nothing that says you can't," she told him. "Why not?"

"Just in case," Harry told her cryptically. Then he went to Lee Jordan, who was doing commentary for the game, and told him that Ginny would be playing instead of Katie. He looked alarmed.

"Why?"

"She's laid up in the hospital wing with mononucleosis. She'll probably be fine by Monday".

"She's got WHAT?" he said, his eyes wide. Uh-oh, Harry thought. Had he perhaps been kissing Katie? Well, well--

Madam Hooch blew her whistle. Lee sat down next to McGonagall, smiling feebly, still looking aghast by what Harry had told him. Harry and the other team members assembled in the center of the pitch, along with the Slytherin team. He noticed that they'd added some girls to replace players who had graduated; Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode were the new Chasers. He supposed they'd been there that day when Malfoy had ordered him and Hermione off the Quidditch pitch, but he hadn't taken notice of much other than the new Nimbus 2003 broomsticks. Crabbe and Goyle were Beaters. There's a shock, thought Harry. Malfoy was still the Seeker, of course, and now that he was captain, Harry had to shake his hand before the start of the game.

They stood for what seemed a very long moment, eyes locked, emerald green and storm grey. Then Harry extended his hand first and Malfoy somewhat slowly moved his hand to meet it. Malfoy's skin felt dry and cold, as though he had a circulation problem. Harry was glad to be able to release it.

They all mounted their brooms and when Madam Hooch gave the signal, fifteen brooms rose into the air and the game began.

"Angelina Johnson gets the first possession of the Quaffle. She passes to Alicia Spinnet. Watch out! Head Girl coming. And Alicia passes to Ginny Weasley, substituting today for Katie Bell who's--under the weather--" Lee choked. McGonagall looked at him strangely.

Harry flew above the fray in an elliptical circuit that covered the whole field, keeping track of the action but also scanning for the Snitch. Ginny looked nervous as she took the Quaffle, and then--

"Oh! Ginny Weasley's dropped the Quaffle. Slytherin in possession, Bulstrode passes to Parkinson, back to Bulstrode who's going to try to score--Yes! Saved by Ron Weasley, the Lions' new Keeper!"

Ron grinned, holding the red ball over his head, then, still holding onto the Quaffle, he had to go into a Sloth Grip Roll to avoid a Bludger that had been hit at him by Crabbe.

The Gryffindors had the Quaffle again, but once more, Ginny was the weak link in the scoring dance, and the Slytherins took possession again, although Ron stopped them from scoring once more. This pattern was repeated five more times. Harry hadn't seen the Snitch, and he felt it was getting pretty tiring. There was no score yet.

Harry signaled to Madam Hooch for a time out. He landed on the ground next to her. Malfoy alit a moment later.

"What're you pulling, Potter?"

Harry ignored him and spoke to Madam Hooch. "I want to rearrange our line-up".

"What?" came Malfoy's indignant response. "You can't. No substitutions. That's the rule".

"It's not a substitution. All seven players will be the same. But some will be in different positions than they started".

Madam Hooch looked at Malfoy. "It's legal. Go see Jordan, Potter, and have him announce the changes".

After Harry spoke to him, Lee announced, "There have been some changes in the positions the Gryffindor players will be holding. Ron Weasley will now be playing Chaser; Captain Harry Potter will play Keeper; and Ginny Weasley will play Seeker".

A collective gasp went up from the spectators; Harry wasn't going to be playing Seeker? He looked over to where the Weasleys were sitting. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had looked so proud that four of the seven players on the Gryffindor team were their children; now they looked positively shocked that Ginny would be playing Seeker. Charlie, Bill and Percy were sitting in the row in front of their parents. The older brothers exchanged knowing looks, smiling.

Then Harry saw Malfoy's face; he was furious. He saw Malfoy mouth the words I hate you. Harry smiled beatifically at him. The play resumed, and the difference was like night and day. Ron and Alicia and Angelina tossed the Quaffle back and forth effortlessly. Ron feigned that he was aiming at the goal on the Slytherin Keeper's left, then somehow sent it sailing into the one all the way on the Keeper's right.

"Ten to nothing, Gryffindor!" Lee Jordan shouted gleefully. It happened again and again; Harry was starting to get downright bored as the Gryffindor Keeper; the Slytherin Chasers couldn't get anywhere near the Quaffle, and George and Fred were surpassing themselves at hitting Bludgers that kept the Slytherins dodging and weaving to protect themselves.

"Fifty to nothing, Gryffindor!" Lee cried. Then, in no time, it seemed, "Ninety to nothing, Gryffindor!" Harry felt like he blinked, then Lee proclaimed, "One-twenty to nothing. GRYFFINDOR!"

The crowd seemed to be in the grip of some mass hysteria. The screaming and yelling seemed to be all that Harry could hear, but somehow he didn't mind. He noticed Cho in the stands, for some reason near the Malfoys. Lucius Malfoy had turned to talk to her. She smiled at him; he wished he could pay more attention to what was going on between them, but suddenly, Harry saw that a Bludger was heading right for Ginny. Fred and George were heading for her, but Harry could see that they wouldn't be in time. His heart leapt into his throat, hoping it would miss her--

And then Malfoy swooped in and positioned his broom so that the perfectly groomed Nimbus 2003 twigs would take the brunt of the Bludger, thus protecting Ginny. The impact of the Bludger on Malfoy's broom was so great that Malfoy fell and he wound up in the Starfish and Stick position, which was usually a Keeper defense where the Keeper held onto the broom with one hand and one foot curled around the handle, while keeping the other limbs stretched out. Malfoy scrambled to get seated again. Harry could see that Ginny was furious.

"Time!" Harry yelled to Madam Hooch.

Harry soared down to the grass again. Malfoy landed beside him a few moments later. Madam Hooch looked impatient.

"Changing the positions again, Potter"?

"No. I just need a word with the Slytherin captain".

Madam Hooch moved away, but kept an eye on them. Harry tried to speak low enough that she wouldn't hear.

"Malfoy! What the hell do you think you're doing"?

"What do you think I think I'm doing? That Bludger was heading right for Ginny!" he whispered back angrily.

"You are the Slytherin captain. Act like it! Ginny's out here to win, like the rest of us. If she thinks you're cutting her slack because of--well, cutting her slack, she'll never speak to you again, I can guarantee it. She's too proud for that. And I'll give you something else Malfoy; I didn't put her in to throw you off. That's just a fringe benefit. I put her in because she's doing good, and because of her we're going to win. NOT because you're trying to be nice to her. This isn't time to be nice. It's war. I'll thank you to remember which side you're on. No one's going to say we won this game because you threw it. I won't have it tainted that way".

Malfoy glared at him, then looked over at Ginny. Harry looked too. Ginny's hair was escaping its braid, and her eyes looked wild. She was angrier than Harry had ever seen her.

"Now do you believe me? If looks could kill"--

"Yeah, I get it. You'd be doing a dance over my dead body right now".

“Are you going to play to win, now?”

Malfoy set his jaw. “Just watch me”.

Harry grinned. “I didn’t say you were going to win”.

They rose into the air again, and Madam Hooch blew her whistle to restart the game.

Ron and Alicia and Angelina scored forty more points; it was now one-sixty to nothing. Even if Malfoy were to miraculously catch the Snitch before Ginny, they would still win the game. Harry flew in a small circle before the goals in one direction then the other, to avoid getting dizzy. Then--he saw the Snitch. It was a foot or two off the ground hovering near the middle Slytherin goal post. He itched to get it, but he knew he dared not; that would be a foul called a Snitchnip. Only the Seeker was allowed to touch the Snitch. He looked up and realized he needn’t have worried. Ginny was diving toward the Snitch, Malfoy having to turn in the middle of having been going in the opposite direction. There was no way he would make it there before her, although he looked like he was trying. The next thing Harry knew, Ginny was flying a circuit around the field, holding the Snitch above her head, the crowd roaring its approval, Lee Jordan practically hoarse.

“AND GINNY WEASLEY HAS THE SNITCH! GRYFFINDOR WINS, THREE-HUNDRED TEN TO NOTHING!”

It was unprecedented. Slytherin hadn’t scored once. Harry and the rest of the team flew over to Ginny. They all landed in a tangle of arms and legs, everybody hugging everybody else, Ron and Harry, Ron and Alicia, George and Angelina (although not everybody was kissing like that), Fred and Ginny, and then finally Harry finally found himself face to face with Ginny. She looked more beautiful than he’d ever seen her, her eyes shining, her face glowing, her hair wild. He grinned at her and threw his arms around her, then kissed her soundly on the mouth, quickly, before he lost his nerve. She stared at him, speechless, while the crowd jostled them and separated them again, the excited pairings going through one recombination after another. Harry turned and found himself face to face with Hermione. She was livid. She brought her foot down on his left foot quite hard and turned on her heel, pushing people out of her way. Harry yelled and started hopping on one foot, his eyes squeezed shut in pain. When he opened his eyes again, his foot throbbing, he realized that no one had noticed. Wait--he was wrong. Malfoy was looking right at him, smirking. He would think that was funny, though Harry.

But then he could see that Malfoy had very little reason to go on smirking. Snape and Lucius Malfoy and several teammates were rounding on him, voices raised. Harry could see that Malfoy was raising his hands helplessly, shaking his head and shrugging. Harry remembered that Snape knew about Malfoy and Ginny; he probably suspected that Malfoy had thrown the game. Harry seethed. He would not have people thinking that was the only way they could win.

Harry wasn’t sure why, but he walked over to the angry Slytherins who had gathered around Malfoy. He heard things like “Letting a girl beat you...” He pushed through the crowd until he was facing Malfoy. A sudden quiet descended. Draco Malfoy stood looking at him, stony-faced. Harry extended his hand. “Good game, Malfoy.” Malfoy took his hand, but let it go quickly. He didn’t speak, so Harry continued speaking. “I know we surprised you with Ginny. You had no way of knowing how good she is. I didn’t know until I played her at the Weasleys this summer. Even Charlie’s never beaten her, he says.” He let that sink into the crowd; the great Seeker Charlie Weasley had never beaten his little sister? Harry heard murmuring. “And then adding Ron to that, well--you had no way of knowing. Never played either one of them before, did you?”

Malfoy looked at him gratefully. Harry acknowledged it with a nod, then turned to go. He caught Lucius Malfoy’s eye for a moment; it was the coldest look Harry had ever seen. Harry felt as though he’d drunk ice water. He looked away from Malfoy’s father and returned to the happy throng of Gryffindor supporters, smiling and anticipating the celebration that would take place in the common room. But then--he remembered Cho talking to Lucius Malfoy during the game. He turned, looking for her. Odd; she was still in her seat, staring into space. No one else was sitting around her. Everyone else was on the field celebrating or had started back to the castle.

He climbed up the stands slowly, cautiously approaching her. She was still not moving. Harry’s heart thudded painfully. Was she all right? What had Malfoy’s dad done to her?

But when he was finally standing next to her, she suddenly seemed to come to life again. “Oh, hello, Harry. Good game. Congratulations!”

He looked at her, his brow furrowed. She was acting like nothing was wrong, as though she hadn't been virtually catatonic a moment before. He sat next to her. "Are you all right"?

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" He stared at her still, wondering whether to worry. Was he placing her in danger?

She was looking concerned now. "Harry? Is something wrong? Can I give you a congratulations kiss"?

Harry tried to shake off his feeling of uneasiness. He smiled feebly at her as she moved closer to him. When their lips met, she melted into him in a way she'd never done before; he'd always felt before that her kisses were somewhat mechanical and choreographed. This was different, this was--

Harry clutched at her, feeling her hands going into his hair. He opened his eyes a crack; the Quidditch pitch was deserted. There was no one left to see them. He closed his eyes once more, trying to remind himself that it was a good thing that she and Krum seemed to be getting along, so the masquerade could end soon. Is that what this is? Harry wondered. Guilt-snogging? If so, she was very good at it.

Harry was glad he wasn't supposed to be treating her terribly yet. There were some ghosts of doubt in the back of his mind, but he pushed them away. (The ghost that looked like Ginny was a little harder to push away than the ghost that looked like Hermione. Ginny hadn't tried to cripple him). He released the guilt and doubt and became, for the moment, just another fifteen-year-old boy kissing his girlfriend....

* * * * *

Chapter Fifteen: Dueling With Snape

Harry rode on the high of the Quidditch victory all weekend. He awoke Monday morning with something that felt almost like a hangover; a headache he knew had nothing to do with his scar. It was simply the headache of having to come crashing down into the everyday world again, into--

Potions.

First thing after breakfast.

Harry groaned as he trudged down the stone stairs with Ron and Hermione and the rest of the fifth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins. Hermione still wasn't speaking to him. (She still came downstairs to run with him in the morning, but pointedly refused to talk to him the entire time). This was in sharp contrast to everyone else in the school (all the non-Slytherins, anyway) who were treating Harry as even more of a hero than usual, for having been captain of the team that captured such a stunning victory.

Ron had also come in for his share of admiration; Padma Patil, of all people, had wangled an invitation to the Gryffindor common room from her twin on Sunday, and she and Parvati had spent a great deal of time with Ron, who looked like he couldn't believe his good fortune, surrounded by gorgeous twins who were hanging on his every word. It didn't hurt that he'd just adopted an adorable tiny kitten who had quickly become very attached to him. The Patil twins exclaimed over Argent's every yawn, every stretch, the way she washed her face, the way she clawed her way up Ron's robes to reach him. After the Yule Ball, Harry wouldn't have been surprised if Padma had never acknowledged Ron's existence again, but now he was the star Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Hermione seemed to be as annoyed with Ron as she was with Harry; every time she looked up from her reading at Ron and the Patil twins, she was looking daggers at him.

And Ginny! Another extraordinary thing that had happened on Sunday was that a virtual storm of owls descended on the Gryffindor table at breakfast bearing invitations for Ginny to join various boys in walks around the lake or in the gardens. Some of them were boys she'd never met or talked to. She coloured more deeply with each successive letter she read. The owls didn't stop once she was back in the common room. They were beating their wings against the windows, demanding to be let in. Harry knew that if he went to the window and opened it, the owl would fly straight to Ginny, and he wasn't wrong once.

He could tell that she was extremely uncomfortable about her new notoriety, however. Handing her yet another letter, he suggested to her quietly that she send an owl of her own--to Malfoy, so they could meet in the Potions Dungeon. She smiled at him gratefully; the owls wouldn't be able to get at her where there weren't windows. She stayed in the dungeon for much of the afternoon, and Harry had to fight the urge to check on them. She hadn't said anything to him about his

kissing her after the game, and he hadn't said anything to her. It was as though it had never happened (except for a lingering pain in Harry's left foot, from Hermione's reaction). Harry had also seen Hermione glaring at Ginny.

Thinking of Malfoy and Ginny made Harry think of Snape and his mother, that other Gryffindor/Slytherin combination. As he walked down to the dungeons, Harry remembered what Snape had said about her and potions. It sounded like his mother was very much on Snape's mind these days, as he engaged in his covert work. It seemed that he was still tortured about not having been able to save her from Voldemort. Snape probably would have been a better secret keeper than Pettigrew, reflected Harry. He remembered the trials he'd seen in Dumbledore's Pensieve, the hard-faced Death Eater and the way Dumbledore had stood and defended Snape when Karkaroff had tried to implicate him in order to get out of Azkaban. If only there were some way for him to understand better, to understand what his mother ever saw in him, understand why Dumbledore trusted him...

And then, as he was unpacking his potions supplies, he had it: The Pensieve. If only Snape had a Pensieve; if only he would use it to store whatever memories he had of his mum...And then, if Harry could devise some way to access it, to enter it as he had entered Dumbledore's Pensieve....It was risky. And perhaps a bit invasive, like reading another person's diary. Harry shook his head. He'd think about all that later. He didn't even know where to get a Pensieve...

"Potter? Potter!" came Snape's voice now through his confused thoughts. Harry jerked his head up. How many times had Snape said his name?

"Yes, Professor?" he said, as respectfully as he could, which wasn't his usual attitude toward him. Snape noticed the difference, and looked unnerved.

"Having you been eating *Crocus colchicum* instead of preparing to make the Snake-Venom Antidote?"

"Have I been eating—what?"

Snape sighed deeply. "Who can tell Potter why I would ask him whether he'd been eating *Crocus colchicum*?"

Hermione's hand flew up. Her face looked grim. For once Snape did not hesitate to call on her. She seemed to be trying to sound even more like an annoying know-it-all than usual.

"*Crocus colchicum* is a species of the genus *crocus* that is highly toxic. In ancient Greece, malingering slaves would eat just enough of the bulb to be too sick to work the next day." She gave Harry a hard look from across the room. Harry could tell that Snape saw; a smile curled at the corners of his mouth. He was clearly enjoying seeing that Harry and Hermione were on the outs. All right, thought Harry, I'm trying to understand him better why? But then, he remembered his talking to Sirius about why his mum dumped him for his dad. He'd left something out; but what?

Snape moved to the front of the class. "Now, usually, you are not required to have *Hieracium venosum*, or rattlesnake-weed, in your potions kit, so I have some up here that Professor Sprout has been cultivating in the greenhouses. Come in an orderly fashion to get one of the plants"...

Harry tried to stay focused while he worked. Ron was his partner while Hermione worked with Neville. He noticed that Malfoy didn't seem quite well; he was even paler than usual, if that was possible, with dark circles under his eyes. He kept rubbing his arms when he thought no one was looking. Harry thought about the cold look Lucius Malfoy had given him on Saturday, and the way he ganged up on his son after the game along with the other Slytherins and Snape himself. What had Malfoy's dad done to him? Harry wondered. He remembered him talking about legal curses that were still very painful...Malfoy certainly looked in pain, just now. Harry wondered fleetingly what his dad had done to him the other time a Slytherin had been beaten in Quidditch. Then he shook his head; it wouldn't do any good to think about that. It wasn't his lookout if Malfoy's father couldn't understand it was just a game.

Just a game. Harry smiled to himself. He never imagined he would think that about Quidditch.

"POTTER!" Snape yelled again, and during the rest of the class, Harry tried very hard not to let his mind wander. Although, he reflected, I'm probably the last one here who would ever need a snake-venom antidote....

* * * * *

After classes were over for the day, Harry hurried up to the common room to write a letter to Sirius, to ask him whether he knew of some way to acquire a Pensieve. Harry told him he would pay him from his Gringott's vault. I hope it doesn't cost ten-thousand galleons, he thought. What might a Pensieve be worth?

Harry thought about the Pensieve all through dinner. He was feeling somewhat distracted. Then, when he went for Animagus training after dinner that evening, Professor McGonagall wasn't there again. He felt like he'd woken up, looked around for her. Dumbledore wasn't there either. Then he went over to the fireplace and saw that she'd left a note on the mantel telling him to go to Hagrid's. That's odd, he thought.

He walked down the sloping lawn to Hagrid's hut, shivering in the December wind; he hadn't brought a cloak. His black school robes whipped around him. When he arrived at the enclosure where the golden griffin was, Harry was glad that he wasn't in the habit of wearing Sandy to go to Animagus training. In fact, Ginny was doing him the favor of wearing Sandy on her arm for him, under her robes, as she was the only one who knew about the training (and since she usually found it very difficult to refuse to do anything he asked--he tried not to feel guilty about that). McGonagall was standing outside the fence, waiting for him.

During the previous Friday's training session, she had told him that Dumbledore had told her of his wish to learn to transform into a golden griffin. She didn't seem surprised. Luckily, the lion form he'd been transforming into wasn't all that different; he only needed to learn to produce the wings, otherwise he was nearly there. That and learning to tolerate the excruciating pain and maintain the griffin form for more than two seconds.

"Hello, Potter," she greeted him, also shivering in the cold somewhat.

"Hello, Professor".

"As your head-of-house, I have some leeway in these matters, and so I am giving you permission to spend this week sleeping out here with the golden griffin. It is a necessary step in your training. You need to bond with a specimen of the animal you will be transforming into".

Harry pulled his robes closer around his body as a gust of wintry air hit him. "Sleep? Out here? Couldn't we--take the griffin up to the castle"?

"No. We can't".

"Well--but what are the other students in Gryffindor going to think? About me not sleeping in my own dorm all week"?

"Hmmm..." she said, brow furrowed. Then she brightened. "Ah. You've got detention. All week".

"Detention for what"?

"Well, let's say you stay out tonight without permission, ergo, I give you detention for the rest of the week. During your detention you will, let's see, you will"--

"Use Muggle cleaning methods to clean every trophy in the trophy room"?

She nodded. "Excellent".

Harry grimaced. "Ron had to do it once. Wish I'd been with him; for my detention, I had to help Lockhart answer his fan mail"...

He thought he saw a smile playing around the corners of her mouth, but over the years, she'd become very good at suppressing such displays.

"Very well, we have a plausible story in hand. Now, Hagrid tells me you've had some contact with the creature"--

"He's let me feed him, and I've flown on his back twice. But I have to make sure I don't come down here with my snake...He tried to come after me once when I had her on me".

"Well, naturally. That's what a griffin does, Potter. Are you sure about this? Your lion is coming along. Not that I would have chosen an animal such as a lion to begin with. It's not very inconspicuous".

"I'm sure professor. It just feels so--right".

She nodded. "I know what you mean. Those of us who are Animagi--we think we are choosing the animals, but I have always suspected that in a very real way, the animal actually chooses us".

"And I'm not doing this to be inconspicuous. I feel more like--more like I'm arming myself for battle." She nodded, understanding. Neither of them said the name they were thinking. "I just have one question, Professor: Isn't it rather cold to be sleeping outside?" He shivered again.

She smiled. "Did you think this golden griffin was sleeping in the cold? Really, Harry. We aren't cruel to animals at Hogwarts. This isn't Durmstrang. Griffins are from the Middle East and Northern Africa, originally. They like warm weather. The air inside the fence is magically heated. Just a little, during the day, when there's sunlight. You may not have noticed it during your classes. We make it much warmer at night, when it's dark. In a way, we do not need a fence or a wall to keep the griffin in; he doesn't like to stray from the comfort of the enclosure. When you flew on him, how long was he in the air?"

Harry thought. "Maybe a couple of minutes, at most"?

"You see? He was anxious to get back to the warmth. And have you been doing the reading on griffins I was suggesting? Because you must know everything you can. I will be setting you an examination in one week".

Boy, Harry thought. No one said there was going to be a written test. But he nodded at her.

"All right, then. In you go. Sleep well".

She turned to go. "Professor! Has he, um--eaten lately?" He eyed the animal warily.

"Yes. Hagrid assures me that he had two-hundred pounds of raw mutton for his dinner. Goodnight, Potter." She turned and started walking back toward the castle. Harry shivered in the wind and turned to look at the griffin again. Oh, well, he thought. If that's where it's warm, I'd better get inside the fence.

He climbed over and landed on the spongy ground, immediately feeling a warmth envelop him, making him close his eyes in relief. It was like suddenly being transported to the tropics. McGonagall wasn't kidding. He approached the griffin cautiously. He'd never been near it when Hagrid wasn't around. I'm supposed to bond with it, Harry thought.

He moved nearer to the sleeping animal, looking so much like a lion. He crouched down next to it, putting his hand on its flank, feeling the warmth emanating from it. There was also a low rumble traveling up his arm, making his entire body resonate with the purring of the griffin. Taking off his robe and balling it up like a pillow, he curled up on the ground next to it, feeling its breath on his back, feeling the purr taking over his brain. He stared into space for some time, since it was much earlier than he usually went to sleep. He turned onto his back, looking at how clear the stars were in the night sky, then he closed his eyes and tried to imagine flying through the air under his own power, tried to imagine being a golden griffin...

* * * * *

The detention ruse seemed to be working. After the initial night outside, McGonagall staged a scene which consisted of her reaming him out in front of the entire house. Harry grimaced and tried to look contrite about being out all night. She announced his sentence and left the common room, a place he'd only seen her a few times since coming to Hogwarts.

"Blimey," Ron said to Harry after she'd gone. "Staying out all night. What'd you go and do that for"?

Harry looked at Hermione, who was looking as triumphant as if she had turned him in. Harry shrugged. "It's hard to explain right now. Let's go eat breakfast." McGonagall had been good, he thought. Too good; he felt mortified by being called up on the carpet in front of everyone. He was a prefect, supposed to set an example, and so on.

Each night after that, he walked down to Hagrid's cabin to sleep in the enclosure with the griffin. After the first night, he used his Invisibility Cloak, so no one would see him walking across the grounds, even though it was dark. On Tuesday morning, he'd woken up to find a large paw draped over him, almost as though he were serving as some kind of stuffed toy for the creature. By Thursday night, he felt ready to try to transform, including wings.

He closed his eyes, concentrating hard, then feeling the rippling through all the bones in his body as he changed form, changed appearance. He landed on all fours, his enormous paws standing on the mossy earth beside the real griffin, and with an effort, he concentrated even harder and then expanded his wings on either side of him, turning to look at them best he could, gold and gossamer and stronger than anything imaginable. He looked at the griffin. It was awake now, staring at him. Uh-oh, Harry thought. Would it be alarmed? Would it want to fight another griffin?

The griffin spread its wings too, and took a short run before leaping into the sky. Harry gasped and collapsed onto the ground; he'd held the form of the griffin for a good two or three minutes. That was a record for him. Unfortunately, if the real griffin thought he was going to attempt to fly with it yet, it was crazy. Harry had no interest in coming crashing down from the sky in his human form, needing to be carted off to the hospital wing for repair.

The griffin wheeled in a circle above him, then came back to earth. It cocked its head, looking at him, then reclined again, looking sleepy once more. Harry curled up next to it again, as had become their pattern, and fell into a deep sleep, trying to forget the painful transformation he'd just executed. He felt more like he had been executed, and someone had botched the job, like with Nearly Headless Nick. But as he leaned against the griffin, the warmth of the animal and the rhythm of its inner motor seeped into his body, and he was soon slumbering peacefully, the pain leaving him, as he dreamed dream he would not remember....

* * * * *

It was Saturday morning before he received a reply to his letter to Sirius, plus a large package. Hedwig nearly dropped the Pensieve on Ron's head as he sat next to Harry eating some kippers.

"Hey!" Ron yelled, spitting out the bite of fish he'd been chewing.

"Eeeew!" Ginny recoiled. She'd been reaching for a piece of toast and the half-chewed bite expelled from Ron's mouth had just barely missed her hand. Will Flitwick, sitting next to her, laughed into his orange juice and wound up snorting it through his nose. Amy and Andy Donegal held their stomachs, laughing uncontrollably at this chain reaction.

Harry caught the package, immediately understanding Hedwig's difficulty (and she was far from being as small as Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon). It was about eighteen inches square and almost a foot high. Harry shoved the box under the table and removed Sirius' letter from Hedwig's leg. Ron craned his neck to see, but Harry moved so he couldn't. Ron scowled.

Dear Harry,

Here is the Pensieve. Not as expensive as a Firebolt, but it comes close.

Oh dear, thought Harry.

We can discuss the cost later. You said you wanted to actually meet to talk with me. The best thing to do would be for you to be in the common room near the fireplace at one o'clock tonight. Until then---Sirius

He put the letter in his pocket and rose from the table, picking up the Pensieve, so he could take it up to his trunk. As he was leaving, Hermione stopped him.

"Harry!"

He turned, confused. So she was suddenly speaking to him again?

"Your shoes are untied," she said. He was holding the Pensieve on his right; she was on his left. He looked down; both his shoes were tied securely. He looked up at her again. Hermione was putting something into her pocket.

"Made you look!" she said in a sing-song voice, turning back to her food. Harry rolled his eyes and resumed his course. Great. She's talking to me again for the sole purpose of trying to make me look and feel like an idiot. He left without a backward glance,

He had been waiting for a reply all week, which felt like it had dragged incredibly, but now the rest of the day seemed as long as the other five days put together, as Harry watched each minute tick by agonizingly slowly. He practiced Quidditch with the team, he read *The Tempest*, he played chess with Ron...

And, after the brief morning encounter in the Great Hall, he and Hermione gave each other a wide berth.

Harry was also relieved that he would be sleeping indoors again--although he couldn't actually sleep until he'd talked to Sirius. When at last, the few remaining stragglers left the common room, at about a quarter-to-one, Harry drew a breath of relief, going over to the fireplace and leaning back in a chair to wait for Sirius.

When he appeared, Harry jumped; he still wasn't used to this kind of communication. He was lucky he hadn't been caught in Snape's office, he was so surprised when Sirius' head had appeared in that fireplace.

Sirius smiled at him. "Hello, Harry. How are you"?

He looked tired, Harry thought. "All right. Thanks for sending the Pensieve".

"Would you mind telling me why you need one"?

Harry could not meet his eyes. "Well, I'm planning to give it to--a friend. As a present".

"I see." Sirius looked dubious. "That's some present".

"Well, it's someone who really needs it. Has a lot of stuff locked up inside his head".

"How do you even know what a Pensieve is"?

Harry grimaced. "Dumbledore has one. I--accidentally fell into it, and"--

"And are you planning to 'accidentally' fall into this one? Does this--friend think his thoughts will still be his"?

Harry looked at him guiltily. "It's for Snape".

Sirius looked shocked. "Now, that I did not see coming. Snape? You giving a Pensieve to Snape"?

"That's not all. I have a confession. In October, when you called Snape in his office, I was there. In my Invisibility Cloak I heard everything, about the Polyjuice Potion and about--about my mum and Snape, and the Malfoys, and Death Eater activity near the Weasleys' village"...

"You were there!" Sirius looked furious. Harry thought he was furious at him, but he wasn't. "If you were there, someone else could just have easily--oh, Harry, I'm not meaning to yell at you, it's just--security"--

Harry looked down. "I'm sorry. When I slipped into his office, I didn't know you were going to call him. I was so surprised I almost screamed when your face popped up in the fire. I'm lucky he didn't give me a month of detentions. Please don't yell at him".

"That Invisibility Cloak--" Sirius was muttering, shaking his head. Harry thought he must be remembering all of the antics his father had engaged in using the cloak. Harry wished he dared ask about some of that, but clearly this wasn't the time.

"Sirius?" he ventured. "When you and Snape use the potion--be careful, okay"?

Sirius smiled at him again. "I promise".

"I mean--Lucius Malfoy seems pretty ruthless. Even his own son--" he remembered the way Malfoy had looked on Monday, and shivered. And then he remembered Lucius Malfoy talking to Cho Chang at the Quidditch match, how she had looked so strange afterward, like she was in a trance...

He told Sirius about that, and Sirius widened his eyes. "Now that doesn't sound good, Harry. What happened after that?" Harry reddened. "Well?" Sirius prompted him.

"After that we--we were"--

"What?" Sirius was getting impatient.

"Snogging," Harry said in a very soft voice. Sirius suddenly burst out laughing. Then he shushed himself, still shaking with laughter.

"Sorry, Harry. I'm still getting used to you not being a baby, and here you are a teenager with hormones running amok. The time I get used to that, you'll probably be a grandfather".

"That's if I live to graduate from Hogwarts," Harry said glumly. Sirius looked at him levelly again.

"Harry. I won't hear that talk. You didn't tell me you had a girlfriend".

"Um, yeah," was Harry's eloquent reply. He didn't feel like going into the Viktor Krum Plan for Sirius. "I just wish I knew what he was saying to her. I mean, he doesn't seem to just make idle chitchat".

Sirius nodded, deep in thought. "I agree. He had to be doing it for a reason. And you probably can't ask her; if she was placed under a spell, she'd be unlikely to remember anything. But you might want to be careful when you're with her. Just in case. Make sure you have your wand at all times. Don't let your guard down. Now, I know it's hard to be vigilant and kiss a girl at the same time"--

"Sirius!" Harry laughed, reddening again.

"I know you're laughing now, but think about it. A teenage boy--how better to get at him than going through a teenage girl?"

Harry nodded. "Actually, I have thought about it. You know, Hermione being kidnapped. I've wondered--whether she was placed under the Imperious Curse. Told to--do things"--

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "What sort of things"?

Harry looked away, embarrassed. "I'd rather not say. But it doesn't matter right now, I suppose. We're not speaking".

"You and Hermione? Why"?

"It's a long story--" What was he supposed to tell Sirius? That he'd been kissing Hermione, too? (Well, doing just a little more than kissing.) And that she'd tried to mash his foot after seeing him kiss Ginny? He didn't want Sirius to think he was completely out of control, running around kissing every girl in sight.

"A messenger approaches," Sandy hissed. Harry jerked his head up. A messenger? Who could that mean?

"Sirius. You'd better go. Someone's coming. Thanks for everything. And don't forget what I said about being careful".

"You too." And he was gone. The fire flickered normally once more. Harry sank back into the armchair, wondering who would walk in on him.

A few minutes later he had started to doze off. Suddenly, Hermione was crawling into his lap, putting her arms around his neck, pillowing her head on his shoulder. "Harry," she whispered. He opened his eyes in surprise, not knowing what to do or do.

"Hermione!" was all he could think of, staring at her, shocked, putting his arms around her awkwardly. "Why are you--" she handed him Sirius' letter. He realized that she must have nicked it from his pocket when she pulled the shoe-lace stunt at breakfast.

She looked into his eyes intently; she seemed contrite. "I'm sorry Harry. I--I've been such a"--

He put his finger to her lips. "No. I should have told you about Sandy. But some of the other things--I really can't tell you yet. Sirius doesn't even know. But you will know. Eventually. I promise." His voice became softer. "I've missed you".

She smiled sadly. "Good. Now don't ever do that again".

He was perplexed. "Do what"?

She looked down. "Kiss Ginny." She looked up at him again. "I know, I know. I should be more mature than that. You w in a crowd of people, she'd just won the game for the team--I never knew I could just erupt with jealousy like that"--

He smiled at her and tweaked her nose. "My foot will remember that for a while. That should keep me from straying, eh

She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, god, I didn't mean to hurt you! I can't believe I did that"!

He removed her hands from her face, lifting her chin with his finger. "You can make it up to me now," he told her quietly

Their lips met softly, tentative kiss after tentative kiss, putting off the deeper kiss they each wanted. Then Harry slowly opened his mouth, bringing his hand up and gently pulling her chin down, licking her lips and holding her face in his hands, taking his time. She trembled, sinking her fingers into his hair, pulling him to her, and now they were kissing properly, deeply. They'd never done this before, a slow, leisurely exploration of each other, no hurrying, no frantic claw at clothing. Harry broke the kiss slowly and leaned his forehead on hers.

"Promise me something?" he whispered. She nodded. "Next time you're upset with me, just do the killing curse or something. Put me out of my misery quickly. I've seen what it's like being your enemy. Definitely not something I ever want to repeat. No one crosses Hermione Granger." He smiled at her. She looked down, starting to cry. "Oh, Hermione don't! I didn't mean to--" but she couldn't stop, and now she buried her face in his neck, and he could feel her tears on skin.

He stroked her curls as she muttered through her sobs, "I'm so sorry, so sorry--" and when she was cried out, he heard her sigh. He held her tightly, leaning his cheek on her hair. Her breath warmed his neck. He felt so tired. He closed his eyes, just for a minute, he thought.

When he opened his eyes again, the room was stunningly bright, a white light glaring in through the windows. Hermione was nowhere to be seen. Harry had sat sleeping in the chair all night, still wearing his clothes and robes from the day before. He rubbed his eyes and yawned. Ron came hurtling down the stairs, stopping abruptly when he saw Harry.

"There you are! Thought you'd done something stupid again, like staying out all night".

"Your confidence in me is underwhelming," Harry replied sleepily.

"Go get changed! It's the first snow! I'm glad it's Sunday. I'd be going crazy if this were Monday and we had to go to Potions right now!" Harry smiled as Ron went to the window, gazing out at the snowy grounds. That explains the white light, he thought. Ron reminded him more of a five-year-old than a fifteen-year-old. He went up to his dorm, grinning. He thought of Hermione and felt a joy bound through him he hadn't felt in a very long time. They were all right again. He thought of holding her in the chair, like she was a little girl. When had she gone upstairs? he wondered. It was a lucky thing Ron hadn't found them like that. Not that it would have been too incriminating; they were both fully clothed, merely sleeping. But still...

They spent much of the day outside. It seemed like every student in the school had turned out to play in the snow like small children. Even Alicia Spinnet had foregone her Head Girl dignity to engage in a snowball fight with Angelina and Weasley twins, which ended with everyone being pelted with self-propelled bewitched snowballs which, luckily, were a softer than Bludgers. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had conjured up ice-skates for themselves and were racing each other back and forth on the frozen lake. Some Slytherins decided to skate too, playing Crack-the-Whip, but Harry and Ron got Hermione and Ginny out of the way in time to avoid injury. Harry was momentarily alarmed by the fact that Crabbe and Goyle and Crabbe's "little" sister were all on the ice at the same time; he was afraid it would break under the strain. But it held up fine, not even hairline cracks appeared. The only person he knew that he didn't see was Malfoy.

Later, they all relaxed by the fire in the common room, drinking hot chocolate and toasting bread and muffins on sticks by the fireplace. They felt warm and cozy and content. Even Hermione did not suggest doing schoolwork. Ron had noticed as soon as Hermione had come downstairs that morning that she and Harry seemed to be back to normal, and when Harry confirmed this, he did not question it, merely looked relieved.

As the time approached for the evening meal, Harry went up to his dorm so he could be alone. He sat on his bed to write a short note on a piece of parchment.

"FOR SEVERUS SNAPE, FROM A FRIEND.

PERHAPS THIS COULD BE USEFUL FOR YOUR MEMORIES OF LILY”.

Harry wrote in upright block letters, in a style as unlike his usual handwriting as he could muster. He folded the note and placed it under the knotted string that was around the box the Pensieve came in. Then he took his Invisibility Cloak from his trunk and put it in the pocket of his robes. Harry made it through the common room without anyone taking any notice of him except for Hermione. She smiled at him, raising his eyebrows.

He mouthed the words, I'll be right back. She nodded, and he left. Once in the corridor, he put on the Invisibility Cloak, holding the large box awkwardly with one hand. He made it down to the dungeons without meeting anyone and entered the Potions classroom.

Harry walked cautiously over to the door to Snape's office, meaning to place the box gently on the floor. Instead, it slipped from his grasp and struck the stone floor with a loud thud. Harry heard a firm tread, then the door to the office swung open abruptly. Snape started to step out into the classroom, but had to stop, because of the package sitting in the doorway. Snape narrowed his eyes, looking suspiciously around the room. As always, someone's eyes going right through him gave him a strange, queasy feeling. He dared not move or draw breath; if Snape had merely extended his arm for its full reach, he would have come in contact with Harry.

Snape looked down at the package again. Seeing the note, he stooped to withdraw it from the string, as though he were avoiding touching the package itself. He read it, then looked around the room again, frowning. He took out his wand, and Harry was sure he was going to perform some charm to ferret out a person hiding in plain sight—but instead he levitated the package and caused it to float into his office. He was obviously still reluctant to touch it. Harry wondered if he would blow it up, like when the police found suspicious packages lying around airports that could be terrorist bombs. The office door closed with a bang and Harry exhaled noisily. He crept carefully back to the corridor and upstairs, dreading every moment that Snape would know that he had left it, and come dashing up to Gryffindor Tower to accuse him of some nefarious purpose for doing so. Harry took off the cloak in the corridor, stuffed it back into his pocket and climbed back through the portrait hole into the common room.

* * * * *

When almost everyone was done eating dinner that evening, Dumbledore stood at the head table and made an announcement.

“Wasn't this a nice day? I'm sure everyone had fun in the snow; I know I did.” Harry smiled, remembering seeing Dumbledore sledding down the sloping lawn and ice-skating. Only a few other professors had indulged in winter sports however. Professor Flitwick had helped his great-nephew and his friends build an enchanted snow fort and Professor Sprout had been using her wand to make beautiful ice sculptures that looked like some of the more exotic plants in the greenhouses. McGonagall had convinced Professor Vector to do some cross-country skiing with her, around the lake. It did not actually seem to involve magic.

“I'll bet it gave you all good appetites. Winter at Hogwarts! An enchanted time! And wait until you see the Christmas decorations this year! I hope each and every one of you will sign up to stay at school this Christmas; for those that do, there will be a treat.” Harry grimaced; he hoped it wasn't another ball. That would be so complex, what with Cho and Hermione...and what if Malfoy wanted to take Ginny? He'd be visiting Ron in Azkaban for the rest of his life, after he killed Malfoy...

“The day after Christmas is, of course, Boxing Day. And this year at Hogwarts, we are going to have a traditional Boxing Day observance.” Dumbledore looked around, as though waiting for the cheering to start. Harry noticed that Hermione was smiling broadly, looking like she would burst. He remembered her talking to Dobby about Boxing Day, when they were eating in the kitchens. What was all this about? What had Hermione convinced Dumbledore to do?

There was silence. “Ah, yes. Perhaps most of you are too young to remember what people used to do on Boxing Day. Traditionally, families that had servants switched places with them on that day. And that is what we will do here at Hogwarts this year on Boxing Day: the masters will be servants and the servants will be masters”.

Harry's eyes opened wide and he turned to Hermione. She was positively glowing. The snake's prediction! She had said she knew what it meant. It was about Boxing Day!

“So,” Dumbledore continued, “I hope that as many of you as possible will stay to enjoy this traditional observance of Boxing Day. Each of you may sign up in the entrance hall. Hurry! Only two weeks to Christmas! Now, enjoy your pudding,” he said, sitting again, preparing to dig into some trifle.

As they were walking back up to Gryffindor Tower, Ron turned on Hermione. “This was your idea, wasn’t it? Boxing Day?”

She lifted her chin defiantly. “What if it was?”

He sighed with exasperation. “When are you going to learn? The elves like their lives just the way they are. Just because you feel guilty”--

“Yes I do, Ronald Weasley, and so should you too! So should everyone here! We are all complicit in the perpetuation of a great injustice! Now, Dumbledore’s convinced them that this is a traditional thing, he’s gotten them to agree to be the only ones who get waited on for one day. With any luck, once they get that little taste of freedom”--

“What? They’ll all jump ship? Hermione, I like my clean laundry just appearing in my wardrobe. I like the meals, the warm beds and clean sheets and all the rest. I’ve heard that in some Muggle schools, they make the students do chores like that. Is that how you want it to be around here?”

“That wouldn’t happen. Dumbledore will be making the elves an offer at New Year’s: any of them that want to will be given their own clothes and their freedom. If they want to continue to work here, they will get wages and time off. They won’t be property of Hogwarts anymore. I know that we’ll be lucky if even a handful decide to do it the first time, but I’m hopeful. It helps that Winky’s gone, of course. I am realistic, you know; I’ve decided that some elves will simply never want to be free. It’s just not the norm in their culture. But it’s time for an evolution in the culture”...

“You’ve decided that, have you? You know what’s best for everyone?”

Harry had had enough. He stepped between them. “All right. Hermione and I are okay again, and now you two are going to fight at it? Is this really necessary? Each of you knows the other doesn’t agree about this. Can you both just let it drop?” He looked back and forth between the two of them. Ron backed up.

“This is partly your fault. You’re the one who freed Dobby”.

Harry sighed; now Ron was getting hacked off at him. “He was owned by the Malfoys! They made him beat himself up for the time”!

Ron shook his head. “Neither of you knows what it’s been like to grow up in a wizarding family that can’t afford house elves...” He turned and strode up the stairs, two at a time, his frayed robes billowing out as if to emphasize his words.

Harry turned to Hermione, who was looking crushed. He pulled her into an empty classroom and locked the door. “Hermione,” he said, holding her upper arms, “You know that what you did is wonderful, you know that, right? You’ve got such a good heart, you just can’t--” but suddenly he couldn’t go on talking because she had stood on tiptoe and pulled her mouth to hers. He hesitated for a moment, then wrapped his arms around her, holding her face up to his, tracing her jaw with his fingers, feeling her shiver at his touch. He broke the kiss and looked down at her, smiling.

“Just so we’re in agreement. You’re wonderful. Go that?” She nodded, colouring. They left the classroom, walking upstairs without touching, but Harry felt he was in the warmest embrace possible. He gave her another quick kiss and a smile before they entered the common room. She grinned back, with just a shadow of doubt behind her eyes. Harry hoped that loads of students would sign up to stay for Christmas break. He dreaded seeing the look in her eyes if they didn’t...

* * * * *

During the next week, Snape spent a great deal of time in his office when they were having Potions. He would come out at the start of class, give them instructions, then shut himself in his office again and not emerge until near the end of the class, to check on their work. When it was just a few days before Christmas break, Harry went over to Neville’s and Hermione’s table to whisper to Neville, “What do you think Snape has been doing in his office for the last week-and-a-half?” Neville shrugged.

"I was down here once, doing some extra work, and I knocked on the door to ask him a question about a potion I was working on. He opened the door and he was sitting with a large stone bowl in front of him, holding his wand. The bowl had something white in it, but I also felt like I could see pictures floating in it. It was strange".

Harry smiled to himself. He was using the Pensieve. After classes, Harry came down to the dungeon again. He'd had another idea, thanks to the conversation he'd overheard between Snape and Sirius. He knocked on Snape's office door and heard him cry, "Alohomora!" and the door swung open.

"Oh. It's you, Potter." Harry stepped into the office, realizing that he had never done so before except for when he was under the Invisibility Cloak. He took note of the Pensieve on the desk, but then moved his eyes elsewhere, not to seem like he was focusing on it. "What is it?" Snape snarled without energy, as though he were too tired to be adequately nasty.

"Well, Professor, I've been thinking about this ever since the end of last term..." A lie, but a hopefully, a convincing one. "Perhaps it would be a good idea for there to be a Dueling Club again at the school. A real one, run by someone who knows what they're doing." Snape looked at him with a sneer.

"If you think the Headmaster has time to run a Dueling Club"--

"Oh, no. I know he's--quite busy. I was thinking of you." He registered the surprise on Snape's face. "Not that you're not busy, too. I didn't mean that," he added hurriedly. "It's just that, if you hadn't shown us the Disarming Charm..." He thought again of Voldemort, of their wands linking, forming the golden cage, the phoenix song...

"Then you and Weasley and Granger wouldn't have knocked me out in the Shrieking Shack," Snape said with another snarl, although it sounded somewhat forced now.

Harry grimaced. "Sorry about that. And thanks for covering for us. I've never said." Snape looked surprised yet again. Harry wasn't accustomed to Harry thanking him for anything. Harry remembered him saying to Sirius that Harry didn't even give him credit for saving his life. Harry also remembered Hermione whimpering, "We attacked a teacher...we attacked a teacher...Oh, we're going to be in so much trouble," when Snape had flown across the room and struck his head against the wall. Snape could have had them all expelled.

"I thought," said Harry, "it would be a way for the students to be prepared. For what's to come. Now that Voldemort's back." Unlike with McGonagall, Harry didn't feel he needed to avoid saying Voldemort's name. And unlike many other wizards he knew, Snape didn't flinch at the name.

"Well," Snape said, considering this; or perhaps he was planning to admit that he had been in the wrong about Sirius; and all, the two of them were working together now, doing undercover work (you couldn't get much more undercover than using Polyjuice Potion). But Snape hadn't come that far yet. He stood and motioned to the door. "Come out here, Potter."

Harry frowned. What now?

But Snape had moved some tables out of the way with a flick of his wand. Now he held his wand out, pointing at Harry.

"What--" Harry began.

"We are going to duel. I want to see how you've come along since second year".

Harry remembered his brief duel with Malfoy during the first Dueling Club. He had used a tickling charm on Malfoy, but in the midst of it, Malfoy had managed to put a dancing curse on Harry's legs. After those spells had been canceled, Snape had whispered the snake-conjuring charm in Malfoy's ear, and Harry had discovered that he was a Parselmouth...

Harry took out his wand and faced Snape, trying to be as expressionless as he was. They bowed, then stepped back, each holding their wands like fencing foils. Harry tried not to blink. He saw Snape start to open his mouth, point the wand at Harry.

"Expell"--

"Impedimenta!" Harry cried, faster, pointing his wand at Snape, who suddenly seemed to be moving excruciatingly slowly, continuing to speak his incantation the whole time.

--"i--ar--" he said deeply, slowly, advancing on Harry still. Harry calmly walked around behind Snape, watching his slow progress with a smile.

--"mus," Snape finished, as a burst of sparks flew out of the end of his wand, landing harmlessly on the stone wall opposite. Harry watched him continue to move in slow motion, then decided that was enough. He pointed his wand at Snape again, saying, "A tempo!"

Suddenly, Snape stumbled, moving at his normal speed again. He looked before him, his head whipping back and forth not seeing Harry. Then he spun around, finally seeing Harry behind him. Harry was trying very hard not to look smug. Snape's eyes were very wide now. His wand arm was hanging by his side. He bowed to Harry again, and Harry bowed back. They each put their wands away.

"Well, Potter. Perhaps you should be the student captain of the Dueling Club." Snape said this without emotion, but to Harry this sounded like high praise indeed.

"Me, sir?" Harry felt he risked giving the impression that his voice hadn't changed after all, it came out so high. "All right, suppose," he agreed nervously. Then he thought better of it. "Wait--no. We should wait. See who signs up. Decide by having everyone duel everyone else in the club. See who has the best record".

Snape gave him another strange new look Harry had never seen: respect. He'd just been offered the position of captain of the Dueling Club and refused it, suggesting that whoever it was should earn it, not just have the idea for the club to begin with. Snape was clearly surprised.

"All right, Potter. I'll see the Headmaster about posting a notice and announcing it at the evening meal. If you'll excuse me, I was--in the middle of something".

"Of course, Professor," Harry said, nodding. He turned to go. Before leaving the room he looked back for a second; Snape was looking at him strangely. Harry moved his eyes away quickly, moving swiftly out the door but trying not to seem like he was running.

When Harry arrived in the entrance hall with Ron and Hermione, preparing to go into the Great Hall for dinner, they found a throng of students clustered around what looked like a piece of parchment posted on the wall.

"Oh, good!" said Hermione, smiling. "Some more people signing up to stay for Christmas break!" She had been sorely disappointed that, thus far, only five students in the entire school had put their names on the list: other than Harry and Hermione, there was only Ernie MacMillan, Hannah Abbot and Roger Davies.

But Hermione was wrong; as they pushed their way through the crowd, they could see that there was a second parchment that had been posted beside the first, saying, "DUELING CLUB." Nothing else was written on the parchment. George and Fred Weasley turned to Lee Jordan.

"You hear anything about this, Lee?" George asked him.

"First I'm learning about it".

Roger Davies looked annoyed. "I'm Head Boy. Why haven't I heard about it"?

Harry looked at him. "Because I just suggested it to Professor Snape this afternoon".

"What?" Ron was incredulous. "Snape? Are you mental? He'll turn everyone into hinkypunks or something".

"Well, I thought he might actually know what he was doing. Could teach us a thing or two. Hermione, can I use a quill?" She fished one out of her robes pocket and handed it to Harry, who wrote Harry Potter with a flourish, first name on the list. "It'll be fun. And useful".

As Harry was handing the quill back to Hermione, Ron grabbed it and stepped forward to put his own name down. Hermione was next. Then the quill was being passed from student to student, as more of them signed their names to the parchment. Harry and Ron walked into the Great Hall; Hermione waited to get her quill back, then joined them after a few minutes.

After most people were done eating and had started in on pudding, Dumbledore stood. "Good evening. I hope everyone has had a good meal. I have some exciting news for you all! I have given Professor Snape permission to start a Dueling Club. An attempt was made to have such a club several years ago, but it didn't work out. Given the--current climate--it seems to be a good time to try this again. Professor Snape, would you like to say anything?" He turned to Snape with a smile. Snape stood slowly, looking out at the student population with an expression that reminded Harry of Moody, as though he were doubtful that any student at the school could duel his or her way out of a paper bag.

"The club will not meet until after the holiday. If you try to put anyone else's name on the list except your own, you will not succeed; I have enchanted the parchment so that this is not possible".

"Oh, bloody hell," Harry heard George say softly. "That must be why I couldn't put your name on, Fred. You'll have to do better later".

"I suggest that any student interested in this activity spend the holiday doing research on appropriate charms and hexes. Only the first twenty students on the list will be accepted at the start; then, the four students with the worst dueling records will be dropped from the club, and the next four people on the list will be allowed to try. There will ultimately only be sixteen members of the club. But they will undoubtedly be the sixteen best duelers at Hogwarts." Snape looked around the room, as though doubting that such people existed.

"Also, only fourth years and up may join. Good evening!" He sat down again, looking intent on eating an apple tart, as though he hadn't just made an extremely uncharacteristic announcement.

Fred Weasley got up and raced to the entrance hall carrying a quill. He came back looking somewhat deflated. He sat down heavily again. "I'm twenty-one on the list. I'll have to wait for the first lot to be sacked before I can join." George looked very disappointed for him; it was unusual for the twins not to be doing everything together. (Well, there was Angelina, but she had started as a joint project as well).

Harry smiled to himself, feeling very satisfied. The talk around them was all about the Dueling Club. He caught Hermione's eye and winked. He hoped she would get over the whole Boxing Day debacle; maybe next year, more people would stay...And then he realized that unless somebody else signed up for Christmas break who was from Gryffindor--

He and Hermione would be alone in Gryffindor Tower.

* * * * *

Chapter Sixteen: The Christmas Party

On the last day of the term, Ron was to present his essay on *The Tempest*. Harry had done a passable job on his, but truthfully, he had found much of the play impenetrable. Hermione had written about Miranda, largely focusing on her exclamation, "Oh brave new world!" and Miranda's new awareness of men. Moody liked it, but Hermione, Harry noticed, was very red during the entire time she was reading it, which she did in a rapid, high-pitched voice, racing through it so quickly, Harry wasn't even sure he got all of it.

Ron was still working on his essay at two in the morning the night before, polishing it. Everyone else had gone to bed. Harry was keeping Ron company so he wouldn't fall asleep. He had tried looking over Ron's shoulder casually once or twice, to get a taste of what he'd written, but to no avail. Ron looked up at him calmly.

"I've put a charm on the parchment so only I can see what's really on it. So sod off, Harry. I mean in a yes-you're-still-my-best-friend way, and thanks-for-staying-up-with-me way, but all the same--sod off".

"How's Moody going to read it then?" Harry wanted to know.

"I'll just take the enchantment off. Or--who knows? Maybe that weird eye of his can see through enchantments as well as walls, desks, clothes"--

"Invisibility Cloaks"...

Ron grinned at him. "Lucky for you the real Moody likes his sleep. But--can I ask you something"?

“What”?

“Why did it take you four nights to clean the trophies when I did it in one night when I was twelve”?

Harry’s mouth was about to say something, but he realized he had no idea what, and shut it again. Then he had a thought, a question he’d been wanting to ask, and he decided to take a chance.

“Ron, if you could pick any girl in this school to be your girlfriend, who would it be”?

Now Ron jerked his head up. “What are you playing at, Harry? You didn’t answer my question”.

“If you answer mine, I’ll answer yours”.

Ron grimaced. “Harry, I’m not going to dignify that with”--

“Ron, just--okay. You probably know that I only asked because--I think I already know the answer”.

Ron looked highly affronted, and raised his eyebrows. “Oh, you think so”?

Harry shrugged. “Prove me wrong”.

Ron’s face darkened. “Harry, I--” but he faltered. Then he got up and paced around the room, ran his hands through his bright red hair, at times looking like he was going to try to tear out a clump of it in frustration.

“I don’t want things to change!” he finally choked out. “Why can’t things just stay the same? Why”?

“Because they can’t,” Harry said quietly. He looked at Ron, whose breathing had increased as though he’d just run a marathon. “Why can’t you just--just tell her”?

Ron lifted terrified eyes from the floor to Harry’s face. “Because I can’t. No. I can’t”.

“Why”?

“Why? Because she’d have to either say yes or no. And if she said no, what then”?

“What if she said yes”?

Ron looked at him sympathetically. “Then something else would change.” Me, Harry thought. He’s thinking of me, of me being left out.

“And what if she said yes,” Ron went on, “but then it all went to hell? Then what”?

Harry shrugged again. “Then you would have tried”.

Ron shook his head vehemently. “It’s no good. No good! This is too soon. We’re so young! Why can’t we just”--

--“be twelve forever?” Harry finished. “It’s about three years too late for that”.

Ron looked at him miserably. “Why does it have to change?” he whispered.

Harry made a face at him. “You know, she won’t wait forever”.

Ron whipped his head around. “What is that supposed to mean”?

Harry looked him in the eye without quavering. “It means what it sounds like it means”.

Ron looked at him shrewdly. “Why did you start asking me all this”?

Harry’s gaze still did not leave his. “Call me stupid, or an optimist or something, but I thought that if I asked, I might actually get an answer. Shows what I know”.

Ron still glared at him, as though he were trying to read Harry's mind. Then he went back to the table and gathered up parchment, quills and ink and his anthology. He looked Harry in the eye again before beginning to climb the stairs to the dorm.

"This conversation never happened," he said, almost menacingly. Then he went swiftly up the stairs.

Harry stared after him, unbelieving. How could he be so stubborn? Harry wondered. The three of them had been inseparable since Halloween of their first year, when they'd saved Hermione from the mountain troll. But--two boys and a girl, they were getting older--something was bound to change.

Harry had hoped he could bring Ron around, get him to tell Hermione. Then Harry could bow out and stop feeling so guilty. But Ron had refused to grow up, to admit they were all growing up. Why did he have to be so difficult?

In the meantime--he was glad he'd told Ron that she wouldn't wait forever. Ron had been warned. Harry could continue with a clear conscience (almost). He had given Ron the perfect opening, and he'd refused it.

But something nagged Harry in the back of his mind, and then he realized what it was: Snape had told Sirius that his dad had been unable to tell his mum how he felt about her, but then he got over that and told her, and she'd left Snape for his dad. Was that going to happen to him? Harry wondered. If Ron finally said something, would she just go? He shook himself sternly, trying to stop that train of thought. Stop it. Stop it.

And then he realized--they'd been having a conversation all about Hermione, but--

Neither one of them had once said her name.

* * * * *

"Weasley!" came Moody's growl. Ron looked up. He'd been rereading his essay for the tenth time that day. He stood shakily and made his way to the front of the class. He sounded oddly detached as he spoke the words only he could see on the parchment:

"Ariel and Caliban are two sides of the same coin: Prospero. Ariel is the personification of Prospero's nobler side, striving for knowledge, eschewing physical comforts and political ambition. Caliban is his baser side, expressing the same rage, jealousy and desire for revenge over Prospero's usurping his rights on the island as Prospero expresses to Miranda when describing Antonio's usurping the dukedom of Milan.

"They are both his slaves, and when each complains of this, Prospero is swift to anger and remind them of why he deserves gratitude and service, not resentment.

"And, for thou wast a spirit too delicate
To act her earthy and abhorr'd commands,
Refusing her grand 'hests, she did confine thee,
By help of her more potent ministers,
And in her most unmitigable rage,
Into a cloven pine; within which rift
Imprison'd, thou didst painfully remain
A dozen years.

"It is as though Prospero is describing himself and his own twelve-year imprisonment. He was 'a spirit too delicate/To act her earthy and abhorr'd commands' (the great goddess Politics). His cloven pine was his library in Milan, then the rotting ship, and finally, the island.

"But Ariel is not yet free because Prospero is not free. He is the slave of his baser instincts--his jealousy, rage and desire for revenge, not to mention incestuous desire for his daughter. This side of Prospero (personified in Caliban) must be enslaved by him so that he can attempt to avoid it ruling him.

"Prospero wants Caliban to be grateful for his having educated him and civilized him, but it is clearly as successful as if he had tried to teach his own penis to read. Perhaps this was the point to Prospero's bookishness in Milan".

Parvati suppressed a giggle and Hermione was deep red. Lavender was staring at Ron with her mouth open, her lips moist, her eyes glazed. Ron read on, oblivious.

“His condemnation of Caliban’s trying to rape Miranda smacks more of jealousy than fatherly protection, and in fact, the anger is probably aimed more at himself than Caliban, in an attempt to keep his own errant desires under control.

“Ariel serves Prospero’s spiritual needs: he sings, plays tricks on people’s minds, and is usually invisible--not quite of the world. Caliban serves Prospero’s physical needs--making fires and fetching wood, providing food and other comforts. Caliban’s physical presence is the antithesis of Ariel’s; he is called a monster. He lives up to his title obligingly. Prospero no longer denies his need for physical comforts, as he did when glued to his books in Milan, but he doesn’t like it, either.”

“In the end, Prospero shows every sign of returning to the purely intellectual life that led him to lose touch with other humans to begin with. Ariel is released from service because Prospero will now play that role himself. Caliban is also released, but it seems to be because, even after twelve years, Prospero has never come to terms with this part of himself and probably never will”.

The class clapped tentatively. The girls all looked dazed. Parvati was fanning herself with a piece of folded parchment, sweat glistening on her upper lip. Hermione was quite scarlet, and her breathing didn’t seem quite normal. Lavender simply looked hypnotized.

Moody stamped his wooden leg on the floor. Right, thought Harry. Repression, big time. Ron really knew what he was talking about--he was the walking, talking personification of repression. It was his hobby.

And yet--the effect that his frankly-worded essay had had on the girls was remarkable. They all looked as unrepressed as Harry had ever seen them. He strongly suspected that if no one else had been present, they would have all ripped Ron’s clothes off and attacked him.

Moody’s response to Ron’s essay was cryptic. “Excellent!” he said in a bark. “Gives us all plenty of food for thought.” That’s for sure, thought Harry. That’s for sure.

* * * * *

They all returned to the common room after class. Ron’s essay went right out of Harry’s head as a ripple of excitement traveled through the students gathered there. Harry couldn’t make out what was going on, the talk was an unintelligible babble. Finally, he noticed that slips of parchment were being passed through the crowd. They must have been magically duplicated, for they all said the same thing:

CHRISTMAS
PARTY! PARTY! PARTY!

Saturday, 23 December

No. 2 Floor Alley
Hogsmeade
(Katie Bell’s Great Aunt’s House)

10am - 4pm

UNSUPERVISED
DO NOT TELL THE STAFF

BYOB
(Bring your own butterbeer)

“A party, eh?” George said, putting his arms around Angelina’s waist. “Unsupervised?” he whispered in her ear, but not very softly. Angelina looked him in the eye.

“Then I take it you want to go?” she said, a mischievous tone in her voice.

“Try and stop me,” George said, grinning. Angelina put her arms around his neck.

"Not on your life." She kissed his ear and it looked like that was just going to be the beginning.

Fred threw a cushion at them. "Get a room"!

Angelina threw back her head and laughed throatily. "We plan to"!

Harry felt himself colouring. Oh. It was going to be that sort of party. He looked sideways at Hermione. She wasn't looking in his direction. He turned the other way toward Ron, who was holding one of the parchments, staring at it and looking though he were trying to swallow a Bludger.

All anyone could talk about the rest of the afternoon was the party. Harry and Ron were playing chess while Hermione watched. They were all trying very hard to ignore the party talk. Then suddenly, Harry opened his eyes very wide; he could take Ron's queen! He looked at the board again. Ron had clearly moved the queen to take the bishop he'd had protecting his king. And if he took the queen with his bishop, would he then be vulnerable? Harry checked; Ron's knight was nearby, but it would take--he counted carefully--six L-shaped moves for it to take his king. It was only two diagonal squares away, but luckily, it couldn't be moved diagonally. Whereas, if Harry took Ron's queen--he would have Ron's king in his sights.

Harry smiled, moving the bishop forward and taking the queen. She left the board kicking and screaming. He looked up into Ron's eyes.

"Check".

Ron stared at the board; his king was protected by a bishop on the black square next to the king. He couldn't touch Harry's bishop with it. There was also a knight directly in front of the king, which Ron now directed to move one square away from the king and two over, so it was in the path now between Harry's bishop and Ron's king.

"Just cannon fodder, that's all I am, completely expendable..." the knight muttered as he moved to his new position. Harry immediately took him with his bishop and said again--

"Check".

Ron furrowed his brow. Hermione stared at the board, then stood up excitedly.

"No, Harry, it's not check. It's checkmate! You--you've won, Harry"!

Harry and Ron both stared at the board. Ron's king, if he didn't move, was going to be taken by Harry's bishop. If he did move it, the king would be taken by either one of Harry's knights or Harry's queen. Hearing Hermione's declaration, Ginny came over, followed by Seamus, Fred, Lee, and others. Ron looked up, surprised to see so many people around them.

"Well," he said flatly. "I suppose it was the beginning of the end when you took my queen." Harry felt as though he had killed Ron. He tried to get Ron to meet his gaze but he refused.

"Wow, Harry, how long have you been trying to beat Ron?" Seamus laughed.

"Way to go, Harry," said George.

"SHUT UP!" Harry said suddenly, louder than he had meant to. Everyone had been muttering and laughing and talking excitedly about the game and the party--but now there was total silence. Sometimes, Harry thought, it pays to be the Boy Who Lived. He rose and went to the portrait hole without looking at anyone. When he was in the corridor, he could only walk two steps before he had to lean against the wall and sink down onto the cold stone floor, his head in his hands. He was going to lose Ron. He knew it. He was going to lose his best friend.

....when you took my queen....

Suddenly, the portrait hole opened. Ginny climbed out.

"Oh, Harry, there you are. I'm glad you didn't get very far. Are you all right?" She sat down next to him. He sighed and looked at the ceiling.

"No, not really".

She hugged her knees, rested her chin on them. "Hmm. that's different. Most people say yes whether they are or not".

"I'm not feeling like putting a pretty face on things, just now," he said irritably, looking down at his hands.

They sat in silence for a while. He'd felt at first that he really just wanted to be alone, but now he was grateful for her presence beside him, just being. Then, she spoke softly.

"You know, Harry, I never thanked you"--

"For what?" he said, sounding more snappish than he'd planned. Evidently, Ginny decided to overlook this.

"For suggesting that I send that owl to Draco. The day after the match. He really needed me, but he was afraid to ask me to come"...

"He wasn't afraid to keep you in the Potions Dungeon all afternoon," Harry grumbled in a low voice.

"Oh, we weren't in the Potions Dungeon".

Harry jerked his head up. "I expressly told him he could only see you in the Potions Dungeon"--

"When I sent the owl," Ginny interrupted him, "I watched to see where it flew. It went directly to the hospital wing. I sat by his bedside, and I read to him".

All Harry could say to that was, "Oh".

Ginny sighed and nodded. "Madam Pomfrey had to give him a lot of painkillers. And this syrup she makes from fig leaves for the bruising".

"Bruising"?

"On his arms. His dad wasn't too happy about the match".

Harry frowned. "What did his dad do"?

"The Passus Curse. It's a little like the Cruciatus Curse, but it's legal. Not as painful. And you can't just point your wand at someone and say 'Passus.' You have to combine it with a specific body part or organ, like 'Brachio suo passus est.' And it doesn't last that long--only for a few seconds. It's a bit like being stabbed or poked really hard in the same area. But if you do it repeatedly--like Draco's dad did--you can get quite a lot of bruising and the pain can really accumulate".

Harry grimaced. "That's why he wants Moody to get around to teaching us mind-body separation".

She nodded. "He mentioned that".

Harry looked at her for a moment, perplexed. "I guess I just don't understand, Ginny. How you two even became friends and let alone"--

"More".

"Yes." Harry paused. "Um, Ginny--how much more"?

She wouldn't look at him. "Only a little more".

"He isn't--pressuring you"--

She looked up at him now. "No, Harry. We're both aware of the fact that the wizarding age of consent is fifteen"....

He was still concerned. "And is he aware of the fact that you'll be fifteen in a few months"?

She looked away again. "We haven't discussed it. We're--not anywhere near ready to discuss such things, Harry. Trust me, please? I can take care of myself. I would never let someone talk me into doing something I don't want to".

Harry put his hand on her arm. "This is Draco Malfoy we're talking about".

"You say that like you know him, Harry. You don't. Maybe--maybe no one does"...

She looked at the wall now, as though focusing on something blank would help her to concentrate, to remember all the details.

"It was the beginning of term. After Herbology, I was helping Professor Sprout take some spleenwort plants up to the hospital wing. She said it was for Madam Pomfrey to make Prophylaxis Potion, whatever that is. She was acting strangely, said she thought Madam Pomfrey shouldn't just go doling it out to any girl who asked. Then she looked at me and said that of course, I was a good girl, I would never need it. I haven't bothered to look it up, though I meant to".

Harry remembered that they had covered spleenwort in Herbology in October; it was generally used for making medicines for liver and spleen ailments, but such medicines could only be used for men because it was believed to cause barrenness in women. It didn't really, not permanently, but Harry could guess what the Prophylaxis Potion was for, if Sprout was talking about Pomfrey giving it out to girls.

"Anyway, when we got to the infirmary with our levitating trays of spleenwort, there was Draco sleeping in one of the beds--he was the only patient--and he had this awful look about him. I couldn't see anything wrong with him, but he was wincing in his sleep when he moved. Professor Sprout had left, and Madam Pomfrey was arranging the spleenwort in her office. She was about to go when he cried out in his sleep".

"Did he say anything about how he'd gotten hurt"?

"Not exactly. He said--he said"--

"What"?

"Mummy".

Harry laughed, and so did Ginny, a little, but then he could see she was making herself stop. "Now, Harry," she chided him. "We all do that. I'm sure you've-- you've cried out for your mother".

Harry sobered, looking down and then up at her again. "Too right".

"At any rate, he seemed to--to need someone so. I went over to him. He was saying 'Mummy' over and over, and then said, 'Make him stop, Mummy.' I took his hand, and shushed him, told him Mummy was there. He settled down again, went back to sleeping more peacefully. He never opened his eyes, never knew his mum wasn't really there. After a while I took his hand out of mine and left. He looked so"--

"Please don't say cute or handsome or sweet or anything, I won't be able to eat for a week".

--"lost. Alone," she finally said.

"So if he never knew you were there, I still don't understand how"--

"Well, we always seemed to turn up in the Potions Dungeon at the same time to do extra work. I--I admit I was sneaking a look at him while I worked. After that day in the hospital wing, I was--curious about him. He was usually pretty nasty to me, actually. Called me Weasley, made snide remarks about our family being poor. You know. Vintage Draco Malfoy".

"Don't I know it".

"Finally, one day I lost it. I said to him, 'Well, at least my dad doesn't put me in hospital, and if I were in hospital, my real mum would come and hold my hand.'" She smiled. "He didn't know what I was on about. Told me I was mad. I told him I'd been up there when he was crying, 'Mummy, Mummy. Tell him to stop, Mummy,' and that I'd held his hand and told him his mum was there. He looked shocked. 'That was you?' he said. But I was so angry with him, I couldn't stop somehow".

told him that in our family, which he was always insulting, we looked out for each other, we weren't afraid to express our feelings"--

Harry made a face, looking away from her so she couldn't see. He thought of Ron.

"I asked him who did he think he was, why was he so insistent on making people think he had no feelings, no soul? I said, 'No wonder no one likes you.' As soon as I'd said it, I wanted to bite my tongue. I couldn't believe I'd said such a thing. I looked--I felt so dreadful for making him--for making anyone--look like that. And he just said, 'Well, you've expressed your feelings all right,' and he left".

"Whew!" Harry exhaled. "Nothing like making friends with someone by getting into a huge row".

"Well, I wouldn't exactly say we were friends at that moment. But the next time we were both in the dungeons at the same time--he was civil to me. We talked about our work, and what we were doing in classes. A real conversation. He laughed and it wasn't at someone else's expense. Something had changed, somehow. We were on our way to being friends. And now"...

She stopped, stared into space, then a smile crept over her face and she coloured slightly. "You know what I was reading to him, the day after the match"?

"What"?

"The Wind in the Willows".

Harry laughed. "You're kidding".

"Not a bit," she still smiled. "He always likes to read Wind in the Willows when he's laid up sick".

Harry thought for a moment. "Well, I can see him identifying heavily with Toad. Toad Hall would be the equivalent of Malfoy Manor, I suppose." He looked closely at her. "What do you read when you're sick?" he wanted to know.

"That's the interesting thing--like Draco, I like to read a children's book. I've always been partial to The House at Pooh Corner. I always felt a kinship with Piglet, somehow"...

"Piglet"?

She stood up. "Don't laugh at me." She checked her watch. "We should go to dinner before the stampede. What's your favorite children's book"?

"My what"?

"Your favorite children's book".

Harry looked down, then up at her. "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory." He started to stand awkwardly, but then she put out her hand and helped him up. She nodded knowingly.

"Charlie's family was dreadfully poor, but he had a family"--

"Two parents, four grandparents." Harry grinned.

"That's probably the last book Ron would choose," Ginny said. "Now Hermione's would probably be--Matilda".

"Spot on! And it's a good book, but those Wormwoods--" Harry looked like he'd just eaten an Every Flavor Bean tasting like dung.

"Bit too much like the Dursleys? I suppose then that you didn't like James and the Giant Peach"?

"Oh, not at all. I quite like the part where the peach rolls right over Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker. After Dudley started his diet last year, I had some similar fantasies about my aunt and uncle and a giant grapefruit"...

They both went down the stairs to dinner laughing.

* * * * *

The train from Hogsmeade wasn't leaving until five o'clock, so the students who were going on the last Hogsmeade visit of the term sent their luggage down to the train station after breakfast. Hermione had had Harry invite Cho to the party during dinner the previous evening. She had sent an owl to Viktor, giving him the address of the cottage where the party was to be held. They would have another opportunity to put the two of them together. It was largely a Gryffindor party, but some students from other houses would be there. Harry hoped he could spend as little time as possible with Cho Chan

Harry, Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Cho walked down to the village along with the other Gryffindors going to the party, except for the Chasers from the Quidditch team. Alicia and Angelina went to the village before breakfast with Katie to help her get the cottage ready.

When they arrived at Katie's great aunt's house, it seemed very quiet. (Her great aunt was in America visiting her grandchildren for Christmas). The cottage had a charming front garden, even covered with snow, and swags of evergreen and holly were draped across the turquoise-blue-painted wooden fence separating the garden from the lane. Hermione knocked on the red-painted Dutch door with a large boxwood wreath on it, as Harry wondered whether they had the right house, but the moment Katie opened the door, the noise that spilled into the lane confirmed that they had found the party. Must have put a silencing charm on the house, Harry thought.

The noise thus far was largely from the Wizarding Wireless Network being turned up very loud, but there was also the bustling coming from the kitchen, where Alicia and Angelina were laughing loudly. Soon the noise was largely from the small living room of the house being filled with rowdy teenagers all jostling to get a good seat, although Fred grabbed Katie and began dancing to a fast number on the wireless, and refreshments began to be passed around, despite the fact that they'd all just finished breakfast.

Harry felt like his head was whirling. Hermione sat next to Ron, who was looking rather protective. Viktor hadn't arrived yet. Cho was clinging to Harry's arm, making him want to pry her hands from him, and he thought Ginny was looking around in a strange way. He saw her slip into the kitchen, looking like she hoped no one else had noticed.

Suddenly, another crowd of people spilled in the door, including a hunch-shouldered Viktor, as well as Ernie MacMillan with his arm around Hannah Abbot, and Roger Davies escorting--Harry had to rub his eyes, he couldn't believe it--Fleur Delacour. Harry was still in shock as she came rushing over to him, pulled him away from Cho into an embrace and firmly kissed him twice on each cheek, in rapid succession.

"Arry! 'Ow are you? Ah, I see you are doing quite well, yes?" she said, eyeing him up and down in a way that made him blush a color deeply. "The leetlest champion eez growing up, n'est-ce pas"?

Harry caught Cho's face out of the corner of his eye. She was not pleased. Good, thought Harry. Let the beastly behavior begin.

Then he caught a glimpse of Hermione's face; also not pleased. Well, I hope she does a better acting job than that, he thought. Viktor was greeting her now with a kiss on the cheek. He pulled her off the settee where she'd been sitting with Ron, who scowled, but then Fleur had seen Ron too, and she threw herself into the spot Hermione had just vacated, also kissing him twice on each cheek. Ron's ears were bright crimson. He appeared to have forgotten about Hermione, who was now reacting poorly to Ron's being kissed. But then, Harry thought, she never liked Fleur. After all, Ron did get up the nerve to ask her out, even though she didn't accept. This might turn out to be a very interesting party, Harry thought.

Fleur returned to Harry and Cho, Roger on her arm. "So," Harry said to her. "What are you doing here, Fleur"?

She tossed her cornsilk hair over her shoulders and bestowed an indulgent smile on him. "I am teaching now at ze village school. Because I am ze youngest teachaire I am teaching ze most petite children, yes? I am eemproving my English since I am coming to live in Hogsmeade. My seestair Gabrielle is also going to ze village school. Eef I am still here in a few years, she will of course attend 'Ogwarts instead of Beauxbatons. I would naturalment prefer to be as close to 'er as possible".

"Of course," Harry said feebly, but then another influx of guests from the front door turned the room into a crowded mass of bodies, and they were separated from Roger and Fleur. People were laughing and talking and drinking butterbeer, the center of the floor given over to dancing. Harry, Hermione, Cho, Viktor and Ron were in a cluster. Viktor and Cho were

talking Quidditch and Harry and Hermione were talking about which teachers they thought would be willing to do which chores on Boxing Day.

A slow song came on the wireless, and Harry jumped when a small pale hand appeared on his arm. Alicia was standing at his elbow. The room seemed very dark; the sky outside was already cloudy, and the curtains in the room were drawn. There were only a few candles for illumination.

“Harry--would you like to dance?” Alicia was asking him. Harry stared at her in shock. I’m being beastly to Cho today, he reminded himself.

“Oh--er, yeah. Sure.” He thought, Smooth, Potter. Real smooth.

He and Alicia moved into the middle of the mass of dancing bodies. He placed his hands around her waist and she put her arms around his neck, resting her cheek on his chest. She was even shorter than Hermione, he realized. Somehow when she was being Head Girl, she seemed--larger. He felt her breath through his shirt and her fingers tickling his neck. He prayed for the song to end soon--although he saw that Cho looked none too pleased. Good. Think dreadful things about me, think I’m a cad. Go ahead.

Harry saw Hermione whispering to Viktor, who was bending down to put his ear near her mouth. Harry grimaced over Alicia’s head. But then he understood what was happening: Viktor leaned over to say something to Cho, and then the two of them walked toward the dancing throng, and Viktor and Cho put their arms around each other, increasing the number of dancers by two. Yes! thought Harry. Thank you, Hermione.

But Harry was starting to get a little alarmed about Alicia. What was she doing with her hands? Then to his relief, the song was over and Harry turned to see Katie looking up at him.

“Dance, Harry?” He agreed, and Alicia went off looking sulky. He saw that Viktor was dancing with Cho again. Ron was then pulled onto the dance floor by Parvati--or was it Padma? Harry wasn’t sure. He lost track of Hermione, then he saw her over near the narrow staircase leading to the bedrooms. She looked him in the eye, then turned to climb the stairs.

When the song ended, he deflected yet another invitation to dance and made his way through the crowd to the staircase. He held onto the railing convulsively, acutely aware of the splintery wood beneath his hand, a large lump in his throat which he could not swallow. Turning for a moment, he saw that Viktor and Cho were dancing to a third song. He went back to climbing the stairs. At the top he found Hermione, smiling broadly at him. He kissed her quickly on the cheek.

“Viktor and Cho are still dancing,” he told her.

“Good. Gives us a chance to be alone.” Harry looked around uncertainly at the plethora of doors opening off the small irregularly-shaped landing. He realized that the house was probably magically larger inside than out. From the front, one wouldn’t expect to find more than two rooms upstairs, three if the bathroom were counted. He also wasn’t sure they should be sneaking off to a bedroom in the midst of the party--that night on the hearthrug, he felt like anything could have happened....

But Hermione was pulling him toward a door with glass panes in it that had a red brocade curtain hanging on the other side. She opened it, revealing a book-lined study with a generous bay window containing a couch, on which Ernie MacMillan and Hannah Abbott were writhing and kissing.

“Aaack!” Hermione choked out. “Sorry!” she said hastily, shutting the door before she could be verbally attacked by Hannah and Ernie.

“Um,” she said to Harry, “you open the next one.” He laughed at the look on her face. He moved two doors down, past one labeled LOO, which he deemed it unwise to monopolize. He tapped gently on the door first, and, receiving no answer, opened it cautiously.

It was a bedroom, a larger bedroom than the cottage had any right to hold, with a sitting area near some leaded-glass windows and a large four poster with a brightly-colored patchwork crazy quilt. In the bed was George Weasley.

“George!” Harry cried, before he could stop himself. He hadn’t opened the door very much, and Hermione, behind him, could not see into the room.

George was under the quilt, leaning back against the pillows, not wearing anything from the waist up. Harry doubted whether he was wearing anything from the waist down, either. When he opened the door, George had his eyes closed, expression both happy and agonized on his face. His muscular shoulders, chest and Bludger-whacking arms were as generously freckled as his face, the skin pale beneath the spots, but growing more and more flushed with each moment.

When Harry said his name, George's eyes flew open and he cried out. Suddenly, Angelina's head popped up from under the covers. Harry looked at her in surprise, her bare shoulders smooth and dark as Belgian chocolate.

"Oh, George, I didn't hurt you, did I?" she asked, quite concerned. Then she turned and saw Harry in the doorway.

"Oh, hello, Harry," she said, as though this happened every day. "If you're looking for the loo, it's the next door over, the one labeled LOO. Can't miss it".

She dove under the quilt again, and George threw back his head, a low groan beginning in his throat, growing louder and louder. Harry still stood in the doorway, frozen, mesmerized. George opened his eyes again, and on seeing him still standing there cried: "Sod off, Harry!" at which point Harry woke up and abruptly slammed the door.

He and Hermione looked at each other, each feeling the giggles coming on. Hermione stuffed her fist in her mouth, her eyes watering with mirth. Harry pressed his mouth into a line, holding his stomach, closing his eyes with the effort of not laughing out loud.

When they felt almost under control they crept to the next door. It was locked. So were the next three. Then a door revealed narrow, steep stairs going down and a collection of noises that sounded like they were coming from the kitchen. Back stairs, thought Harry. He moved on. Then Harry felt a knob give way. He stopped and tried rapping on the wood before just opening it. There was no answer. Not that that did any good last time, he thought. When people are preoccupied...

He opened the door cautiously, peered around the edge, made a sound like, "Eergh!" in the back of his throat and closed the door, leaning against it as if afraid that Hermione would insist upon opening it again.

"Harry?" she whispered. "What is that room"?

"Linen closet".

"And? Who's in there"?

"Justin Finch-Fletchley".

She frowned at him. "Well, he's not alone, is he"?

Harry opened his eyes wide. "No".

Hermione waited. "Well? Who's he with"?

Harry felt suddenly impish. "Guess".

"Okay--Lavender".

"Nope".

Lisa Turpin".

"Cold".

"Susan Bones".

"Colder".

"Pansy Parkinson".

Harry made a face. "He's not blind, deaf and dumb, Hermione".

She laughed. "All right, I give up".

"Well--it's that sixth-year Ravenclaw prefect--oh, what's the name"...

Hermione's brow furrowed. "The sixth-year Ravenclaw prefect is Cho. We left her downstairs with Viktor, unless she's learned to Apparate"--

"The other sixth-year Ravenclaw prefect".

A sudden wave of understanding swept over Hermione's face. "Ooooh! It's--oh, drat, what's his name again? He's nice. They'd make a really cute couple".

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes. Meanwhile, I have to say--getting a bit tired of this. One last try, and then back downstairs, before someone comes up and wants to know why we're lurking about in the corridor".

She agreed, and they moved on to another door. Taking a deep breath, Harry simply opened it. The room that met his eyes was a long conservatory, all manner of exotic and magical plants growing in planters of all sizes. The planters lined the edges of the long, narrow space, which had a tile walkway leading down the center of the room like a corridor. It culminated in a seating area about thirty feet from the door which had a wicker loveseat, where two people were kissing.

It was Draco Malfoy and Ginny Weasley.

He closed the door quickly, before Hermione could see.

"What?" she said, just a slight whine in her voice.

"Go back downstairs," he told her. His voice was hard. She frowned.

"Harry"--

"It's occupied. Go back downstairs. We can't go together, you know that. I'll wait a few minutes before I follow".

She sighed and kissed him quickly on the lips. "Oh, well," she said, turning to go. When her head had disappeared down the stairs, Harry went back into the conservatory, locking the door magically, then striding the length of the room to the oblivious kissing couple.

He stood before them. Both of them had their eyes closed; Malfoy had one hand around her waist, the other sunk into her luxurious hair while she clasped her hands around his neck, her face turned up to his as he devoured her mouth. Harry tried to stem the tide of anger growing in him.

"Ahem," he cleared his throat.

Malfoy whipped his head around in shock.

"Potter"!

Ginny's mouth was open; she was speechless, and colouring deeply. Harry looked back and forth between them, his jaw clenched, telling himself he would not reach for his wand.

"How did you two get up here?" he demanded. "The last time I saw you, you were going into the kitchen," he said to Ginny.

"Back stairs," she said simply in a quiet voice. Harry stared back and forth between the two of them again, still trying not to reach for his wand. Instead, he pulled the basilisk amulet out of his shirt and held it out.

"Ginny! Why did you give this to me"?

She looked flummoxed. “Be--because when I was in first year, you saved me. From the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets”.

Malfoy’s mouth hung open stupidly. “What? There was a basilisk down there? And Potter”--

“I killed it. When I was twelve.” He glared at Malfoy, who was the one trying to swallow a lump now.

“They never told us”...

“No. That was to protect Ginny, so no one would know she’d opened the Chamber.” Malfoy looked at her in surprise. Harry went on. “She opened the Chamber because she was under the influence of the diary of Tom Riddle--which your dad gave her, Malfoy. Your dad almost got her killed”.

He watched this register on Malfoy’s face, who looked desperately at Ginny, as though afraid she would suddenly decide to tell him off. Harry went on.

“Having saved Ginny’s life,” he said to Malfoy, “I feel somewhat responsible for her. I love her--” he said, his voice cracking a little (while Ginny’s eyes became very wide) “--like a sister.” He looked at Ginny, aching that he’d just said that--but knowing he had no choice but to convince all of them--himself most of all--that it was the truth.

“You know that your families will never consent to your being together. You know that one of you will have to turn on your family if you want this. I’ve decided that it will be you, Malfoy”.

Draco Malfoy was staring at him as though he’d never heard of or seen Harry Potter before in his life. “What?” he finally said, at a loss for words.

“You will convince your father to take you into his confidence. You will learn all you can of the plans of the Death Eaters, your father in particular. You are going to put your own father in Azkaban”.

“Harry!” Ginny was shocked. Both Harry and Malfoy looked at her as though she were incidental to the entire conversation.

“Ginny,” Malfoy said to her softly. “Could you wait over by the door, please”?

She opened her mouth to protest, but she looked at Harry and he nodded at her. She strode angrily over to the door to the conservatory, then leaned against it, her arms crossed, looking extremely put out.

Then Malfoy turned his back to her and said quietly to Harry, “Listen, Potter. Ginny doesn’t know yet, but that--that was a good bye kiss. I was just about to break up with her”.

It was Harry’s turn to be surprised. “What”?

“Shut up! I was going to tell her--tell her that after Christmas break, I was going to be a different person, a person who couldn’t be with her anymore--” his voice faltered, but then he cleared his throat and straightened up. Harry looked at him shrewdly for a moment, then he had a flash of brilliance.

“So that’s what’s going to happen on Christmas night...” he said slowly. Malfoy’s eyes were wild.

“How do you know about that”?

Harry smiled enigmatically. “I have my sources. So. You’re going to be a Death Eater, so you’re breaking up with Ginny. How noble of you. Except that it won’t work”.

“What? What won’t work”?

“Breaking up with her. You think that means you won’t care about her anymore? Think again. When Voldemort--or your dad--comes after her again, or someone else in her family, what are you going to do? Sit back and say, ‘Oh, well, I don’t care about her anymore. I broke up with her’”.

Malfoy's face darkened. "I can't be with her if I have--that thing on my arm. This is what I was raised to be. This is what my father says I was destined to do".

"And as recently as last June you were looking forward to it, weren't you? I remember what you said on the train. But then--you had nothing to lose. Now you've got Ginny to lose. Now you've got someone in your life who actually cares what happens to you." Malfoy set his jaw stubbornly, refusing to look at him. Harry went on, whispering fiercely. "Why do you still want to do your father's bidding? Do you like the Passus Curse?" Now Malfoy looked at him, with a pure hatred in his eyes; Harry knew, and that killed him. "You plan to do the bidding of the father who bargained for your life when you were a baby by promising you to Voldemort!" Malfoy looked startled that he knew this, but he didn't comment on it.

"It's not as though I have a choice, Potter. It's not as though I can refuse..." his voice faded, and he looked through the conservatory's glass ceiling, at the white winter sky, flat and featureless and hopeless.

"But you will do it. In a way. You will become, to all intents and purposes, a loyal Death Eater. You will have the Dark Mark burned into your arm. You will do whatever they want you to do during your initiation. But none of it will mean anything because you will be mine. You will spy for me. You will give me your father." Harry took a deep breath. "I'm tired of running. I'm taking the fight to Voldemort. I'm going to take down his Death Eaters one by one, starting with your father until he has no more servants and has to face me on his own, like a man"!

Malfoy turned and looked at Ginny. "You think my giving up my father will make a difference to her family"?

"It's the only thing that could make a difference to her family".

Malfoy shook his head. "Still--he's my father. Azkaban"...

"Better Azkaban than what an overzealous Auror could do to him. You know they're authorized to kill, when they deem it necessary." Malfoy considered this, swallowing, nodding. "So you'll do it," Harry said to him. It wasn't a question.

Malfoy gave him a look with eyes that were dead. "Yes," he said tonelessly. Harry turned to Ginny.

"Ginny, you can come back." Looking still very miffed, Ginny strode back to them, her colour up, her robes flying around her wildly, illustrating her mood. Harry was sure that she had never looked lovelier. "I'll give you two five minutes--that's all. After that, I start sending other Weasleys up here, understand?" They both nodded. Harry turned and walked back to the door. The wheels had been set in motion....

He turned with his hand on the knob, preparing to leave. Ginny was crying, touching Malfoy's face with her fingers as though it were a precious thing to her. He pulled her mouth to his, and she responded immediately, opening her mouth under his and twining her hands around his neck. Malfoy pressed his hands to her back, holding her as close to him as possible.

Harry turned and walked out the door, his heart in his throat. Walking away from them was the hardest thing he'd ever done.

* * * * *

When Harry came back downstairs at last, he found Ron and Hermione near the refreshments, surreptitiously glancing at Viktor and Cho, who were on the other side of the room talking animatedly.

"How long have they been like that?" he whispered to them.

"About fifteen minutes. Where've you been?" Ron wanted to know.

"Queue for the loo".

"Because I've heard there are people upstairs--um"--

Harry thought of Ginny and Malfoy. "Yeah, there are people--umming--up there. Some more than others. They get rather upset if you don't know where the loo is".

Ron's eyebrows shot up so high they disappeared into his hair. "Like who"?

Harry decided to have some fun. "Guess. In five questions or less".

"Um--is it someone in Gryffindor"?

"Most people here are Gryffindor. Yes".

"Is it someone in our year"?

"Oh, come on Ron. The three of us are here, there's Parvati and Lavender dancing, and Seamus and Dean are on the couch. And Neville didn't come. The answer is: No. You've wasted two of your five questions".

"Is it someone in sixth year"?

"No. I'm done giving you clues".

"Is it someone on the Quidditch team"?

"There you go! Good one. Yes".

He looked around the room suspiciously. He saw Fred talking to Katie and Alicia. Harry and Hermione were standing with him, and just then Ginny came out of the kitchen, making Harry feel extremely relieved. She must have used the back stairs. Ron grinned.

"George and Angelina! Ha"!

"Ssssssh!" Harry reached up and put his hand over Ron's mouth. Then a look of horror came over Ron's face.

"George and Angelina!" he said more quietly. "Blimey! Mum will have a meltdown, she will"...

"So don't tell her, you prat!" Harry hissed at him. Ron looked unbelieving.

"And she was worried about Percy and Penelope"...

"Is she worried about Bill and Charlie, too? Honestly, Ron, Percy is out of school, after all. And George and Fred practically are," Hermione said, sounding critical of Ron's mother for the first time Harry could remember.

Ron still looked dazed from the revelation about George and Angelina. "Still--" he said in a hoarse whisper. "Mum told me she'd kill me if I ever got a girl in trouble--" He stopped abruptly, and his ears turned deep red.

"Anyway," Harry said, trying to get them on topic again. "Viktor and Cho are hitting it off. That's good. The plan's going well, agreed"?

They both nodded. Something was actually working.

In no time, it seemed, it was time to leave for the station. Hermione said goodbye to Viktor at the cottage; he was Apparating back to the Chudley Cannons' team headquarters for his luggage, then taking a Portkey back to Bulgaria to see his family for Christmas. Harry and Hermione accompanied the other students to the train, so they could see them off. For the first time, Harry noticed Hermione looking a little wistful about not going home for Christmas, and he realized that she hadn't seen her parents since Snape and Sirius brought her to Privet Drive. Perhaps this whole Boxing Day thing was to take her mind off that, he thought. She was keeping herself busy so she wouldn't think about missing her parents, worrying about them, wondering whether they were safe.

At the station, the luggage had already been loaded onto the train and Harry and Hermione were traveling up and down the train corridor saying goodbye to various Gryffindors and friends from other houses. Harry heard Cho calling to him, and pointedly ignored her, walking in the other direction. Suddenly, a hand emerged from a compartment and pulled him in, the door rolling shut behind him.

It was Snape. He immediately released him, and Harry straightened his cloak, wondering what was going on.

“Potter,” Snape began, “I need to talk to you. I was going to send you an owl, but this is better”.

Harry furrowed his brow. “Why do you need to talk to me”?

“Should any students need to borrow potions ingredients while I am gone, I am placing you in charge of my private store. I have charmed my office door so that only this password can open it. Only you and the headmaster know it.” He handed Harry a small piece of parchment. “I want you to keep meticulous records--the type and amount of any ingredients borrowed. They are to be replaced within a week of the start of the new term. Understand”?.

Harry was still confused as to why he was being burdened with this. “Yes, Professor”.

Harry turned to go, but suddenly Snape said with mock-casualness, “How is your owl, Potter”?

Harry turned and stared at him. What? “My owl, sir”?

“Some weeks ago at breakfast, your owl delivered to you a rather large package. Has she recovered”?

He had seen, Harry realized. He had seen Hedwig delivering the Pensieve. And he left it in the same box to give it to him. He knows it was from me. Harry had grown so accustomed to Snape missing meals in the Great Hall (perhaps to talk to Sirius? to brew Polyjuice Potion?) that it had not occurred to him that Snape was present that day; he hadn't even look

“She's fine, sir”.

“Post owls are powerful magical creatures, Potter. Don't abuse them,” he growled.

“No sir”.

“You should go.” He looked at Harry now as though Harry had invaded his private compartment, rather than having been yanked in through the door by Snape himself.

Harry opened the door to leave, and turned to him suddenly, remembering something important. “Oh, Professor”--

“What”?

“Good luck.” Harry looked at his face, but it was as impassive as ever; he was not about to admit he was planning to do anything that required luck.

“Remember: you are the only student with the password to my office. Keep meticulous records, Potter”!

Harry nodded and left, closing the door behind him. When he was back on the platform, standing next to Hermione, the two of them raised their hands silently to the friends whose faces were pressed to the glass, excited to be going home for Christmas. There they went, Ron and Ginny, Seamus and Dean, George and Fred and Angelina...Harry lowered his hand and Hermione turned to go; then Harry saw Draco Malfoy ride past, slowly raising a hand, looking right at Harry. Harry solemnly raised his hand in response, as if he were taking an oath.

When the train had disappeared, he turned to where Hermione was waiting for him, at the steps leading down to the platform back to the castle. They walked back to Hogwarts silently, their shoes crunching on the snow, a light breeze blowing flakes from the bare branches of the trees that lined the path.

They were now the only Gryffindors at Hogwarts.

* * * * *

Chapter Seventeen: Scars

Christmas day dawned clear and sunny. When he awoke, Harry groaned, dreading another day like the one before, and the night before that.

After he and Hermione had returned to the castle from the train station, they went back up to the common room. He put Sandy back on; she'd been staying warm by the fire. Crookshanks lounged nearby with Bainbridge and her kittens (it

suddenly occurred to Harry to wonder whether Crookshanks was the kittens' father). Hermione had promised Jules Quibbler that she'd look after the mother cat and her litter during Christmas break. Harry wished he'd had Sandy with him at the party, so he wouldn't have walked in on all of those different people in the cottage. And so he would have been prepared for the possibility of Snape giving him the password to his office; could anything be stranger? He hadn't told Hermione about that yet.

From the moment they entered the common room, Harry felt strange. It was so quiet, so empty. It was just the two of them, plus a few hours before, they had been lurking about the upstairs at Katie's great aunt's cottage, looking for a private place, and now they had all of Gryffindor Tower to themselves, and Harry could not ever remember being more terrified.

He told Hermione he was going to the library; she said she'd get some books and parchment and join him. But he didn't go to the library. He walked up to the third floor corridor where they'd gone in their first year to try to get to the Sorcerer's Stone. He tried the door; it was unlocked. He entered and lit his wand to break the darkness. The empty room was as he remembered it, but--thankfully--without the three-headed dog called Fluffy standing on top of the trap door. Harry sat on the floor, leaning against the door, putting out his wandlight and just sitting in the dark.

"It is cold here," Sandy hissed at him.

"I know. Sorry. I didn't take you out in the snow, did I"?

"There is no light. Why are you here"?

"I'm hiding".

"Why"?

Why indeed? What was he hiding from? Just Hermione. Hermione and an empty Gryffindor Tower.

And himself.

"Harry Potter"?

"What, Sandy"?

"You did not answer my question".

"I don't have a good answer, Sandy. I'm not feeling much like talking right now. No offense, I hope. I just want to sit quietly".

"I do not take offense when someone wants to sit quietly. More people should try it".

Harry smiled in the dark.

He had eventually come down for dinner, and when Hermione questioned him about his whereabouts, he said he'd become lost because he had run into the Bloody Baron, ghost of Slytherin house, and to avoid him he'd taken a number of turns into unfamiliar corridors and up and down strange staircases...

He heard a hissing voice under his robes saying, "Liar." Oh, shut up, Harry thought.

Hermione had looked dubious about his explanation, but did not verbally question it. Dumbledore had moved the house tables to the walls and they sat at a centrally-located table with Hannah and Ernie and Roger, plus the staff and faculty who had not gone elsewhere for the holiday. After dinner, Harry had hurried up to his room, climbing into bed in his clothes, until Sandy complained of it (when he slept she didn't have to be shrouded under sleeves, since he was shirtless at that time). He changed into his pajama pants and pulled the curtains around him, wishing they were made of iron.

Harry sat up in bed now, pushing aside his bedcurtain cautiously, unwilling to let Christmas day really start, procrastinating and enjoying it. He squinted in the brightness from the window; it must have snowed again, making the grounds of Hogwarts blindingly bright. He let the curtain fall once more, remaining in the shelter of his bed, surrounded by the deep red hangings, glowing with the light, soft and blurry, without his glasses. Safe in my womb, Harry thought. He

didn't want to be born. Can't I just stay here? he pleaded to no one in particular. Can't time just stand still? Suddenly, he was completely in sympathy with Ron. Status quo. Is that too much to ask?

And then there had been the day of Christmas Eve. He had slept late, then couldn't find Hermione when he'd descended to the common room. He'd gone back to his room and retrieved the Marauder's Map, eventually locating Hermione with McGonagall in her office. He did not go there, however. Instead, he stayed in his room and practiced Animagus transfiguration (putting Sandy downstairs by the fire again first). He had maintained the griffin form for about three minutes when he was with the griffin, and now he had actually worked his way up to about ten minutes. The pain was still pretty bad, but he was hoping that Moody's anti-Cruciatuus training might help with that too. Although, if his body were divorced from his brain how would he accomplish the transfiguration? Perhaps the pain-blockage and the Animagus transfiguration were mutually exclusive. Maybe the Animagus transfiguration relied on the wizard being even more aware of pain, not less. He considered this; it was plausible. But not comforting.

At lunch the day before, he had talked to Dumbledore and the two of them played chess the rest of the afternoon. Harry tried to ignore the information Sandy was giving him about the moves Dumbledore was going to make, but he finally gave up and succumbed to a bit of cheating with her help. Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling a little bit less after Harry's sixth win.

"Doing very well today, aren't you, Harry? And your snake certainly has a lot to say; she seems to be hissing quite a lot. Is she a chess savant?" Harry lifted his eyes to Dumbledore innocently. So, he doesn't suspect she has the Sight, merely talent for chess. Interesting; you'd think Dumbledore would know something like that....Then he thought about the time he'd beaten Ron at chess. He couldn't remember whether Sandy was helping him, for some reason. Had he simply treated her predictions as something that came out of his own brain? Had he really beaten Ron? he suddenly had to wonder.

During much of the day, Hermione was meeting with McGonagall again, and after dinner, Harry again sprinted upstairs. Hermione was oddly congenial about his avoidance of her; when they were together, she didn't seem in the slightest worried. Harry didn't know whether to be offended or relieved.

At last, he decided that it was Christmas, he was going to get up, he was going to look at his presents. No more procrastinating. No more being afraid to be alone with Hermione. It was just Hermione. Nothing to be afraid of. Nothing to worry about.

Except wanting her so badly he thought he was going to die.

NO. He pulled his brain back from that thought. Presents. Yes. Christmas presents. He put his glasses on and then opened the curtains at the foot of the bed, finding a pile of packages on his trunk.

"What are those packages?" Sandy hissed.

"Christmas presents".

"Oh. I have been wondering what Christmas is. I have been meaning to ask. So. That is the presence of Christmas".

"No. One of those is a Christmas present. More than one, you say Christmas presents, plural. They're gifts".

"Who has given you these gifts"?

"Well, my friends. And Ron's mum. And I think I saw one from my cousin Dudley".

"The large boy".

"Right".

"What do you do with them"?

"You open them".

"And then"?

“Well--it depends on the present. Can I just get on with it, Sandy?”

“Of course”.

Harry opened his gift from Ron first. Ron had bought him a copy of *Great Quidditch Captains of Hogwarts* by Roderick Plumpton, III. It contained a number of photographs of people flying about on broomsticks wearing the colors for Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin. The players zoomed around the photos, showing off some very difficult maneuvers. A Snitch-catching technique called the Plumpton Pass had been named after the author's grandfather, who as a Seeker in 1921 had caught a Snitch up his sleeve, maintaining until his death that it was not an accident and that had meant to do it.

Harry leafed through the book; in a table listing the names of those who were, in the author's opinion, the greatest Quidditch captains of Hogwarts teams in the last century, Harry saw the entry “Charles Weasley, Gryffindor.” Then he saw that Ron had handwritten at the bottom, “Harry Potter, Gryffindor.” Harry smiled; it was actually quite touching. Ron could be strangely sentimental sometimes.

Next came a package that had arrived with Hedwig the day before; Harry had already sent her to Smeltings with Dudley's present, a Sneakoscope (so he could determine whether his roommate was in fact stealing from him). Harry had wanted her to have his gift before returning to Privet Drive for the holiday, so his aunt and uncle wouldn't get upset about Hedwig. And this way Dudley was able to send her back from Smeltings with Harry's present. Harry tore the wrappings off the book quickly; Dudley had sent more tapes for Harry's portable tape player. Oh well, he thought. He had been corresponding regularly with Dudley, but had neglected to mention that he couldn't use the tape player at Hogwarts. Maybe down in the village it would work, he thought. It might be worth a try.

He set the tapes aside and pulled Sirius' present onto his lap. Another book: “*He Flew Like a Madman*,” which was a biography of “Dangerous” Dai Llewellyn. Harry frowned; he was sure he would like the book, but why did everyone think that all he thought about was Quidditch?

Next came a large box from Mrs. Weasley. As usual, there were sweets and cakes, and a green hand-knit sweater. He munched on some treacle toffee while he reached for Hagrid's present, which was in such a small package, it fit in the palm of Harry's hand. He opened the very small box to find a model golden griffin, which yawned and stretched as he exposed it, then took to the air and began to fly about. Harry wondered briefly, as he enjoyed watching the griffin, what Hagrid suspected anything concerning his Animagus training, but he put it down to Hagrid simply knowing how much he liked the griffin. Oddly enough, the only other student in the class who'd really done well with the golden griffin was Neville, who often did not want to get within thirty feet of the creatures they studied. (But Hagrid gave him good grades anyway. It occurred to Harry that Hagrid must have known who Neville's parents were and what had happened to them from the moment he met him).

Sandy flinched when the miniature golden griffin flew near her.

“Don't worry Sandy, it's just a toy”.

“I do not like it”.

He put the toy griffin away. There was another book-shaped package, which he saw was from Ginny. Taking the paper off, he found a copy of *The House at Pooh Corner*. Inside, she had written, “For Harry -- I know you won't be converted from Charlie, etc., being your favorite, but sometimes if you're needing to feel better, you might find this helpful. -- Love Ginny”.

He ran his finger over the figure of Piglet on the cover of the book, thinking of her large brown eyes, her unruly red hair. Then he saw her in Draco Malfoy's arms, kissing him passionately; she had such a look of abandonment.... It both excited him to think of her having that passion in her, and made him feel utter revulsion that the person benefiting from that passion was Draco Malfoy, whom he had been forced to entrust with her safety.

The book was quite a safe gift. The sort of thing a sister would give a brother, or a friend she thought of as a brother--or who thought of her as a sister, as he'd told Malfoy.

He noticed that there was no gift in the pile from Hermione. That's odd, he thought. But then again--he still had the present he was planning to give her, so perhaps she was bringing his in, too.

Sandy hissed at him that Hermione was coming. He rose and went to the wardrobe to look for something to wear, but he didn't like most of his options, so he was still standing with the wardrobe door open wearing just his pajama bottoms when Hermione came bursting into the room. She was still in her nightshirt and dressing gown, chirping, "It's Christmas! It's Christmas! Happy Christmas, Harry!"

He turned and laughed; he imagined her as a little girl, coming downstairs Christmas morning to a pile of packages from her loving parents, and then he stopped suddenly, trying not to think about the way Christmases had been for him before coming to Hogwarts. He looked at her again, at how pretty and excited she was, wondering fleetingly why he was so afraid to get up, be alone with her. It's just Hermione, he told himself again. What's to worry?

Returning her smile, he walked over to her and answered, "Happy Christmas, Hermione," giving her a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek. He felt her fingers flutter across his bare back. They separated and she glowed up at him, one hand still behind her back. Suddenly, she whipped out her hand, which held a small gift-wrapped box. Harry grinned at her, sitting down on his trunk to open it.

Inside the package was a small mahogany box with a wind-up key on the side. He turned the key clockwise several times but then it wouldn't go any more and he had to stop. He lifted the box lid and immediately heard the whirring of mechanical parts going round and round, then a high-pitched plucking noise met his ears as the small metal drum with infinitesimal spikes began to come into contact with the tiny metal strips that were each tuned to a specific pitch. Harry listened for a few seconds, then lifted his face to Hermione in wonder.

"It's See-o-gan," he said softly.

She smiled gently. "I know. I heard you humming it while you were studying, and I tried very hard to remember it. I went to Dumbledore when you were off with McGonagall after dinner one night and asked him if he knew what it was. He wasn't sure, he had to think about it. But Snape was next to him; they'd been talking. Dumbledore asked him to be excused for a moment so he could talk to me--he always has time for the students, you know? Snape looked really grumpy about it. And then, the strange thing is, when he heard the tune, he said, 'Lily used to sing that.' He said it rather softly; he seemed very nervous -- I don't know -- un-Snape-like. I like that; it's a new word I've just coined. He said it was called See-o-gan. But then he spelled the Welsh, and it was Suogan or something like that. Dumbledore said he remembered it now, it was an old lullaby"...

Harry nodded; his throat felt tight. "My aunt used to sing it for Dudley..." he said softly, listening to the music box.

He could remember being four or five, sitting in his cupboard under the stairs, and his Aunt Petunia would be upstairs putting Dudley to bed, saying, "All right, there's my little Duddy-diddems! All tucked up cozy for the night..." her annoying voice sounding the way Aunt Marge's did when she was talking to her dogs. And then, it would happen, the one similarity that Harry knew of between his mother and her sister: her singing voice. It drifted down the stairs and resonated in his small, dusty prison.

He had a very vague memory of his mother singing to him, more of an assumption, really, since his aunt had let slip once that when they were children, the two sisters had sung duets in the church choir, and that the lullaby had been sung by both and taught to the sisters by their mother. His aunt would begin the Welsh lullaby, and suddenly, Harry could imagine it was his own mother, singing for him. He would close his eyes in the dark cupboard, lean back on his mean, scratchy blanket on his spider-infested mattress on the floor, and listen to the voice, the voice of a mother singing her precious son to sleep...Nevermind that it wasn't his mother, that he wasn't the precious son. He could close his eyes and listen and imagine...

Somehow, that tune had stayed with him. He didn't remember all of the words, because large parts of it were in Welsh, but the tune was as much a part of him as his scar; perhaps the tune was another kind of scar, marking him for life, an indelible part of him, an artifact from his early life, before his world blew up.

The music box wound down and the tune stopped half-way through the first phrase, leaving him hanging, waiting. But that's all right, he thought. That's for next time, something to look forward to. He closed the lid, looked up at Hermione, smiling, but she was strangely blurry, soft at the edges...

"Oh, Harry!" she exclaimed softly, her hand on his cheek. "Are you crying"?

He was, and it surprised him. He wiped his face with his hand hastily, not bothering to take his glasses off, just pushing them up onto his forehead momentarily, then repositioning them. He tried to smile at her again.

"I'm fine," he said, his voice catching, belying his assertion. She smiled as though she were also trying not to cry, and tousled his hair quickly with her hand.

"Good," she said quietly. She took a deep breath, trying to change the mood. "Now! Where's my present"?

Harry smiled, moved his gifts from his trunk and opened it, removed a box that was about half the size the box for the Pensieve had been. But then, he pulled it back, feeling horrified. "No! Wait, I--I'll get you something else, this is--no, Hermione, you don't want this, trust me"...

She furrowed her brow. "What? What are you on about, Harry? I'm sure whatever it is--I mean, I loved my birthday present".

"That was--I don't know. That was easier. We weren't--you know. September was before--" He was babbling and stumbling over his words, unable to say what he meant. "I mean, you got me something so--so wonderful, and this is--don't open it, please"...

But Hermione pulled out her wand and summoned the package from him, with a satisfied look on her face. "I am going to open my gift, Harry Potter, and you can't stop me." She smiled, putting the box down on Ron's bed and opening it. She removed a large lump covered in tissue-paper, which seemed rather heavy. She frowned, pulling the paper off, until what looked like a gargoyle was revealed, about the size of a human head, but with the face of a lion. She put it down on the bed, taking a second tissue-wrapped lump out of the box, finding an identical lion gargoyle. She sat down on the bed, holding both lions on her lap, looking at them, perplexed.

Finally, Harry couldn't take it anymore. "I'm sorry, Hermione! I'm terrible at this. You hate it, I know you do, oh bloody hell"...

She looked at him, not angry or looking upset at all, merely puzzled. "But, Harry--what are they"?

He stopped verbally beating himself up. "They're bookends," he said quietly. She suddenly looked like she'd had an epiphany.

"Ooooooh! Bookends! Of course"--

--"Because you're Hermione Granger and you read a lot and have a lot of books and I'm just about the sorriest excuse for a boyfriend that the world has ever seen and of course you're going to hurl those at my head now and of course I deserve it so I should have expected it"--

But as Harry's diatribe continued, Hermione's laughter finally made its way into his consciousness, and he stopped, amazed. She put down the bookends and walked over to him, putting her arms around his waist and giving him a firm hug. He awkwardly put his arms around her. She looked up at him.

"Is that what you are, Harry? My boyfriend?" she smiled.

"Well, unofficially, I suppose. We can't be official yet, can we"?

"True, true. But if the way Viktor and Cho were at the Christmas party is any indication, maybe we won't have to wait much longer".

He looked down at her shining face. "That would be nice..." he said, leaning down to kiss her. Her hands pressed on his back, then started to caress his skin in circular patterns, sending signals to other parts of his body....He pulled back abruptly before she could detect the effect it was having on him. The two of them weren't wearing much clothing, they were in a room with five beds, and there wasn't another soul in Gryffindor Tower.

"Well, we'd better get dressed and go down to breakfast," he tried to say in a normal voice, although to his own ears he sounded slightly strangled. "Fancy skating after that? Or sledding"?

Hermione walked to the window, evidently oblivious to how she'd been torturing him. "Sounds good. There's a fresh snowfall. And--oh my." Her voice had dwindled into almost-nothingness. "They're -- they're here, Harry," she whispered

Harry turned to find her staring out the window at the grounds with a look of abject terror on her face. Harry joined her at the window. What he saw made his blood run cold.

Walking across the grounds down near the lake and heading for the forest were seven enormous shapes. Each one had to be at least twenty feet tall, one or two might have been twenty five feet. They were all dressed in cloaks that looked patched together from multiple animal skins, at least several hundred required for each cloak. But they weren't skins from small animals like rabbits or foxes. The heads had been left on, and Harry could see deer, enormous bears, mountain lions, wolves...They walked into the forest and the trees swallowed them up, since the massive firs were about twice as tall as the giants. It took some time. Even after all of the giants were concealed in the forest, the tops of the trees continued to shiver, as though it were a field of wheat and normal-sized people were pushing the wheat stalks aside to walk through it. Huge footprints marked the path where they'd been walking through the snow on their way to the forest.

Harry swallowed, watching the last of the giants enter the forest and disappear from sight. "Remind me," he said shakily to Hermione, "not to go into the forest ever again"...

She nodded, still staring at the spot where the last giant had disappeared, and he remembered how terrified she'd been when Hagrid's mum had picked her up. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"Go dress for breakfast".

She nodded, still dumb, and turned to leave in a daze. When she was gone, Harry looked out the window again. The trees in the forest were still moving.

Giants had come to Hogwarts.

* * * * *

Breakfast in the Great Hall was festive, even with the small number of people that had remained at the castle. The usual complement of twelve Christmas trees adorned the huge space, each decorated with different magical ornaments, everything from live fairies and enchanted bubbles to tiny silver and gold bells that played carols in complicated harmonies, like a miniature carillon. They ate and talked to the sound of the tinkling melodies, Dumbledore at the head of the table, wishing everyone a Happy Christmas as they arrived, passing around all manner of delicacies that did not normally grace the breakfast table at Hogwarts. Harry tried a delicious raspberry-filled croissant and Hermione helped herself to some gravlax and fresh sour cream with feathery fronds of dill, caviar and small rounds of toast with chopped hard-boiled eggs.

Roger Davies was actually being somewhat relaxed--he wasn't even wearing his Head Boy badge. Hannah and Ernie kept looking at each other furtively and smiling and colouring. Harry didn't have to wonder what was going on in Hufflepuff house last night...Then he realized that there were no students from Slytherin. Typical, he thought. No one in Slytherin would dream of waiting on house elves on Boxing Day. But then--hardly anyone else in the school had stayed to participate in the Boxing Day switch, either.

After breakfast, Harry and Hermione rose when Dumbledore did and tried to discreetly follow him from the hall. He stopped suddenly and they stumbled into him. Dumbledore turned, smiling at them as they picked themselves up, and said, "Shall we go to my office to talk?" They nodded, and then the three of them continued their upward path to his office. At the gargoyle that guarded the entrance, Dumbledore said, "Fizzing Whizzbees!" The wall opened, and Harry saw the now-familiar spiral stair that led to the round room where all of the headmasters of Hogwarts had held sway. Dumbledore sat behind his desk and gestured for Harry and Hermione to sit in the two chairs before it.

"Now, I think I know what this is about, but why don't I let you tell me anyway"?

Harry took a deep breath. "It's the giants sir"--

Dumbledore looked unperturbed. "Yes?" he said, still smiling.

"Yes, well--we saw them go into the forest this morning. Seven of them. And we've met Hagrid's mum, too." He looked sideways at Hermione; he wondered if her gravlax was going to come up again.

"And you're concerned," Dumbledore said. It was not a question.

"Well, yes. I mean--what are they going to eat? Will they stay in the forest? What about the magical creatures that live there--the centaurs, the unicorns--will they be in danger"?

Dumbledore smiled and said kindly, "Now, now, Harry. Not to worry. I just met with Fridwulfa again yesterday--handsome isn't she? And she assures me that her friends are quite well-behaved. While they've been in eastern Europe, none of them have eaten a single human, and they've brought a good supply of food for themselves. The students here will be perfectly safe".

"Well, then, what about security? I mean, we saw them go right into the forest. There are huge footprints in the snow out there! What if Hannah or Ernie or Roger saw? What if one of the professors decides to tell the board of governors"?

"The staff all know. Not everyone is happy, but they all know. And Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff houses do not have windows that look out toward the forest, as Gryffindor Tower does. And I had Hagrid smooth out the footprints this morning." Dumbledore stopped smiling now; he looked very grave indeed. "We need the giants as our allies, Harry. Not our enemies. There is an expression, 'My enemy's enemy is my friend.' Do you know that one"?

"I think so".

"Well, we need to get as many of the enemies of Voldemort as possible all working on the same side. Hogwarts is a very safe place, Harry, but still--you were spirited away with a Portkey and almost killed. And Cedric was killed".

At the mention of Cedric's name, Harry lowered his head. He could not look at Dumbledore suddenly, even though he knew he was not being blamed.

"The giants are yet another defense we will have at the school now. I do not know whether we will need them. I do not know when Voldemort or the Death Eaters will strike next--things have been strangely quiet since the summer, since--" and he looked at Hermione, whose eyes were very wide now "--Hermione was taken in Bulgaria. There have only been two or three reports of Death Eater activity in that time." Near the Weasleys, Harry thought. But he didn't want to say it with Hermione in the room; she would be afraid for Ron, having gone home for Christmas, even though his oldest brother was also there.

Dumbledore went on. "It is possible that something is going to happen soon"...

Tonight, thought Harry. But again, he could not say aloud that he knew about that; Dumbledore might regret having given Harry his dad's Invisibility Cloak, if he didn't already. He simply nodded at Dumbledore. And then he realized--he hadn't even told Hermione about that, and about Malfoy and Ginny. (Although she'd said that she knew who Ginny was planning to meet that night--assuming she was right).

"All in all, Harry, try not to be too alarmed about the giants. I plan to make sure they are quite happy and comfortable here and also to assure that the other residents of the forest are able to carry on as usual. Was there anything else"?

"No, sir".

"Good. Now, who wants to go sledding?" His eyes were twinkling at them again and Harry and Hermione had to smile. McGonagall was a fine head-of-house, Harry thought, and as deputy headmistress, she would probably be running things one day; but for now, he was glad that Dumbledore was headmaster. He couldn't picture McGonagall using the names of sweets for her office passwords, or sledding with the students in the winter.

They had an enjoyable day, romping outdoors. Hagrid joined them too. Harry and Hermione did not mention the giants to him. Every so often, Harry noticed the trees of the forest swaying in a way that clearly had nothing to do with the wind, and he caught his breath, half-wishing he'd brought his Firebolt, so he could pull Hermione onto it and zip up to the castle quickly in the event that a hungry giant should emerge from the trees. After eating lunch, they went back outdoors again. As long as Harry did not see the trees moving, he was fine. There were other things that could make him nervous, however. He was extremely glad to see that Hagrid was not interested in trying to skate on the lake...

Then it was time for Christmas dinner. Harry always knew to expect a sumptuous feast, and this year was no different, even though their numbers were small. Roger had asked Dumbledore's permission to invite Fleur and her sister Gabrielle up from the village. Once more, when she saw him, Fleur performed the two-kisses-on-each-cheek maneuver. Harry looked at Hermione. She was smiling, nonplused; good, thought Harry, she's stopped getting jealous over Fleur. Or, he considered, maybe she was reassured by the "boyfriend" statement he'd made that morning.

In addition to the usual turkeys and hams and multiple side dishes and flaming Christmas pudding, there were, of course, Christmas crackers at every place, and more scattered about the table. Hermione and McGonagall opened a cracker together, and out leaped a number of small creatures that looked nominally like small bunnies, but they appeared to be somewhat insubstantial, as though they were made from the fluff that one finds under beds and dressers. There was also a hat with a feather duster on top. McGonagall placed it on her head, giving Hermione a rare smile, then turning to Dumbledore.

"I'm all set for tomorrow, Albus, aren't I"?

Dumbledore, for once, looked like he was trying very hard not to laugh. Hermione was cooing to the dust bunnies, who were leaping about the table now, unfortunately causing a small cloud of dust to rise into the air every time one of them landed. Some of the food was becoming quite grey.

Hagrid pulled a cracker with little Gabrielle Delacour; it emitted a hat with the head of a Hungarian Horntail on it. "Just like the one ye got past in the Tournament, Harry!" he exclaimed happily. Harry and Hermione smiled at him. The cracker also contained small model dragons which moved about, also just like the ones they'd selected for the Tournament. Fleur recoiled from these, perhaps remembering the first task, but her sister gasped with pleasure as they flew about between the goblets and pitchers of eggnog and alit on the plum pudding. There were several different species, including a Norwegian Ridgeback. "Just like Norbert..." Harry heard him say softly, sadly. Harry could tell Hagrid still missed Norbert a great deal. Unfortunately, this wasn't exactly a good time for making an overseas trip to visit a dragon.

Then Dumbledore and Harry pulled a cracker together, and what leaped out was a hat with a golden griffin on it, the wingspread a good two feet. "Ah, that's just the thing for me!" Dumbledore said, putting it on his head in place of his usual wizard's hat. Some small toy snakes also burst out of the same cracker. Harry poked at them. They were like Muggle rubber snakes from joke shops, except that they moved and hissed and coiled themselves around his finger when he picked them up. But, of course, thought Harry, these don't speak Parseltongue. He listened for a few minutes to the hissing of the toy snakes and it just sounded like hissing to him. Sandy was confused; she said as much under his robe. He hissed back softly to her that he would explain later.

Then, finally, Roger and Fleur shared a cracker that emitted small white doves and a bridal veil and black top hat, much to Roger's consternation. He turned quite red, while Fleur busied herself about trying on the veil and getting others around her to tell her how striking she looked. She shoved the top hat on Roger's head so hard, he had to struggle to pull it off, and when he did, there was a telltale red mark across his forehead.

After dinner, they played some games and Dumbledore led them in singing carols. By the time Harry and Hermione went upstairs to Gryffindor Tower, it was rather late. Harry anticipated that there might be a problem extricating himself from her, but she yawned hugely, saying, "Oh! It's going to be a big day tomorrow! We've got a hundred house elves to cook breakfast for, and there's only--let's see--seven teachers who stayed and five students. Twelve of us. But McGonagall said she'll have been planning things out, so I think we'll have things pretty well under control. Of course we can't pop in and out of rooms like the house elves, but"--

"Oh, so that's what you and McGonagall have been doing. Planning for Boxing Day! But--wait, Hermione. If no one can Apparate on the grounds of Hogwarts, how come house elves can"?

"It's PEOPLE who can't Apparate on the school grounds, Harry. And anyway, what the house elves do doesn't get classified as Apparating by the Ministry of Magic. It's just how they move around, like the way we walk or run. And they don't have to learn to do it or be licensed or use wands or anything. They just start getting around that way from the time they're born. Must drive new parents crazy, I'd think." New elf parents. Elves having elven babies. That was something he'd never thought about before.

"Right, well, good night Hermione. Happy Christmas." He kissed her on the forehead. But she caught him around the neck as he was trying to get away.

"Happy Christmas, Harry," she said raising herself up and kissing his mouth gently, opening her mouth for a brief agonizing second, then pulling back and kissing his nose affectionately. She looked at him, seemed to sigh for a moment and went up the staircase to the girls' dorms. Harry gazed up at her retreating back for a moment, mightily tempted to follow her up, but he stopped himself. Self-control. I have self-control.

But he had to keep repeating this to himself over and over until he had crawled into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin.

Before he closed his eyes, he said to Sandy, "Tell me I have self-control, Sandy".

"All right. You have self-control, Harry Potter".

But he didn't completely believe her. Then he heard her hissing again.

"What is self-control, Harry Potter"?

Harry sighed.

"Good night, Sandy".

* * * * *

The sea crashed against the rocks violently, sending up spray a hundred feet above the water, often much more. The wind was high, as though a storm were brewing, but there were no clouds in the sky. The rocks were jagged and dangerous-looking, as though giant knives had been sunk down into the water with their blades pointing up. The cliff rose straight and steep, chalk white and lifeless on the sheer face; no life could be supported by that lime, that corrosive lime, especially in combination with the salt spray...

Dover, he thought. They're at Dover.

Then, at the top--grass touched with frost, a thin carpet of it. Moss too, and lichen clinging to the sea-wet rocks here and there. There was a pervasive smell of salt. The moon hung over the landscape, not quite full, but still glowing like a beacon, casting everything into high relief. The stars seemed too bright and numerous to be real, stars that city dwellers never see, for the urban lights. It was a magical place, a beautiful place.

It is an evil place.

Hooded, cloaked figures stood in a loose circle, perhaps twenty-five feet in diameter, not ten feet from the sheer drop. They did not speak; some of them seemed to be shivering in the cold, in the freezing sea spray that could not be escaped this close to the edge of the cliff, the edge of the world. Near the center of the circle stood their leader, tall and thin and silent. Only he did not betray any reaction to the environment, standing as still and unwavering as if it were a midsummer's night. Perhaps he no longer felt the cold, or had such cold blood running through his veins that the cruel, scouring wind was warm by comparison. A large snake curled around his feet, as if guarding him from harm--although who would dare to attempt such a thing, no one knew. Certainly no one present, not if they wanted to see another dawn.

He turned away from the sea; he was watching, waiting, expecting someone. They appeared as if out of thin air, some yards from the waiting circle. A shivering man with a curling-up beard and hair that had once been black but was now streaked with white was being escorted by two more figures in hooded cloaks. He could not walk properly, he was being dragged, his feet scarring the landscape, leaving a twin trail behind him through the moss and scrub and lichen. Another figure followed. He did not wear his hood on his head, and he seemed to be the only one besides their leader who was unaffected by the weather.

That will happen when you've lived for twelve years as a rat.

He pointed a silver hand, directing the prisoner's escorts. With a flourish, he withdrew a wand from his robes, flicked it toward the center of the circle, and at his silent command, a piece of earth rose like an ancient altar stone, as if it had been there for time out of mind. The escorts lifted the man onto the stone, pushing him down into a prone position, then joining their comrades on the perimeter.

The hoodless man stood by the side of his Master. The Master nodded at him, a sign of approval that the servant clearly had been coveting. He fawned on his master, bowing, practically kissing the hem of his garment.

"Karkaroff, my Lord".

The Master walked away from the sycophant as if he did not exist, going to the raised altar-like stone, surveying his quarry, gliding his eyes over him as if deciding what types of torture would be most exquisitely painful. The most excruciating pain. Yes, for such a coward...he'd find out what there really was to be frightened of...

He waved his hand in an almost careless gesture, and snake-like cords appeared that bound the prisoner's legs and chest to the massive stone. He went to stand at the prisoner's head, looking down at him so that they were each upside down to the other.

"Karkaroff---" the Master said softly, almost hissing the "f" sound, like a snake.

The prisoner had his eyes squeezed shut, but that did not satisfy the Master. With a flick of one finger, the prisoner's eyes were forced to stay open; in fact, he could no longer blink, and this inability, within seconds, began to make him shake violently.

"Karkaroff," the Master said again, his voice high and low at once, hissing and growling. "Why did you not return to me when I summoned my servants upon my regaining my body? Why did you run away like a scared little rabbit?"

And suddenly, there was no man on the stone, but a small brown hare, looking confused and disoriented, nose twitching, eyes still unable to blink. An instant later, the man was lying on the stone again, bound to it still, as though that had been his state all along. The figures in the circle laughed appreciatively, and their Master beamed around at them, satisfied with their reaction.

He needs an audience.

"You should have known that you could not hide from me, not when you still bear the mark that tells you who owns you."

The prisoner was shaking all over, tears running down his temples into his hair, his eyes wild from several minutes of exposure to the cold night air and sea spray. He whispered something, faltered.

"What? Do you have something to say in your defense?"

The prisoner nodded and tried to speak again. "Your heir," he choked. "I have been seeing to the education of your heir."

The heir.

The Master smirked, as if this were of no consequence.

"He may or may not be my heir. I have yet to determine that. I have already started to find him useful, however, and I hope that soon he may join us here. But if you think that that will buy you back into my good graces...you must think I am the Minister of Magic".

He smiled ever so slightly, and this time, the figures around the circle laughed in a more subdued manner. The Master paced around the stone in a leisurely fashion, as though he had all the time in the world--which he did.

"However, I should not be too angry, my wayward one, because this evening you will be very useful to me. In fact, extremely useful. You see, a new Death Eater is here who will take your place, and your fate will amply demonstrate to him what happens to those who do not obey their Master." Another flick of his finger, and the prisoner's eye muscles could perform normally again, blinking when necessary, lubricating his eyes. But it was a small comfort; he knew what was coming. Or thought he knew. The Master moved to the prisoner's feet, facing away from him.

"Bring him to me," he hissed softly.

A hooded figure standing opposite the Master reached out to the thinner figure standing next to him and touched his arm, making him flinch. Hesitant at first, this figure moved forward, in what would be confident strides, if he were not shaking so much. The Master made a gesture with his hand, a slight pushing downwards, and the slim figure went to his knees. Another casual gesture, and of its own accord, his hood flipped back, revealing yellow-white hair and milky skin, storm-grey eyes reflecting the moon.

"We have here at last--the Moonchild. See how even the color of his hair is like moonlight." He seemed like he might touch that fair hair, but his long-fingered hand did not actually come in contact with it, merely moved above the bare head which was shaking, shivering in the cold, his teeth clenched so he would not make noise.

"You!" the Master said to him. "You have been promised to me since your first birthday, because I would have killed you then, my future enemy. Tell me now why I should not kill you".

The grey eyes rose to the Master, then looked down again. "I am not your enemy, my Lord." The voice did not waver, was not loud, but even and clear on the cold air.

"Not my enemy? The signs said so. The Prophecy said so. But I spared you, allowed your parents to raise you to serve me. I waited to see what you would become".

A figure at the perimeter of the circle pulled back his hood, revealing another head of silvery hair. "I have raised him to be your faithful servant, my Lord".

The Master moved toward the speaker. "Have you raised him to be more faithful than you?" The man who had spoken hung his head, silent.

Suddenly, from his kneeling position, the youth spoke, louder this time, with a clarity that sliced through the cold air and the noise of the sea. "I am not your enemy, my Lord, because we have the same enemy".

The Master gestured with his hand again, carelessly, and the massive snake moved so that it curled around the kneeling figure. It took its own tail in its mouth, completing the circle.

"Name this enemy," the Master hissed to him.

"POTTER".

The word hung on the still air, and even the waves seemed to have stopped crashing on the rocks. Then the hooded figures began to murmur to each other, as though a profanity had been uttered.

My enemy's enemy is my friend.

With a gesture, the Master achieved their silence again, and once more, the only sound was of the sea. He walked around the kneeling figure inside the snake's circle.

"If Potter is your enemy, then indeed, we are allies." He walked to the stone again, placing his long, thin hand on the forehead of the prisoner, who closed his eyes. Suddenly, he took out his wand and pointed it at the youth, as erect and dignified as he could be while on his knees, and cried, "CRUCIO"!

The fair young man threw his arms out, convulsing, his head thrown back as pain deeper than any pain imaginable coursed through him, like fire through all his veins, like hot knives piercing every inch of skin, like having that skin flayed removed layer by layer by excruciating layer....

But he remained in the kneeling position throughout the pain, and did not cry out, although some guttural grunts escaped from his clenched jaw and his eyes squeezed shut from the pain, tears slowly seeping out from under his lids, making pale streaks on his moonlit face.

The Master lowered his wand, and the pain stopped. The youth huddled inside the snake circle, his head on his knees, catching his breath, not looking up.

"Now," the Master said silkily. "That hurt, didn't it"?

He raised his face, still in his huddled position. He was no longer erect and proud; he was broken. "Yes, my Lord".

"Ask me not to do it again," the Master said, almost petulantly.

"Please, don't do it again, my Lord," he said immediately, gasping as he said it.

The Master smiled. "Obedience is so important. I cannot have anything but unquestioned obedience. You see here before you an exemplary Death Eater," he told the other hooded figures. "All he is missing is--the Mark. Rise." The young man struggled to his feet, shaking violently. His legs looked like they would give way any moment. "Give me your arm." The requested arm was extended, and the Master pulled the sleeve back, showing the pure white skin there.

"Whose are you"?

"Yours, my Lord".

The Master placed the tip of his wand in the crook of the young man's elbow, crying with a terrible voice, "MORSMORDRE"!

The young man screamed in agony as he had not when he was being tortured, sinking to his knees again and holding left arm in his right hand, as the figure of the skull and snake burned themselves into his flesh.

There is nothing like the smell of burning human flesh.

Slowly, he raised his head again to look at the Master, his breath coming in irregular pants and heaves, the skin of his forearm smoking faintly. He would carry the scar for the rest of his life.

"Thank you, my Lord".

The Master threw back his head in what passed for a laugh. He turned to the hoodless man with the silver hand. "You could learn a thing or two from this one, Wormtail." He turned to the young man again and commanded him, "Rise." He stood, no longer shaking, but as composed as the Dark Lord. The snake let go of its own tail, slithering to its Master, sorting itself into a coil next to the altar stone.

"Now, as my newest servant, you will help me with the matter of our friend here," he said, gesturing at the prisoner.

The grey eyes flashed, meeting the terrified eyes of the prisoner. The youth looked momentarily apprehensive, then a shield went up, a barrier, and he was unreadable again.

"Am I to do the killing curse, my Lord"?

"No, no. When the time comes, that will be my very great pleasure. And a quick death is not the type of reward he deserves. No, you will have the privilege of being first to curse him with a pain that will make him wish he were dead. You have just experienced it yourself. Was that your first time"?

"Yes, my Lord".

"Having just been through it, you should have enough pain and anger in you to pull it off, even though you are so young. Just remember all of the agony you felt, how every bone in your body"--

"My Lord?" There was a slight gasp from the other figures; he had interrupted the Master. The Master looked at him through slits of eyes.

"Yes?" he hissed.

"I know of something else".

The Master scrutinized him with interest. "Something else? The Cruciatus Curse is called unforgivable because it is the worst pain that can possibly be inflicted on someone. Can less pain possibly be appropriate for this traitor"?

"It is--from another country. I believe it would be unforgivable as well if the authorities in this country knew about it, but yet, there are no laws regarding it".

The Dark Lord smiled. "You have piqued my interest. Very well. I am feeling generous. You may proceed".

"He needs to be untied." Now Wormtail whipped his head around.

“My Lord--” he began, but with a flick of his hand, the Master had removed the bonds that held the prisoner to the stone. Cautiously, the prisoner sat up on the stone. He didn’t look inclined to move further than that, however, as he apprehensively looked at the young man who was planning to cause him pain.

The fair head turned toward his father momentarily, who nodded at him. He turned back to the prisoner, pulling his wand from his cloak and pointing it at him with a straight arm that did not shake.

“HARA KIRI!” he cried, and it was terrible to hear the hate in the young voice, newly changed, too high still to belong to a man, too low to be a boy. The curse struck the prisoner, and he was forced to position himself as if kneeling. He did not seem to be in pain as yet; he seemed to be going through a pantomime of picking up an object, tracing its invisible length through the air...

Is that a dagger I see before me?

...then taking the invisible object and moving as if plunging it into his lower left abdomen, grunting with pain, then pulling it across his midsection. The prisoner looked down, and that was when the screaming began. The screams were high and long, and the prisoner paused barely a second between them, clutching his stomach desperately and continuing to scream so loudly that it was not possible to hear the crashing waves anymore over the deafening crescendo of his pain. Finally, the prisoner blacked out from the pain, and the Master turned to the youth and slowly began to strike his hands together, smiling grimly. The other figures also clapped solemnly, as the fair head turned, looking around at them, seeking their approval and respect. When the applause had ceased, the Master said to him, “Tell, me, what did he feel”?

The young man glanced briefly at his father again and turned back to his new Master. “He imagined that he was plunging a large ceremonial dagger into his midsection and slicing himself open. Then he imagined that he saw his own entrails spilling out onto his lap--and he felt all of the pain as if it were actually happening”.

The Master nodded in appreciation. “The illusion of self-mutilation, of suicide. Well-chosen.” He turned to the other figures. “Witness the new generation! For fourteen years, no new Death Eaters have joined me, but now we will add to our numbers and increase our power!” He pointed his wand into the air and cried, “MORSMORDRE!” once more, and this time, an explosion sounded, waking the unconscious prisoner, who looked down, astounded that he did not appear to be bleeding to death from what his own hand had done, then looking up, to see the huge green skull and the snake, hovering in the sky over his head. He began shaking once more.

Suddenly, pounding footsteps were heard. Another hooded figure was running toward the circle, panting, “My Lord, my Lord,” repeatedly. When he was inside the perimeter, he threw back his hood to reveal that he was--

The youth’s father.

The fair young man turned and looked at the man he’d been regarding as his father, then back at the newcomer. The two men were identical.

The Master looked back and forth between the two men with narrowed eyes.

“My Lord,” the new arrival panted, pointing at the father already standing in the circle. “That man is an impostor! A spy!”

“No, my Lord!” the man said who had been in the circle. “He is the impostor”!

The two men glared at each other, wands out, when suddenly, the Master raised his wand and pointed it toward the man who had been there the entire time. “We shall see!” he cried, and all of the other Death Eaters converged upon him with their wands drawn, forgetting about the youth and the prisoner. The newcomer grabbed the prisoner and the youth and pulled them away from the stone, back in the direction he’d come. But Wormtail saw them go, and his voice was carried on the wind.

“Master”!

The Dark Lord turned; in less than a second, his wand was aimed at the fleeing trio.

“AVADA KEDAVRA”!

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” Harry screamed continuously, holding his scar, his head threatening to explode from the pain.

A flash of green light was the only visible thing in the world. It was a screaming green flash. The screaming went on and on and on and on and on...It was the sound of the world turning in on itself and disappearing.

* * * * *

Chapter Eighteen: Boxing Day

The scream resounded through Gryffindor Tower, echoing in the stairwells, the noise bouncing off the unyielding stone which refused to absorb the horrific sound, but sent it on its way again and again and again, amplifying it, so that it grew exponentially worse with each repetition.

At the center of Harry's scream was the terrible not-knowing. Had the killing curse hit someone? Who? Harry remembered Sirius agreeing with Snape that if two Lucius Malfoys showed up when Voldemort summoned the Death Eaters, that would be a disaster.

And that was exactly what had happened.

Harry sat up, his head filled with a blinding pain.

Was Draco Malfoy dead?

Was Lucius Malfoy? Was Snape? Sirius?

Sweat was running in rivers down Harry's face, his neck, his chest and back. He clutched at his basilisk amulet, thinking of Ginny, Ginny. If Malfoy was dead because of him, she would hate him.

All my fault. All my--

"Harry!" Hermione cried. He heard her stumble into the room, panting, sounding like she had run as fast as she could down the stairs to the girls' dorms and back up the boys' stairs. She parted the bedcurtains, finding him sitting up, perspiring profusely, looking fevered and ill. She hadn't put her slippers on, nor her dressing gown over her blue flannel pajamas. Her curls were wild and her eyes were blazing. She held her wand before her, with the end lit.

"Harry!" she said again. "Are you all right?" She put her hand on his cheek, then tentatively moved a finger to his scar. She cried out again, knocking her hand away, putting his head in his hands and crouching on the bed, rocking back and forth. She backed up. After a few seconds he glanced up at her. He could tell she was frightened. He swallowed.

Harry tried to sit up, ran his fingers through his hair. The room looked strange in the light of Hermione's wand. There were no clouds at Dover, in his dream, but at Hogwarts the sky was covered with a grey blanket; another snow storm was coming. No moonlight penetrated the clouds; the room would have been pitch black without the wandlight.

He looked at her. "Going to the lav," he said shakily, standing slowly, moving toward the door as if he'd just learned to walk. She sat on the edge of the bed to wait.

Harry crossed the hall, holding onto the door frames, staggering into the small, tiled room. The magic that was at Hogwarts detected his presence and the candles on the walls and hanging from the high ceiling flickered to life. (Not everyone thinks of taking a wand to the lavatory). The light hurt his eyes, and he staggered to a sink, squinting, leaning over it heavily, looking down. It looked like all of the Hogwarts sinks. It looked like the sink in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom that led to the Chamber of Secrets, where Ginny--and he--had almost died.

At the time, it had felt like the worst day of Harry's life, when he had found out that Ginny was in the Chamber, probably dead. Sitting in the common room with her brothers, waiting, with that rising feeling of dread in his chest...

Since then he had slain the basilisk and saved her, and saved Sirius and Buckbeak the hippogriff. And then--there was Cedric.

Harry turned on the cold tap, holding his hands under the water, leaning over to splash it on his face. He cried out when he touched his scar; the water drops that landed there immediately turning to steam. He winced, looked in the mirror. Even though he wasn't wearing his glasses, he was close enough to the mirror that he had no trouble seeing himself. His scar

was red and seemed to be throbbing. The skin around it was slightly pink and inflamed. His pupils were very large, leaving only a thin sliver of green iris around the blackness. He had a slight shadow on his face; he would just use his wand to shave in the morning, like Ron did. No transfiguration.

After splashing water over his torso too ("Sorry, Sandy") and drying off, he returned to his room. He went to the silver pitcher near the window to pour himself a drink of water, then turned to face Hermione.

"Voldemort," he choked. "Killing curse--my scar"--

Hermione nodded, rising and putting her arms around him. He gathered her to him. It was so comforting to have her warmth pressed against him, to feel her breath on his skin, her hands caressing his back. He kissed her on the forehead, then moved to get back into bed. When he was lying down on his back, his arms behind his head, wondering how he would ever go to sleep again, she reached for the music box she'd given him that morning; she wound it up and opened the lid. The lullaby floated out of the little box. Harry smiled at her and she smiled back, stroked his cheek.

He thought she was going to go back to her dorm then, but she pulled back the covers and climbed into his bed with him, snuggling up to him, lying on her left side. She put her head on his chest, her right arm--still holding her lit wand--across his stomach. He looked down at her, kissed her forehead again.

He would tell her everything, he knew. She had to know.

He soon felt rather than heard her breathing peacefully, slumbering on his chest, and he took her wand from her hand, saying, "Nox," and put it on the bedside table. He wrapped his arms around her, feeling safe and protected somehow, knowing that this slip of a girl was with him, by his side.

The music box stopped just before the end of the lullaby--only one note was left unplayed.

Tomorrow he would tell her everything.

* * * * *

Although he lay back for long periods of time with his eyes closed, he slept only sporadically. He felt comforted by the warmth and weight of Hermione beside him, in the dark. Near sunrise, a soft grey aura started to break through the blackness in the room, and in this predawn light he saw that she'd turned over on her side, with her back to him. He rolled over beside her, spooning her, putting his left arm around her waist, pressing against her, feeling her back against his chest, the backs of her thighs against the fronts of his.

He watched her sleep, watched her dream, her eyes moving back and forth beneath her eyelids. What are you dreaming about, Hermione? He caressed her hair with his left hand, then rested it on her hip, feeling tired enough to doze off again, at last, unable to keep his eyes open any longer, to resist the lure of sleep.

When he woke again, he could tell it was much later, although the flat grey light was not appreciably different from the dawn. There was a slight hollow in the mattress where she had been lying, an indentation on the pillow where her head had been. But when he put his hand on the place next to him where she'd lain, it was cold. She'd been gone for a while.

Harry looked at his watch; it was nine-thirty! Not only had he not woken early enough to run, but he'd let Hermione down. He was supposed to help her make breakfast for the elves. He threw on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, slipped on his sneakers without untying them and retying. He practically leapt out the portrait hole, running down the stairs to the kitchens so rapidly, his legs in such a repetitive rhythm, he was afraid he wouldn't be able to stop at the bottom.

He arrived at the painting of the bowl of fruit breathing hard, and tickled the pear to open the door. Upon entering the kitchens, Harry was surprised to see, not a bustle of activity, but a calm breakfast being enjoyed by Dumbledore, Hagrid, Moody and Roger Davies.

"Good morning, Harry!" Dumbledore greeted him. "Sit down, sit down. You missed the elves' breakfast, but we'll get you up to speed by lunch! Dobby has them outside playing in the snow right now, if you can believe it. I think I'll check on them soon, make sure they're not trying to clean the windows or shovel paths to the greenhouses!"

Harry smiled; convincing the elves not to work was not half the battle--it was pretty much the whole battle. He sat next to Dumbledore, who passed him a plate of toast and some jam. Harry poured himself some orange juice.

“So,” Dumbledore said softly, once Harry was eating. “Hermione mentioned something about your scar.” Harry nodded. “We’ll go upstairs to talk when you’ve eaten.” Harry nodded again, as he drank.

He saw again the circle of Death Eaters in the moonlight, Malfoy’s face when he thanked Voldemort for burning the Dark Mark into his arm....He’s got nerve, Harry thought. I’ll give him that.

“So, Harry,” Hagrid said to him. “Did yeh like yer present”?

Harry smiled at him. “Definitely. Thanks, Hagrid. Did you like yours?” Harry, Ron and Hermione had jointly given Hagrid one of Colin’s photos, another copy of the one Hermione had received for her birthday, in a frame they’d bought in Hogsmeade that was bordered by all manner of magical creatures: unicorns, hippogriffs, centaurs, dragons, griffins (the usual kind, not the Gryffindor kind) and other things--but no Blast-Ended Skrewts.

Hagrid smiled in that way he had that made it seem that he was about to cry. “Yeah. I loved it,” he said, sniffing for a second.

“Potter!” Moody said suddenly. He was sitting across the table from Harry, eating a sausage he’d speared on the small knife he carried with him at all times. His blue magical eye was swiveled to the side, perhaps watching to see who might come through the door next (or who was on the other side of it), but his normal eye was fixed on Harry, small and dark and beady.

“Sir,” Harry replied, swallowing his juice quickly and setting down his goblet.

“I expect you to take the lead in class after the holiday!” he informed him. “Been letting Weasley and Longbottom get all the points with their essays! I expected better of you”!

Harry squirmed, wishing he were not saying this in front of Dumbledore and Hagrid, not to mention Roger Davies, who suddenly seemed to be listening intently with an expression on his face that looked designed to give him the appearance of not listening at all.

“Yes, sir,” Harry responded, hoping that would be the end of it.

“I mean, that Hamlet essay,” Moody went on. “About him being jealous of his uncle because he wished he had had the nerve himself to kill his father and bed his mother! Where the hell did you get that idea”?

Unexpectedly, Dumbledore came to the rescue. “Actually, Alastor, that’s a pretty standard Oedipal interpretation of the play...quite a few other people have come to the same conclusion”.

Now Moody fixed both his regular and his magical eye on Harry. “Oh? You don’t say. So! Potter! Not beneath a little plagiarism”?

“No! I mean, yes! I mean”--

“Now, now, Alastor, just because other people have thought of it before doesn’t make it plagiarism. I’m sure Harry had some original points to make as well, didn’t you Harry?” Dumbledore looked at him, and Harry squirmed again. Nothing like having the headmaster and a professor dissecting his work in front of others...

“Well, I did notice something about Rosencrantz and Guildenstern”...

Now Moody brightened. “Yes! That’s true, you did. Pity you didn’t focus on them. I did like that; they can’t say, ‘I think, therefore I am!’ For them it’s more like, ‘I am summoned, therefore I am!’”

Dumbledore smiled and nodded. “I like that. Very Tom Stoppard”.

Harry frowned. “Who”?

Dumbledore put his hand on Harry’s shoulder, getting to his feet. “Well, Alastor, you can’t accuse him of plagiarism if he hasn’t heard of Stoppard, can you”?

Moody looked slightly disappointed, as though he'd been dearly looking forward to stringing Harry up for academic dishonesty. Dumbledore looked at Harry.

"Coming, Harry"?

"Um, yes sir," he said with his mouth full. He picked up another piece of toast to bring with him and followed Dumbledore out of the kitchens, looking over his shoulder quickly at Moody, who was surveying his sausage with his good eye--but magical eye was aimed right at Harry. Harry quickly turned to look in front of him again, following Dumbledore.

They did not speak while climbing the numerous staircases necessary to reach Dumbledore's office. Once Harry was seated in one of the chairs before Dumbledore's desk, the headmaster lit the fireplace with his wand and then turned and scrutinized him with concern in his usually-twinkling blue eyes.

"Before I say anything else, Harry, you should know: Professor Snape and Sirius are both safe. Sirius contacted me as soon as they returned to Remus Lupin's, where they've been staying. Sirius told me you knew a little of what they were planning. I won't ask how you knew".

Harry closed his eyes and heaved a sigh of relief. "Then no one was killed! Oh, thank"--

"I didn't say that".

Harry opened his eyes. "I had a dream. I saw Voldemort with the Death Eaters. But it ended when he did the killing curse. My scar hurt so badly"--

"I know. Did you think no one could hear you outside of Gryffindor Tower"?

Harry looked at him, not wanting to ask, but compelled beyond any instinct of self-preservation or fear. "Who was killed?" he asked quietly.

"Karkaroff".

Of course! Harry thought. It had taken months for him to be tracked down; Voldemort would not want to take the chance that he would go unpunished. Even though he didn't get to torture him as much as he would have liked.

"Who--who was there? Was it Sirius or Snape"?

"There was a--complication. I'll let Sirius explain it to you. He should be calling any minute"--

And sure enough, there suddenly appeared in the fireplace the head of Sirius Black.

"Hello, Harry. Hello, Headmaster".

Dumbledore smiled. "Why is it so difficult for former students to call me Albus"?

Sirius coloured. "Called up on the carpet too many times for that, I suppose. I'll work on it".

"Well, I promised Professor Sinistra I'd help with cleaning the tablecloths from breakfast. Must be going. You two have a nice chat," he said, as though Sirius had called to pass the time of day with Harry instead of talking to him about life-and-death issues.

When Dumbledore had gone, Harry crouched by the fire, a million questions buzzing in his brain. "Who was there, Sirius? Was it you or Snape? Which one was real? The Lucius Malfoy who was already there, or the one who came later? Where's Draco Malfoy"?

Sirius waited for Harry to settle down. "We ran into a snag, Harry. Snape was unable to procure a hair from Narcissa Malfoy. That meant that he had to transform into Malfoy and Apparate to the meeting of the Death Eaters without having me in the Malfoy house to serve as a distraction, to delay or prevent the real Lucius Malfoy from going. Our backup plan was for Snape to go a little bit later, to create the impression that the impostor had gone first, after preventing the real Lucius Malfoy from going, and that the real Malfoy then got away and managed to Apparate to the site.

“Snape had hoped he’d be able to make it in time to prevent Draco Malfoy from getting the Dark Mark, but evidently that wasn’t the case. He had also hoped to save Karkaroff--we had heard rumblings that they’d finally run him to ground in Kent--but Voldemort got him with the killing curse”.

“Dumbledore told me”.

“As for where Draco Malfoy is now--I assume he’s home with his father. After Voldemort killed Karkaroff, Snape stunned Draco, then Apparated out of there. I’m assuming that the Malfoys still aren’t clear on what happened. At least, I hope they’re not”.

“I saw him get the Dark Mark”.

“What? What do you mean”?

“I saw everything that happened up to the killing curse. In a dream. Because of my scar. It’s happened before”.

Sirius looked quite grim. “I see...tell me everything you remember”.

So Harry told him about Karkaroff talking about educating Voldemort’s heir, and Draco Malfoy putting the Hara Kiri curse on him and saying that he and Voldemort had the same enemy--him.

“I have a thought about Voldemort’s heir, Sirius”.

“Which is”?--

“I think it’s--Viktor Krum”.

Sirius looked shocked. “Krum! Are you sure”?

“Well, of course not. But it makes a lot of sense, especially his going after Hermione, and the way he couldn’t really explain how she’d gotten back after her abduction”.

Sirius was lost in thought. After a minute he spoke. “Well, that won’t be too difficult to check. I can probably manage to get something from his father and his mother, and from Krum. Hair or skin or some such thing. Unregistered Animagus, you know. Then we can put the samples through magical tests that will show whether those two can be Krum’s parents. Snape knows how to do it. It’s even more reliable than a Muggle DNA test. We’ll soon know whether Krum’s father isn’t really his father. Although proving that Voldemort is will be slightly harder”.

“Sirius,” Harry said quietly. “I have something else to tell you. I--I told Draco Malfoy to cooperate and get the Dark Mark off me so I wouldn’t become a Death Eater. I told him to feed me information so that his dad would go to Azkaban”.

“What? Harry, this isn’t a game. What makes you think he did it because you told him to? This has been coming all his life; even if he’d wanted to fight it, he would have been killed. You said yourself Voldemort talked about killing him. And why should Draco Malfoy do anything you tell him, anyway? What incentive could he possibly have”?

“Well”--

“Yes”?

“A girl”.

“Aahh,” Sirius nodded. “Ginny Weasley”?

Harry’s mouth hung open. “How did you--? Oh, yeah, that’s right,” he said after a moment, remembering that Snape had told Sirius that Draco Malfoy and Ginny were in the Potions Dungeon working, and Snape saying he thought Malfoy’s hormones put him up to it.

“So, Harry--do you think he’ll really work against his father”?

“I hope so. If Ron finds out that Ginny’s involved with Malfoy, and I knew and didn’t tell him”...

"You're taking a bit of a chance, aren't you Harry? He could just as easily pretend, just to get you off his back".

"Well, I have a theory--I think he didn't put the Cruciatus Curse on Karkaroff so that he couldn't be sent to Azkaban. He used something he knew would be painful, and that Voldemort would approve of, but he technically stayed within the law. And I think that was for a reason".

Sirius considered this. "I hope you're right, Harry, I really do. I still think you should treat any information he feeds you with the utmost suspicion, and contact me so I can vet it. Do you think it's totally impossible he's just playing you"?

"No, of course not. But because of Ginny--I can hope".

"All right. I'll try to come visit you in person before the new year. I understand almost no students stayed at the school.. he trailed off, smiling slightly.

Harry grimaced. "Well, Hermione had this Boxing Day idea"...

"Dumbledore told me," he smiled.

"And I guess it kind of scared everybody off. Not exactly a huge success".

"Ah, well, Harry. It benefits them to have house elves toiling invisibly behind the scenes, doesn't it? You and Hermione grew up in Muggle households, and I'll wager you've done a lot more Muggle cleaning than she has, based on what you've told me about the Dursleys. She has a keen sense of justice, has Hermione. Why do you think she's in Gryffindor and not Ravenclaw"?

Harry's brow furrowed. "I hadn't thought about it. I suppose you're right. Just based on academics, you'd think Ravenclaw"...

"And based on my behavior in school, you'd think I would have been in Slytherin," he laughed.

Harry made a face. "It's Wormtail who should have been in Slytherin".

Sirius sighed. "I'll not argue with you there. But I need to go. Snape tells me you approached him about a Dueling Club. Sounds like a good idea. Although I can't believe you asked him, of all people. Not that he wouldn't be good; I just can't imagine you two being civil to each other".

Harry smiled. "Well, if you two can do it"--

"Did I say we'd been civil to each other? Oh, damn--" His voice dropped. "He just walked in the room," he whispered, then he began speaking rather loudly again. "All right, Harry. Glad you liked your Christmas present." Although Harry hadn't said. "See you soon." And his head disappeared from the fireplace. The flames danced before Harry's eyes. He leaned back on his haunches, his arms wrapped around his knees.

....do you think he'll really work against his father?

Everything depends on it, Harry thought. Everything.

Especially Ginny's safety.

* * * * *

Harry went back down to the kitchens to wait for Hermione. The moment he walked in, he met a scene of pandemonium.

There were house elves everywhere, of all ages, scrubbing the large central table, blacking the stove, polishing silver, mopping the floor and cleaning the windows. Harry was speechless. They all worked desperately, whether because they couldn't believe how filthy everything had become in the few hours since the day had begun, or because they were going through extreme withdrawal from their cleaning addiction, Harry couldn't tell. It looked like they were all in the grip of some mass psychosis. He watched with his jaw dropped.

“Move, please!” said a squeaky voice behind him, and he jumped. An elf was trying to mop the floor where he was standing. Water sloshed into his sneakers.

“Hey!” he yelled, taking the mop from the elf, who look quite miffed, popped out of sight and appeared a second later with another mop, continuing as though nothing had happened. Harry shook his head, threw the mop aside and ran over to the large table. He pointed his wand, crying, “Accio!” causing the cleaning flannels to leap from the hands of the small dynamos. Unfortunately, he didn’t figure on what to do with over twenty cleaning flannels, all hurtling quickly toward him. In moments, he was covered with them and couldn’t see, but they were immediately retrieved by the elves, who resumed work. All right, he thought. The old-fashioned way. He put his wand away and started going down the table, yanking them out of the elves’ hands one by one, having to fight a couple who were ready for him. But in seconds, it seemed, they all had their cleaning flannels yet again and were going at it once more. He grunted with frustration.

Dobby came running to him. “Harry Potter! Help! I isn’t able to stop them! All they is wanting to do is clean, clean, clean!”

“Well, what do you think I’m trying to do?” he snapped at Dobby.

Suddenly, the door opened and closed behind him, and he turned to find Hagrid with Hermione, carrying a bucket and mop. She was wearing jeans, a stained blue shirt, and a bandanna tied over her hair, and she smelled strongly of soap. She looked around at the elves, and Harry saw her eyes begin to fill. Oh, no, he thought. No, no, no...

“Help me!” Harry called to them, and soon the three of them were running around the kitchen, fighting with the elves to get their mops and scrubbing brushes away from them. Hagrid was soon covered with elves who had sunk their fingers into his clothes, trying to climb up his body to reach the dustpans he was holding over his head, out of reach--until one of the elves used a hover charm on Hagrid, and he began to float toward the high ceiling.

“STOP!” Hagrid bellowed loud enough to make the castle crumble. The elves did in fact stop, but only for a split second. They looked with extreme disinterest to see who had shouted, and upon seeing, went right back to work, looking, if anything, more desperate than ever.

This, thought Harry, is a disaster.

Harry pointed his wand at Hagrid, breaking the hover charm and simultaneously bringing him back to the floor safely. When he was standing beside him again, he said to Hagrid, “You’re the only one loud enough to get their attention. Say something else”.

Hagrid thought for a second, then bellowed, “THE NEXT ELF WHO CLEANS ANYTHING GETS CLOTHES”!

Every elf froze.

Harry cleared his throat, wishing he knew what to say. He looked at Hermione for a second, at how miserable she appeared (she stopped wresting a large cleaning flannel from a surly-looking elf who was about a foot high). He turned back to face the throng of elves, unsure how to begin.

“Elves of Hogwarts!” he cried, wincing as his brain told him how stupid that sounded. “Today is Boxing Day. You are not supposed to work! You have an excellent work ethic--no one anywhere could fault you on that! But--you have no self-respect!”

Suddenly, Harry knew just what he wanted to say, and he picked up speed and confidence, the words spilling out of him. “How much pride can you have in working when you are not free, when it’s what you must do? What’s there to be proud in that? If you were free, and working for wages, then you’d have a reason to be proud! Then that would show your work ethic! If you were free, you could still work here at Hogwarts if you wanted, for wages. Families could stay together, you could have days off, you could buy yourself and your children things with your wages. And most of all--” he looked at Dobby, thinking of Lucius Malfoy. “--you could exercise your consciences. If any of you have ever served a dark wizard you know what I mean”.

He looked at Hermione, who was both glowing at him and looking like she was going to cry. Hagrid was crying, blowing his nose on a handkerchief the size of a tablecloth. Harry felt exhilarated, and continued. “You each have an obligation to yourself to choose whether to support good or evil. Voldemort has returned--” gasping from the small creatures, but Hagrid didn’t care “--and we wizards and witches will need your help. But it has to be given willingly, not because you’re in service. On New Year’s Day, when Dumbledore asks who wants to be free, and work here for wages, I hope you all say

you will. And then, when we need you by our sides, when we're fighting against Voldemort and the Death Eaters, I fully expect to see a mighty army of elves, willingly doing what's right because each one followed his or her own conscience and made a choice!"

Silence.

The elves looked at each other. No one had ever said these things to them before. Think for themselves? Decide whether to support good or evil? The looks being exchanged between the elves were uncertain, confused. None of them moved to resume cleaning, however.

Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Dumbledore beaming at him. Moody stood by his side, a look of approval sitting very strangely on his distorted features. Harry hadn't heard them enter the room. Dumbledore turned to the elves, saying, "Now, go play! The kitchens are in good hands! Don't come back until tomorrow!"

Still looking uncertainly at each other, one by one, elves began disappearing, the pops! coming slowly at first, then picking up speed, until the sound of elves popping out of the room was almost deafening. Dobby was last to go. He gazed up at Harry.

"Thank you, Harry Potter," he said simply, softly, his homely face wreathed in smiles. Then, with a pop! he too was gone.

"Your reward is coming," Sandy hissed under his sweatshirt. That was good to know, Harry thought; usually, he felt she was so cryptic and difficult to fathom. Despite the inexactitude of this prediction, he felt it at least was an optimistic one. His reward. That had to be good, right?

"Quite the orator, Harry". Dumbledore smiled.

Moody shook his head. "Never thought I'd see the day when I'd want house elves to be free--but you made some good points, Potter," he growled. "Let's say--ten points for Gryffindor. Makes up for that Lord of the Flies quiz." Harry winced. He'd bungled that one mightily, gotten the names of some of the major characters mixed up. The week of the quiz he'd done very little studying, as it was the week he'd spent outside with the golden griffin. Now he knew what his reward was. Oh, well, he thought.

Dumbledore, Moody and Hagrid left. When the door closed behind them, Harry turned to Hermione, seeing her gazing at him with the most amazing expression he'd ever seen on her face. Suddenly, she was in his arms, she had thrown her hands around his neck and he was holding her tightly and she was kissing him deeply. He bent over her, holding her head up to his face, her bandanna slipping off the back of her head. Perhaps this was what Sandy had meant by his reward.

Harry wasn't sure how long they kissed. They finally drew their mouths apart slowly, and Hermione's eyes bore into his that way again. He smiled at her.

"If you're going to respond like that every time I make a speech, I'm going to wind up making so many speeches you'll be really tired of hearing the sound of my voice".

"Well, if I ever do get tired of the sound of your voice, I know what to do," she said, kissing him quickly again, just as they heard a loud pop! nearby. They turned to see a very surprised-looking Dobby. Harry thought he might actually be blushing.

"Oh, Harry Potter and Miss Hermione, I, um, oh, nevermind..." he trailed off, leaving with another loud pop! Harry laughed.

"There you go; we've actually made Dobby speechless"!

Hermione grinned up at Harry, and they both laughed.

"Come on. We have work to do." But as they cleaned, whether waving wands or using Muggle methods, Harry couldn't help think every time he looked at her how glad he was that she'd had the Boxing Day idea, and that it had kept most of the students away from the castle for the holidays.

* * * * *

They had an exhausting day, cleaning and cooking lunch, cleaning up again, cooking dinner, cleaning up again...

Harry changed his mind about being glad about the other students not staying. In addition to providing more hands to do the work, he thought they all could have used a taste of the work that the elves accomplished for them all on a daily basis. Maybe if they knew what it was like, more of them would have joined S.P.E.W., he thought.

Dumbledore seemed to thoroughly enjoy himself, as did Professor Vector, with whom Harry had never spent any time, and whom he liked quite a lot (Hermione seemed quite gratified by this; Harry suspected that after McGonagall, Vector was her favorite teacher). Professor McGonagall rivaled Hermione for wanting to make sure everything went just so, and Professor Trelawney spent an inordinate amount of time predicting that disaster would accompany every chore. Harry steered clear of her as much as possible; once when it was unavoidable, she said to him, "The stars have told me that you shall study augury after the holiday." The stars! Harry sneered inwardly. She's the professor! (Although, in his opinion, she was only nominally a professor--much the way Malfoy felt about Hagrid).

Harry and Hermione bade the other students and the professors good night and staggered up to Gryffindor Tower. Although he had promised himself the night before that he would tell Hermione everything, Harry felt too exhausted to do anything more than give Hermione a good-night kiss on the forehead and drag himself up to his room. He took off his sweater and jeans, crawling into the bed in just his drawers, basilisk amulet and Sandy, not bothering with pajama pants. At the last minute, he remembered to take his glasses off and put them on his bedside table, then dropped off as soon as his head hit the pillow.

After a little while, the bed shook. "Wha--" Harry started to say, trying to open his eyes. All he could see was pitch blackness. But he could feel and smell someone familiar and warm getting into the bed with him, sliding under the covers. He felt smooth bare legs against his, a crisp cotton night shirt against his bare chest. He thought groggily for a moment about the fact that he was wearing only his drawers, but he decided he was too tired to care. She curled onto her side, and he curled up against her back, as he had that morning, putting his arm around her waist. He buried his face in her hair for a moment, then came up and whispered in her ear, "Why are you here, Hermione"?

"I'm not leaving you alone, Harry, not after last night. If--anything else should happen with You-Know-Who, I'm going to be right by your side".

"You're liable to go deaf from me screaming about two inches away from your ear"...

He heard her give a little laugh in the dark. "I'll take my chances. I'm not going anywhere, Harry Potter. Get used to it".

Hmm, thought Harry. I like the sound of that. He tightened his arm around her; she grasped his hand and brought it up to her lips, kissed it, making him shiver. Maybe he should stop worrying about Ron stealing her away....

She put their entwined hands around her waist again, and then they both put their heads down and were almost immediately fast asleep.

* * * * *

Harry awoke to another grey-lit morning. He rubbed his eyes, then grabbed for his glasses, surprised when they were placed in his hands. He put them on, the room coming into focus, and especially Hermione's face, inches from his.

"Good morning," she whispered, kissing him lightly.

"Good morning," he said groggily, having forgotten she would be there. She had a lopsided smile.

"Sleep well?" she asked him, putting her hand on his chest and moving it in dreamy circles. He nodded, trying not to show how her touch affected him, glad the covers were pulled up to his waist. He fingered the basilisk, watching her curiously, wondering how long she had been watching him sleep. "So," she went on, "You never sleep with shirts on anymore?" She looked at him appreciatively.

He returned her lopsided smile. "Never".

She flattened her hand now, her palm so warm against his stomach that he had to suddenly inhale through his nose and stifle a groan in his throat. "Not that I'm complaining..." she said softly, the edges of her mouth turning up slightly. But then her brow furrowed as she looked at the amulet he was touching lightly. "Do you also never take that off"?

Harry glanced down at the amulet Ginny had given him. "Just about".

"Even in the shower?" He wondered fleetingly whether she wanted to find out from personal experience...

"Even in the shower. It doesn't seem to have hurt it any," he said, inspecting it for damage.

"That's not why I asked," she said vaguely.

He examined her face; she looked terribly young, suddenly, and insecure. He knew he couldn't put off telling her the truth about everything any longer.

"Hermione," he began earnestly. "Sandy wasn't the only thing I was keeping from you. I want to come clean. You should know what's going on, because I'm probably going to need your help. The trouble is--it means keeping some things from Ron".

She grimaced. "Well, we're already doing that, aren't we? Or did you think we'd tell Ron about where I slept the last two nights as soon as he gets back? Or sooner, with owl post"?

"No, of course not. And there are some things we can tell Ron." He explained to her about being in the Potions Dungeon in his Invisibility Cloak (leaving out the bit about Ginny and Draco Malfoy). He told her what Sirius and Snape had said to each other, including Snape being his mother's boyfriend when they were in school. Hermione's mouth hung open in shock. Then he told her about Ginny and Malfoy getting together after she saw him in the hospital wing (and their fight in the dungeon), and how he'd found them in the conservatory at the cottage in Hogsmeade during the Christmas party. He told her about his ultimatum to Malfoy, about helping Harry to put Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban. She gasped.

"Harry! You didn't!" He nodded. "But--but, his own father"!

He looked grim. "Ginny was shocked too. But he agreed to do it, for her".

She looked at him shrewdly. "You mean, he was all set to break up with her, and you encouraged him not to do it and talked him into turning on his father?" She was incredulous. Then he told her about the dream, and seeing Malfoy receive the Dark Mark, and Karkaroff being killed and Snape getting away after stunning Malfoy.

"But doesn't this mean that Dumbledore knows that Draco Malfoy is a Death Eater? Do you seriously think he'll let him stay at the school"?

"He seems to be doing just that. But you know Dumbledore--he doesn't give reasons for things. You can ask until you're blue in the face. I asked him my first year why Voldemort wanted to kill me in the first place, and he wouldn't tell me".

"Well, it sounds like you've found out, now".

"Found out what? That I'm supposedly part of some prophecy? I still don't know anything. What was the prophecy? And Malfoy and I are only two of the three people in this prophecy. Who's the other one? I don't feel any better informed than I was on my eleventh birthday when I first found out I was a wizard and Voldemort killed my parents".

Hermione stared into space thoughtfully. "Harry," she said softly, "do you really think Ginny is safe with Malfoy? A Death Eater? And if Ron found out"--

"Well, that's one of those things we're not going to tell him, isn't it"?

She seemed uncertain. On the one hand, she had appeared encouraged that he had prevented Malfoy from breaking up with Ginny, but on the other hand, Ginny was her friend, and Ron's sister...How was it different, Harry thought, from fixing up Cho Chang with Viktor Krum? It was different, he knew. This was Ginny.

Finally, he told her about the Pensieve, and about Snape giving him the password to his office. "Have you used it yet?" she asked anxiously.

"No," he said vaguely. He'd thought about going down the morning of Christmas Eve, and again on Christmas day, but something had stopped him. Did he really mean for Harry to be able to look at what he'd put in the Pensieve? Harry couldn't shake the idea that he had no right to do this to begin with, it was private. "I haven't even looked at the parchment he gave me. It's right there," he said, indicating a small folded wad on the bedside table.

Hermione picked it up and opened it; Harry thought of grabbing it from her, remembering Snape saying that Harry was only one besides Dumbledore who had the password, but then he realized that if he did decide to go down to Snape's office to use the Pensieve, he wanted to have her with him.

She was staring at the slip of parchment with a strange expression on her face. "What is it, Hermione"?

She raised her eyes to his. "Here," was all she said, handing it to him. He took it, turned it around and read the password with a lump in his throat.

Lily Evans.

Snape was trying to tell him something. Harry both wanted to know and didn't want to know. Learning more about his parents had been a goal of his since he came to Hogwarts, and now suddenly he wondered whether he was better off knowing. There was still probably time before Snape would be back...he would think about it later.

Harry put the parchment back on the table, shook his head to clear it and checked his watch. "Well, we'd better get up and go running. Didn't do it yesterday." His voice sounded hollow. He swung his legs out of the side of the bed away from Hermione and walked over to the wardrobe. After standing at the open door for a moment, he glanced down and realized that he was walking around in front of her in just his black boxers. He hadn't bothered asking her to leave, as he had during the summer. Of course, she had opened the door again after that and caught him, looking much the same as he did now.

He peered over his shoulder, seeing her staring at him. Her eyes weren't on his face, they were significantly lower. She didn't seem to have noticed that he was looking back at her. She had a dreamy smile curling at the corners of her mouth. He smiled, amused.

"Hermione!" he called softly, as though trying to wake her.

"Hmmm?" she said, distracted, moving her eyes to his face now.

"Go get dressed for running".

She smiled and headed for the door. "I was just--you've been wearing pants to run for a while, instead of shorts. I have seen your legs in a couple of months." She grinned broadly and closed the door behind her. Harry looked down at his legs. Okay. Didn't know girls looked at guys' legs...but then he remembered Parvati on the day she'd cut his hair. Some girls did, obviously.

He glanced at the bed, glad that he could let the house elves do the work again, and wondering what they would make of his bed, obviously having had two bodies lying in it, and Hermione's bed not being used. Then he thought of all the teenagers who had been at Hogwarts over the years, and realized that the house elves had probably seen it all...

* * * * *

Every morning for the rest of the week, Harry put the slip of parchment in his pocket when he dressed after his morning shower, thinking today I'll go. He and Hermione had stepped up their running; after almost six months, they could handle more, and so they were rising earlier to run for about half-an-hour longer. Each night, Hermione curled up in his bed with him. They were getting into a routine.

When they weren't outside in the snow, they spent their days with Roger and Hannah and Ernie practicing charms and hexes for the Dueling Club; they had all signed up. By Saturday, Roger was getting quite peeved with Harry and Hermione; he had yet to best either one of them in a duel. Hannah and Ernie had not bested them either, but Roger seemed to feel it was his right as Head Boy to do this. Harry sensed trouble coming, from Roger's out-of-control ego. He found himself unaccountably missing Percy Weasley.

Every so often, Sandy told him what was coming during the dueling, but she usually said exactly what he was thinking was coming. He whispered to her that he appreciated her help, but didn't need it, thanks. She stayed quiet after that.

Sunday was New Year's Eve. Following the afternoon dueling practice in the Great Hall, Harry was leaving when Hannah came running after him.

"Harry! You dropped something." She handed him the parchment with his mother's name on it. Somehow it had fallen out of his pocket.

"Oh, thanks," he mumbled, staring at it. Just go.

He glanced up at Hermione, who nodded at him. They watched Roger, Hannah and Ernie walk up the marble staircase, then, without another word, they walked side by side, not touching, down the stairs to the Potions Dungeon.

When they reached Snape's office door, Harry shook with nervousness. Hermione smiled encouragingly at him, but he couldn't take his eyes from the door. She gently took the parchment from him and said the password.

Nothing happened.

They looked at each other, then Hermione said, "Perhaps he charmed it so that it would only recognize your voice and Dumbledore's".

Harry nodded; he'd been thinking that too. Hoping that his voice would actually sound normal, he prepared to say a name he realized he'd never before in his life uttered out loud.

"Lily Evans".

The door opened, creaking on its hinges. They entered, then closed the door carefully behind them. Flames sprung up from the candles on the walls. His eyes moved to the desk, to the Pensieve sitting there. He walked to it slowly, still resisting, but he realized, still reluctant. Next to the Pensieve, there was a parchment. It was not directed to anyone, nor signed. It said "Don't ask questions if you don't want answers".

Harry vaguely remembered his once saying that to Snape--or had Ron said it?--when Hermione had been trying to answer questions in Potions class that he'd been directing at Harry....He smiled. Did this mean that Snape actually had a sense of humour? he wondered.

Don't ask questions if you don't want answers.

Harry wanted the answers and didn't want the answers. He had never felt so conflicted. He was glad Hermione was there. She was being very businesslike and brisk, that take-charge aspect of her personality he especially liked when he was feeling wishy-washy and indecisive.

"So," she said, "How does this work? You've done this before".

"Well," he said, remembering the Pensieve in Dumbledore's office, "I put my wand into the--the stuff in the bowl and it started to swirl around. Then I leaned over and when my nose touched it, I sort of--fell in"--

He put his wand to the moving surface as he spoke, then bent over, shivering when he felt the cold, smooth Pensieve contents touch his skin....

Suddenly, he was falling, with a worse feeling in his stomach than when he'd ridden on Fridwulfa's hand. With a crash, he found himself sitting in a heap on the floor of the Potions classroom they'd just walked through to get to Snape's office. A second later, Hermione came crashing down onto the floor next to him. They both rose, brushing off their robes, then looked around.

Under his robes, Harry heard a hissing: "A serpent and a griffin with be allies." Sandy sounded like she didn't care for the prediction at all. He remembered her reaction to the golden griffin.

Hermione gasped. Standing on the other side of the room were two students, working together at the same table, sharing a bubbling cauldron. One was a beautiful girl, about sixteen, tall and willowy, with long dark-red hair and sparkling green eyes. She smiled up at her companion, a tall, pale boy, also about sixteen, slender but muscular, with shining black hair swept back into a ponytail, and a black beard and mustache he had obviously just started growing giving his face shape and character, accentuating his high cheek bones and his lantern jaw. His black eyes sparkled down at the beautiful girl and he returned her smile.

Beside him, he saw Hermione's shock. He didn't care for the appreciative look she was giving his appearance, especially since it was--

Severus Snape.

* * * * *

Chapter Nineteen: The Mind of Severus Snape

Harry and Hermione stood stock still, gazing at the sixteen-year-old Lily Evans and Severus Snape. A griffin and a serpent, was what Sandy had said. Oh! Harry's brain finally caught on. Gryffindor and Slytherin! Of course!

"Harry?" Hermione suddenly said. "Why are you hitting your forehead"?

"Oh? Huh? Um--no reason. Nevermind," he responded, embarrassed.

"Harry?" Hermione said again, softer this time, not taking her eyes from the two people across the room.

"What"?

"Why don't they say something? About us, I mean".

Harry frowned. "Hermione--these are memories. We're not really in the past. It's not like a Time Turner".

The realization washed over her; her eyes widened. "Oh! That's right! So stupid"--

He patted her arm. "You are way too hard on yourself. The first time I was in a Pensieve I expected people to take notice of me, too. Come on, we're probably the only students at Hogwarts who've used both a Time Turner and a Pensieve".

"Sssshh!" Hermione said. "They're saying something".

Lily was leaning over a potions text, reading. "You know, Severus, you didn't tell me why you wanted to make Eutharsos Potion, or what it was for"--

Young Severus Snape suddenly panicked and grabbed the book from her, putting it on the side of the cauldron away from her.

"It--it doesn't matter, does it?" his voice shook. "Thank you for your help. I would've botched it, most likely." Snape? Harry thought, trying not to laugh. "Where are--your friends"?

"They're--off doing things they don't want me to know about." She sighed. "For the past year--" she began, then looked at him, shook herself, changed the subject back to the potion. "Actually, if you'd have boiled anything but the roots, you certainly would've botched it up. But you still haven't let me read what it's for"--

She reached for the closed book he'd set down just as he poured the potion into a beaker, straining it through cheesecloth just as Harry had done when he'd made his Eutharsos Potion. Lily was still paging through the book, searching for the right potion recipe. He noticed for the first time that she wore a silver prefect badge; Snape did not.

Snape stared at the murky concoction and then drank it all down, just as Lily cried, "Aha! Here it is"...

But as she read, Snape began to look rather peculiar. Harry remembered the sensation of each individual part of his body going to sleep, then waking up again, and the clarity with which he could see afterward. When the young Snape shook himself and his eyes lost their glassiness, Harry could tell the potion had taken effect.

Lily was frowning, a vertical line developing between her brows. "I still don't see why you need to"...

But Snape had put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. He looked extremely determined, and his eyes burned.

"Lily," he said in a firm voice, no longer shaking. "I have to tell you something." He pulled her closer to him; she looked at him, a perplexed expression on her face.

"I love you," he said, and lowered his mouth to hers. Harry wanted to avert his eyes, but he was too horrified to move. Lily seemed frozen, unresponsive at first. Then she slid her hands up around his neck, while he pulled her closer and the fevered nature of the kiss increased...

Harry could not watch any longer; he turned to Hermione, making a face, expecting to see a similar expression on hers, but her jaw had dropped.

"Wow," she breathed. "That's some kiss." Harry grimaced, closing his eyes.

"Hermione! That's my mother! And Snape!"

"I know..." she trailed off. Evidently, the kiss wasn't over yet.

Don't ask questions if you don't want answers. Yeah, yeah, thought Harry. Serves me right.

Harry turned back to them; they looked like they might be getting ready to end the kiss. Suddenly, Lily pulled back and slapped him hard across the face.

"Yes!" Harry cried gleefully. "Go Mum!"

Hermione hit his arm with the back of her hand. Harry held his arm, pretending it hurt, grinning. He was about to say something to her, but his sixteen-year-old mother was speaking now.

"How dare you!" she cried, backing away from Snape, her chest heaving. She pulled her hair behind her with her hands, then nervously began twisting it into a coil. She wouldn't look at him. He had an expression of complete and utter confusion on his face.

"She was kissing him back," Hermione hissed, indignant.

"How dare I--" Snape began, confused.

"How dare you take that--that courage potion and then kiss me! Is that what it takes for a boy to tell me he cares about me and kiss me?" Harry thought A boy? Was she perhaps talking about someone other than Snape? "I'm so sick of being treated like a disembodied brain floating around here, like I don't exist from the neck down. 'Ask Lily, she knows the answer.' I'm a human being! I have feelings, and needs. Taking a potion to talk to me is--insulting. Am I so scary?" she demanded of him. Frankly, thought Harry, yes. More than a little scary.

"No, Lily, that's not it. I was just--just nervous. I've wanted to say this for so long"...

"Then you should have just said it! Damn you..." she trailed off, looking like she was going to cry. He stepped closer and put his arms around her. She acquiesced at first, putting her head on his chest, then pulled away, wiping her eyes, adopting a more businesslike manner.

"You meet me under the oaks by the greenhouses in four days time, or however long it takes that potion to wear off. Do not take any more of it! Then if you want to tell me you love me and kiss me--well, we'll see! But don't you touch me until that damn potion wears off!" Her eyes were blazing, and she turned and stormed out of the room. Snape stared after her, Harry thought, with a lovesick expression on his face that was--he thought of Hermione's new favorite word--extremely Snapelike.

Harry looked at Hermione, who was grinning back at him. "I like her!" she said.

"Hmmp," was Harry's only comment. He had not expected his mother to be so--

"I mean," Hermione went on, "I totally understand what she's talking about!" Her voice grew softer. "Viktor was the first person to treat me like I wasn't just a disembodied brain"...

“Hermione! I--we--I mean”--

“Sshh, Harry. I’m fine now. After all, you didn’t need a courage potion to kiss me”.

Harry remembered then that the Eutharsos Potion he’d taken had probably still been in effect on the day of the Gryffindor vs Slytherin Quidditch match. Was that how he’d gotten up the nerve to kiss Ginny? He glanced at Hermione, deciding that he wouldn’t mention his own experience with the same potion. He didn’t feel like getting his foot mashed again.

But suddenly, the dungeon was dissolving in the way that Harry had experienced before, in Dumbledore’s Pensieve. There was nothing to see but smoky greyness; he could see his own body and he could make out Hermione, through the murkiness, but only with great difficulty. A whirlpool of darkness engulfed them both.

Suddenly, Harry felt solid ground beneath his feet again. Hermione was beside him once more, just as if they had not moved. They were out of doors. It was a crisp autumn day, and they were standing near the greenhouses. The landscaping was different from Harry’s and Hermione’s time. There was an allee created by paired oak trees leading from the rose gardens to the greenhouses, the branches arching overhead and meeting, forming a corridor, a protective canopy, a space both indoors and outdoors. The trees were a riot of crimson and gold, cinnabar and saffron, the ground was littered with acorns and leather-brown leaves. Snape was sitting at the base of one of the oak trees nearest the greenhouses, in the shade.

“That’s funny,” said Harry. “These trees are huge. Why did they chop them down”?

“I remember Professor Sprout saying they used to have oaks here for potions ingredients--you know, the leaves for memory potions, the acorns for tea to help seers sharpen their inner eye--as if anything of the sort would help--the bark and roots for various medicinal purposes, and the sap as a binder for potions. But she said the oaks developed a fungus on their roots, and had to be destroyed”.

Harry looked perplexed. “You obviously pay much more attention in Herbology than I do”.

“That goes without saying,” she said, her eyebrows raised. There she goes again, he thought.

Snape seemed nervous. Clearly, the Eutharsos Potion had worn off. At the far end of the corridor of trees, they could see a slender figure with long hair approaching, black Hogwarts robes billowing behind her. Snape watched her approach and though he were mesmerized. When she reached him, he started to stand, but she was lowering herself to the ground and he was half-way up, and he had to awkwardly fold his long legs under himself again. In fact, the two of them looked like the most awkward people Harry had ever seen. He tended to think of his mother as having moved like a dancer, gracefully. She actually moved more like a colt who had only a vague idea of what to do with so many limbs at the same time. Every movement seemed to be thought out so far in advance, it was wildly inappropriate by the time it was executed. She was just a bookish young woman who never thought much about how she appeared to others. He could even see a little of his Aunt Petunia’s jawline, now that he looked. It seemed less horsey on his mother, but the resemblance was there.

However, Snape clearly thought her awkwardness was endearing; he was looking at her with undisguised adoration, obviously putting her on such a high pedestal that if it were not for the potion, he never would have said or done anything. At least with that out of the way, the ice was broken somewhat--although he looked like he wished he had more of that potion. His hands were shaking visibly.

She looked at him squarely, and said with no preamble, “Well, Severus”?

He moved his eyes down to her hands in her lap, and picked up one of them, twined his long fingers in between hers, raised his eyes to hers again. “Lily,” he began, his voice catching. He cleared his throat, then tried beginning again. The painful, thought Harry. “Lily,” came the second try, “I meant what I said in the Potions Dungeon”.

She looked at him reprovingly, shook her head. “Try again.” But she did not remove her hand from his.

He cleared his throat yet again. Harry was actually starting to feel sorry for him. No wonder his father found it hard to approach her.

"Lily," he said louder and firmer, as though he'd made up his mind to simply get it over with. "I love you." And he leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. He pulled back after the quick kiss, examining her face, waiting to hear whether he had to try yet again.

But she smiled this time, looked down at their linked hands, then back up at his face. "There, now was that so hard? I mean, without potion?" He shook his head, a slight smile pulling at his mouth. "But that kiss," she went on, "wasn't much like the one from the other day, was it?" she said in a lower, more suggestive voice, her green eyes glittering.

Both Harry and Snape opened their eyes wide as she leaned in toward him, clearly opening her mouth.

Harry reflexively covered his eyes, saying to Hermione, "Tell me when it's over." Beside him, Hermione sighed with exasperation.

"Oh, honestly, Harry. It's like going to the movies with my little cousins. 'Tell me when the mushy parts are over.'" Harry peeked through his fingers at her.

"You're enjoying this"?

"Well," she seemed reluctant to admit any such thing. "I suppose I'm not as invested in it. That's not my mum over there."

"And that's not my dad," Harry reminded her. "That would be different".

He dared look at them again. They were ending the kiss. Thank goodness, thought Harry.

Snape looked at her seriously again. "There's something else I want to tell you, Lily. Something no one else knows. Well, not any other students. I want you to know everything about me".

His mother seemed somewhat apprehensive, as if she were unsure about the whole situation now that he'd made that statement. She didn't say anything, just gazed at him expectantly, withholding verbal judgment, and yet somehow looking rather judgmental at the same time. If she'd have raised me, Harry reflected, I wouldn't have gotten away with anything.

Snape went on. "I want you to know the truth, about why I avoid the sunlight, and eating garlic, and that potion I have to get from Madam Pomfrey"...

Lily backed up from him a little, pointing at him. "Sirius was right!" She looked alarmed and vindicated all at once.

"What"?

"Well, avoiding sunlight, and garlic, and going to Madam Pomfrey for potion regularly--Sirius saw it, but I didn't want to tell James. He thought he was crazy, but--you're a vampire! Oh, my god, I let you kiss me"...

Snape's jaw dropped. "Is that what--" He looked both angry and sad. "No, Lily. I am not a bloody vampire. Pardon the pun, but I have porphyria".

She looked perplexed. "Porphyria"?

"It's a liver disease. I take Porphyry Potion for it, made largely of spleenwort, with love-lies-bleeding as well. There's also a topical salve I can put on, to increase the time I can spend in the sun. Porphyria is a little like hepatitis, but it's hereditary. It's not usually found in wizard bloodlines, but I had a Muggle great-great-grandfather or something like that, and he had it. Some of the symptoms are photophobia"--

"Oh," she said, "sun-sensitivity".

"Yes. And sensitivity to the alium bulb, and all related bulbs--onions, garlic"--

"And since it's a liver disease, it affects your blood".

"Yes. So, at one time, it was thought that people with porphyria needed other people's blood. Hence the whole idea that those suffering from it were vampires".

She looked confused again. "But--there are real vampires, aren't there"?

"Oh, yes, and they can't go out in the sun either. And I do have a reflection--not that I care much for it...But they really do drink blood. People with porphyria don't, although it was assumed that they did--that we did--for centuries. And vampires are only repelled by garlic; I have a bad reaction to anything related to alium-- usually the worst for me is elephant garlic and shallots--but it certainly doesn't kill me. Neither does the sun, for that matter; I wind up looking rather jaundiced and blistered if I get much sunlight. I can't process the nutrients from it, like most fair-skinned people, who are fair to make it easier to absorb sunlight. Sun and alium bulbs just make me feel rather sick, which is what I am anyway. It's a chronic, incurable disease, both in the wizarding world and the Muggle world. It can be treated, managed, but there's no cure, and if I have children, there's an excellent chance they'll inherit it".

Lily looked at him silently, pityingly. Snape saw, and then Harry saw the Snape he knew for the first time: angry. "Don't look at me that way, Lily. Don't pity me. That's not why I told you. I just thought you should know".

"Oh, Severus," she said, linking her arm through his, putting her head on his shoulder. He looked down at her, smiling slightly, but unsure. Perhaps he's afraid she's just feeling sorry for him now, Harry thought. But he seemed to forget about that as she moved to kiss him again...

Harry turned to Hermione, to have somewhere else to look. "Have you ever heard of porphyria?" he asked her. He should have known what to expect.

"Oh, yes. Some people think George III had it. You know, 'The Madness of King George.' And plenty of people suspect Vlad the Impaler had it too, you know, Vlad the Bad, in Romania. He was sort of the basis for Bram Stoker's Dracula".

"I didn't know that".

"Of course, Stoker had plenty of contact with real vampires, but he couldn't put anything in the book that hit too close to home. He was a vampire hunter, you know. A really powerful wizard, killed loads of them. Evidently, he wanted more Muggles to know what to do, too, to make his job easier, so he wrote the book as a kind of instruction manual, disguising it as entertainment. He taught Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts for a while. I read about it in"--

"Hogwarts: A History.' I didn't know any of that. Have you memorized that book"?

She laughed. "Not yet. Working on it".

He smiled, shook his head. Then something struck him. "You mentioned madness"...

Hermione looked grim. "Yes. Near the end of life, it causes madness. Dementia. Earlier than that, though, people with porphyria tend to be rather tetchy, you know--quick tempered".

Harry grimaced. "That explains a lot".

"Actually," she said, "this also explains why Lupin assigned us that vampire essay after Snape assigned us that werewolf essay in third year. He obviously thought Snape was a vampire all these years, and wanted us to figure it out, like I figured out Lupin was a werewolf after I did the werewolf essay. Except that it never occurred to me that Snape was a vampire because I knew I'd seen his reflection. You know, in the glass beakers and things in the Potions Dungeon. That would have happened if he were really a vampire"...

Then the world around them seemed to evaporate into the grey smokiness again, and when it resolved itself, they found themselves standing in the Great Hall.

"How long did it take you to get used to that?" Hermione asked him, clutching at her head as though it ached.

He swallowed, looking around at the familiar setting. "I'm not sure I am used to it, yet".

Hermione was still on her vampire kick. "Harry, do you suppose the first vampire was someone with porphyria who was cursed? Say, three-thousand years ago or something, a wizard had an argument with someone who had porphyria, cursed them, and the first vampire was created"?...

Harry shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Why do you suppose we're here?" He looked around the huge space. The ceiling was deep sapphire blue, with a crescent moon visible amid a crowd of stars. The tables were all occupied; looked like the evening meal. They went instinctively to the Gryffindor table, but the people sitting there talking seemed to be speaking gibberish. Harry saw his mother, sitting next to a blond girl he did not know, and then he saw his father, across from her, and if he didn't have his mother's eyes and hadn't gotten his hair cut, it would have been like facing a mirror. James Potter, wearing a prefect badge on his Hogwarts robes, was laughing at something a young Sirius Black was saying, seated next to him. Hermione was looking at Sirius in a way Harry didn't like, as when she had stared at the young Severus Snape. Okay, he told himself, she looked at you that way too, when you got your hair cut. Get a grip.

Seated on the other side of his father was the young Remus Lupin. Harry noticed that the backs of his hands were rather hairy for a sixteen-year-old, and that he had the most facial hair of any of the students. He leaned over his plate, shoveled in his food as though worried someone would snatch it from him any moment.

On the other side of his mother--Harry did a double-take--was the young Peter Pettigrew. Harry stared at the boy who would betray his parents and cause their deaths in just a few short years. He thought for a moment; in three years, his parents would marry, in four he would be born, and just over a year after that...he would be orphaned because of the small, insecure boy sitting next to his mother, watching her out of the corner of his eye. She was oblivious to Peter, laughing at something her girlfriend had said.

"Why can't we understand them?" Harry asked Hermione.

She shrugged, walked over to the Slytherin table, where the young Severus Snape was eating, head down, not talking to anyone around him.

"Harry, the Slytherins sound just fine. Come here".

He walked over to where she was standing. The Slytherins had several conversations going at once.

"And then I grabbed the Quaffle and did a fake to the left--" a hulking blond boy was saying to a pimply black-haired girl with olive-colored skin.

"Man, how many goblin rebellions is Binns going to rehash?" said a boy with chocolate skin and cornrowed hair. "I'm having trouble sleeping at night, I'm getting so much sleep in his class"...

"Well," said the hawk-nosed boy beside him, "maybe you'll catch a certain someone wandering around," his voice dropped, "looking for blooooood"...

Snape jerked his head up from his plate at that, fixing the hawk-nosed boy with a glare that Harry recognized from Potions class. So, Harry realized, even the Slytherins thought he might be a vampire.

Suddenly, Hermione spoke. "I know, Harry! These are Snape's memories; we can only perceive details as well as he could. Well, maybe a little better; we're really much more aware of our environment than we think we are. Important things are easily accessible in our conscious brain, but a lot of details still get stored in the rest of our brain, and we just don't normally access them".

Harry nodded; it made sense. Snape would have been vaguely aware of where the Gryffindors were sitting, but he wouldn't have been able to hear their conversations. Then Harry saw something out of the corner of his eye; he turned to see the teenaged Sirius Black creeping toward the Slytherin table with a goblet in one hand and something vaguely spherical and bulky in his other. Snape must have had a vague awareness of this--or perhaps it was because of his knowing what happened after the fact. Remus Lupin was leaning around James Potter's back to see what Sirius was doing, a grin on his face.

When Sirius reached the Slytherin table, he tapped Snape on the shoulder. Snape whirled around, just after Sirius discreetly handed the goblet and round item to the boy sitting next to Snape, who switched Snape's goblet for the one Sirius had brought and placed the round item in the middle of Snape's dinner plate. Even the Slytherins were in on it.

"What?" Snape barked at Sirius, turning away from his plate.

“What what?” Sirius said, trying not to laugh. Snape glowered at him, then turned back to his dinner. When he saw the head of elephant garlic on his plate, he pushed it away from him in a panic, banging it into his goblet. Nervously, he picked up the goblet and gulped, but lowered it almost immediately and spit out the contents.

Blood splattered on the tablecloth and his robes, and on the people on either side of him. “Eeeew--” some Slytherin girls complained. Snape had blood on his teeth and around his mouth. Blood. Sirius had given him a goblet of blood.

He was back at the Gryffindor table now, laughing with Remus. Peter Pettigrew tried to be a part of their joke, also laughing, but he was largely ignored by the other boys. James Potter glanced over at the Slytherin table, looking uncomfortable. Lily seemed to be trying very hard not to run over to Severus Snape and comfort him--or trying very hard to resist putting a hex on Sirius Black; Harry could see she was torn, looking daggers at Sirius and regarding Snape with a desperate expression. Snape looked over at the Gryffindor table; Lily had turned to hear something James Potter was saying to her, then James turned and met Snape’s gaze, frowning.

Harry and Hermione watched as McGonagall hauled Sirius off, saying something about a detention (Sirius looked like he thought it was worth it), and Dumbledore came to the Slytherin table to check on Snape. He put his hand on his shoulder.

“Everything all right, Severus? Do you need to see Madam Pomfrey?” He obviously knew about the porphyria.

Snape looked up at him with an inscrutable expression; not gratitude, not resentment at being singled out...but he shook his head, saying, “No, Headmaster. I’m fine”.

Dumbledore nodded, looking shrewdly around at the other Slytherins. So much for house loyalty, Harry thought. He wouldn’t trust any Slytherin as far as he could throw one. Except--Snape was Slytherin...Harry felt conflicted and confused. He was also not feeling particularly happy about Sirius.

“Well,” Hermione said, “That was unpleasant. I can’t believe Sirius--ah!” she cried, as the world slipped away from them again and they were surrounded by the grey nothingness. Harry held his breath, wondering where they would find themselves next.

When the fog cleared, Harry saw that they were standing in the corridor outside the Gryffindor common room. The fat lady in pink was slumbering in her portrait, snoring softly. Lily and Snape were standing before her, their arms around each other, her head on his chest. Oh, no, thought Harry, preparing to avert his eyes again...

Then he saw that the two of them were slightly older; his beard and mustache didn’t look as insubstantial, and then he saw the Head Girl badge on her robes. They must be in seventh year now, he thought. She raised her head and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

“I--oh, Severus, last night was just”...

Harry saw through the high window in the corridor that a pink dawn light was starting to appear around the edges of the clouds that were visible. Oh, god, thought Harry. They spent the night together...

Suddenly, James Potter appeared as if from nowhere. Harry turned to see his dad whipping off his Invisibility Cloak and standing with his wand pointed at Snape, the most furious expression Harry had ever seen on anyone clouding his face.

“Get your hands off her.” He clenched his jaw shut again after he spoke, breathing through his nose. He wore a Head Boy badge on his black robes.

“James! Stop that! Put your wand away!” his mother scolded him.

“Great examples, your parents,” Hermione commented suddenly. “Head Girl and Head Boy, sneaking around all night”

Harry grimaced at her. “You should talk,” was all he said. She shrugged.

“I have an excuse. You and Ron corrupted me.” She smiled now. “Kidding, Harry. Can’t you take a joke?” But Harry was thinking about the fact that she’d mentioned Ron; it might not have been conscious, but it seemed they’d been avoiding saying his name.

Lily had removed her wand from her robes and pointed it at James now. It was an eerie feeling for Harry, seeing his parents as teenagers, looking angrily at each other with their wands out. How did they ever get together? he wondered. He had the feeling that each could do serious damage to the other if they really wanted to.

Harry heard footsteps, and turned to see Sirius, Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew coming round the corner. Lupin looked exhausted, limping slightly, leaning on Sirius. Pettigrew brought up the rear, looking nervous.

"What's going on?" Lily wanted to know. "Where have the four of you been all night?"

James was incredulous. "What? You're asking us that? When it's obvious that you two"...

"But you do this all the time! And you never--you never talk to me about it--" her face started to crumple, and she swallowed, struggling now to stay in control. "I thought we were friends," she said softly, seeming to direct this at James in particular. He squirmed, looked at his three other friends, then back at her.

"I can't tell you Lily. Believe me, you wouldn't want to know"...

Sirius looked defiant. "Anyway, shouldn't he go climb back into his coffin?" he sneered at Snape. "The sun's up".

Snape moved forward and grabbed Sirius, shoved him up against the stone wall, his face a mere inch away from the other black-haired boy. "I'm tired of you, Black," he hissed softly. "Watch your back." Then he shook himself and stepped back from Sirius, still angry. He walked to Lily, put his arms around her and kissed her soundly, then glared at the other and strode away. As he did so, Harry and Hermione were engulfed in grey fog once more...

...only to find themselves outdoors, at night, near the Whomping Willow. "Oh, Harry," Hermione breathed. "Is this going to be what I think it is?"--

Harry swallowed and nodded. "I think so".

He wished he knew what else had happened there in the corridor, after Snape left. Had his mother and father dueled? thought for a moment that he could ask Sirius, but then he realized--no, he couldn't possibly do that.

He searched the sky; the moon hadn't risen yet. Where was Snape? How could they be here if he wasn't? Then Harry spotted him; he was hiding in a clump of bushes just out of reach of the tree's wildly flailing branches. Harry looked toward the castle; here they came, the four of them, Lupin looking quite wild already, hairier than usual, a red light in his eyes. Harry had never really seen a werewolf transform before; he hadn't been paying attention when coming back from the Shrieking Shack in third year, he was simply trying to get away before Lupin could hurt him or Ron or Hermione.

But now, he could watch safely, knowing there was no way for him to be hurt. The four of them arrived at the Whomping Willow, and his father found a long stick which he used to press the knot that stopped the branches from moving. Harry lifted his eyes to the night sky; the moon was rising. Lupin was looking progressively worse. He crawled into the tunnel under the branches, followed by Pettigrew. Down the tunnel, Harry could hear Lupin begin to cry out, presumably because of the transfiguration progressing. Snape leapt out from his hiding place.

"So! Sneaking off to Hogsmeade in the middle of the night! A gang including no less than our Head Boy! What are you up to? Planning to do a little breaking and entering? Or a little vandalism?" Snape looked accusingly at Sirius and James who looked very panicky.

Sirius smiled at him; Harry thought it was the most untrustworthy smile he had ever seen. This was a very different side of his godfather. "No, as a matter of fact--well, you can go see for yourself, Snape. Just come on in and find out"...

Sirius stooped down to enter, and Snape did the same. James' breathing seemed to be irregular. Snape took his wand out before he went in, approaching the tree cautiously. He ducked down, putting his head into the tunnel, then started to move on his hands and knees into it, as the others had done.

Harry heard a low growl, a rumbling that made his hair stand up on the back of his neck. Hermione reached out and clutched at his hand; she had squeezed her eyes tightly shut. They knew Snape and the others would be all right, but somehow, being in this time and place was incredibly nerve-wracking, and Harry felt like he couldn't be sure of anything anymore.

Harry heard the growling growing louder, and then suddenly, his father leapt and grabbed Snape by the foot. Snape banged his chin on a tree root as James extracted him from the tunnel, then his dad hit the knot with his wand, making branches flail about again. Snape and James were each struck by the Whomping Willow; Snape had a gash on his forehead and a bloody nose; James had a lump on his temple. The terrible growling was very loud now, and Harry and Hermione saw what appeared to be an enormous wolf straining to get out of the tunnel, trapped by the branches across the entrance and the other limbs doing their frantic, macabre dance. The wolf was red-eyed and salivating, and as he looked at him, Harry could feel his heart beating very loudly in his ears. He thought he was probably even more frightened than when he was facing Voldemort. There was just something about the possibility of being mauled by a wild animal...even if, technically, there was no chance of its happening.

Snape was doubled up on the ground, holding his leg, blood running into his left eye, which he squeezed shut. His right eye was wild with pain. "Damn, you Potter, you broke my ankle!"

James was lying flat on the ground, trying to get out of range of the tree's reach before standing. "Broke your ankle? Saved your life, more like!"

The two of them glared at each other. The growling continued.

"What about them?" Snape suddenly said to James, still sounding snappish. James looked nervous, as though he were afraid of giving too much away.

"They'll be fine. They're used to it".

"Used to being bitten by a werewolf"?

"No, you git!" James stood now, holding his arms out. "Look at me; the moon is up and I'm not a werewolf, am I"?

Snape looked suspiciously back at the growling, snarling animal still trying to get out of the tunnel. "But how"--

"Can't you just be glad to be alive? Listen; we both need to go to the hospital wing, and you probably can't walk without my help. Here," he said, extending a hand to Snape, who looked up at him with a clear hatred on his face that was eminently familiar to Harry; it was the expression he'd seen on Snape's face on his first day of Potions when he was in first year, looking every inch like the boy who'd saved his life.

Finally, reluctantly, Snape took the hand and grunted as he stood. James put Snape's arm across his shoulders and put his arm around Snape's waist. He had to hop on his right foot, holding his left knee bent to avoid putting weight on the broken ankle, which was where James had grasped him to remove him from the tunnel before Lupin could get him.

Harry finally felt prepared for the swirling greyness when it took over this time; when it cleared, he and Hermione were in the hospital wing, the sun shining in the windows. Snape and his father were the only two patients, his father still asleep. Snape fingering the bandage on his forehead, turning to glare at the boy in the other bed. The door to the infirmary opened and Lily entered, running to Snape's bed, looking frantic.

"Oh! This morning, McGonagall said--Oh, Severus, are you all right?" She took his hand, looking at his bandaged face, then down at his ankle, still sporting another bandage to protect the boneset salve that would soon mend it.

He nodded at her, looking like he had a lump in his throat.

"What was it? You said--you said you would find out for me what they'd been doing. Did you"?

He nodded again, then said quietly, "They've been covering up for Lupin. He's a werewolf".

She looked shocked. "A werewolf?" she said, almost inaudibly. "But how--wouldn't they be in danger themselves"?

"I don't know how they avoid him attacking them. But Black was going to let it--him--kill me, until Potter"...

She turned to look toward James' bed. "Yes?"

He grimaced, seemed to be unwilling to give James any credit for doing anything right. He swallowed. "Until Potter pulled me out of the way".

She turned to look at James again, who was awake now, looking back at her. He seemed very calm.

"Hello, Lily," he said simply. She gazed back at him as though seeing him for the first time.

"You--you--" she struggled. "You saved Severus' life".

He looked embarrassed. "Yes, well--if he had died, it would have made you sad," he said softly. He looked into her eye earnestly, a pleading expression that was unmistakably full of love. Lily caught her breath, recognizing it, and looking frightened of it at the same time. His expression of love was replaced by one of misery, as he closed his eyes, turning over on his side, away from them.

Snape had seen the look they'd exchanged, and he was obviously disturbed by it; he looked hunted, threatened. Lily bowed down and kissed him on the cheek.

"Get some rest. I'll be back later." He nodded at her silently. She turned again to James' bed, put her hand on his shoulder; it looked suddenly like a very intimate touch, far more so than when she had kissed Snape. "I'll bring you your notes and homework assignments, all right James"?

He turned over, giving her that look again. "Thank you, Lily".

She looked like she shivered under his gaze, but it was only for a second, and then she moved toward the door, glancing over her shoulder just before she left.

But she looked at James Potter, not Severus Snape.

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty: Dark Deeds

Harry looked at young Snape, lying in the hospital bed, and his father, in the next bed. If he had died, it would have made you sad, James had said to Lily. And yet, if he had let Snape die, he would have had a clear field. He had no way of knowing that Lily wouldn't be just as much Snape's girlfriend after the incident as before. Instead, she seemed to be impressed that he had saved the life of her boyfriend with no thought of reward....That was what had changed everything, Harry thought. It was obvious. Snape's face was miserable; he glanced over at James Potter with a hatred that made Harry's blood run cold. His father was oblivious, lying back with his eyes closed, but with a very slight smile. Was he thinking of Lily?

Harry turned to speak to Hermione, but the world was changing in a swirl of grey smoke once more; Harry almost felt like it was routine, now.

They were on the Quidditch pitch. There was a game going on; Harry could see from the colors of the robes that it was Gryffindor vs. Slytherin. He and Hermione were standing by the bases of the goal hoops for the Slytherin side. He searched for Snape, squinting at the crowd of people in the stands waving Slytherin banners; none of them looked like him.

"Do you see him?" he asked Hermione. She too scanned the crowd.

"No. But wait--if he were watching, wouldn't we probably be in the stands? Maybe he's playing".

They both examined the Slytherin Chasers, whizzing about on their brooms, trying to intercept the Quaffle from the Gryffindor Chasers, including a serious-looking boy with messy black hair and glasses who looked very familiar...

"There he is!" she cried triumphantly.

"Where?" Harry whipped his head around.

"Look up".

Harry shuddered, remembering when she'd said that in the forest, when they'd met Hagrid's mother. He tipped his head back and discovered that Snape was the Slytherin Keeper. That's why they were standing where they were. He was having a bad time of it. James Potter came flying down the field with the Quaffle and in a matter of seconds, it seemed, had flung it past Snape through the center hoop, prompting the student who was doing the announcing to cry, "SCORE! And Gryffindor gets ANOTHER ten points, again thanks to POTTER! That's Gryffindor one-forty, Ssssssssslytherin ZERO!"

Harry gazed in rapture at his father; he'd always wished he could have seen him in action as a Quidditch player; he'd heard so much about him. And now, here he was, flying effortlessly, flinging the Quaffle through the hoop with a casualness that belied the work involved, his red robes flying out behind him, the crowd chanting, "POTTER! POTTER! POTTER!"

Harry could see that the Gryffindor Seeker--a slight girl with hair the color of a mourning dove--was marking the Slytherin Seeker--a skinny wisp of a boy with brown hair cut too short for his prominent forehead. Both Seekers looked no older than thirteen, small and agile, but the Slytherin Seeker in particular looked around the field sharply; nothing would miss his gaze, it seemed.

Harry saw it first; the Snitch was near the Gryffindor goal posts, not a foot off the ground. As usual when he saw a Snitch, his hand started itching to grab it. A roar went up from the crowd, and Harry looked up; his dad had scored on Snape again. The Slytherin Seeker didn't seem to be aware of this, in as much as he now saw the Snitch and was clearly focused on reaching it first. He didn't know that if he caught it now, the game would be a tie. The announcer started to give the score: "THAT'S GRYFFINDOR ONE-FIF---OH!" He no sooner started his announcement than his dad had scored again, and the Slytherin Seeker was still oblivious, still on his way to catch the Snitch. In a second, he had it in his hand, looking triumphant, flying past the Slytherins he expected to be cheering him, and looking baffled that they weren't. Then the announcer gave the final score: "THE GAME IS OVER AND GRYFFINDOR WINS, ONE-SIXTY TO ONE-FIFTY! GRYFFINDOR HAS WON THE QUIDDITCH CUP!"

His dad had scored twice in the amount of time it took the Slytherin Seeker to see the Snitch and grab it! Harry found himself grinning, having to work very hard to restrain himself from whooping gleefully, watching his dad come to a landing with the rest of the team as the entire school, it seemed (except for the Slytherins) converged on the Gryffindor team in joy.

A shadow passed over where Harry and Hermione were standing, and they saw Snape descending to the grassy pitch five feet from where they stood, looking stony-faced. He was the one who had lost the game for Slytherin; he had let James Potter score those last two goals before the Snitch was caught.

In the throng of people surrounding the Gryffindor team, Harry could see his dad being hugged by his fellow red-robed teammates, and then he saw Lily making her way through the crowd, grinning at him and finally throwing her arms around his neck, as he gathered her to him and kissed her thoroughly, while people continued to pat him on the back. Harry heard one or two shouts of, "Get a room!" as their kiss continued. His mother resurfaced then, turning red, still unable to stop smiling, and she and his father walked back to the castle with their arms around each other, jostled by the crowd, yet somehow, carving their own private space out of it. Harry looked at their departing forms with satisfaction, also unable to stop grinning. They were now a couple, he thought. All was well with the world.

He felt a hand on his arm; it was Hermione. Her face was so sad, he didn't know what had happened. "Are you all right, Hermione?" he said with concern. She drew her mouth into a line.

"Not me. Snape. Look at him, Harry".

Harry turned to Snape, walked around him and looked up at his face. Although only eighteen, he now looked like the man he was accustomed to seeing in Potions class; he had shaved his beard, but there was a slight shadow on his face as though he'd forgotten that day. His hair hung in his face, lank and greasy, and his eyes were filled with a combination of contempt and sadness. He was miles away from the sixteen-year-old boy who'd declared his love for Harry's mother in the Potions Dungeon. He already looked like his life was over, like he was just biding time until some gruesome end. That Harry thought, is the face of someone who has nothing to live for.

Snape didn't include his break-up with my mum in the Pensieve, Harry thought. But it had clearly already occurred. That morning in the infirmary must have been the beginning of the end...

Snape looked down at his hand; there were red blisters on the back. "Damn," he muttered softly to himself. "Missed a spot..." He took a small tube out of a pocket in his robes and rubbed a salve onto the inflamed skin. He watched the throng of Gryffindor supporters making their way to the castle; there were still some subdued Slytherin supporters on the pitch, but they were avoiding Snape. His eyes slid furtively over his teammates, then he picked up his broom and walked toward the greenhouses. Harry and Hermione followed him, as there was no swirling greyness yet. He reached the shade of the oaks and after walking a few yards away from the entrance to the corridor of trees, stopped and leaned against one of them, staring into space. Perhaps he's remembering being here with my mum, Harry thought. Then he heard a step on the path, twigs and fallen leaves being trod on, and Harry and Hermione turned to see a young man, perhaps in his mid-twenties, walking into the oak allee toward Snape. He looked familiar, somehow...

"Tough luck, Snape," the young man drawled. He had cornsilk-light hair and a pointed face, grey eyes that betrayed no emotion. Snape looked toward him, silent, as though he were willing him to disappear; he did not seem to want comparison just now. But the man either couldn't tell or didn't care.

"Remember me?" he asked, as though anyone could ever forget him. Snape spoke with almost no inflection in his voice.

"Malfoy. Seventh year when I was in first. Sorry you wasted your time coming today".

The young Lucius Malfoy smiled ominously. "Oh, it would have been nice to see a Slytherin victory, that's true. But I definitely did not waste my time coming".

Snape was not looking at him. He had taken out his tube of salve and was rubbing some into the back of his hand again. Malfoy smirked. "Is that what you do? To stay out in the sun? I wondered. It's pretty bright today; you must be glad to get away from it again." Snape looked at him now with narrowed eyes; the vampire thing again. Malfoy approached him and was now standing about a foot away from Snape, who was looking like this was making him very uncomfortable.

"Careful," he said softly to Malfoy. "Better not come too close. I get rather peaked after a match." Harry smiled; well, if people are going to think you're a vampire, might as well use it to intimate them.

Except that Malfoy wasn't. Not in the slightest. Instead, he laughed. "I brought insurance," he informed Snape, pulling a necklace with a head of garlic out of his robes. Snape immediately recoiled, backing up and putting his hand over his mouth and nose. Malfoy laughed again. "I wondered whether people were putting me on about that. I can see now they weren't. Of course, I should have known; you obviously haven't looked in a mirror in quite a while." Snape flinched at the insult, but said nothing. "I just want to talk to you. Can I talk to you"?

Snape looked doubtful that it would be that simple. "About what"?

"What are your plans for when you're done school"?

Snape looked like he didn't want to tell him, but he said in a flat voice, "Working in my uncle's apothecary in Dunoon".

Harry made a face. "Where's Dunoon?" he asked Hermione.

"West coast of Scotland. Just north of the Isle of Arran".

Harry refrained from asking where that was as Malfoy spoke again.

"Ah, Dunoon. The Firth of Clyde is quite beautiful, isn't it? Of course, I like Dunoon because of its bloody history....So. Uncle in Dunoon. Is he Scottish"?

Snape nodded. "My mother's brother".

"Mother's side. Hmmm. Dunoon. What's your uncle's name"?

"MacDermid".

"Ah, Clan Campbell. Good. Not Clan Lamont. Weaklings. Of course, in Dunoon, chances are you're going to be one or the other. In all of Argyllshire, for that matter. Although anyone with sense agrees that the Campbells had it all over the Lamonts centuries ago; they let the Muggles in their clan take over much sooner than the Campbells. I'm Clan Campbell as well, on my mother's side. She's a Bannatyne. Glorious, bloody history, Clan Campbell. My father's French family has

almost as bloody a history--always managed to be on the winning side, whether it was the revolution, or the reversals that followed, or the Vichy regime...but no one can really touch the Scots for bloodiness, eh”?

Snape stared at him, looking like he was wondering where this was going. He did not answer. Malfoy continued, clearly enjoying hearing the sound of his own voice.

“You know what my favorite bloody story is? Takes place in Dunoon; you made me remember. The Massacre of 1646. After the Campbells hit the Lamont castles of Towart and Ascog with all they had, and the Lamonts surrendered. Our clan gave them a written guarantee of liberty. Of course the idiots believed that. They were taken to Dunoon in boats and sentenced to death in the church. Only a little over a hundred survivors. The histories say they were all shot or stabbed to death, but we wizards know it was really the killing curse did them in, except for the thirty-six “special gentlemen” who were hanged from a tree in the churchyard--I think they were half-wizard and half-Muggle. And then there was the Chief and his brothers. They were prisoners for a number of years; why they didn’t kill them, I don’t know. Of course, at that time, the Chief was still a wizard. Might have been because of that. The almost-dead were buried in the same pits as the dead. Think of it! Wish I’d have been there”...

“Why are you telling me this”?

“Because I think we’re kindred spirits, Snape. Same house. Same Clan. And I’m hoping--same desire to serve the Dark Lord”.

Snape’s eyes widened only a little, as though he were trying to hide his surprise. “Is that what this is about”?

Malfoy stepped toward him again; Snape cringed back against a tree. “I have a job to offer you”.

“I told you; I have a job lined up,” Snape said, voice shaking ever so slightly.

Malfoy stepped back, his smile in place again. “It’s not a full-time job, although it’s an important one. You’ll still have plenty of time to--work in your uncle’s apothecary,” he said, as though he were patting a small child on the head. It was a very light pat on the head, a patronizing sneer at Snape’s choice of job.

“What is it”?

“Do you know the boy who’s the fifth-year prefect in Ravenclaw”?

Snape looked like he was thinking about this. “I don’t really know him. I know what he looks like. Blond boy”.

“Yes. Do you know who his father is?” Snape shook his head. “Well, his father is a very important man. His father works very hard. He puts dark wizards in Azkaban. He’s always working. And his son hates him for that, among other things. His son is just looking for a way to get back at his father. But he’s only in fifth year; he’s young, doesn’t know any of the right people. That’s where you come in”.

“How”?

“You will get to know him, before school is out for the summer. Become his friend. Write letters to each other, invite him to visit you in Dunoon during holidays. I want you to become the big brother he never had. A father figure, for a boy whose father has written him off. He needs someone like you, and you can be there for him. And you have time; it will be two years before he’s done school. I expect by that time, he will be ready”.

“Ready? For what”?

“For one of these.” And Malfoy pulled up his sleeve, showing Snape the Dark Mark on his arm. Snape drew in his breath between his teeth. “You won’t get yours until then, also. Don’t want to tip off young Mr. Crouch too early. Until then you’ll be strictly an unofficial Death Eater”...

“Crouch? Do you mean--Barty Crouch’s son”?

“Yes. Barty Crouch, Jr. We fully expect him to be very useful. But we need you to--cultivate him. Make him ripe for the picking. You have two years. Should be enough, don’t you think”?

"But--his father! If I approach Barty Crouch's son and suggest that he become a Death Eater, what makes you think he won't report me to his father"?

Malfoy smiled. "He won't. Not if you do your job and make him trust you completely. He's looking for a way to get back his father as much as we are; and we've decided that using his own son will work very nicely".

Snape swallowed. "What if I refuse"?

Malfoy stepped toward him with his wand out now; Harry had not seen him remove it from his robes. "Then I will have to kill you. Fortunately, wands happen to be little pointy sticks made of wood," he said bringing it ominously close to Snape's heart, then pulling back. "Of course, I could just alter your memory, but that's no fun. You'd still be walking around. I thought that a dark creature like yourself would welcome the opportunity to serve the Dark Lord".

Snape swallowed. Harry thought, vampire or no, being stabbed in the heart is being stabbed in the heart. Fatal. He almost forgot that Snape had of course survived this encounter. Snape swallowed again, never taking his eyes off Malfoy.

"All right." His voice was quiet and no longer shaking. And, to Harry's eyes, he seemed to have an expression of purpose now. He had a mission, a reason to go on living, even if he couldn't be with Lily. So, Harry thought, Lucius Malfoy recruited Snape to be a Death Eater, and then Snape recruited Crouch...Malfoy removed a stoppered vial from a pocket in his robes. "Here," he said, tossing it to Snape.

Snape caught it reflexively, stared at the viscous red liquid inside, then looked back at Lucius Malfoy's face.

"A gift," Malfoy told him. He turned and walked out of the grove. Snape held the vial of blood, looking at it intently. Harry wondered whether he might actually be considering drinking it...

But as Snape walked back to the school under the oaks, he threw the vial so that it broke against one of the larger tree trunks, shattering, splattering the blood. Snape's green robes billowed out behind him, and Harry wondered what else he would be required to do as a Death Eater...

Then the swirling greyness returned and Harry tried to find Hermione in the maelstrom, failing. When they felt their feet on solid ground again they were outside a stone cottage with a thatched roof, diamond-paned leaded windows with flower curtains, red-painted flower boxes overflowing with plantings. A cottage garden was laid out in a complicated pattern before the house, flagstones leading from the garden gate to the red-painted front door. The lane was a dirt path, and outside of the fenced-in garden there was only green grass--very, very green grass, like Mum's eyes, Harry thought. Like mine. There were no nearby neighbors.

Something about it felt familiar to him. Something in the back of his mind recognized this place...

Snape was standing next to them, also looking at the cottage. They followed him to the door and waited with him while he knocked. When it opened, Harry felt his jaw drop, not because his mother was standing there, but because she was holding a baby on her hip, a baby with a tuft of black hair and large green eyes, and--no scar on the forehead.

"Aw!" said Hermione. "Baby Harry--so cute"!

Harry grimaced and colored. "Please"--

She laughed. Lily looked surprised to see Snape.

"Severus! I--what are you doing here"?

His face was very serious. "I need to speak to you Lily. It's very important".

She stood silently, bouncing baby Harry up and down to pacify him. He was waving his arms about and gurgling, then started struggling.

"Down!" he said, still struggling. "Down down down down"...

She gave in, placing him carefully on the smooth tiled floor, on his bare feet, and he went running into the cottage, wobbling back and forth. His mother was wearing a summery dress. I must have just learned to walk, thought Harry. It must be near my first birthday.

“Severus, I don’t think you should be here”.

“Please, Lily; hear me out. May I come in”?

She looked reluctant, but finally stepped aside and allowed him to enter. Harry and Hermione followed. They were in one half of the cottage, the public space. Through a doorway in the rear Harry could see an addition holding a kitchen with large, well-scrubbed wooden table, solid-looking wooden chairs gathered around it. Through two doors leading to the other half of the cottage he could see a large bed covered with a quilt, and, in the smaller room, a cot with a mobile hanging over it, stars and planets, sun and moon. He felt a strange sensation, a familiarity. This had been his home, where he lived with his parents. His home. He had come home.

His mother sat on a couch that was perpendicular to the empty fireplace. Snape sat in a chair on the other side of the hearth, while baby Harry climbed up onto the couch next to Lily and started flicking at her earring with his fingers.

“Ouch! Harry, stop. Go play; Mummy has to talk to her friend”.

But the one-year-old did not get down from the couch. He sat back next to his mother, sticking his lower lip out, pouting. Hermione laughed. Harry grunted. Your girlfriend should never be allowed to see you as a baby, he thought. Under no circumstances.

But then, there was the sound of a car, followed after half a minute by another knock at the door. Lily sighed and rose to answer it, saying, “Excuse me for a minute, Severus”.

Snape looked nervous about being left alone with little Harry. Although he was only twenty-one now, he looked like the man Harry saw day in and day out in the Potions Dungeon. Well, Harry thought, if he’s here to try to win my mother back he could have fixed himself up a bit.

Then there was another bit of familiarity; a voice that cut through Harry’s heart, a voice he had hoped not to hear again until late June.

“Lily, mum needs you to do this! I don’t care if it’s illegal! Isn’t it enough that Daddy died in that traffic accident last year? She’s all we have left”!

His Aunt Petunia was at the door. She was only a half-dozen years older than his mother, but she also looked very similar to the way he was accustomed to seeing her. She not only has not aged well, he thought, she did it early.

“Petunia, there’s a reason why the magical community tries to keep Muggles from knowing about what we can do. And I’m not even sure that I could help mother, even if I didn’t care about breaking the law! When witches and wizards get cancer they usually immediately remove the cancerous cells by magic, or transfigure them, but you said mum has it all through her! How could I remove it without killing her? And I’m not permitted to anyway. Petunia, we can only prepare ourselves for the inevitable”...

Harry’s aunt’s voice shook; he’d never heard her like this. “I will prepare. You can stay here. Don’t bother coming to the funeral. You won’t be welcome. Not when you could have saved her and refused. What’s the point of you being a witch if you won’t save her? You know what you are, and that husband of yours? Unnatural. Abnormal. How can you not save your own mother? It’s just--” But Harry’s aunt couldn’t continue; she buried her face in a handkerchief and turned away from the cottage door.

“Petunia--” Lily pleaded, but he heard his aunt’s retreating footsteps, the garden gate slamming shut, a car starting up again, wheels straining to find purchase in the rutted dirt road.

His mother returned to the couch after closing the door quietly. She raised her eyes to Snape as he said, “I’m sorry if this is a bad time, Lily, but”--

“My mother is dying and I can’t do a damn thing about it and my sister hates me because of it. Is that your definition of a bad time, Severus? Because that is my definition of an absolutely shitty time, thank you very much.” Harry was shocked.

hear his mother cursing, watching the tears flowing silently down her cheeks, finally understanding better the enmity between his mother and her sister. Little Harry had gone into his room, was playing on the floor with some blocks and stuffed toys. Hermione was looking in at him wistfully.

Lily and Snape sat opposite each other, looking down, not speaking. Finally, Snape said softly, "I came here to--to warn you that the Dark Lord will be coming for you. Well, actually, for Harry"...

She looked up at him, perplexed. "What are you talking about? Harry? What could he possibly want with Harry"?

Snape glanced toward Harry's nursery, frowning; the one-year-old was arranging some stuffed toys in a row, an impromptu parade. He looked back at Lily.

"The Dark Lord keeps careful track of omens and signs. A seeress has predicted his downfall--she gave a prophecy with some centaurs helped interpret. The centaurs have pinpointed two of the three people involved"...

"Severus! You're not making any sense. What is this prophecy"?

He frowned. "Let me see if I remember all of it: The Dark Lord will be defeated by a triangle: a lion, a moonchild and a flame-haired daughter of war"...

"And Harry is"?"--

"Evidently, he is the lion. He is a Leo, correct"?

"Yes, but so is James. Harry was born a week before his birthday; James called it his early birthday present," she smiled feebly. "Who is the moonchild supposed to be"?

"A family named Malfoy had a son last year a few weeks before Harry was born. July seventh. Which makes him a Cancer. Those born under that sign are also called moonchildren. I know because I'm also a Cancer".

"And the flame-haired daughter of war"?

"The centaurs are still working on that one. The confusing thing is, some of the centaurs think that there are doppelgangers for each of the people in the prophecy. They think that the Dark Lord will be defeated twice, that there are two sets of people who fulfill the prophecy"...

"Defeated twice? Defeated means defeated, doesn't it"?

"That's why it's confusing...But the Malfoys have struck a deal. They are promising to raise their son to be a servant of the Dark Lord. He has promised not to kill the child, for now. I came to plead with you, Lily. Strike a deal. Save yourselves and Harry. Don't try to fight--you can't win".

"What? That's why you came here? To tell me to raise my son to be Voldemort's servant?" Harry was impressed; Snape wasn't saying Voldemort's name. "How do you know all of these things, Severus? I thought you were working at an apothecary in Dunoon. How do you know about prophecies, and Voldemort coming after us? How?" She had stood and was pacing around the room nervously. She glanced into the nursery; small Harry had fallen asleep on the rug, his head pillowed on a stuffed bear. She went to him and picked him up so she could put him in his cot, but the movement woke him and he fussed. She shushed him, setting him down, giving him his bear. And then she sang to him.

It was the lullaby from the music box...

Harry listened to his mother's singing, a lump in his throat. Hermione laced her fingers through his, putting her head on his shoulder. When the lullaby was over, the baby's fussing was history; they could hear him breathing peacefully. She closed the door quietly, turned to face Snape with blazing eyes.

"You're one of them, aren't you? You're a Death Eater." Her voice was cold and assured. He gave her a look that told her she had spoken the truth. It was quickly replaced with an expression of desperation.

"I was--but I'm not now, Lily. You must believe me! I was recruited at the end of my seventh year at Hogwarts, and for the next few years I was--cultivating a son of an official who is very high up in the Ministry of Magic..." She looked shocked by this. "

then I heard about this prophecy, and you and James and Harry being targeted. I went to see Dumbledore, and he--he understood why I did what I did, and promised me I would not be punished, that I could be a spy, I could be useful. I haven't hurt anyone, Lily. I recruited one young man who was angry with his father, and if it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else who recruited him. Please--promise me you'll say that you'll raise Harry to serve the Dark Lord. You don't have to mean it! Just say it! Save your life--Harry's life-- James' life. Do whatever is necessary"...

She glared at him with complete and utter hatred in her eyes.

"Get out".

"Lily"--

"Get out now! Before I seriously hurt you"...

He swallowed. "If you won't cooperate, at least promise me you'll go into hiding. Find a safe place".

"Oh, we'll go into hiding, all right. Do you think we'd stay here, where you know where to find us? I can't believe you and I ever--ever--" she trailed off, looking sickened.

Snape swallowed, seeing her so repulsed by him. "Please, Lily. Don't push me away. I want to help".

But now she had her wand in her hand; she looked angry enough to do the killing curse. "I said get out. While you still have two arms and two legs." Looking at her face, Harry doubted this was an idle threat. She was, if possible, even scarier at twenty-one than at sixteen, and she'd been formidable then. Harry turned and looked at Hermione, yet another Muggle-born witch. Did she and his mother try overcompensate for their births? He looked back at his mother; her hair was pulled up in a messy bun at the back of her head, loose tendrils resting on her neck, her blue summer dress reminding him of the one Ginny had worn at the Burrow. She was beautiful and impressive and powerful, and no one in their right mind would cross her.

Snape left reluctantly. She never lowered her wand.

The grey storm surrounded them once more, and when he could see again, Harry and Hermione were in a familiar place. The Leaky Cauldron. Snape sat at the bar, holding a glass with a very small amount of amber liquid in the bottom. He looked like there might have been quite a lot of it not too long ago. His eyes were hooded, his hair hanging in his face became a kind of mask, to hide behind. Harry couldn't believe how he'd gone downhill.

"Look!" Hermione touched his arm. She pointed toward the door to Diagon Alley. Albus Dumbledore was entering; but he was much more subdued in his facial expression and clothes than they'd ever seen him. He wore a grey traveling cloak over black robes; the cloak's hood was up, so that all they could see of his head was a sliver of his face, nonetheless recognizable. His spectacles glinted in the flickering candlelight and firelight in the pub; Harry could not see his eyes.

Dumbledore's nod to old Tom behind the bar was almost imperceptible. Tom gave an infinitesimal nod in return, and Dumbledore quietly proceeded down a corridor to one of the private dining rooms. Harry had not seen whether Snape noticed any of this, but he now put a silver Sickle on the bar and, carrying his glass, walked quietly down the same corridor. He went to the same room as Dumbledore, Harry and Hermione following.

Dumbledore was seated at the dining table; he had taken down his hood and looked more like the headmaster they were accustomed to seeing--but even though Harry had only seen that grim look on his face a few times, he knew it wasn't a good sign.

Snape sat next to him but did not look at him. He contemplated his glass for a moment before downing the rest of the liquid, giving a small gasp and pulling his lips back from his teeth. Harry saw his Adam's apple bob twice. Snape put his glass down with a thunk, still not looking at Dumbledore. Another silence followed.

"Should you be drinking that?" Dumbledore suddenly asked him, in what was surprisingly close to his normal voice, despite the evidence that they were not in a normal situation at all.

Snape moved only his eyes toward Dumbledore. "No. Bad for my liver." He traced the rim of the empty glass with one long, pale finger.

Harry was becoming more and more uncomfortable with the silence. He turned to Hermione, who was watching the two men, so familiar and yet not, a perplexed expression on her face. He opened his mouth to speak, then changed his mind. Dumbledore had finally broken his silence.

“How did it go?”

Snape tilted the glass, gazing into it, looking like he wished it were full again. “Not well.” He stared at a spot on the wall. Harry was now standing in front of that spot, so it felt uncomfortably like he was boring his eyes right through him, as though he could see him. Somehow, it was worse than when he was wearing the Invisibility Cloak.

Snape spoke again, quietly. “I told her about the prophecy. She didn’t believe me. But she understands that the Dark Lord believes it, that they’re in danger. I think they’re going into hiding. She--knows that I was recruited. I tried to tell her I wasn’t Dark anymore, but she kicked me out”...

Dumbledore put his hand on Snape’s arm. “I know you’re fine, Severus. I will vouch for you before anyone who doubts that. There is a charm that will help them hide--the Fidelius Charm. I’ll contact Sirius Black about it. He’ll need to be in on it. They’re closer to him than to Pettigrew. And Remus”...

“He’s a werewolf! Do you know how many werewolves are serving him now? They’re flocking to him”.

Dumbledore sighed. “I’d like to believe Remus wouldn’t do that--” he began, but he looked doubtful. “You go back to Dunoon, Severus. You’ve done what you can. If you hear anything, you know where to find me”.

Snape nodded, looking miserable. The greyness swirled around Harry and Hermione. When will it end? Harry wondered. But he needn’t have; when the fog dissipated, they were on a grassy knoll looking down into a valley; it was night, and there was only a half-moon. Starlight did very little to illuminate their surroundings. They seemed to be in the middle of nowhere.

Snape was standing nearby with a young man with a short fringe of blond hair around his face, a round, pale, rather innocent-looking face. But Harry knew he was not so innocent; he recognized Barty Crouch, Jr. Snape was looking around him, apparently as confused as Harry and Hermione about where they were and why.

“Why did you have us Apparate here?” he asked Crouch, who smiled sunnily.

“So we could watch the show. Any minute now, right over there.” He pointed down into the valley at a clump of trees that had smoke emerging from them; there must be a house in their midst, Harry thought. But then Crouch took in the confusion on Snape’s face. “Oh, hadn’t you heard? The Potters tried to hide using the Fidelius Charm, but it turned out their Secret Keeper was a Death Eater! How’s that for luck? Plus, I heard that the same Death Eater got this centaur to figure out who the girl in the prophecy is; you know, the ‘daughter of war.’ So she’ll be next. Just wait for it; should be a time now”.

Snape looked wild. “You mean, they didn’t move? They just used the charm? Damn! I told her to run, to go into hiding. He seemed completely unmindful of who he was speaking to.

Crouch eyed him suspiciously. “What are you saying? You tried to tip them off? They refused to capitulate! They still do have to die, if they agree to the Dark Lord’s demands! But they’ll probably be stupid and fight”...

Snape wasn’t going to listen to this any longer. He began to run down the moor toward the valley. Harry and Hermione ran too, following him. Suddenly from behind them, they heard young Crouch cry, “CRUCIO!” and the curse hit Snape with force from behind, sending him down onto the ground. He flipped over, his face contorted in pain, a scream torn from deep within him, where Harry knew the torment lived, the complete and utter agony of it...

Crouch walked to where Snape was, still holding his wand on him. Finally, he flipped it up, breaking the spell, and Snape struggled to prop himself up on his elbows, panting, hatred for the boy he’d recruited showing in his black eyes as he worked to get his breath back.

Harry must have blinked then, because suddenly Snape was whipping out his wand and pointing it at Crouch, crying, “Expelliarmus!” causing Crouch to fly backwards, striking a large boulder, while his wand went flying into the air and into Snape’s waiting hand. Crouch lay on the boulder, inert.

"He must be knocked out," Hermione whispered to Harry. He nodded, his heart in his throat.

Snape rose a little shakily, still obviously feeling the pain from the curse. He ran more slowly than before down into Godric's Hollow. But before he had gotten twenty more feet, there was an explosion. It distracted Snape and he twisted his ankle on the hill, falling. On the ground again, he raised his eyes to the heavens, and to Harry, his face was terrible to behold.

The Dark Mark hovered over the hollow. Harry went to his knees; his legs simply could no longer hold him up. Hermione joined him on the ground, putting her arms around him. Silent tears ran down her face. Snape stayed where he was on the ground as though paralyzed; then another explosion was heard from the hollow, and an unearthly cry. It was a death rattle taken to its ultimate degree, a cry from the abyss, the roar of either an angel or a devil suffering and dying.

Snape was on his feet running again, clearly operating on pure adrenaline. They followed him down into the valley and through the garden gate. It seemed to take forever to get there. Lily lay across the flower beds before the cottage in her nightgown, that look on her face Harry remembered from seeing Cedric right after he'd been killed. Harry didn't see his father; he must have been killed inside the house...

Little Harry was wandering around the garden, his finger in his mouth, crying piteously. The scar on the forehead was bleeding, dripping down onto his nose. Snape did not show any sign of surprise that Harry was alive; he seemed to care for one thing only. Snape sank to his knees beside Lily, gathering her body to him, cradling her, as his anguished sobs competed with the baby's bawling.

"Harry," Hermione said, choking on his name. Tears were still streaming down her face. "How do we get out of here"?

He wanted nothing more than that too. He tried to remember what Dumbledore had done; he put his hand under her elbow and tried to think about rising into the air; the cottage dissolved and then there was nothing but blackness; he had the feeling again of doing a slow-motion somersault, and he and Hermione landed on their feet in Snape's cold office. But Harry didn't stay on his feet for long; he immediately collapsed onto the floor, and Hermione fell with him, holding his head while he cried for his mother, his father, even for Snape...

It felt like he had cried for a very long time. He felt drained afterward, as though he had no more tears left to use for the rest of his life. He wiped his face and put his glasses back on. He looked at Hermione; her eyes were red, her face blotchy. He assumed he didn't look any better.

"What time is it?" he asked in a small voice.

She moved the sleeve of his robe, uncovered his watch.

"After ten o'clock".

"We missed dinner." His voice didn't sound like his own. Someone else seemed to be speaking for him, saying stupid mundane things about time and dinner, as though any of that mattered. Nothing mattered. Nothing could ever be as real to him as what he had seen in the Pensieve, Snape holding his mother's dead body, his mother singing to him as a ballad, his father pulling Snape away from the werewolf that was also Remus Lupin, the look in Sirius' eyes when he invited Snape into the tunnel under the Whomping Willow...

He felt like his life would never be the same again.

Harry stood shakily, and then could not remember doing it.

Nothing was real.

They walked up to the entrance hall. Harry couldn't feel his feet on the steps, the railing under his hand.

Nothing was real.

"I'll go find Dumbledore or McGonagall," Hermione was saying. She was like a television show he was watching in the house on Privet Drive. She was as real to him as that. "Since there are so few of us here, I'm sure they missed us. I'll tell whichever one of them I find first that we were working on potions and didn't notice the time. Then I'll see if there's anything I can get to eat in the kitchens. Do you want me to get you something"?

Nothing was real.

She was trying to be helpful, trying so hard. How could she know? Harry thought. How could she know that she wasn't even here, that she wasn't even real? She probably thought she was real. She couldn't know. People who weren't real couldn't have that kind of self-knowledge...

"No," came the hollow voice again. "I couldn't eat. I'm going to bed".

Nothing was real.

"All right," she was saying. "I'll see you up in the tower".

Harry couldn't remember climbing to Gryffindor Tower, speaking a meaningless password.

Nothing was real.

He went up the stairs to his room and undressed for bed. When he put his head down on the pillow, he immediately fell asleep.

Nothing was real.

* * * * *

Harry woke up. He had been having a dream. He thought it was about something he'd seen in the Pensieve, but he couldn't remember now. He didn't remember Hermione coming to bed, but she was curled beside him, breathing peacefully, as though the Pensieve hadn't happened, as though she wasn't the least bit affected by it. He momentarily hated her for that; then he remembered how he had lain down and immediately gone to sleep, and he undid that thought. He didn't hate her, couldn't hate her...

His mind felt like it was slowly recovering from the Pensieve experience. Even the little sleep he'd had had helped. The dream had been in there for a very long time; much longer than when he was in Dumbledore's. He thought about what he'd seen. About his mother and Snape.

Harry looked at Hermione sleeping peacefully. The clouds had lifted and moonlight spilled in through the window; the moon was full. Remus Lupin would be changing... Sirius could transfigure himself into a dog, for safety. Perhaps since Snape was staying with them, he could make some Wolfsbane Potion for Lupin. After all, Snape had to brew Porphry Potion for himself (which was another use for all that spleenwort Sprout had given Pomfrey).

Snape had porphyria. Some things were falling into place now. Not the least of which was Snape's mental instability, his temper. And his impatience with people assuming they knew what he was all about. When he was young, rumors of his being a vampire. Now that he was older, persistent rumblings that he was a Death Eater. He couldn't win, thought Harry. And yet--here he was, working for Dumbledore as a spy.

He turned onto his back, staring up at some shadows being cast on the ceiling by the moonlight. Hermione was curled facing away from him. But when he changed position, she mumbled in her sleep, then rolled over, pillowing her head on his chest, throwing her right arm and leg over his body. Her nightshirt seemed very thin; he could feel her chest squashed against him, her hand brushed agonizingly over his left nipple for a split second, her knee was dangerously close to his crotch....

She was suddenly very, very real to him. Too real.

Suddenly, Snape was the last thing on his mind. Harry began to feel warmer, began to have thoughts about touching her, caressing her--no. That would be wrong. She was asleep, peaceful...

She moaned in her sleep, mumbled something. He looked down and saw her eyes moving behind her eyelids. He thought about what he'd be likely to be dreaming about if he sounded like that, and became even warmer. Not touching her became the most difficult thing in the world for Harry. He shook with the effort of just lying still, closing his eyes, trying to will sleep to return. Sleep did not cooperate.

Finally, he couldn't take it any longer. This is stupid, he thought. There are four other beds in this room. I don't have to torture myself like this. He crept out of bed carefully, lifting her arm and leg from him gingerly and placing them back on the mattress. He walked over to Ron's bed and parted the curtains, pulled back the covers and climbed under them. An improvement, but his body had not yet forgotten what his mind had been thinking a few minutes earlier.

Sleep sleep sleep sleep sleep sleep became his brain's litany. He tried an old trick of his when he was having trouble sleeping third year, when he couldn't stop hearing the sounds of his parents' deaths: he stared as hard as he could at an object--he chose the silver pitcher near the window--and tried very hard not to blink, to tire out his eyes, force them to close once and for all. He stared at it for a good minute (he counted in his head). Finally, he was starting to feel the effect of the staring; his eyes were beginning to feel like they must close or he would go insane. It probably would have worked if it weren't for one thing.

Hermione was standing now between him and the pitcher, blocking his view. The moonlight behind her made her nightshirt appear diaphanous, and Harry squeezed his eyes shut after seeing that, determined to pretend that he was asleep. He heard her approach the bed, then felt the mattress dip to one side momentarily as she climbed onto it. Go away, he thought sternly, trying to mean it. He felt the fabric of her nightshirt brush his arm. He opened his eyes; the contact had produced goose pimples all over his body. He could no longer pretend to be asleep.

"Harry?" she said softly. "Are you all right? Why did you move over here"?

"Hermione," he whispered. "Go back to sleep".

"I checked the clock. It's after midnight. Happy new year, Harry." She leaned over him and kissed his lips, and it would have been a quick kiss, done and over with, if he hadn't lost all pretense of control at that point and put his hands in her hair and opened his mouth under hers.

That was all it took. He gave up, he surrendered. He kissed her like he was afraid he'd never kiss her again, with a desperation that was shattering. He felt like he was clutching at life after experiencing far too much death. He pulled her onto him, and now she was lying on top of him, kissing him back, knowing why he had moved. He could no longer hide from her what his body wanted; he could tell she could feel it when she broke the kiss and looked down at him with wide surprised eyes. But it did not faze her; she moaned and leaned down to kiss his chest. He shook, trying to stabilize his breathing, wanting to slow things down a little, wanting to make her happy. He pulled her face up to his again, kissing her then moving his lips down her neck. She knelt over him, sighing, while his fingers unbuttoned her night shirt. She gasped when he continued kissing down her body, when he took the tip of one breast in his mouth, when he moved his hand up her thigh...

But then, for some reason, he heard unbidden in his head a voice, a voice that almost brought him crashing down to earth.

JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN DOESN'T MEAN YOU SHOULD.

She was hovering above him, her breathing matching his while his hands and mouth worshipped her, and he could feel her starting to shake in a different way. Harry felt like he was losing his concentration, though, as the voice in his head shouted again.

JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN DOESN'T MEAN YOU SHOULD.

Harry froze. His heart seemed to be beating loud enough to be heard by the entire castle, by the entire countryside. GET OUT OF MY HEAD, Harry commanded the voice. LEAVE ME ALONE.

But then another voice was heard; a hissing voice. This voice was harder to ignore.

Sandy.

Damn damn damn damn damn damn, became the new litany in Harry's brain. He took a deep breath, looking up at her. He had never seen such a beautiful expression on her face, the abandonment and expectation there. If only--

But they had to stop. It wasn't safe. She looked down at him, her expression starting to return to normal inasmuch as he was no longer doing anything with his mouth or hands. "What's wrong, Harry?" she whispered.

He pulled himself to a sitting position and reached out to button her shirt for her, if possible aching for her even more than before. "We--we have to stop".

"Why?" She almost sounded near tears.

"Believe me; I don't want to," he said with a catch in his voice, leaning forward to kiss her forehead. "Sandy said. There isn't much time. Do everything I tell you to do, please. No questions".

She nodded and rose, standing next to the bed, waiting for her instructions. Good girl, thought Harry. He was glad he'd told her about Sandy; Hermione knew to take her predictions seriously. It wasn't like Trelawney; there was no doubt that Sandy knew what she was talking about.

"Close all the curtains on all the beds. Hurry." They ran around the room doing this; then Harry went to his trunk and took out his Invisibility Cloak. He had her put it on and stand in the corner near the wardrobe; someone entering the room would have her behind him after taking only two steps into the room.

"Get your wand," he told her.

"Oh, Harry--I don't have it! It's in my dorm"...

"Damn!" He ran his hand through his hair. "All right, all right. Just stand in the corner there where I told you to. I'm going to get under Dean's bed with my wand and wait. That'll give me a clear shot. Okay? Are you in the corner"?

"Yes," her voice came from the right direction.

"All right. I'm getting under the bed. We don't talk any more now. Try not to make noise of any kind".

Her answer was no answer, which was fine with him. He crawled under Dean Thomas' bed, holding his wand in front of him. He lifted the hem of the coverlet up a few inches where it met the floor, giving him a view of the lower half of the door to the room. His wand was pointing toward it. He was ready.

But his brain was still playing over what had happened on the bed, on--he suddenly realized--Ron's bed. Damn! he thought yet again. Ron's bed!

But he found himself wishing, in spite of that realization, that they'd had more time, that they'd brought the activity to completion, so that he would have experienced that just once before dying. Would he see more than a few minutes of the new year before being killed? Would Hermione? He saw his mother again, dead, Snape cradling her in his arms. He thought about how young his parents had died, the things they'd left undone--like raising their son...

He watched the door in anticipation, wondering just how he would die, whether it would be painful. But then he shook himself; STOP THAT. I am not going to die, he told himself. I am not going to die. But as much as he would have liked that mantra to take over his brain, he found that he was unable to stop playing Sandy's words over and over in his head again...

"A dark wizard is coming".

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-One: The Dueling Club

Harry felt like he had been waiting under Dean Thomas' bed forever, watching the bottom half of the door. His stomach was cold, pressed against the dusty stone floor. His right hand was shaking, trying to hold his wand steady and failing. He strained to hear Hermione breathing in the corner; perhaps it's too far away, he thought. Or perhaps it's a good thing that her breathing isn't so audible it can be heard clear across the room. He just hoped whoever entered the dorm wouldn't hear her. If only she'd brought her wand, he thought for the twentieth time since crawling under the bed. Then we'd have him outnumbered...

Finally, Harry heard a step on the landing outside the door. The moon was like a spotlight shining in the window. Harry watched the doorknob turn, heard the catch pull back, the hinges squeak ever so slightly as it opened.

He saw black robes over black trousers, black boots treading lightly on the stones. If he weren't fairly certain that he wasn't planning to use a Time Turner in an hour to return to this moment, it could have been him in his Hogwarts robes, his favorite black slacks and his black boots he'd bought over the summer. Stop it, he commanded his brain. Concentrate.

The wizard walked carefully over to Harry's bed. Harry could no longer see him. He heard the bedcurtains being pulled aside, a grunt as it was discovered that Harry wasn't in bed. The intruder moved to Ron's bed, pulled open those bedcurtains; another grunt, another empty bed. That had been part of Harry's plan; make him uncertain where to look.

Then Harry thought his heart would stop beating, he was so surprised by what happened next. The man had started walking right toward him, toward where he was under Dean Thomas' bed. But then suddenly--

The man was no longer a man.

The large black dog that had taken his place sniffed the floor and then went unerringly to Harry in his hiding place. Harry let out a gust of air, collapsing flat on the floor, relaxing his grip on his wand. The large black dog put his snout under the bed, licking his face, and Harry winced, then patted the dog on the head in a tired, half-hearted way, mumbling, "Hello, Sirius".

But the dog still didn't change back into a man; instead, he carefully sniffed Harry's right hand, moving his nose over every square inch of it. Harry was starting to feel more than a little strange. Was this Sirius? Or someone else?

"All right, Sirius. Change back already".

And suddenly, Sirius Black was crouching before him. "Happy New Year, Harry".

"Happy New Year!" Harry cried angrily, bumping his head on the underside of the bed frame. He crawled out, rubbing his head, shaking from anger and frustration and--he had to admit--from feeling rather foolish.

"Um, Harry--why were you hiding under the bed?" Sirius asked innocently.

Harry wasn't feeling particularly charitably-inclined toward Sirius at this moment. "I was hiding under the sodding bed because I thought you were a sodding dark wizard"!

Sirius' eyebrows flew up. "What? Why ever would you think that"?

Harry drew his lips into a line and removed Sandy from his arm, holding her up so that they could talk face to face. "Sandy," he began, "you told me that a dark wizard was coming".

"And so he did".

"Sirius is not a dark wizard"!

"What color is his hair"?

"Black".

"And is he a wizard"?

"Yes, of course".

"So. He is a dark wizard".

Harry sighed with exasperation. "Sandy, 'dark wizard' has a very specific meaning. You couldn't say 'black-haired wizard' or just, 'Here comes your godfather'"?

"What is a godfather"?

Harry felt close to losing it. "Nevermind." He wrapped her around his arm again, then looked up into Sirius' perplexed face.

"Mind telling me what that was all about? And do you know how strange that looks and sounds, you standing there hissing at that snake, and it hissing back"--

"Oh, um, well--you know I'm a Parselmouth"...

"I seem to remember something about that when I bought you your birthday present, yes." Sarcasm seeped through his words, making Harry feel foolish again.

"Well, what I didn't tell you is that snakes have the Sight".

Sirius furrowed his brow. "Snakes? All snakes"?

"As far as I've been able to tell. There was this really big one we were studying in Care of Magical Creatures which predicted Boxing Day. She said, 'The masters will be servants and the servants will be masters.' She also knew that no one would stay for Boxing Day. Something like, 'Many will go but few will stay.' Both of those were a couple of months before the events happened. Sandy's only a small snake, so she can only see a few minutes into the future, and only right around where she is. She told me a dark wizard was coming, but what she meant was a black-haired wizard, and of course--here you are".

Sirius nodded with understanding, scrutinizing Sandy more closely than he had previously. Then he looked in Harry's face again. "Don't you think you should let Hermione come out of the corner now"?

Harry spluttered. "How--how did"--

But Hermione was emerging from the Invisibility Cloak, walking over to them and folding it neatly into a rectangle as she did so. "He must have smelled me when he was a dog," she concluded logically. Harry hadn't thought of that. Sirius was looking at Hermione strangely, then seemed to shake himself, as though he were trying to govern unruly thoughts.

"Um, Hermione--" he said hesitantly, not quite looking at her now, but around and past her. "Don't you think you should put on a dressing gown or something"?

Harry looked at her in her thin nightshirt; even in the moonlight, he could see her reddening, and she dashed over to Harry's trunk to put on the dressing gown she'd left there before climbing into bed earlier.

"I don't suppose we could have some light in here, could we?" Sirius asked. Harry nodded and waved his wand at the candles. Sirius sat down on Ron's trunk and Harry sat on his own. Hermione looked uncomfortable.

"Going to the loo..." she mumbled, practically running for the door.

Sirius' gaze stayed on the doorway even after she was gone. Still looking in that direction, he asked, "Harry, what exactly did I interrupt"?

"Interrupt? What makes you think you interrupted anything?" Harry's voice sounded unnaturally high to him.

Sirius fixed him with a gaze that would have done Mad-Eye Moody proud for producing squirms. Harry looked away. "Hermione has been sleeping up here, yes. Ever since I had the dream about Voldemort and the Death Eaters, and my scar hurt me. She didn't want to leave me alone. But look!" he said, pulling back the bedcurtains of his bed, and then Ron's. "Two beds slept in. Two"!

Sirius gave him a Do-I-Look-Like-An-Idiot Look. Harry faltered momentarily.

"Regardless of how many beds have been slept in, I know what I smelled when I was a dog Harry. It's pretty unmistakable".

I would have a dog Animagus for a godfather, thought Harry. He grimaced and sat again, giving up with a sigh. "Okay, that was what you interrupted...but it's not like we've been--you know. Up until tonight it's been strictly sleeping"...

Sirius frowned. "Harry--do you mind my asking whatever happened to your other girlfriend"?

Harry had forgotten about mentioning Cho to Sirius. So now he had to explain about her and Viktor Krum...When he had done so, Sirius nodded with understanding.

"It's not that I'm passing judgment, Harry--I had enough girlfriends in school--but I just want to give you a suggestion." Harry thought of how many times in his life he'd wished for parents, and how a parent was the last thing on the planet he wanted just now. But he nodded as Sirius went on. "There's this thing called Prophylaxis Potion. Madam Pomfrey will give it out to any girl who's in fifth year on up. One dose lasts six months, and you--well, the girl--can take as much as six doses at once, so it can last up to three years. Works the day after, too".

Sirius looked at him significantly, as if hoping Harry understood the slightly cryptic statement so that Sirius wouldn't have to be any more specific. Harry nodded.

"I've heard of that potion. Made with spleenwort. Speaking of which--how did you and Snape and Lupin get on? Tonight was a full moon, too".

Sirius grinned. "Snape wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. We left while it was still light. But he did make some Wolfsbane Potion and left it for Lupin. He's probably back in his own Snapish quarters already"...

Harry decided it was his turn to make Sirius uncomfortable. He looked so harmless, so amiable and avuncular, sitting there on Ron's trunk. How could he be the same young man in the Pensieve?

"So. You didn't give Snape any goblets of blood"?

"Goblets of--did he tell you about that"?

"Well, in a roundabout way," he said, figuring that was a reasonably accurate description of having found out about it while he was in the Pensieve.

Sirius looked down at his hands. "I'm not proud of some of the things I did when I was young, Harry. I mean, I even made a pass at Lily once"...

"You what?" Harry yelled, as Hermione came back into the room, clutching her dressing gown at the neck to hold it closed more securely.

Sirius laughed. "Didn't work. You should have seen my face afterward--she must have put three different disfiguring curses on me in very quick succession. Hard to reverse that kind of thing. It was a month before any girl would consider looking at me again".

Harry laughed. Hermione sat down on the trunk next to him. "What did I miss?" she wanted to know.

"Oh, um," Harry said, stalling. Sirius leaped into the breach.

"Harry said you'd been sleeping up here, keeping him company. I thought I would sleep up here, too. Why don't you eat and use the beds you were already in, and I'll pick another? We should all get some rest." He looked very pointedly at Harry, who couldn't keep looking back without feeling very, very guilty.

Harry went to his own bed. Looking a little uncertain, Hermione went to Ron's. Sirius chose Neville's bed, and they were soon all ensconced behind their bedcurtains, calling goodnight to one another, and Harry put his wand through the curtains to extinguish the candles.

He laid back, trying to fall asleep again, thinking about Hermione lying on the other side of the room, and what had almost happened. Perhaps it's for the best, he reasoned, trying to convince himself. Although it was good to know Prophylaxis Potion would work the day after...

* * * * *

Harry and Hermione rose to run as usual, waking Sirius briefly to tell him where they were going. He nodded groggily and turned over, going back to sleep. When they were returning upstairs after the run, they came to a halt suddenly when Dobby popped into view before them on the third floor, near the girls' prefect bathroom.

“Harry Potter! Harry Potter! And Miss Hermione Granger! I is looking for you all over the castle! I is telling you good news!”

Harry just wanted to get to the shower. “What is it Dobby?” he said wearily.

“Nine house elves is asking Dumbledore for clothes today!” Dobby looked ecstatic. Hermione had been looking excited when he started talking, but now her face fell.

“Nine? Just nine?” she said softly.

Dobby didn’t notice her disappointment. “I is thinking it is what you was saying on Boxing Day, Harry Potter! That is what I is thinking!” Dobby was practically bouncing off the walls. Hermione looked like she felt she had failed. Harry was torn between responding to Dobby’s joy or Hermione’s attack of self-doubt.

“Um--thanks for telling us, Dobby. We’re each going to the showers now, though”...

“Thank you, Harry Potter! Thank you!” Dobby cried, grinning, and then popped out of the corridor again. Harry was able to turn to Hermione now, but she evidently didn’t want words of comfort or reassurance. She went to the portrait of the shepherdess, gave the password, and entered the bathroom without a word to him, looking like she was about to cry. Harry grimaced; he knew they couldn’t have expected many house elves to want clothes right away, but nine did seem like rather a small number.

When he arrived at the boys’ prefect bathroom, he discovered that Snape wasn’t the only one who had returned a day early to the castle. The luxurious marble room had been deserted for the previous week at this hour--Roger and Ernie seemed to use it later, or at night--but as soon as Harry opened the door, he was confronted by someone he hadn’t seen since his dream on Christmas night.

Draco Malfoy.

“Um, hello,” Harry said, taken by surprise. Malfoy had evidently already bathed and was wearing a green Slytherin bathrobe and shower shoes from the wardrobe. He smirked at Harry.

“What’s the matter, Potter? All your blood permanently left your brain from spending so much time shagging Granger?”

Harry was speechless, his mouth hanging open. Finally, he managed to stutter, “We haven’t--there’s been no”--

Malfoy looked terribly smug now. “Oh, my mistake. Didn’t figure Granger would be such a tease. I see. All your blood must have left your brain from all the wanking you’re doing, while thinking about shagging Granger”...

Now Harry felt his face redden. He stopped trying to address the lewd things Malfoy had been saying (and tried not to think about them himself) and return to what he’d originally meant to say.

“I was going to ask if you were all right, but I don’t know why I should bother being nice to you, you insufferable git”.

Malfoy made a mock sad face. “Aw. That hurt. Is that the best you can do”?

But Harry had had enough. He grabbed Malfoy’s left hand and pushed up the sleeve of the bathrobe. “I was asking because I saw you get this, you sodding bastard!” The Dark Mark showed vividly on Malfoy’s pale skin. “And I saw Voldemort put the Cruciatius Curse on you, and saw you put the Hara Kiri curse on Karkaroff before Voldemort killed him”.

Malfoy looked suddenly terrified. “Saw me--? How? Were you--were you the one impersonating my father”?

“No, you idiot. I can’t Apparate yet”.

Malfoy looked at him with narrowed eyes. “But you know who it was, don’t you”?

“Maybe I do. It’s none of your business”.

“Oh, if someone goes around pretending to be my dad and then stuns me, I think it’s my damn business! And you still haven’t said how you saw those things. Were you impersonating someone else there”?

"No." Harry pointed to his scar. "It links me to Voldemort. I've had dreams when he's been feeling especially violent or murderous; the dreams show me what he's doing, what's happening where he is. I had a dream on Christmas night. But when he did the killing curse, my scar hurt so bad I woke up. I wasn't sure who had gotten killed. For a little while, I thought it might be you"...

Malfoy tried to recover his cockiness, but it was half-hearted. "That would have made you happy"...

"I was afraid Ginny would think it was my fault. But it's a moot point, now. You're alive and kicking and as obnoxious as ever".

"How touching that you were concerned." He smiled evilly. Harry's ire was up, and he was finding it harder and harder to control the urge to put a really good hex on him.

"So," Harry said. "Your father will probably tell you what's going on now, when Voldemort summons the Death Eaters. He'll have to tell you, since you can't Apparate to him from Hogwarts--since you can't Apparate at all, in fact".

"What makes you think I can't Apparate?" Malfoy said softly.

Harry frowned. "But--you're not old enough. You can't get a license until you're of age. It's illegal otherwise".

Malfoy smiled--or at least, what passed for a smile for him. "And you think I would have a problem with that"?

Harry swallowed. He should remember to stop making assumptions about what Malfoy would and wouldn't do. Working on learning Apparition before he was legal was probably small potatoes for him.

"Anyway, even someone who can Apparate can't do it on the grounds of Hogwarts. So, whenever your father tells you what happened at one of the Death Eater meetings, send me an owl and I'll meet you to get the information".

Malfoy laughed, shaking his head. Harry stared at him; had he cracked? Had Voldemort used the Cruciatus Curse on him for too long?

"You're really funny sometimes, Potter, you know that?" But suddenly, his face was anything but funny. Harry remembered how grim he had looked when he had cursed Karkaroff.

"Let me tell you how this is going to work," Malfoy went on. "I am going to go about my life, going to classes, eating, sleeping, corresponding with my father, playing Quidditch, and--oh, yeah--snogging with Ginny as much as humanly possible. If I hear anything incriminating from my father, I'm keeping it to myself until such time as I have enough information to get him locked up in Azkaban properly, where the bastard can't get me, and with a guarantee from the Ministry of Magic that I will be immune from all prosecution and absolutely safe. You will not know anything. Up until the moment my father puts the final nail in his own coffin, you will be completely in the dark. We are not friends. We will not correspond, or meet, or even be civil to each other, understand? I'm running the show now, and you just have to live with it".

Harry stared at him. "What? That's not what we agreed to"...

"I don't give a damn what you think we agreed to. I'm holding all the cards, Potter. And Ginny too, who is very nice to her father. Thank you very much. We're doing this my way now".

Harry swallowed. "I don't know about this--I'd rather know what your father's up to before someone I care about gets hurt. How do I know you're actually going to do this? How do I know you're not just playing me? How do I know I can trust you?"

Malfoy smirked again; he put his hand on the doorknob, preparing to leave.

"You don't".

He was gone.

Harry found himself pacing back and forth on the cold marble floor, running his hand through his hair. He was at the mercy of Draco Malfoy, and he didn't like it one bit. Something about this was making him very, very nervous. It didn't f

right; it was a recipe for disaster. What if Malfoy had no intention of following through, what if he just wanted to be with Ginny and make Harry think he was going to turn in his father? He thought of Ginny, kissing Malfoy in the conservatory the Christmas party...If Malfoy helped put Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban, the Weasleys could probably forgive Harry after the fact for not telling anyone about Ginny and Draco Malfoy. But if he was lying...

Some of his closest friends--probably his best friend--would be wanting his head on a platter.

* * * * *

Sirius met with Dumbledore before leaving; Harry loaned him his Invisibility Cloak to go to the headmaster's office. That evening, the rest of the students returned on the Hogwarts Express, and sleeping arrangements for Harry and Hermione returned to normal. It felt strange to be eating dinner again at the Gryffindor table, crowded with students chatting happily about the Christmas presents they'd received and what they'd done on holiday. Harry listened but didn't listen to Ron, who talked so much during the meal it was unclear to Harry whether he'd actually eaten anything. At bedtime, Harry was afraid Ron would notice something amiss with his bed, but the house elves had, as usual, put fresh linens on it and placed a warming pan between the mattress and coverlet. To Ron, everything was normal.

Luckily, the first day back was a Tuesday. Tuesday wasn't bad; Care of Magical Creatures, Herbology, History of Magic, and Divination. The golden griffin was gone; now they were onto snow sprites, because they were in season. They raced around the lawn near the lake, snow crunching under their boots, trying to catch the tiny flying creatures, who would wave their hands for a few seconds before flying off again. It wasn't easy; they blended in with the landscape so completely. Harry was amazed that these small beings who looked made of ice could be so warm.

For Herbology, they were now in Greenhouse Five, which felt uncomfortably like a tropical jungle. They took off their robes, but were still sweating profusely while wrestling with the magical Kudzu which had tripled in size over the previous week; pruning it back was very dangerous, and twice it caught Ron around the neck and tried to cut off his air. When they left, he was rubbing his neck, muttering something about bringing weed killer next time.

History of Magic was basically naptime, not that Binns ever noticed, and then Divination was canceled because Trelawney had taken to her bed with a cold, "Which the stars told me would occur today." They knew she would be better by Thursday, however, so they enjoyed the reprieve while they could.

It was Wednesday that Harry was dreading.

Harry was not looking forward to returning to Potions, unsure of how to face Snape, now that he'd been inside the Pensieve. Suddenly, everything that had happened during the holiday seemed to have occurred a very long time ago...

When he walked into the Potions Dungeon for the first class of the new term, Snape barked at him, "Potter! In my office."

Harry looked at Hermione; she raised her eyebrows and shrugged. This still seemed like vintage Snape. No difference.

Harry went into his office; Snape left the door open. To Harry, this seemed calculated. He noticed that the Pensieve was no longer on the desk; Harry couldn't see it anywhere. "So, Potter. Did anyone use any potions ingredients while I was gone?"

Harry looked him in the eye, trying to see the man from the Pensieve. "No, sir."
"No one entered my office at all?"

Harry hesitated for a moment. "I did, sir".

"Did you find what you were looking for?" His face was still inscrutable. Harry thought he knew what he was asking.

"Actually, sir, a bit more. Not that that's a problem".

Snape assessed him through narrowed eyes. "I am now changing the password again. The one I gave you before will no longer work. If you want something from my private stores, you will need to ask me. Now return to your station." Snape's voice now seemed uncharacteristically quiet.

"Yes, sir," Harry said clearly, crisply. They were not going to talk about the Pensieve now; perhaps they would never talk about it. But Snape knew Harry had been in the Pensieve, Harry was sure of it. That was enough for now.

Harry went through the rest of Potions--indeed, most of the rest of the day--still feeling like he was in a dream, that the Pensieve had been reality, not this. Snape seemed unchanged in some ways, and yet--Harry knew he could never see him the same way again.

Then, in Defense Against the Dark Arts, he woke up.

Moody was finally going to start teaching them something practical. It's all very well and good to contemplate what makes people turn Dark, thought Harry, but it's another thing to be able to deal with dark wizards. However, as it turned out, they were not going to be learning mind-body dissociation yet. First, they were going to be learning some marginally-legal curses, and putting them on each other. Hermione was shocked.

"Now, now," Moody growled at her scandalized face. "Madam Pomfrey knows to expect all of you near the end of class. Just a precaution I thought I'd take; end it early, let everyone go to the infirmary. None of you will be permanently injured, and none of you will be feeling anywhere near as much pain as you get with Cruciatous curse. But you've got to know a little about what pain is before you learn to block it. These are curses no one else is going to teach you; they don't transfigure anything, and to call them charms would be a misnomer. They're curses, hexes. They're designed to hurt. Now, some of you probably know a few such spells already, in spite of the fact that you've never actually had these things assigned. And I understand a few of you have signed up for the Dueling Club; these will be especially handy for you. All right, pair off as follows: Brown with Finnigan, Granger with Longbottom, Patil with Potter and Thomas with Weasley. Alphabetical; easiest way to start".

Moody had cleared the center of the room of desks. The four pairs stood facing each other, wands at the ready. Parvati looked nervous, Harry thought, her large brown eyes seeming even larger than usual. She preferred Divination class, he knew. He hoped he wouldn't hurt her too badly. It sounded like Moody was going to have all of them writhing on the ground.

"What I'm going to teach you today is the Passus Curse," Moody announced. Harry whipped his head around; Moody noticed. "Know that one, do you Potter"?

"Uh, no. I know of it. I know you have to specify the body part".

"That's right. Directed pain. Specifically aimed. Good for a surprise, a shock, since it actually doesn't last very long. Or, sometimes it's done in the one spot repeatedly for maximum effect. That way, it can even be fatal. I once hauled in a dark wizard who had attacked a man's kidneys with Passus so many times in quick succession, he died of renal failure." The students looked around at each other with alarm. "Of course, we won't be doing anything like that today." He sounded like he was saving that lesson for a special treat, Harry thought, sincerely hoping that he was wrong.

"We'll start with the hands and arms. Hand--say 'mano suo.' Upper arm--say 'lacerto suo.' Entire arm--say 'bracchio suo.' Then follow that with 'passus est.' Got that? But don't tip off your opponent which one you're going to use. Element of surprise. And you must concentrate; think of the targeted body part, think of the most intense pain you can. Focus! We start with this side--" he said, indicating Seamus, Neville, Harry and Ron. Facing them, Lavender, Hermione, Parvati and Dean looked more than a little apprehensive.

"At my signal," Moody said to them. Suddenly, red sparks flew from the tip of the wand Moody was holding up above his head.

Harry pointed his wand at Parvati's right hand, crying, "Mano suo passus est!" She screamed and dropped her wand, holding her hand, bending over and squinting her eyes, clearly trying not to cry. Harry dropped his wand, going to his knees, putting his hand on her back and his face close to hers, whispering, "Are you all right, Parvati"?

She raised glistening eyes to his, biting her lip, shaking her head. He took her hand in his, massaging it, warming it, and her eyes gazed back at him again, reminding him of how she'd looked after she'd cut his hair. He shook himself and looked away, stood up again and released her hand. He saw that Ron was frowning in their direction, and Hermione to Hermione was clutching her left upper arm, rubbing it vigorously, while Neville repeatedly apologized.

"Oh, Neville, stop! That was good, really. We're all going to be doing a lot of this; can't get squeamish"...

Ron had gone back to watching Dean flex his left hand. Ron looked apologetic. Dean's face was screwed up in pain. Lavender was on the floor, holding her right arm, crying. Seamus was bumbling around, patting her awkwardly on the head, saying, "There, there".

And Malfoy's dad does this to him all the time, Harry thought. No wonder he didn't fall apart when Voldemort put the Cruciatus Curse on him. Then Harry remembered that Malfoy did ask him not to do it again; Harry had refused to do the same thing. Of course. Malfoy was supposed to be playing the role of an obedient Death Eater. Hopefully, it was just a role...

Moody clumped around the room, shaking his head. "People, people! One little curse, and you all fall apart! That was nothing! On your feet, everyone! I'm sure you're all thinking, These are my friends. I've known them since we were sorted together. We eat every meal together, go to our classes together, relax in the same common room. And now I've got you attacking each other. And you don't want to. But you've got to learn! You must disconnect yourself from your emotional ties to the person you are attacking. Yes, I'm the meanest son-of-a-bitch you've had teaching you. I know that. But this is what's necessary to make sure you are properly prepared. What do you think the O.W.L.s will be like? Think no one will get hurt taking those? Think again. NOW! The other side. Positions! On my signal".

This time, Harry was on the receiving end of the pain. Parvati had pointed her wand at his left arm, crying, "Braccio suo passus est!" and pain had started to blossom from his elbow as though he had rammed it into a brick wall with all his might. He gritted his teeth against the pain, trying to tell himself it wasn't so bad. And after a minute, he actually seemed to believe it. When he thought back to the Cruciatus Curse, and when he had first started transforming into a griffin, it really wasn't so bad. He felt like his heart was beating faster than before she had cursed him, but other than a residual throbbing, he felt he'd managed the attack rather well.

Ron wasn't doing so well. He was biting his lip, holding his left hand with his right, doubled over, red-faced, stifling cries in his throat. On Harry's other side, Neville was doing somewhat better. He was rubbing his right arm, wincing, but despite the fact that Hermione had attacked his wand arm, he hadn't dropped it. He smiled feebly at Hermione through the obvious pain, saying, "That was good." Hermione looked stricken; Neville was the last person she ever would have chosen to hurt. She looked like she was the one who was going to cry.

Lavender had apparently had no such scruples about attacking Seamus. He was rubbing his left upper arm, saying, "Ah! Ah!" repeatedly and turning in a circle, stamping his left foot hard as he turned, as if he could channel some of the pain down through his leg and away from him.

"All right!" Moody barked, ignoring the reactions of those who'd just been cursed. "Finnigan, Longbottom, Potter and Weasley, you stay where you are! Brown, Granger, and Patil, you each shift down one and Thomas, you come up here with Finnigan. All right! The first side will go again. On my signal!"

And so it went. Harry tried not to think at all as he cursed Hermione's left hand; he tried to choose the smallest target he could, and didn't want to hurt her right hand so she'd still be able to write (she was working on a three-foot essay for Binns). She in turn looked at him stony-faced when it was her turn to curse him. But he could see the look in her eyes after she'd done it, the remorse and empathy. He smiled feebly at her, holding his right upper arm, breathing through his nose.

Moody had them go through every possible combination. At last, Ron and Harry turned to face each other.

Harry went first again. He knew Ron hadn't been handling the pain well; he'd been watching him the whole time. He dreaded adding to that hurt, and then wondered whether he was just thinking about physical pain...

"Mano suo passus est!" Harry cried, pointing at Ron's left hand, as he'd done with Hermione. But to his surprise, Ron managed to grit his teeth and stamp his foot a few times (a la Seamus) before looking like the pain had subsided.

Harry waited for Ron to curse him back. He gazed at his best friend, remembering being on his bed with Hermione, feeling guilty. After the red sparks came out of Moody's wand this time, Ron didn't attack him right away. Harry looked to his left. Seamus was being cursed by Neville, whose voice, speaking the curse, had an authority Harry was still getting used to.

Since he hadn't been paying attention to Ron, Harry was unprepared for the curse when it came. Ron had pointed his wand at Harry's right arm. The pain that suddenly radiated through his limb made him drop his wand, and he tried to block his mind, stop the transmission of the pain to his brain, convince himself he didn't feel any pain at all... This isn't so bad.

voice in his head said. He almost felt like he was floating, although it was different from the Imperius Curse. This was something he was doing, he was in charge of it...it felt lovely, actually...

When he opened his eyes, he discovered the whole class looking at him, and Mad-Eye Moody was in particular peering into his face.

"You did it, didn't you Potter?" he growled. Harry swallowed, gazing back at his lopsided, gruesome visage. "You got sick of the pain and started working out a way to block it on your own, didn't you?" Then one of his unnatural-looking smiles spread across the damaged terrain of his face. "What do you need me for?" he joked in a growl. "You've got me beat. Couldn't have done that at fifteen if I'd been offered five-thousand galleons and a go at the Queen Mum." They all stared at him, shocked. "Oh, come on. When she was young, she was quite a dish".

That made them finally break up into laughter, only to be stopped short by their physical pains. The laughs turned into almost universal moaning and groaning. Harry was the only one who didn't seem to be rubbing sore muscles and wincing. Moody dismissed them and they all went trooping off to see Madam Pomfrey for pain relief.

As they approached the hospital wing, Ron looked sideways at Harry, who realized they hadn't really had a proper conversation since he'd come back. A conversation being something that didn't consist of Ron talking at him all through the meal. He hadn't told Ron about the dream on Christmas night, for instance.

"Should have known you'd be the first to do that, Harry. Like when you overcame the Imperius before anyone else." Somehow, Ron sounded more resentful than impressed.

Harry decided to change the subject. "On Christmas night, I had a dream and woke up with my scar hurting," he whispered. How should I do this? he wondered. And then he knew; he would simply tell Ron about the events at Dover as straightforward a way as possible, no hint of Malfoy possibly being willing to betray his father. If Ron suddenly started treating Malfoy differently, that wouldn't look right. Plus, he couldn't know that Malfoy's incentive for turning in his dad was his own sister.

Ron didn't react at first. Then, quietly, without inflection, he said, "Tell me later." Harry nodded and they all proceeded to the hospital wing. Harry would have to think very carefully about everything he said, since he was going to have to leave Ginny out of the conversation entirely. Ron could not know about her and Malfoy. Plus, he would have to be sure to leave out the bits about Hermione sharing his bed after the dream. He would have to edit himself very carefully.

The problem with lying, he thought, is that you have to make sure you tell the same lies in the same way to the same person each time. It was almost more trouble than it was worth.

Almost.

* * * * *

The rest of the week, all of Harry's classes seemed to pass in a blur. Learning Augury in Divination was like doing tea leaves at the beginning of his third year; only now they were staring at the disgusting entrails of a dead chicken and interpreting the future based on that gory mess. How enlightening, Harry thought. And--surprise, surprise--Trelawney said that the entrails predicted his untimely death. Must be death from boredom, he thought. The only time he really felt alive and alert was in Moody's class.

They progressed to producing pain in the legs, using separate incantations for thigh, knee, foot and ankle. Harry was getting better at blocking the pain, even though they technically weren't on that yet.

As he was leaving class on Friday, a large eagle owl came flying down the corridor and landed on his shoulder. He had a note tied to his leg.

"Meet me in the Trophy Room in half an hour," it said in a small, angular script. There was no signature. Harry turned it over and over, trying to figure out whether to go or not. Ron and Hermione looked at him, waiting for him to say what it was. He shrugged and acted like it was nothing. He decided to get his Invisibility Cloak and go early to see who it was.

When he entered the Trophy Room in his cloak, no one was there. He wandered around the edge of the room, looking idly in the glass cases, smiling to himself when he saw the Award for Special Services to the School that he and Ron had received second year. Then he saw the award Tom Riddle had received. Why had he never noticed before that it had t

same name? And it was also connected with the Chamber of Secrets. Harry remembered that Ron had had to clean slugs off it after burping slugs all over it..

He probably could have brought Sandy, to warn him of what was going to occur, but he didn't want someone to hear her hissing under his clothes, so he'd left her in the common room near the fire. Harry heard a step behind him and turned to see Draco Malfoy looking around furtively. It was ten minutes before the appointment time. What was Malfoy up to? Harry wondered. He waited to see what Malfoy would do, but he just wandered around the edge of the room as Harry had done, looking at the awards, grimacing when he came to the one Ron and Harry had received, muttering, "Special Services".

When the appointment time had been reached, Malfoy looked at his watch impatiently, saying softly, "Come on Potter, half an hour..." and Harry knew that Malfoy had in fact sent the note; he didn't just happen to be wandering in the Trophy Room at the same time. Harry had been walking very softly about five feet behind Malfoy as he had circumnavigated the room, but now he came to within a yard of him and said in a low voice, "I've been here for twenty minutes, you stupid git".

Malfoy looked around wildly. "Potter"?

"Who else"?

"Where are you"?

Harry moved a few feet to Malfoy's right. "Where I can see you, but you can't see me".

Malfoy looked really hacked off now. "Cut it out, Potter".

Harry kept moving as he spoke. "Come on, Malfoy. You're the one who asked to meet me. Taking a chance, aren't you?"

"It's important".

"Anyway, you said you didn't want us to be seen together".

"I also don't want one of the teachers calling my dad to take me to St. Mungo's because I'm standing around in an empty room talking to myself".

Harry laughed softly. "I dunno. Sounds like fun. You'd probably be exempted from end-of-year tests".

"Very funny".

"I thought so. Are you going to get to the point or not, Malfoy"?

Malfoy turned to one of the glass cases, his back to the door, speaking softly. "What did you say to Moody"?

Harry was thrown. "Moody? What did I say about what"?

"Christmas night"!

Harry was baffled. "I didn't say anything to him. What are you talking about"?

Malfoy drew his lips into a line. "Then if you didn't, who did"?

"Will you please tell me what you're on about"?

Malfoy sighed. "He's been down on me since the new term started "...

"That's only a few days".

"It's enough. We've been doing the Passus Curse--which as you know is one of my favorites," he added sarcastically. Harry grimaced. "He keeps asking me whether I would like to push up my sleeves to work, and he specifically pats me on the left arm, right where the mark is. I'm convinced he knows I've got it. How else would he know if you didn't tell him"?

Harry was about to say that Dumbledore also knew about it, but realized that he couldn't reveal that Dumbledore had had Snape undercover, and that if they had been able to manage it, Sirius would have been undercover in Malfoy's own

house. Then he thought about it, and knew why no one had needed to tell Moody about Draco Malfoy having the Dark Mark...

"Malfoy, what are your robes made of"?

"I dunno. Wool for the winter, I suppose. Why are you changing the subject"?

"I'm not. And what kind of shirt are you wearing under your robes"?

"Cut it out, Potter, and tell me"--

"What kind of shirt?" Harry breathed in a fierce whisper.

Malfoy snorted through his nose. "Linen, I suppose. Something my mum thinks is elegant. Luckily, it gets softer with wear. Pretty scratchy at first. Can we get back to the subject"?

"This is the subject. Unless you're wearing something with sleeves made of--I don't know, lead or something--Moody has no trouble seeing that mark on your arm. And for all I know, he can see through lead".

"What are you on about now"?

"Moody's magical eye. All last year, you had Crouch teaching you, masquerading as Moody, and you never picked up on the eye? He can see through wood, fabric, the back of his own head--and Invisibility Cloaks. We better hope he doesn't come in right now, else he'll think I'm a Death Eater too, sneaking around under my cloak to talk to you." Harry wondered why Malfoy didn't know about the eye. Maybe Moody (the real one) didn't want the Slytherins knowing about what he could see?

"You mean, he can see right through my clothes"?

"Yeah, I see what you mean, Malfoy. If he can see your entire body, beats me how he keeps from spewing up his lunch".

"Sod off." Malfoy said half-heartedly, trying not to speak too loudly. Harry laughed softly.

"Actually, he was really giving Parvati the willies at the Yule Ball. I think she thought he was being a dirty old man, looking through all the girls' clothes at their bodies"...

Now Malfoy smirked, and it looked to Harry like he was harbouring some very dirty thoughts himself. "It'd almost be worth losing an eye if the replacement lets you see Parvati Patil's body"...

Harry was shocked. "Should I tell Ginny you said that"?

Malfoy looked around, panicked. Harry thought he might have forgotten that he was actually talking to another person, that he wasn't engaged in an interior monologue. "I did not say that. I will deny it with every breath in my body".

Harry laughed. "It's okay. I won't say a word. It just means you have a pulse, anyway".

Malfoy actually smiled, still looking in the awards case. "What, did you get some action at the Yule Ball, Potter"?

"Malfoy! Why are you always so interested in my private life"?

Malfoy shrugged. "It irritates you when I ask. How can I pass that up? Too much fun. Even when I can't see you." Malfoy sighed, moving on to another award case. "But I don't know what to do about Moody"...

"Deal with it by being exactly what he thinks you are: one of the new generation of Death Eaters. I happen to know that other Slytherins in your year have parents who are involved with Voldemort. Maybe they'll look up to you again if you show them the Mark. You want deep cover, you've got it. Do your best to come off as Dark and evil as possible. Shouldn't be too far a stretch for you"...

Malfoy grimaced. "I'll have you know Ginny thinks I'm a prince".

Harry laughed. "Maybe if she's lucky, the next time she kisses you, you'll turn into a frog. It would be a move up".

"Ha ha".

But as far as Harry was concerned, the conversation was over. He went to the door of the room, preparing to leave. Malfoy spoke softly, said something he couldn't hear all the way from the doorway. Then, from the corridor, Harry heard him say more loudly, "Potter? Damn you, where did you go"?

Harry left, smiling. He thought, St. Mungo's, here you come...

* * * * *

At dinner on Friday, Snape announced that the Dueling Club would be meeting for the first time Sunday after lunch in the Great Hall. The first twenty students who signed up were to stay after the meal was over.

Harry looked forward to Sunday afternoon for the rest of the weekend. More than once, Ron or Hermione had to shout him to bring him back from a reverie in which he had caused Malfoy to revert to his bouncing ferret form during a duel.

At long last, Sunday afternoon arrived. The members of the club remained in the hall. Harry looked around--plenty of familiar faces. The usual suspects, plus a couple of people he didn't know all that well, just from prefects' meetings. Harry already knew that Roger, Hannah and Ernie had signed up, as well as George and Angelina and Malfoy with his erstwhile sidekicks, Crabbe and Goyle. Harry Ron and Hermione were the only Gryffindors in their year. Alicia had also signed up and Ginny and Colin were the only fourth years from any house.

Harry noticed Hermione avoiding Millicent Bulstrode, the only girl from Slytherin who was present. At the Dueling Club their second year, she had gotten into a wrestling match with Millicent instead of dueling properly, and then had mistaken a hair from Millicent's cat for a human hair; when she had tried to use the hair in some Polyjuice Potion, intending to take on Millicent's appearance temporarily, she had instead sprouted cat whiskers and fur. Harry didn't blame Hermione for avoiding Millicent. There were many bad associations there.

Justin Finch-Fletchley was the only other Hufflepuff besides Hannah and Ernie. And almost all of the Ravenclaw prefects had signed up except for Roger's brother Evan: Mandy Brocklehurst, from fifth year, Liam Quirke from sixth year (Harry tried not to stare, after mistakenly walking in on him and Justin at the cottage), Liam's sister Niamh, who was seventh year, and Cho. Harry did a double take. He hadn't realized Cho's name was on the list. Just when he thought he could avoid her during Sunday afternoons, he thought.

Snape had apparently planned everything out in minute detail. Harry figured he'd probably done this while staying at Remus Lupin's; otherwise he might have been forced to engage in an actual conversation with two people he'd actively disliked for twenty years--and who had once tried to kill him (although it wasn't Lupin's fault).

He had a long list of combinations of duelers. By his calculations, it would take four meetings for all of the members to duel with each other once. Only one duel was to take place at a time, and then the rest of the club would vote for the winner by sending sparks up from their wands. If it seemed close, an exact count would take place.

"That's a total of one-hundred and ninety duels!" Hermione whispered to Harry and Ron, doing the math quickly. They nodded at her, as if they'd figured it out too.

Fifty duels would take place during the first meeting. After the first twenty-five, there would be a half-hour break. If they were lucky, they would be done by the time the school starting trooping into the Great Hall for the evening meal. Everyone in the club would duel five times with five different partners. Snape said he would post the standings in the entrance hall the morning. Harry was itching to get started. He hoped he would be dueling Malfoy.

Snape swept the tables out of the way with his wand, leaving the center of the room clear. After this, he suddenly barked "Abbott!" Hannah jumped, then stepped forward, looking nervous. "V. Weasley!" Harry was perplexed. Who was that? Then, Ginny stepped through the crowd, and Harry realized the V was for Virginia.

Snape had them bow to each other. Ginny looked very calm; Hannah looked like she was wondering why she'd thought this was a good idea. She'd been the same when they'd practiced dueling during the holiday.

Ginny disarmed her within seconds, returning her wand to her afterward, then flushing as she received a unanimous decision from the rest of the club, and returning to the ring of students that had created an ad hoc arena.

Ron was up next. He faced Mandy Brocklehurst, whom he did not know at all. He stunned her before she could do anything, netting the Weasleys another win. Snape revived her afterward.

George had more of an actual duel with Millicent, but after he had done the Jelly-legs Jinx on her and she had cemented his feet to the floor, he quit fooling around and disarmed her. The Slytherins voted for her, Malfoy making remarks about George being in love with the floor, but everyone else voted for George, so he got the win.

Harry apprehensively watched Alicia confound Cho, then disarm her. He wondered whether it would be good form to vote for Cho even though she clearly lost; then he remembered that he was not supposed to be nice to her anymore, and abruptly put up his wand for Alicia. Cho gave him a hurt look.

He was up against Crabbe next. Harry quickly disarmed him, feeling that it hadn't been much of a challenge. Then Malfoy beat Colin Creevey, Ernie defeated Niamh and her brother Liam was trounced by Roger. Angelina and Hermione then won over Justin and Goyle respectively. The first round was over. Each of them had dueled once.

The second time around, Ron and George won again, this time against Hannah and Mandy. Then after Alicia disarmed Millicent, Harry's name was called again. He moved to the center, waiting for Snape to call the name of his opponent.

"Chang!" She stepped forward, smiling at Harry, who was frankly aghast. He'd been looking forward to going up against Malfoy; it hadn't occurred to him that he might have to duel Cho. So now in addition to voting against her in her duel against Alicia, he had to try to beat her himself. Beastly behavior, he reminded himself. He wondered for a moment when he ever thought it was a good idea to use her to help rid Hermione of Viktor Krum.

After they bowed, Harry waited for her to make a move. She seemed so small and delicate, so young in spite of being a year older than him. Then he shook himself. Beastly behavior, he thought, coming right up.

"Mano suo passus est!" he cried pointing at her right hand. She cried out, dropping her wand, then holding her stricken right hand with her left, bent double, crying. He fought the urge to go to her, to make sure she was all right. The club members looked appalled; no one else had done such a painful curse yet, not even the Slytherins, and Harry had done it to his girlfriend, as far as most of them knew. No one could argue that he'd disarmed her, so he should have received a unanimous vote--but the Ravenclaws all voted for Cho, glaring at him. It wasn't enough to give her the win, but that was the intention. They voted for her to demonstrate house loyalty. And tonight, he thought, I have to go to a prefects' meeting with all of them. What fun.

By the time the break came, Harry had also disarmed Millicent, George had defeated Hannah, Hermione had won over Justin, and Malfoy had also beaten Cho, as well as his once-loyal retainer, Crabbe. Ginny had defeated Goyle with the Impediment Curse, slyly walking up to him while he was moving in slow motion and removing his wand from his grasp, then returning him to normal speed. He stumbled, tried to curse her, then saw that she was holding two wands while he had none. The vote was unanimous, even including the Slytherins. Harry thought he saw Malfoy smirking, trying not to look proud of Ginny.

When they returned from the break, the dueling resumed with a new fervor. Harry had broken the pain barrier, and now the duelers were going at each other more fiercely, with no regard for friends or house loyalties. Malfoy was not at all nervous about the way he beat Millicent, and even Hermione seemed quite ruthless about the way she trounced Colin.

Finally, the first meeting was over. Fifty duels! thought Harry. He'd seen some good spells he'd not known about, and he'd gotten off a couple of good ones himself. When he and Hermione came downstairs to run in the Great Hall the next day, Harry saw the parchment on the wall and went to it immediately, finding his name quickly.

Rank: 1 / Wins: 5 (Tie): Granger, Malfoy, Potter, Spinnet, V. Weasley

Rank: 2 / Wins: 4 (Tie): G. Weasley, R. Weasley

Rank: 3 / Wins: 3 (Tie): Crabbe, Davies

Rank: 4 / Wins: 2 (Tie): Johnson, MacMillan, L. Quirke, N. Quirke

Rank: 5 / Wins: 1 (Tie): Bulstrode, Chang, Finch-Fletchley

Rank: 6 / Wins: 0 (Tie): Abbott, Brocklehurst, Creevey, Goyle

Harry couldn't help but grin. Hermione pulled him into the Great Hall, laughing at him. "Come on. You're going to get a swelled head. Five of us are in first place, you know".

"But--somehow I didn't even notice"...

"You didn't notice that you didn't lose any duels? Of course," she said slyly, "it's not like you were really challenged. At least I went up against Roger"...

Harry snorted. "And beat the pants off him like you did every day of the holidays. Actually, I thought Niamh might be able to take you".

Hermione looked perplexed. "Me too. She's seventh year and all. But she was easier than I thought she'd be...she seemed a little distracted." Harry remembered that she had been watching her brother Liam, who had been standing next to Justin whenever they weren't dueling. Not touching, just standing. A little tension in the Quirke family, perhaps, he thought.

"Ron did pretty well," Harry noted, while they stretched. Hermione nodded, not speaking. He wondered whether she was feeling the kinds of guilt pangs he'd been experiencing in reference to Ron. He didn't feel like he could ask her, though. What would he say? 'Oh, by the way, are you really in love with Ron and feeling guilty for being half-naked on his bed with me?' Harry frowned; there was no way they could talk about Ron, and yet his presence was always with them, even when they were alone, their arms around each other...

They'd managed to be alone a few times since the new term had started, just a handful of minutes here and there in an empty classroom, just some stolen kisses. Harry had considered saying something about Prophylaxis Potion, but had no idea how to do this. What if she hadn't been considering doing more on New Year's Eve? He would feel like a complete idiot.

Harry looked forward to the next Dueling Club all week. He learned some more curses in Moody's class, and was researching some more on his own. He wanted to have a really good one for Malfoy when it was his turn to duel with him.

However, Harry didn't really feel like he had any challenges in the second week of the club. He handily defeated Goyle, Justin, Roger, Niamh and Colin. Roger was getting to be quite annoying when he lost a duel. Harry had to keep reminding himself that this was the git who was Head Boy. What did Fleur see in him? he wondered. He didn't have to wonder what Roger saw in Fleur.

When the standings were posted the next day, there were a few changes of status for some people who weren't at the top of the rankings:

Rank: 1 / Wins: 10 (Tie): Granger, Malfoy, Potter, Spinnet, V. Weasley

Rank: 2 / Wins: 7 : R. Weasley

Rank: 3 / Wins: 6 (Tie): Johnson, L. Quirke, G. Weasley

Rank: 4 / Wins: 5 : Davies

Rank: 5 / Wins: 4 : Crabbe

Rank: 6 / Wins: 3 (Tie): Goyle, MacMillan, N. Quirke

Rank: 7 / Wins: 2 (Tie): Bulstrode, Chang, Finch-Fletchley

Rank: 8 / Wins: 1 : Abbott

Rank: 9 / Wins: 0 (Tie): Brocklehurst, Creevey

Harry remembered watching Ginny dueling. She was pretty nice to Colin, actually, using the Impediment Curse as she had before to painlessly disarm him, and she did the same with poor Mandy, who hadn't won a single duel. On Crabbe she actually used the disarming charm; it was impressive to see him flying backwards into Goyle and Millicent Bulstrode who happened to be standing behind him. She did the same thing later to Millicent, who glared at Ginny afterward.

The duel that had him a little worried was Ginny versus Cho. Cho knew nothing of Ginny's erstwhile crush on him, but Ginny's attitude toward Cho...all Harry knew was that she'd been pretty upset about seeing them kissing. Of course, that was several months ago, before she and Malfoy had crossed the line and become more than friends.

Ginny managed to get her curse off first. "Reverso!" she cried, aiming her wand at Cho. Cho stopped in her tracks, looking baffled. Then she turned around, and, her back to Ginny now, she took aim, it seemed, at the students standing directly in front of her. Ginny came up behind her swiftly, plucking her wand from her hand even as the students Cho was facing started backing away apprehensively. Cho looked surprised to find her wand gone; Ginny pointed her wand at her again, saying, "Finite Incantatem!" Cho blinked and turned around once more, finding Ginny behind her, holding both wands.

When Ginny was standing between Harry and Ron at the perimeter of the circle again, Harry asked her quietly, "What was that?"

"Oh, it made her think that what was in front of her was behind her, and vice versa. One of the Confundus-class charms."

Harry smiled; he had something similar in mind for Malfoy, but just a little more disorienting. He hoped he'd get to duel with him the next week.

Hermione also dueled with Cho that day, disarming her quickly, without fanfare. She also defeated Crabbe, Millicent (she looked very smug about this), Mandy (she looked somewhat guilty about this), and Hannah. Malfoy also defeated Hannah, as well as Goyle, Justin, Roger and Niamh. Ron had no trouble defeating Niamh, Colin and Cho, but Crabbe dodged his curse and then disarmed him, and Millicent Bulstrode looked over his shoulder with wide eyes, as though he should be worried about something there, and then caught him by surprise when he foolishly looked.

Somehow, Harry thought that that just seemed to sum up Ron; not seeing what was in front of him, and convinced he had to look over his shoulder to see something interesting.

* * * * *

There was a Quidditch match on Saturday between Slytherin and Hufflepuff, but Harry didn't feel much like going. Justin didn't seem to be as good a Seeker as Cedric had been, and Harry didn't want to see Malfoy gloat over his victory. He suggested to Ron and Hermione that they practice dueling instead. Ginny didn't come; she said that Justin was her friend and she wanted to go to the match to show him support. Harry made a face; and almost said, "Since when is Justin your friend?" He knew that Justin wasn't the Seeker she'd be watching at the match.

The first person Harry had to duel at the third meeting of the Dueling Club was Alicia. Like him, she had a perfect record so far, plus she was two years ahead of him and Head Girl. He'd seen that she was good; but he'd also seen her weaknesses. Well, he thought, only one of us will still have a perfect record after this.

He knew that she dropped her guard when she thought the duel was over. He decided to take whatever she dished out short of the disarming charm, which he knew he could dodge. All that running had come in handy, giving him good, fast reflexes. She wasn't going to be nice, he knew, as soon as he heard her start to say, "Talo suo--" He braced himself for what was to come, having gotten quite good at it. "--passus est!" she cried. But Harry only felt a slight twinge in his ankle before he bowed his head and felt his mind begin to soar, floating free, unable to comprehend corporeal pain any longer. He felt almost as if he were hovering above his body and Alicia's, another kind of spectator to the duel, like looking down into the Pensieve before entering it.

He was actually back much more quickly than he realized. He snapped his eyes open quickly, took aim at Alicia and cried "Expelliarmus!" She flew backward into Roger and Colin; Colin did not seem to mind, blushing a bit as he helped her up, but Roger seemed to think it undignified to have the Head Girl fall on top of him. He made a face at Harry, and when he held up his wand to vote for him, he looked reluctant, as though he wished he could vote any other way, if it were plausible.

Liam Quirke was easy for Harry to disarm with Impediment, and he was looking forward to his next duel. After about nine more pairs squared off, Snape called his name again, and then the name of his opponent.

“Granger”!

Harry froze. He knew he would have to duel with Hermione at some point, but he hadn't wanted to think about it. So far this meeting, she had defeated Angelina and Ernie (being very nice about it). They bowed to each other and began. Harry looked at Snape out of the corner of his eye. Was he enjoying this a little too much? Pitting them against each other? Earlier then, friends had been dueling friends for two weeks, and even boyfriends and girlfriends and siblings. He knew this was coming; in the anticipation of wanting to put Malfoy in his place, he had somehow overlooked that fact.

Hermione hit him with a tickling charm, something he had not been anticipating. He stubbornly clung to his wand, so he would not be counted as disarmed, and he put the Reverso charm on her that Ginny had used, making her turn around in confusion, and coming dangerously close to hexing the spectators; then he used Impediment to slow her down, and, still laughing from the tickling sensation, took her wand away from her. Snape ended both spells, and the club voted. It was close, in as much as he'd been unable to dodge the tickling charm, but he had disarmed her, so after a 10-8 vote, the club went to him.

She smiled sheepishly at him. “Good one, Harry,” she said softly, when they were back in the circle. He smiled back at her.

“You too. Sneaky, that.” She laughed softly, and Ron clapped him on the shoulder, startling him. He looked up at him guiltily.

Ron didn't notice anything wrong. “And just when I thought someone was going to break your winning streak...” he said, sounding very disappointed that this hadn't occurred.

Ron had lost to George during the first round; he had also already lost to Angelina and Hermione, which was probably the reason he had hoped Hermione would beat him. (Although Harry had thought Ron didn't look like he was trying terribly hard to beat her.)

After the break, Ron's was the first name Snape called. Then he announced Ron's opponent.

“Potter”!

Harry groaned inwardly; this was some day, he thought. Dueling with Hermione, and now Ron. And although he and Ron had practiced together, it wasn't the same as being in front of eighteen other students who were going to judge one of them to be the winner--and one, the loser.

Harry decided to use the charm he'd been saving for Malfoy. He could always use it again. They bowed to each other, and Harry again let Ron go first, prepared to dodge whatever he would throw at him.

“Bracchio suo passus est!” Ron cried, aiming at Harry's right arm. As soon as he heard Ron start, though, he didn't bother dodging; this was his method of dodging, in a way. He felt the free-floating sensation again, felt his mind drifting, then returned to reality. Whenever he returned from that strange, almost dream-like state, he felt even more alert, as though he had taken some kind of pill or potion to enhance his awareness of the world.

He immediately pointed his wand at Ron, saying, “Inverso”!

Ron's eyes went wide; he started looking down in a panic, then up, then began turning around in a circle, crying, “Stop Harry! Take it off me! Let me down!” Harry crept up to him, plucked his wand from his hand, and said, “Finite Incantatem!” Ron had his eyes closed; then he opened them slowly, seeing Harry standing before him, smiling apologetically and holding his wand.

Harry received another unanimous vote, and once they were in the circle again, Ron whispered to Harry, “What was that?”

“Ssshhh!” Harry hushed him. “I was saving that for Malfoy, but I couldn't think of anything else just then. Sorry. Don't tell anyone what it was like, okay?”

Ron nodded, looking somewhat annoyed about it, though. Next up were Hermione and Ginny. Harry didn't know who he wanted to win. Hopefully it would be decisive, so there wouldn't be a tallied vote. If he just went with the crowd, whoever lost couldn't get mad at him, could they?

The bowed and readied their wands. Hermione aimed the Passus Curse at Ginny's foot; wincing, Ginny did the Reverso on Hermione, but Hermione, perhaps having rethought her reaction to this after Harry had done it to her, resisted the temptation to turn around. Still, she looked like she was fighting blindly now, staring straight at Ginny without being able to see her. She took general aim and the snaky ropes that flew from the end of her wand bound Ginny's arms to her side; then Hermione looked like she had a thought, and she threw herself down onto the ground, lying on her back. She smiled now she could look up to see Ginny. The Reverso charm would no longer disorient her. She confidently aimed the disarming charm at her while Ginny was struggling with the bonds around her body, catching Ginny's wand as she lay on the floor. Ginny, still bound, flew backward into George, Angelina and Ron, just missing Harry. The four of them helped her up (they were all getting used to people flying backward at them whenever someone used this charm) and then Snape broke the spells both girls were under and the club voted.

It was a tie: a 9-9 vote; Harry had wanted to vote for Hermione, but somehow his wand went up for Ginny. He didn't know whether Hermione noticed. Snape broke the tie, giving the duel to Hermione since she had succeeded in disarming Ginny. She had also apparently found a good way to work around the Reverso charm (if you didn't mind dueling from a prone position).

About ten more pairs dueled, then Snape called, "V. Weasley!" again, followed by, "Malfoy!"

Hmmm, thought Harry. If Malfoy was trying to protect Ginny during the Quidditch game, what's he going to do now? And if he throws it, will she ever speak to him again? He thought of the lose-lose situation Malfoy was in with pleasure; this was almost as good as dueling with him personally.

They bowed to each other and took up their positions. Ginny didn't move; neither did Malfoy. It seemed like every breath in the hall was momentarily suspended, waiting. Then suddenly, Ginny simply cried, "Expelliarmus!" and Malfoy went flying back into the Slytherins, knocking them down like tenpins. But in spite of the unanimous vote, Ginny did not look happy. He'll have hell to pay later, Harry thought happily.

Another dozen or so dueling pairs faced off, and then Snape called "Malfoy!" again, followed by, "Potter!"

Harry stepped forward; he'd been waiting for this. Malfoy joined him in the center of the circle, eyes hooded, face expressionless. They barely bowed, watching each other the entire time. They stepped back, wands at the ready, circling each other. Most other duelers jumped right in before this point, but they waited and watched each other.

Suddenly, Malfoy pointed his wand at Harry his face like a storm cloud, snarling, "HARA KIRI!"

Harry heard Ron and Hermione gasp; they knew it was what he'd done to Karkaroff, since now they both had heard about the dream. Harry couldn't help going to his knees; oddly, his own wand looked to him like a long, curving knife. It was quite beautiful, with a fork-tongued dragon etched down the side, the handle being its tail. He'd never seen such a beautiful knife. It was so beautiful, he knew he just had to plunge it inside himself...

He rammed it into his mid-section on the lower left, feeling his insides shudder with the invasion of the cold metal. He drew it across his abdomen; the finely honed blade met no resistance, but sliced through him cleanly, surely, beautifully. He looked down at his sliced robes, now dark red with his blood. Then it happened; his insides started spilling out of him and a river of blood, and suddenly the pain hit him, the excruciating pain, worse, if possible than the Cruciatius Curse he'd been....

No, a voice in his head said. This is not real. He remembered Moody saying, "It's only pain." He closed his eyes and repeated that over and over, it's only pain it's only pain it's only pain it's only pain...and he felt himself floating up again, seeing himself kneeling on the floor with his eyes closed as if in prayer, Malfoy standing over him with a satisfied look on his face.

Harry looked down again; his robes were deepest black, uncut. His wand in his hand was his wand again. He was all right and he knew it. He looked up at Malfoy, narrowing his eyes.

"Inverso!" he cried, pointing his wand at Malfoy from his position on the floor. Malfoy responded as Ron had, only even more so.

“Aaah! What the hell have you done to me, Potter! Get me down now! I’m going to kill you!” and he turned in circles, looking up, as though that were where Harry was. Harry stood calmly and reached out and plucked his wand from him.

“Finite Incantatem,” he said calmly. Malfoy screamed as the spell terminated, then rubbed his eyes and looked around frantically, seeing Harry in front of him, smiling.

“Nice try, Malfoy,” he said softly so the others couldn’t hear. “But the thing about using that kind of curse on me is--I know the pain isn’t real”.

Malfoy looked at him, alarmed, as though he had metamorphasized into an otherworldly creature. Actually, thought Harry, that’s the face I usually get from Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon. How odd.

The vote was cast, and the duel went to Harry. The Slytherins had voted for Malfoy, but it wasn’t enough to matter. Harry had noticed that Malfoy was getting along better with his housemates since their conversation in the Trophy Room. Good, thought Harry. Better for his cover; if he was planning to put his father in Azkaban, which Harry still doubted from time to time.

He had had a good day. He had made Draco Malfoy panic because he thought he was hanging upside down in the air, and he still had his perfect record. Harry noticed Snape giving him a strange look as he left the Great Hall. Did he know the Hara Kiri curse? Was he wondering why Harry had not screamed in agony?

Harry remembered dueling with him in the dungeon; he had looked at Harry with respect then. He could not make out the older man’s expression now, but it almost seemed tinged with fear, as though he thought Harry was not quite human. But then Harry remembered his Animagus training and smiled to himself as he climbed the marble steps; well, part human and part golden griffin....

* * * * *

Shining tile was everywhere; in some places it shone more than others; there was some dirt and grime here and there, and a great many advertisements, it seemed. West End shows, toothpaste, American films, vacations in France. The curving ceiling overhead gave a sheltering feeling, like an oblong womb, like a tiled birth canal.

The Underground.

On the tube station platform were several dozen people, some alone, some in pairs or larger groups. Mothers held the hands of small children, keeping them away from where the train would be in a few minutes. Students in dirty, artfully torn jeans listed to one side under the burden of rucksacks worn on one shoulder only. A cellist hugged her instrument case to her, a precious thing, her life. Elderly matrons in babushkas held their handbags tightly, prepared to give pickpockets and purse-snatchers a hard time of it. Men who worked in the City, Financial Times under their arms, carried their umbrellas casually, yet prepared to make them weapons if necessary.

They had no weapons to defend themselves against what was to come.

They all clutched the people around them and the objects they carried as though that would protect them, as though that made them safe. They all had a common purpose; getting the train. Each person had an individual mission after leaving the train; go home, make dinner, go to work, do homework, perform at the opera house, give the children their tea and baths and tuck them into bed. But the tube united them temporarily, gave them one goal and destiny, one purpose in life.

One fate.

The train emerged from the tunnel, sliding slowly into the station. He couldn’t tell which station it was; there was a sign, but it seemed to be gibberish. He couldn’t make it out. Then, he saw the face.

Red eyes. Nostrils like slits. Not a human face. Not any more.

And then the world shattered into a million pieces....

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Two: Cho's Mistake

Harry cried out, then clamped his hand over his mouth. He bit into the back of his hand to stifle his cry, drawing blood. The scar had never hurt so badly. He tried doing the pain management, the floating...but it was no good. This was real, physical pain. When it was just a spell, just the illusion of pain, he could remind himself that it wasn't real, that no one was actually, physically hurting him. But this kind of agony was no illusion. There was no blocking it, no way to escape it. He thought his head would explode...

He had skipped dinner, because he had felt so exhausted, climbing up the stairs after the Dueling Club. He had started the stairs all right. He had thrown off a lot of pain during the duels, especially when he was up against Malfoy, but it caught up with him while he was climbing the stairs to Gryffindor Tower. Suddenly, not remembering how, he collapsed. Alicia and Hermione were bending over him, shaking him. Had he blacked out?

Then Ron had taken Alicia's place, catching up with them, and, leaning on Ron and Hermione, he had managed to get back up to the tower. They took him up to the fifth-year dorm. Harry remembered very little. They put him in bed, closing the curtains around him. He vaguely remembered that Neville had been in the room, reading on his bed.

He took his hand out of his mouth; the shape of his teeth showed in a bloody imprint on the soft flesh between his thumb and index finger on his right hand. And now he realized that that hurt like hell, too. But the scar was still worse. He closed his eyes, panting, growling low in his throat. Maybe he could transform into the golden griffin until the pain went away, he thought. He didn't have to worry about Sandy; he wasn't wearing her. He'd left her by the fire in the common room during the dueling, not wanting to risk her getting hurt (and not wanting Ron and Hermione to accuse him of cheating). As a griffin, I don't have a scar, he thought. And the pain of the transfiguration was nothing compared to this.

He pulled back the covers, crouching on the mattress, willing his bones, his skin, his hair and eyes to metamorphosize into the golden griffin. He felt the change come over him, felt the pads of his paws on the blanket, a mane tickling his back and face, his tail swishing back and forth. He felt the usual pain too, but he welcomed it, it receded in importance, became a kind of background noise. The scar torment became a thing of memory. He hunkered down on the bed, his front paws kneading the blankets instinctively. He put his chin on his paws, closing his eyes. Maybe he could actually sleep like this, find some respite from the pain.

He was starting to drift off, enjoying the feeling of his own purring motor resonating throughout his body, lulling his brain into sleep. Then he was aware of a step on the stone floor, and suddenly he heard his bedcurtains pulled aside. He opened his eyes to see Neville standing at his bedside, framed by the red hangings.

He had forgotten about Neville, whose mouth was open in shock. Then Neville's brain connected to his mouth. "Aaaaaa" Neville screamed. Harry immediately returned to his human form and clamped his hand over Neville's mouth, making him produce a strangled sound. Neville's eyes were very large; Harry slowly removed his hand from his mouth and Neville swallowed and tried to speak.

"You--you're--you're"--

"Sssssh!" Harry hissed at him. He whispered, "Don't say anything! McGonagall's been training me in private. No one's supposed to know yet".

Neville nodded, his eyes as wide as ever, his mouth still open. Suddenly, the curtains on Harry's right were swept open. Ron stood there, looking concerned. Harry turned to him, then looked back at Neville, pleading silently for him to keep secret. Neville gave a very small nod, but Harry never really seriously thought that Neville wouldn't keep his word; somehow he knew he could trust him completely.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Ron wanted to know, his breathing irregular. "Is it your scar again?"

Harry nodded, his hand on his head, even though the pain was duller, less piercing. He checked his watch; it was only thirty in the evening. Ron must have skipped dinner, stayed in the dorm to be near him. Harry ached inside, thinking of what a good friend Ron was, how little he deserved him. Even now, he was still keeping the Animagus training from him and Neville knew. In fact, he realized, Neville was the first person apart from McGonagall and Dumbledore who had seen his transfigured form. Even Ginny, who had guessed what he was up to, hadn't actually seen him change, and still thought he was planning to be a lion. Of course, Neville probably thought he was a lion too, he realized.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, fumbling on the bedside table for his glasses. Ron sat next to him, still looking very concerned. Then Harry heard a small squeak, and Ron said, "Okay, sweetheart, you want to come out?" and took Argent from the inside of his shirt, where she had been nestled. She was still quite small, although weaned from Bainbridge now, and Ron had been in the habit of letting the kitten ride around inside his shirt when he could; sometimes Harry had heard her mewling in class, while Ron sat, wide-eyed with innocence, and the professors paced around the room, looking for the source of the noise.

He held the small kitten in his hands now. She rubbed the side of her face against his palm, purring loudly, and Harry smiled, watching her. It was impossible not to smile at a kitten, especially this kitten. Harry watched Ron's face as he watched her too; his expression softened whenever he looked at her, clearly showing how he had fallen for this little ball of fluff.

Harry had been surprised by Ron's relationship with Argent. Thus far, Harry's experience of Ron and pets had been Scabbers, Errol and Pig. Scabbers, of course, wasn't really a rat but the dark wizard Wormtail. Still, Ron had spent quite a lot of time insulting him and complaining about him (although he'd been livid when he thought Hermione's cat Crookshanks had eaten him). Scabbers was also yet another hand-me-down, something which reminded Ron of his family's poverty (the rat used to be Percy's). Errol wasn't really Ron's owl, but he had been allowed to use him; being quite elderly, Errol was winded by even the shortest flight carrying the smallest piece of mail. Pigwidgeon, on the other hand, had enthusiasm to spare, but Ron was constantly frustrated by his manic behavior and the fact that his diminutive size prohibited him from carrying large packages as much as Errol's advanced years did.

Now here he was, almost constantly carrying around this tiny creature who was so attached to him, cooing to her the corniest endearments and letting her climb all over him. Harry had seen that Ron had claw marks all over his arms and legs and chest and shoulders when Ron was changing his clothes. When Argent climbed up his robes and her claws went too deep, he merely winced, waiting for her to reach his shoulder, and she would rub against the side of his face and pounce in his ear.

After what seemed like a long silence between them, punctuated by Argent's squeaks and mews, Ron said, "Hermione should be back from dinner. Do you want to tell us both what made your scar hurt?"

Harry nodded, swallowing, still watching the kitten. If only my life could be that uncomplicated, he thought. Eat, sleep, wash, purr and look at someone with big eyes so that they'll pet me.

He struggled to stand, and when he seemed about to fall backward onto the bed again, Ron reached out his hand to steady him. Argent sat on his shoulder, claws sunk into his robes, but Ron didn't seem to mind. They walked down to the common room, Harry leaning heavily on the railing. They found Ginny and Hermione sitting in armchairs by the fire, talking excitedly about the dueling, but they stopped when they saw Ron and Harry. Both girls stood, alarmed at the sight of him.

"Harry!" Hermione said first. "What are you doing out of bed? You're pale as a ghost!"

"Go back to bed, Harry," Ginny said, putting her hand on his arm, then on his cheek. "You don't look well." Then she moved her hand to his forehead, as if checking for a fever, but when she made contact with the scar, he cried out, closed his eyes and knocking her arm away.

"Ow--" she started to moan, then stifled this when she saw the looks on Ron's and Hermione's faces. Hermione looked very, very grim.

"Harry--it's your scar, isn't it?" Hermione said softly.

He opened his eyes, looking at her dully, nodded. Then he turned to Ginny, who was still holding her arm. "Sorry, Ginny," he mumbled. She shrugged, letting go of her arm reluctantly, as though she were only trying to make him think she was hurt.

He staggered to one of the empty armchairs by the fire, sat down heavily. He started speaking in a low voice as the other two moved to sit in the other chairs.

"Voldemort is going after Muggles now. I saw him. It was a tube station. It--blew up..." he hit the arm of the chair repeatedly, frowning, his eyes squeezed shut. Suddenly his eyes flew open. He remembered. He knew.

"It was Westminster".

"Westminster!" Hermione squealed. Ron and Ginny looked at her strangely; they didn't know why this was significant. "Westminster," she said again, softly. "That's right near Parliament, and Westminster Abbey. And from Parliament Square you can walk along Whitehall to Trafalgar Square"...

But Harry was remembering something else. Something to do with his name...why couldn't he remember?

"Oh, Harry, do you think he was targeting Parliament"?

He shook his head, looking at the fire. "I have no idea. I saw--all of these people on the platform, waiting. Mothers with children...old people..." he swallowed; his throat felt very tight.

"Harry," Ginny said softly, "Is there any chance that it--that it was just a dream? That it didn't really happen"?

Harry shook his head again. "I wish. But whenever my scar hurts like that"--

"You have to go to Dumbledore," Hermione jumped in. He looked up at Ron and Ginny, who both nodded agreement. He swallowed again, knowing they were right. He rose and went to the portrait hole, the others following him. He turned around and put out his hands to stop them.

"I--I need to go alone. Wait here. Please." They looked doubtfully at each other. "I'll be fine. Really. The pain's not so bad now. Please," he said again. They nodded and let him go.

But as soon as he was in the corridor, he realized he didn't want to go alone after all. He started to give the password to go back in, but he realized that he wasn't interested in Ron or Hermione or Ginny coming along. He wanted to talk to someone else.

Without thinking, he started down the stairs. Down, down, down--until he was in the dungeons and knocking at Snape's office door.

"Alohomora!" came the reply, causing the door to swing open suddenly. Harry stepped into the room cautiously. Snape was sitting at his desk, reading essays. There was a large pile of rolled pieces of parchment on the desk; he would probably be working quite late. He could have had all of that done already if he hadn't accepted responsibility for the Dueling Club, Harry realized.

Perhaps Snape realized that too. He looked up at Harry, irritated, snarling, "What is it, Potter? Can't wait until tomorrow for the Club standings? Well, you're still ranked first, the only one still undefeated. Happy? Now, I have essays to grade. You may go".

But Harry stood in the doorway still, holding onto the jamb for support.

"Potter? Are you all right?" Snape tried to sound surly still, but he didn't completely succeed.

Harry shook his head. "I didn't--didn't come for the standings. The dueling exhausted me, especially throwing off the password. The Hara Kiri"--

Snape frowned. "Yes. Technically, that's not illegal in this country, but if it looked as though you couldn't handle it, I'd have aborted the duel and suspended Mr. Malfoy from the club".

"Don't do that," Harry said feebly, feeling weaker and weaker. Snape actually looked concerned, trying to hide it beneath a sneer.

"Come, Potter," he said briskly, getting up and guiding him to the wing chair by the fire. "That's what chairs are for," he added, still trying to maintain a churlish demeanor, but the edge was gone from his voice.

Harry sank into the chair gratefully. Snape sat at his desk again. Harry looked around the office. He'd never really looked around when he'd come in to use the Pensieve or when he'd been hiding under his Invisibility Cloak. In addition to the shelves and shelves of carefully labeled potions ingredients, there were dozens of potions texts lining the walls as well. Many did not appear to be in English, or even written with Roman letters. On the spines of a few texts he recognized

Greek letters, Cyrillic, something that could be Chinese or Japanese, and others that he assumed were ancient runes, simply because he did not recognize them. A broom stood in the corner behind Snape; it looked old and slow. Then Harry realized that Snape's robes were rather frayed at the edges, the tips of his shoes showing beneath his black robes looking scuffed and muddy.

There were no photos of family members waving at him, no friends or former students who had sent signed pictures with their best regards and thanks--not even Slytherins. It was the office of a lonely man. An alone man.

"I don't know if Sirius told you about my dream. On Christmas night," Harry said suddenly. Snape looked at him impassively.

"Yes." His face betrayed no emotion.

"Well," Harry went on, "I saw--I saw you. Looking like Lucius Malfoy. I saw you pulling Karkaroff and Draco Malfoy away from the Death Eaters and Voldemort. Then, when he did the killing curse, I didn't know--I didn't know who had died"...

Harry tried to keep his voice even, but it was difficult. He wanted him to know he was glad it was Karkaroff, but that didn't seem right. He wanted to say he was glad it wasn't Snape, but he couldn't get the words out, somehow.

"Karkaroff was stupid. And a coward," Snape said bitterly. "But he didn't deserve to die. Not like that".

Harry nodded. No one deserved to die like that. He thought of Cedric. He thought of Snape, holding his mother, crying, her green eyes staring into the night sky which had had its constellations augmented by the Dark Mark...

"I had another dream," he said abruptly.

"The Dark Lord?" Snape said apprehensively. Harry nodded. "Where"?

"In London. The Westminster tube station. Near Parliament. It was--it was full of people going home for the evening. It blew up." Harry's voice caught. "There were little kids"...

Snape interrupted him. "Enough." He stood and went to the mantel. He picked some powder out of a ceramic bowl next to what looked like a pickled toad in a jar, and, throwing the powder into the fire, he said, "Remus Lupin".

The flames turned green, then a moment later, Sirius' head appeared to be nestled in among the coals in the firebox.

"Hello, Severus. Oh, hello, Harry. Didn't expect to see you. And if you'd called at this time tomorrow, you wouldn't have gotten me. Or Remus, of course. Full moon, next three nights. Remus is at work right now. Why did you call"?

Snape nodded grimly at Harry. He turned to the flames.

"I had another dream." Sirius looked very frightened.

"Tell me about it".

So Harry described it; the people in the station, the train coming in, seeing Voldemort's face, the explosion, and waking up with his scar hurting.

"Sirius," Snape said when Harry was done. "Didn't I see one of those Muggle contraptions when I was there, one of those radio-tellies? Can you get any information from it? Or from the wireless"?

"I'll try both the television and the radio. Can I call you back?" Snape nodded. Sirius' face disappeared from the flames and they returned to their normal red-orange-yellow glow.

Harry turned to Snape, confused. "They have electricity there?" Snape looked at Harry as if he were hopelessly naive.

"There's no work for Remus Lupin in the wizarding world, any more than there is for Sirius Black. Remus lives in a flat in Manchester, works as a night watchman in a warehouse. On nights with a full moon, if he has to work he locks himself into the warehouse. If Sirius is around, he goes with him, stays with him in dog form. His employers also gave him a gun for the guard job. When the moon is full, Sirius puts bullets into the gun that he made special--bullets made of silver.

Remus has made him promise that if it looks like he could possibly get out or hurt someone in any way, he will use the gun”.

It took Harry a moment to register the fact that Snape and Sirius and Lupin all seemed to be on a first-name basis, finally. Then he realized what Lupin had asked Sirius to do. “He wants Sirius to shoot him?” Harry whispered.

“Silver is the only thing that can kill a werewolf, Potter,” Snape said matter-of-factly. Harry nodded, looking down at his hands, trying to imagine his best friend asking him to do the same. If Ron asked him to kill him, could he ever do it? Dueling was one thing, but this--

The time seemed to drag, but Harry checked his watch and saw that it was only five minutes since Sirius’ head had disappeared from the fireplace. Suddenly, he was back.

“Severus, Harry, I have bad news,” he began. “The tube station--Westminster--it’s very bad. They’re going to be getting bodies out all night. It’s on every channel, and it’s the only story on the radio. Even music stations have stopped playing music and are just reporting this. So far they’ve removed twenty-two bodies and gotten nine people out who survived--but they’re all very iffy. All critical, being rushed to hospital by helicopter. The P.M. has evacuated the houses of Parliament it’s Sunday night, but here are always some government drones slogging away in an office somewhere. Scotland Yard on site--they won’t find anything, of course. I could probably Apparate right down into the tunnel, see what it looks like, I don’t dare with all the Muggle police around. My picture’s still hanging up in police stations around the country. Luckily that actually makes me a typical resident here in Remus’ neighborhood”...

“How do we tell the Ministry of Magic that it was Voldemort?” Harry wanted to know.

“We don’t. Fudge doesn’t want to admit he was wrong about his return. We go with the media. I have a contact who can make sure the Voldemort connection gets into the Daily Prophet without your name being mentioned, Harry. The last thing we need is for Voldemort to find out about your dreams”.

Damn! thought Harry. Draco Malfoy knows about the dreams. And I still don’t really know what side he’s on...

“Oh, and Severus,” Sirius went on. “That operative has the samples. You’ll be receiving them tomorrow. How long before you can run the test”?

“It will take about thirty-six hours,” Snape replied.

Harry frowned. “What test”?

“Well, Harry, you suggested that we need to find out about Krum,” Sirius said .

“But,” Harry said, confused, “I thought you said you were going to get the samples”.

“I couldn’t possibly, Harry. The Krums all know what I look like as a dog, from last summer.” That means Viktor Krum knows, Harry realized. More possible trouble. “It needed to be someone else.” Harry was going to say, But you mentioned being an unregistered Animagus--when he suddenly thought he knew how the samples had been obtained. If you don’t mind answering to an obsolete dingbat... Suddenly, he also knew who the contact at the Prophet was...

“At any rate, I’ll send you all the Muggle papers I can get my hands on concerning the attack. The gits on Fleet Street are going to be wetting themselves--oh, pardon me, Harry”--

Harry grimaced. “I’m fifteen, Sirius, not five”.

Sirius smiled at him. “Right. I got that point the last time I saw you...Well. I’m off to monitor the news reports some more. I wish Remus had something better than a nine-inch black and white--and I’ll go to the corner news agency first thing in the morning. I’ll send the papers using Remus’ owl. He’s pretty hardy, can take quite a load. Have you told Dumbledore yet?”

Snape stepped in. “I’ll tell the headmaster. Harry needs to get some rest; we had Dueling Club this afternoon”.

Sirius smiled at Harry. “So! How’d you do”?

Snape answered before he could get his mouth open. "After three weeks and fifteen duels, he's got fifteen wins. Only one who's undefeated." His voice was flat and emotionless. Harry looked at him, perplexed. "Harry threw off quite a lot of people. Draco Malfoy used the Hara Kiri on him. He's exhausted".

Sirius drew in his breath. "Hara Kiri? And you just--threw it off"?

This time Snape let him answer. "Yeah. Only afterward, I felt like--like I could barely walk".

"Well, you do as Severus says and get some rest. It sounds like he can talk to Dumbledore. I can give him a call, too, before I go back to monitoring the media. Take care of yourself, Harry. Are you going up to Dumbledore's now, Severus?" Snape answered in the affirmative. "All right. I'll give you a chance to get up there, then call in a few minutes. Good night, Harry".

"Good night," he said to his godfather. And he was gone. Suddenly, Harry realized something very odd had happened; when Snape had been talking to Sirius, he had referred to him as "Harry." Twice. It was almost as strange as hearing Malfoy say his first name .

Then he thought about Sirius' reaction to his throwing off the Hara Kiri curse, and also Snape's reaction, and Malfoy's. Why was he able to do it? Why was he able to almost completely overcome the Imperius Curse the first time Crouch had put it on him the previous year?

"Why was I able to do that?" he suddenly said aloud, unable to stop his thoughts from coming out of his mouth. He looked up at Snape. "I mean--can you ask the headmaster for me? I--I don't understand. Is it the same as being a Parselmouth? Is it something I got from Voldemort when he tried to kill me? It was like, once Moody told us we could do it, if our minds were strong enough--I knew I could do it. Last year, when I was in that graveyard..." but he couldn't continue for a moment, remembering some of the more gruesome details of that day. "I mean--Voldemort put the Cruciatus Curse on me twice, and it was--" He shook his head. "I couldn't breathe properly afterward, it hurt so much. But just knowing now that I can stop some kinds of pain, somehow--I did it."

Snape looked at him blankly. A silence hung between them as Harry looked desperately back at him. Finally, Snape said softly, "I don't know, Potter. I can ask the headmaster".

He was Potter again. He would say Harry's first name when referring to him in the third person, but not when addressing him...Harry nodded and followed Snape out into the dungeon, looking briefly over his shoulder at the pile of parchment rolls still on Snape's desk; he'd be up until all hours finishing that now .

They walked together up to the entrance hall, silently. From here, Snape went up another staircase, away from the main stairs to Gryffindor Tower, without a backward glance or another word to Harry. Harry had never gone that way to Dumbledore's office before. Perhaps Snape knew a shortcut.

But suddenly, Harry felt faint again. He leaned against the stone wall, watching the small black dots before his eyes grow larger and larger, blending into each other, one swallowing its neighbor swallowing its other neighbor, watching them begin to dance in whirling patterns, watching them expand until they blotted out the wavering torchlight...

* * * * *

"Aaahhhh!" Harry screamed. He was shivering and soaking wet. Near-freezing water ran in rivulets down his cheeks from his hair, his robes were acting as conduits for streams of water which were now flowing into his shoes. His glasses were covered with drops of water, blurring his vision, and he had inhaled some water as well, making him sputter and choke. He lay on the cold stone floor of the entrance hall.

"Wheeeeeee!" Peeves cackled with glee as he flew about the hall, now rightside-up, now upside-down, now twirling in a spiral and going in a circuit around the hall at the same time. Harry looked up at him, still coming around, finding himself thinking, oddly, That would be a good trick on a broom...

Then he struggled to his feet; the cold water squelched in his shoes as he walked. He looked around, then took his glasses off, touched them with his wand, saying, "Impervious." His glasses now free of water, he put them on, looking around the entrance hall, feeling strangely alert. Peeves might have done him a favour; the impromptu cold shower seemed to have been just the thing to wake him up. Then suddenly, his stomach growled as it hadn't since the time

between Dudley starting his diet after Harry finished third year and the arrival of his birthday cakes from his friends and Mrs. Weasley. A feral, animal sound generated from deep within him. A wild sound...

He smiled up at Peeves, who was still showing off his aerobatic abilities. "Thanks, Peeves. That was just what I needed think." He turned to go up the marble steps that would eventually lead him to Gryffindor Tower (squelch!squelch!), then decided that what he really needed to do was go down to the kitchens for a bite.

But Peeves was appalled by being thanked for his prank. "Thanks! I drop ten water balloons on you and all you can say THANKS? Whatever happened to, 'Sod off, Peeves?' Whatever happened to name calling? No 'git,' no 'prat,' not even 'get away from me?'"

But Harry only smiled at him, pushing his damp hair off his forehead, going through the door leading to the stairs down to the kitchens. Behind him, Peeves was still suffering from his attack of poltergeist-inadequacy.

"WHAT ABOUT A 'GO TO HELL, PEEVES'"?

Harry turned to him briefly before closing the door. "Well, if you could, you'd hardly be here, would you?" he said calmly.

He closed the door behind him, smiling as he heard Peeves lose it further. His scream of "Aaaaaaaargh!" was probably heard all over the castle, and would undoubtedly result in someone else--someone he could more effectively needle--being tortured by Peeves in the not-so-distant future.

Harry descended the stairs, then found the still-life of fruit. After tickling the pear to get it to turn into a door handle, he opened the door to the kitchens, his stomach moving within him with hunger as soon as the delicious smells wafted into his nose and from there into the part of his brain responsible for telling him to eat. Food. Never had he felt so hungry, somehow. Never had he wanted food so badly...

The after-dinner clean-up was in full swing. Elves were putting scouring charms on pots and pans and reshelving washed dishes and goblets by flying them around the tall room. Harry spotted Dobby and an elf that looked almost like Winky, but not quite; she also had large brown eyes and was wearing clothes, but she actually looked happy about this. She wore what appeared to be a dress meant for a large doll or a small baby. It was pink, with a floppy white collar and a little yellow duck embroidered over the chest. Smaller yellow ducks marched around the hem of the garment, which came below her knees, so that it threatened to look like a miniature ball gown. On her head, however, she wore an incongruous ski cap with holes cut for her ears. It was patterned in green, orange, purple and red. She wore mismatched socks, as Dobby always did, one a grey, red and black argyle pattern, the other a brown and tan herringbone.

Dobby's face almost split in two, his grin was so wide when he saw Harry. "Harry Potter! You is coming to visit me!" he crowed in his squeaky voice, bouncing around Harry excitedly. Harry smiled at him. "Harry Potter, you must meet someone! This is Biddy!"

Biddy smiled nervously and gave a little curtsey. "Hello, Biddy," Harry said. "So, you decided to ask for clothes on New Year's Day. That's great!"

Biddy looked down and away, smiling but looking like she was trying not to. Was she blushing? Harry wondered. He couldn't tell. Dobby stood beside her and put his hand on her arm. "Biddy isn't being sure about clothes, not at first. But we is--we is going to be getting married and starting a family...and I is telling Biddy that I only wants to be with another free elf!"

Harry's mouth dropped open. "Dobby! That's great! Congratulations. But--you can't be marrying all of the elves who ask for clothes. How did you convince the others"?

"Oh, they is thinking about it for a long time. They is like me, but they is not wanting to say. The other elves..." Well, thought Harry. Dobby didn't need to tell him what the other elves were like.

"Dobby, do you think I could get something to eat? I missed dinner and I'm starving." Before he knew what was happening, Harry had been seated and about fifteen house elves had brought him six kinds of meat (three kinds of beef alone), four vegetables, three loaves of bread, and several goblets of pumpkin juice. Harry laughed, shaking his head. He reached for some bread and began to cut himself a slice. "Can you sit down with me, Dobby?" Harry asked, wanting to be polite.

“Wait; there is someone who is wanting to meet you, Harry Potter”.

Dobby disappeared with a pop, and Bidy went back to work, looking slightly embarrassed when Harry looked at her, so he stopped doing that (although he was fascinated to see the elf who was going to be Dobby’s wife) and just concentrated on working out what food he was going to eat next. He had a little of everything, it seemed, eating as though he would be back again for years...

When he felt he couldn’t hold one crumb more, Dobby reappeared, and five other elves popped in with him. Dobby introduced them to him as Blat, Tiggy, Pinny, Quiff and Zenana. They were all wearing an interesting variety of clothes, at least, things made of fabric that they were using as clothes, such as Dobby’s tea-cozy hat; Harry thought Tiggy’s skirt looked like it was made of a lampshade covered with several antimacassars). After the introductions were done, the elves dispersed to continue cleaning. Harry turned to Dobby and said, “Where are the others? I thought you said there were nine.” Even including Bidy, there were only six elves besides Dobby wearing clothes.

Dobby looked somewhat embarrassed. “I is sorry, Harry Potter. Three is changing their minds. But seven free elves at Hogwarts is better than none!” he exclaimed, smiling again. Harry was glad Hermione wasn’t present.

“I suppose you’re right, Dobby. They’re very lucky to have you, you know. You can show them the ropes, take them with you go on your day off. Show them around Hogsmeade”.

Dobby looked embarrassed again. “Well, Harry Potter, I isn’t really able to do that, because--I is never taking a day off. Boxing Day is my first day off ever”...

“Dobby!” Harry said, trying to sound stern, but not doing very well. “Dumbledore gave you a day off a month. You should take it! What kind of example are you setting for the others?” Dobby grimaced, looking down and scuffing his foot on the floor. Harry sighed. “All right. The next Hogsmeade weekend is February tenth. Come into the village with me and my friends. We’ll show you round. Promise? You’ll make sure Bidy and the others come too”?

Dobby smiled gratefully at Harry, as though he were saving him from himself. “I promise, Harry Potter. I promise! I is going to tell the others we is going to Hogsmeade with Harry Potter!” And he popped out of the kitchen, making Harry smile and shake his head again.

* * * * *

Harry was feeling rather better after eating, but he still decided to skip the prefects’ meeting. He didn’t imagine that Ron or the other Ravenclaws would be especially civil to him after what happened during the Dueling Club. He told Ron about what Sirius had said about the news reports and sending the papers, asking him to inform Hermione when she returned from the meeting. He went back to bed, taking Sandy with him, and fell into a deep, deep sleep, and if he had dreams, didn’t remember them--which was how he preferred it.

He rose as usual to run the next morning, meeting Hermione in the common room to stretch. They didn’t talk; Hermione was sneaking concerned looks at him while she stretched, but he pretended not to notice. When they reached the entrance hall, they saw the new club standings posted there, posted next to the Quidditch standings. So far, Gryffindor was ahead slightly with three-hundred and ten points, while Slytherin had defeated Hufflepuff by a score of two-hundred and ninety to forty. Ravenclaw had also beaten Hufflepuff earlier in the fall, by two-hundred ten to fifty. Harry wasn’t even sure he cared about Quidditch anymore. He scanned down the dueling standings lackadaisically.

Rank: 1 / Wins: 15 : Potter

Rank: 2 / Wins: 14 : (Tie) Granger, V. Weasley

Rank: 3 / Wins: 13 : (Tie) Spinnet, Malfoy

Rank: 4 / Wins: 10 : Davies

Rank: 5 / Wins: 8 (Tie): Johnson, L. Quirke, R. Weasley

Rank: 6 / Wins: 7 (Tie): Crabbe, Goyle, N. Quirke, G. Weasley

Rank: 7 / Wins: 5 (Tie): Finch-Fletchley, Bulstrode

Rank: 8 / Wins: 3 (Tie): Abbott, MacMillan

Rank: 9 / Wins: 2 : Chang

Rank: 10 / Wins: 1 : Creevey

Rank: 11 / Wins: 0 : Brocklehurst

Harry gave it a disinterested glance; it didn't seem to matter any more. Voldemort was going into London, killing people randomly, not just going after former Death Eaters like Karkaroff. No one was safe any more. No place was safe, with the possible exception of Hogwarts.

Hermione also looked at the standings, frowning. "Let's see," she said softly, in that voice she got when she was thinking aloud, working out an Arithmancy problem. "The only one I haven't beaten is you, and the only one Ginny hasn't beaten me, and both you and Ginny beat Malfoy"...

"Hermione, can you obsess over this later? I'll just start running without you..." She tore herself away from the parchment looking embarrassed. "It's just"--

--"that you're used to getting full marks? Not used to being number two"?

She bowed her head, her lips in a line, but the edges of her mouth smiling slightly. "At least the one I'm number two to you. If it were Malfoy"...

He smiled. "You get to duel him next time. You can get him back for all those names he's called you"...

She looked thoughtful. "You know, it's not that I mind 'Mudblood.' I mean, since I grew up in the Muggle world, it just doesn't carry the meaning for me it does for people like Ron and Ginny. It's just the way Malfoy says it, the way he makes it sound like I eat out of a toilet or something"...

"Hermione!" Harry made a face.

"Oh, you know what I mean. Think of the most disgusting thing you can, and fill in the blank. That's what he's saying when he insults me. It's his tone, not the word that gets to me"...

Harry looked at her; Malfoy was actually hurting her when he said those things, he realized. She was able to be strong enough to cover, but it had really cut deep. Usually it was Ron who leapt into the breach when these things occurred, attacking Malfoy in her defense. Harry had thought it was because Ron was more sensitive to the slur "Mudblood" than he was. Why hadn't Harry ever noticed that before? Ron had never, ever failed to defend Hermione when she was attacked. Had Hermione noticed? he wondered. Or did she think of those deeds as the actions of a loyal dog, her companion and defender, nothing more?

After they finished running and stretching again, they went up to shower and change. Malfoy wasn't in the bath when Harry went. He must be getting up at the crack of dawn to bathe without anyone being able to see his arm, Harry thought. I hope he's losing plenty of sleep.

When he and Ron and Hermione were seated at the Gryffindor table, eating breakfast, Harry heard a rush of wings overhead, and he looked up at the ceiling of the Great Hall. The sky today was like flat white muslin, a typical winter sky now filled with brown and black and grey and tawny owls, banking and circling, looking for the individuals they were supposed to find, dropping parcels into laps, perching on students' shoulders while they untied parchments from their legs.

A barn owl with russet wing tips dropped a large bundle of newspapers tied with twine into Harry's lap; a smaller tawny owl brought Hermione her Daily Prophet subscription. She usually read the wizarding paper over breakfast in a careless fashion, glancing over the front page, skimming the inside pages for anything about developments in transfiguration or charms, giving Ginny the horoscope, letting Ron have the Quidditch page.

But today, she sat staring at the front page in disbelief, two deep lines between her brows from her frowning so severely. She and Ron were sitting across from Harry. Ron looked at her now. "What is it?" he wanted to know, yet sounding like he didn't. He took the paper from her.

"Hermione--there's nothing here about the Westminster tube station"...

"That's just it!" she whispered. "There's nothing there! Fudge must have quashed the story!"

"Well," Harry said grimly. "He didn't manage to get it quashed in the Muggle papers." He held up the top paper in the stack Sirius had sent. The headline read, 43 DEAD, 19 WOUNDED IN ATTACK ON PARLIAMENT TUBE STATION. Ginny stepped down next to him, taking the paper from him.

"Oh, Harry," she breathed, starting to read the story. Harry passed papers to Hermione and Ron, then picked up another one himself. TERRORIST ATTACK UNDERGROUND, said a headline. SCOTTISH SEPARATISTS CLAIM RESPONSIBILITY FOR WESTMINSTER BOMBING, said another. PALESTINIAN GROUP TAKES CREDIT FOR 46 KILLED IN TUBE STATION.

"Forty-six?" Ron said. "Thought it was forty-three".

"Mine says forty-nine," Hermione said. "And it's supposed to be Pakistani religious extremists"...

"Afghans," said Ginny, looking at a different paper.

Harry picked up another paper. "This one says both Catholic and Protestant terrorist groups from Northern Ireland are claiming they did it".

Ginny pulled another paper from the stack. "Fifty-two dead and Scotland Yard is saying something about a Colombian drug cartel. What's a cartel"?

"Like the Death Eaters. Gang of people who work for a drug-kingpin. They have a network for distributing the drugs." Harry's voice sounded like it didn't belong to him. So many people dead, he thought. And all these sick fringe groups so anxious to pretend that they did it, the police pointing the finger at people they knew the public hated anyway, people who had probably done plenty of horrible things for which they'd never been punished.

Harry remembered witches and wizards talking in hushed voices about Voldemort's previous reign of terror. He remembered that when Wormtail had framed Sirius for his own murder and had killed that street full of Muggles, the Ministry of Magic had come quickly to the spot, throwing around memory charms, whisking Sirius off to Azkaban without trial.

But even then, it was only a dozen or so people killed, nothing like the numbers from the tube station. He thought of Moody saying that Muggles were far more dangerous than wizards, had killed far more people.

Voldemort had raised the stakes.

Suddenly, Sandy hissed under his robes, "A griffin will meet with a serpent." Like in the Pensieve. Did she mean Gryffindor and Slytherin again? And if so, who did she mean?

"Oh, Harry," Ginny said again. Harry looked at her. She looked even more horrified than she had before. "Look--" she handed him the paper she'd been reading. He followed her finger down the column.

"You read it," Harry said, after he got a brief glimpse of what it said.

"The BBC," read Ginny softly, "reported that when rescuers were finally able to enter the station proper, they found the word POTTER scrawled on the wall in an unknown green substance. Since the BBC has reported this, a number of groups heretofore unknown to the police have claimed responsibility. Among them are Pagans of the True Earth Resurrected, People Obligated to Treat Everyone Rotten, and Proponents of Traditional Trades Expressing Rage".

Ron laughed. "That's rich! People Obligated to Treat Everyone Rotten"...

"It's not funny!" Harry snapped at him. Ron's face immediately fell; he looked like a four-year-old being scolded.

"Sorry, Harry," he mumbled, his ears reddening.

On his other side, George finally looked up from his breakfast and saw the four of them with the newspapers spread out all over the place. "Are those Muggle papers? What do you want with them, then?"

Harry collected the papers again, trying to pile them into a reasonably neat stack. He didn't answer George. He looked at the head table; the four of them had been seated at the very end of their house table, closest to the professors. Snape was only a few yards away, drinking. He looked at Harry over his goblet and gave a very small nod, then rose and went through a door next to the one that led to the anteroom where Harry had Animagus training. Aha! he thought. Sandy was talking about him and Snape...

He asked Ron to bring his rucksack to Potions for him. He was staggering under the weight of the papers; Lupin must have a really strong owl, he thought. He met Hermione's eye as he left; she looked very worried. Then he looked at Ginny, feeling rather worried himself; she was reading Hermione's copy of the Prophet, chewing her toast. Did Draco Malfoy know anything about the Westminster attack? he wondered. Did Lucius Malfoy?

He went into the entrance hall and then down the stairs to the dungeons. When he entered the Potions classroom, he saw that Snape's office door was already open and he was sitting at his desk. Did that door in the Great Hall lead to a secret passage to his office? Harry wondered. There must be a lot more secret passages than Messrs. Moony, Padfoot, Wormtail and Prongs knew about when they made their map, he thought.

After he entered the office, Snape pointed his wand at the door and it slammed shut. Harry silently dropped the stack of newspapers on his desk. He pulled some off the top that he hadn't seen, going to sit in the wing chair by the fire as he had the previous evening. They sat in silence, paging through article after article, the casualty reports getting worse and worse, the groups claiming responsibility more and more outlandish.

After reading yet another article about a group claiming that they had put the word POTTER on the station wall as their signature (Picts of the True Erse Republic--another Scottish group), he looked up at Snape, who was frowning fiercely at the mess of nonsensical stories. He didn't know what Snape thought of Muggle newspapers before (probably not very much), but he certainly didn't think this would raise his estimation of them.

"The largest death toll I've seen yet is from the Times," Harry said quietly. "Forty-seven adults dead and twelve children; twenty-seven people still in hospital, about half likely to die in the next day or two".

Snape nodded, putting aside the paper he'd been looking at, then drumming his long fingers on his desk, staring into space. Suddenly, the bell rang for the first class of the day, making Harry jump.

"Get out," Snape said suddenly. But he didn't say it in a rude way; Harry understood. He shouldn't be seen in here, hanging out with Snape as though they were friends (were they friends?), especially by the Slytherins who would be coming down for class. He only had five minutes before the second bell would ring, officially beginning the class. Snape waved his wand at the mess of newsprint, and the papers all organized themselves into a neater stack than human hands could ever make and went flying into a cupboard behind his desk, closing and locking. Very neat, though Harry. He hurried out of Snape's office and moved to the back of the class, sitting down at a table. He put his head on his arms sleepily, waiting for the other students to arrive.

He must have dozed off briefly, because he was very startled when he heard a familiar voice bellow, "Potter"!

He tried to open his eyes and raise his head, blinking. The classroom was full of the usual fifth-year Slytherins and Gryffindors. Ron was next to him; Harry remembered now that he'd been dreaming of walking down a Hogwarts corridor and the wall of the corridor itself kept reaching out and poking him...that must have been Ron, trying to wake me up, he thought...

"If you'd like to join us, Potter, get out your dried bird's-foot trefoil seed pods. Unless you'd like to try making your potion without them and poisoning yourself," Snape sneered at him. The Slytherins laughed appreciatively. Harry grimaced and picked up his rucksack, taking out his Potions supplies and sighing. Back to normal. He chanced a look at Ron, who looked apologetic. When Snape had turned round, Harry shrugged at him. Hermione was sitting with Neville; he caught her eye and also shrugged. Then he saw Neville looking at him strangely. Suddenly Harry wondered, Should I have trusted Neville? Should I have put a memory charm on him instead? But he didn't know how to work one; memory charms weren't taught until the end of seventh year, so that students wouldn't constantly be trying to make the professors think they hadn't assigned things, or making them forget that they were going to be setting an exam on a particular day.

Harry moved through his classes in a trance again. He was grateful for Sandy, because many a time she warned him of something they were about to cover in class, and he was able to jolt himself back to the present in time to avoid looking like a total fool.

This was far worse than anticipating Dueling Club. This felt like walking through water constantly; pressing against the water as though it had weight and substance, as though he were in the lake again, trying to get past the Grindylows and merpeople. Except that it wasn't just four people that were in danger, four people he was despairing of getting back to the surface. There were hundreds, thousands, millions of people out there in danger, potential targets. He felt like he was moving through an overwhelming sea of despair and worry, waiting to find out what Voldemort's next atrocity would be.

... "they found the word POTTER scrawled on the wall" ...

* * * * *

Harry had some trouble blocking pain in Moody's class that afternoon. At first, he thought he was just distracted. But then he realized that, after Sunday night, somehow, he felt he deserved to suffer. He just couldn't bring himself to stop the pain. Finally, after Seamus had put a simple Passus Curse on his left ankle, leaving him gasping, he went to Madam Pomfrey for the first time since they'd started the new term, asking her for pain relief.

Then, on Tuesday morning, as he was about to go out the door to Hagrid's class, Sandy hissed to him, "A secret will be revealed." A moment later, Snape appeared, evidently having planned to waylay him at this time .

"Potter! A word".

The rest of the Gryffindors looked at him sympathetically, assuming he was probably in for a detention. The Slytherins, on the other hand, looked pretty pleased about this. Harry waved Ron and Hermione on through the door.

"I'll catch you up," he told them.

When the students from both houses were gone, Snape went down the stairs to the dungeons, not saying a word to Harry, who reckoned he should just follow. They passed by the open door of Snape's classroom, where Harry saw the first-year Gryffindors and Slytherins; Will Flitwick was sitting in the back row with Gillian Lockley, and in front of them he clearly saw Crabbe's younger sister Wilhelmina.

They didn't go into the classroom; about twenty feet farther on, Snape pulled back a tapestry and opened a door concealed there by whispering a password Harry couldn't hear. Snape held the door open for him and Harry went through. There were torches on the walls of the passage, and, immediately to the left, a set of steep, narrow stairs that could lead from the door in the Great Hall, Harry suspected. It wasn't a very long passage; in a moment, it seemed, Snape pushed on what looked like part of the wall, but it pivoted in the middle, leaving about two feet on either side to go through into Snape's office. Harry went through the opening on the left, seeing on that side some of the shelves in Snape's office that held potions texts.

Once in the office, Snape did not close the bookcase. "This won't take long, Potter," he told him tersely. "I've completed the tests on the samples." Harry swallowed, unsure whether he wanted to know .

"Is he"--

"No." Snape sat in his desk chair, shuffling through parchments on the desktop. "There is no doubt whatsoever that Krum is the product of his mother and father. He is not the Dark Lord's son." Ah, Harry thought. That was the secret.

Then he frowned; he'd been so sure! But then, who had Karkaroff been speaking of? Was it one of the other students who'd come for the tournament? Had Voldemort's heir been helping Barty Crouch, Jr., and Crouch hadn't even known? It seemed to Harry that if he had known, he would have said something about it when he was under the influence of the Veritaserum.

"You may go, Potter. Go back down the passage and take the stairs".

Harry nodded at him. He left, hearing Snape's words in his head again.

He is not the Dark Lord's son.

Well, that was a good thing, wasn't it? Harry slogged up the stairs, thinking furiously. The stairs made several turns, in different directions, and at the top was a large wooden door. Sure enough, when he opened it, he was back in the empty Great Hall. So, Snape had shown him a secret passage to his office (two, really, one from the Great Hall and one from a door under the tapestry, although he didn't know the password for that one).

After he closed the door to the secret stairs, Harry tried opening it again, expecting that he wouldn't be able to. But it worked just fine. On the other hand, even if someone stumbled onto this passage, they wouldn't know where to push on the pivoting wall that was also a bookcase unless they'd been shown. Otherwise, it just looked like a dead-end. (And the bookcase wasn't at the very end of the passage either; it was about half-way along. It wasn't at all obvious). Harry thought about Snape showing him this. He must have decided he could trust him completely. But then, perhaps he had already decided that when he gave him the chance to go into the Pensieve...

During the rest of the week, Harry wondered about Voldemort's heir. Perhaps Karkaroff had been talking about Krum all along; Voldemort had said that he wasn't sure he was his heir. Karkaroff could have been mistaken. Maybe the Krums had told him he was Voldemort's heir to get Viktor preferential treatment at Durmstrang. It had certainly worked; Harry remembered the way Karkaroff had doted on him even before his name came out of the Goblet of Fire, how he was so kind and short with the other students from his school. No, Harry was still convinced that Karkaroff had been speaking of Viktor Krum. It didn't matter that Karkaroff had been misled. And Voldemort had said he'd already been useful...that meant he still had to make sure Hermione got rid of him.

When the fourth meeting of the Dueling Club arrived, Harry was feeling like he was in good form again. He hadn't needed to see Madam Pomfrey since Monday. Harry tried not to think about the newspapers he knew were sitting in the cupboard in Snape's office, about the name POTTER being scrawled on the wall of the tube station. It would do no good to think about that now. He had to prepare himself for what was to come. The O.W.L.s were one thing; being ready for Voldemort was quite another.

They would only be doing four duels each for the last meeting. Each round would have eight duels, and when all of the dueling was done, Snape would take some time to figure out the standings and they would all know who wasn't going to make the cut. Harry had to give Mandy Brocklehurst credit; she was terrible, she hadn't won a single duel, but she still went into the center of the circle every time with her head held high, ready to try again. She hadn't run out in tears, or insisted that others were cheating. When people beat her now, they were really very nice to her. It was pity, pure and simple, but she didn't seem to mind.

They began with Millicent Bulstrode defeating Hannah Abbott; Hannah probably wouldn't make the cut either, Harry thought. He wished Millicent weren't good enough, but she probably would be staying, unfortunately. After that, Crabbe and Malfoy bested Niamh and Liam Quirke, followed by Hermione doing her best to give Ernie MacMillan a chance, but he muffed it anyway. Then Mandy lost to Cho and Angelina tricked Ron. Snape called the next two names.

"Spinnet! Granger!"

Hermione was going again. Alicia looked at her with narrowed eyes. They were both very good; Alicia could definitely improve her standing if she could beat Hermione. Harry was the only one who had done it.

They bowed to each other and held their wands at the ready. Alicia quickly aimed the disarming charm at Hermione, who dodged it at the last moment, aiming her wand at Alicia's legs.

"Tarantella!" she cried, and Alicia's feet started to move unbidden, doing a wild tarantella, carrying her around the circle where she did not seem to want to go. Alicia tried to take careful aim at Hermione while she was yet dancing wildly. She put the jelly-legs jinx on Hermione, who collapsed on the floor, unable to stand. Alicia tried to disarm her, but Hermione rolled over quickly, dodging it yet again. She pointed at the dancing Alicia, saying, "Inverso!"

Alicia screamed, for now she had the sensation of dancing wildly while suspended upside down in the air. She continued to dance on the actual floor, however much she thought she was airborne, and narrowing her eyes, she aimed at Hermione again. She actually seemed to be overcoming the disorientation of the Inverso, and Hermione saw this. She couldn't stand up to take Alicia's wand from her, so she swiftly pointed her wand again, crying, "Expelliarmus!" just before Alicia started to say the same thing. But Hermione had done it first; Alicia's wand came hurtling through the air into her hand, and Snape broke the spells on both girls. Alicia shook her head, looking around, then reached out her hand to Hermione, helping her stand. They smiled at each other; they seemed to have been really enjoying themselves. They were well matched.

In the second round, Goyle beat Cho. (Harry was beginning to suspect she wouldn't last, either--he'd never felt grateful to Goyle for anything before, but he was now). Then Ginny defeated George (she seemed to anticipate everything he did). Then Crabbe and Niamh won over Hannah and Millicent. After that it was Hermione's turn again, and when Snape called her opponent's name, she got a look on her face that Harry could only describe as downright evil.

"Malfoy"!

Hermione and Malfoy stepped into the circle. After they bowed, Hermione began her onslaught. Malfoy never had a chance. She cried, "Rictusempra! Reverso! Inverso!" in quick succession, and soon Malfoy was giggling uncontrollably while thinking he was hanging upside-down in the air and also thinking that what was in front of him was behind him. He was so disoriented that he dropped his wand, closing his eyes and holding his head with both hands, looking miserable but laughing hysterically nonetheless. Hermione calmly picked up his wand and broke the spells on him herself, not bothering to wait for Snape.

Harry heard her say softly as she handed his wand back to him, "Remember what happened when you duelled with a Mudblood." She returned to her space between Harry and Ron, her face still stony, but also satisfied. Harry remembered again the day they had first kissed in the Charms classroom and she had controlled Peeves. He was glad someone so powerful was on his side.

The second round ended with Liam defeating Ron (who returned to the circle looking very grumpy), Ginny gently disarming Ernie, and Colin actually getting a win-- but it was over Mandy, so that wasn't saying much. When the third round started, Roger handily beat Goyle, looking pretty smug about it, and Harry and Alicia easily defeated George (he'd been watching Ginny dueling him) and Ron (who looked grumpier and grumpier). After Niamh disarmed Hannah, they took a break. Ginny, Hermione and Alicia were chatting happily about their duels; Ron and George were grousing about dirty tricks (the other person winning seemed to be the "dirty trick" they disliked the most, from what Harry could tell). Harry was sort of drifting between the two groups, not saying much of anything.

After the break, Justin got a spectacular win over Millicent, making Liam grin broadly at him. Niamh even looked like she was warming to the idea of Justin and her brother. Colin managed to get another win as well, over Cho, pretty much cementing her departure, Harry felt. Then he beat Ernie, trying to be gentle; he didn't want to seem unsympathetic, but Ernie was really horrible, he thought. All the practicing during the Christmas break seemed to have gone right out of his head. (Although Harry suspected he actually spent a lot more time involved in a different physical activity during the holiday). Finally, Goyle defeated Mandy, who now seemed to be rather bored with the whole process.

The fourth round started with Angelina besting George (Harry was starting to suspect George had a gender problem with his dueling) and ended with Harry besting Angelina. In between, Crabbe and Alicia beat Justin and Liam, and Roger, Goyle and George defeated Mandy, Colin and Ernie. But the really tense duel of this round was between Ron and Draco Malfoy.

Harry figured afterward that Ron won for two reasons; first, he was just plain hacked off about losing a number of previous duels he seemed to think he should have won, and secondly--Malfoy didn't seem to be trying to win. He wasn't interested in losing quickly, however, drawing it out, but several times Harry saw that he had an opening that he would have exploited with anyone else, and didn't take it. Why? he wondered. He also found himself wondering whether Ginny had been upset about the way he'd let her beat him. He hadn't had any compunctions about beating George, so why was he letting Ron off easy?

When Ron returned to the circle, looking much happier than he had before, Harry didn't dare hypothesize that Malfoy had thrown the duel. If there was a guaranteed way to upset Ron, that was it. Not that it took much sometimes, Harry reflected. Either Malfoy really was going to set his father up and wanted Ron to approve of him and Ginny, Harry thought, or he's lulling me into a false sense of security.

The fifth round seemed to go very quickly; after four weeks of dueling, many of the others looked quite exhausted, to Harry's eyes. Hannah and Millicent went down again, this time to Justin (more celebrating with Liam) and Crabbe. Then Malfoy defeated Alicia, using the Passus Curse on her mercilessly, on her arms and legs and finally her neck, until Harry thought Snape would put a stop to it. After her wand was returned to her, Alicia staggered out of the circle, and Hermione and Angelina let her lean against them. It had probably been the dirtiest duel since he had put the Hara Kiri on Harry. Hermione and Roger had no trouble coming out on top over Liam and Cho, and then Ginny and Niamh defeated Angelina and Justin. There was only one duel left, and Harry knew he was one of the people, because he'd only done three that day, but he couldn't remember for the life of him who he hadn't duelled. Snape called his name and he went into the circle. Then Snape called his opponent's name.

“V. Weasley”!

Harry swallowed as he watched her enter the circle. He had continued growing during the school year and his robes were starting to look a couple of inches too short. Ginny had continued growing, too, and they were now both about the same height. Her hair was pulled back in a messy knot at the back of her head and her brown eyes looked inscrutable and beautiful all at once.

NO, he told himself sternly. I will not let myself get distracted. Get it over with...

After they bowed, he heard her start to cry, “Expelli”--

“Impedimenta!” he shouted, quicker. As she slowed down almost to a complete stop, he plucked her wand away from her hand and then took the spell off. She looked at him, her face very close to his, it seemed. She gave him a very slight smile. Harry smiled back at her; she didn’t hold it against her. For some reason, that was very important to him.

They took another break, and then Snape summoned them back into the hall; he was getting ready to post the standing parchment. “Now!” he said loudly, but without seeming to shout. “Some of you have the same number of wins as another person, or more than one person, in some cases. If there is a tie, your standing is based upon how you performed against other people with the same number of wins”.

They all looked like they were on tenterhooks. Snape swept past them and into the entrance hall, taking down the parchment with the old standings and magically attaching the new parchment to the wall.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Dueling Club Standings

Rank: 1 / Wins: 19 : Potter [Captain]

Rank: 2 / Wins: 18 : Granger

Rank: 3 / Wins: 17 : V. Weasley

Rank: 4 / Wins: 15 : Malfoy

Rank: 5 / Wins: 15 : Spinnet

Rank: 6 / Wins: 14 : Davies

Rank: 7 / Wins: 11 : Crabbe

Rank: 8 / Wins: 10 : R. Weasley

Rank: 9 / Wins: 10 : N. Quirke

Rank:10 / Wins: 10 : Goyle

Rank:11 / Wins: 10 : Johnson

Rank:12 / Wins: 8 : L. Quirke

Rank:13 / Wins: 8 : G. Weasley

Rank:14 / Wins: 7 : Finch-Fletchley

Rank:15 / Wins: 6 : Bulstrode

Rank:16 / Wins: 3 : Creevey

CUT:

Rank:17 / Wins: 3 : Abbot

Rank:18 / Wins: 3 : Chang

Rank:19 / Wins: 3 : MacMillan

Rank:20 / Wins: 0 : Brocklehurst

Those who were cut didn't seem terribly surprised. But Colin was positively beaming about still being in the club; he couldn't believe he'd made it.

"I'm still in the club, Harry! Did you see! I didn't get cut!"

Harry smiled at him. "Good going, Colin".

Ron didn't look all that happy, but he tried to be philosophical. "Well, at least I won more than half my duels. Ten out of nineteen isn't too bad"...

Only Roger Davies seemed really upset about his standing, and he was number six. "Does anyone else think it's strange he spat angrily, "That four out of the top five are from Gryffindor"?"

Snape fixed him with a glittering black eye. "Am I the house master for Gryffindor, Davies?" Roger couldn't meet Snape's gaze; he faltered.

"No, sir, I just noticed"...

"The Gryffindor students might be practicing together, I'll grant you that. But after all of the trials are done, you'll all be training together during club meetings. There will no longer be any 'house secrets,' if that's what you're worried about, Davies".

Roger swallowed and nodded, unable to speak. Good, thought Harry. There's something that can shut him up. Maybe there was some way Snape could come to prefects' meetings...

* * * * *

When the Dueling Club met for week five, they had four new members: Fred Weasley, Pansy Parkinson, Evan Davies Lee Jordan. Harry thought that perhaps the Hufflepuffs had given up.

Harry only had to duel three times; it was going to be a short meeting, only thirty-five duels total, to start to screen the new members, followed by another thirty-five the following week. He won all three duels, maintaining his top position. Hermione and Ginny only dueled twice each, also both maintaining their standings.

Harry was glad that he no longer had to see Cho in Dueling Club, but there was still one hurdle to be leapt: they had arranged to go to Hogsmeade with Viktor and Hermione on Saturday, since it was the Hogsmeade weekend closest to Valentine's Day. Harry for once wanted the week to go slowly, so of course, Saturday zoomed at him with the speed of a speeding train.

On Saturday morning, Harry and Hermione got up to run as usual. After showering, dressing and eating breakfast, he went over to the Ravenclaw table to get Cho for their Valentine's date to Hogsmeade. Hopefully the last such date ever. He and Cho met Hermione in the entrance hall.

"You two wait here. I'll go down to the kitchens to see if the elves are ready." He started to move toward the door to the kitchen stairs.

"Harry!" Hermione said. "What are you talking about"?

"The house elves--oh, did I, um, not mention that I invited them to come along? It's their day off, and they've never had one before, and I told them we could show them around Hogsmeade".

Hermione was trying not to grin too broadly. "Do you mean," she said a little too gleefully, "we're going to be showing the elves around Hogsmeade?" Cho was looking rather upset.

"Well, actually, it's seven. Only six others besides Dobby finally asked for clothes. Don't be upset--please"?

But Cho was the one who was upset. "Harry! This is our Valentine's date! And you're--you're bringing house elves?" she sputtered in disbelief.

Hermione did in fact look disappointed about the number of elves, but she began to look merry again once she saw Cho's reaction. This is perfect, thought Harry happily. I didn't even think about how hacked off Cho would be when I invited Dobby and the other elves. Plus, Hermione's thrilled! He felt very fortunate indeed as he went down the stairs to the kitchens; before the door closed behind him he saw Cho glaring at Hermione.

When he returned with the elves, Hermione and Cho seemed to have reached a kind of detente. He took Cho's arm and they followed Hermione and the elves out the door.

While they walked to Hogsmeade, the house elves bounced around Hermione, talking to her about Boxing Day and playing in the snow. They didn't know; none of them had ever played before in their lives. Hermione was appalled.

"Not even when you were very young"?

"No," Quiff told her squeakily. "House elves is working almost immediately, Miss".

"Well," Zenana broke in, "There is mostly eating and sleeping for a week first. Then we learn how to pop! And we are ready to be useful".

"Wow," Hermione breathed, clearly having no previous idea just how much the house elves lived lives of all work and no play.

When they reached Hogsmeade, they met Viktor Krum at Honeydukes. Viktor was less than pleased to see the elves.

"Herm-own-ninny? Vat are these--creatures that are coming vith you"?

"Don't you have house elves in Bulgaria?" Harry asked him.

"Ve haff human servants. Squibs. But ve giff them magical items to help them do their vork. It is better than haffing to live like Muggles"...

Harry saw Hermione bristle. "I lived like a Muggle for eleven years, and my parents are Muggles, I might remind you." The challenge in her voice was unmistakable. Viktor clearly heard it too.

"Herm-own-ninny," he said, placatingly now.

Harry tried not to grin again; this had all the signs of a last date. Cho was upset, Viktor was walking on eggshells with Hermione. It was perfect. Harry's cheeks were starting to hurt with the effort of not smiling constantly like a complete fool.

"They will not be welcome," Sandy said suddenly, under his clothes. Viktor Krum, whipped his head around.

"Vat vas that?" he said, looking about nervously. Harry cursed to himself. Be quiet, Sandy. Stop hissing. He didn't think about her prediction, he just wanted her to be quiet.

After walking through the village, showing the elves all of the points of interest, they went to the Three Broomsticks for lunch. But the moment they entered the pub, the room went silent. It was about two-thirds full with Hogwarts students, otherwise populated by residents of or visitors to Hogsmeade, adult witches and wizards. Harry hadn't heard so much silence and so many eyes on him since his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire.

Finally, the publican, Madam Rosmerta, came out from behind the bar and walked over to them. She glanced over her shoulder at her scandalized patrons.

"I'm afraid we don't serve their kind in here," she told them quietly, almost as though she were embarrassed, but not as though she were interested in having them change her mind. Hermione goggled at her.

"Don't serve their kind?" she said, with that dangerous edge to her voice. Harry glanced around the room; the looks that the other patrons were giving them were less than friendly. Unfortunately, because Harry was looking around the room and Hermione was glaring at Madam Rosmerta, that meant no one was watching the elves.

With a pop! Quiff had appeared at the table of a handful of sixth-and seventh-year Slytherins, sampling some chips and sips of butterbeer without invitation. Zenana had decided to pop! behind the bar and help herself to some butterbeer directly from the tap. Dobby had a feeling that this wasn't quite accepted behavior and was trying to get Bidy and Tiggo to stop swinging on the chandeliers, giggling hysterically while they did so. In the meantime, Blat had decided to amuse some of the bar patrons by putting hover charms on them and their drinks and food, which started to be flung about in a rather messy manner.

Rosmerta was livid. "You see! You see why they can't come in here? Get them out! Now!"

But Hermione was still up for a fight. Harry used a summoning charm to whisk the elves across the room to him while she yelled at Madam Rosmerta, "They've never had a day off before! They don't know! We'll talk to them--they'll behave"--

But it was as though she hadn't said a word. Rosmerta was purple.

"Out! Out!" she screamed at Hermione. Harry swallowed and nodded at her; he was clutching the six newly-freed elves to him, like a bunch of balloons that had threatened to float away. Dobby was hopping nervously nearby. She turned and stomped out the door, Harry following her, but then she turned and thrust her face in the doorway again.

"You have officially lost all of our future business!"

"Good!" responded Madam Rosmerta with a satisfied flip of her head.

But as Harry was preparing to leave, clutching the wayward elves to him, he saw that Cho was looking at him in shock.

"Harry!" she exclaimed. "What about our date? Don't tell me you're leaving with those--those"--

Harry saw his opportunity and took it. "Yes. You can stay if you like. Hermione and the elves and I won't stay where we're not wanted".

Now she started turning as purple as Madam Rosmerta. "If you leave now, Harry, we're through." She didn't speak loudly but loud enough. Everyone in the pub was watching. Harry Potter was being dumped. He wondered if it would be in the Daily Prophet tomorrow.

"Goodbye, Cho".

Viktor was standing with his hand on her shoulder. Harry nodded at him, then turned and left. When the door closed behind him, he turned to Hermione, putting down the elves, a huge grin on his face.

She was in tears. "Can you believe that? The way she treated them? What she said, even before they started--you know?"

"Hermione," he said to her softly, as the elves started playing in the snow again, as though oblivious to what had just happened. "One battle at a time. Viktor stayed inside--with Cho. And she told me we're through." He smiled broadly. "Our plan worked!"

She looked at the closed door of the pub, then started laughing. "And all we had to do was bring some house elves along on a date..." she began, but couldn't go on for her laughter. Harry laughed now too, and they walked back to the castle with the elves, skipping through the snow and playing with them, happier than they remembered being for a long time. She knew that at some point, she would want to redress the way the elves had been treated at the Three Broomsticks, but it wasn't time for that yet. But he knew he wanted to be beside her for that battle too.

He shouted as Quiff popped! into the space right behind him and put a large, wet, cold snowball down the back of his shirt. He ran after him, hysterical, and he and Hermione and the elves played in the snow for the rest of the afternoon.

* * * * *

That evening after dinner, he went to Animagus training as usual. Ginny had already left the Great Hall, so he gave Sa to Hermione to take back upstairs for him. He didn't have very far to go before his training would be complete. Of course then he would have to think of a more permanent solution for Sandy...

McGonagall was very pleased that the pain didn't bother him very much any more. Or maybe it was just that he had become accustomed to it. Maybe if you weren't used to it, something as basic as the feeling of your blood flowing through your veins would be painful, he thought. It was all a matter of getting used to things, like the elves getting used to having days off, and people in the wizarding world getting used to elves in clothes.

He still needed to learn to fly. He hadn't really used his wings yet. But there was still time for that. He went upstairs after training feeling rather pleased with himself, humming the lullaby his mother used to sing in an upbeat, jazzy way. When he entered the common room, Ron and Hermione immediately waved him over to the chairs by the fire. Ginny wasn't there, probably in the Potions dungeon, he thought. With Malfoy.

"What is it, Harry?" Hermione asked anxiously .

"Yeah," Ron chimed in. "What can't you talk to us about right here"?

Harry made a face at them. "What are you on about"?

"The notes," Hermione said, showing him a small piece of parchment which said, "Meet me in the Charms classroom at midnight. Can't discuss it now. Harry." The handwriting and signature looked for all the world like he had written it. Ron had one like it; but it had a couple of variations. It didn't look identical, so it wasn't magically reproduced, like the invitations to the Christmas party. It also looked handwritten by Harry. He looked up at them both after examining the parchments.

"I didn't write these," he said softly.

Hermione and Ron looked at each other and then him. "Then who did?" Ron asked.

It was starting. They were coming after Ron and Hermione directly, now. Harry didn't want to say it, didn't want to alarm them. He sat down, staring at the notes. "That's not the most important thing. We can work that out later. The question is why?" Hermione and Ron sat down in nearby armchairs. "Whoever did it--do they want to get you into the Charms classroom, or do they want to get you out of Gryffindor Tower"?

Ron stared at him, frowning. Hermione also frowned, her eyes moving back and forth; Harry could tell she was thinking furiously.

"The trouble is," Harry went on, "we have no way of knowing. I also have to wonder why the person that sent you the notes thought they could fool you into thinking I'm the one who sent them. I send all my mail by Hedwig".

"It was Hedwig who brought them," Ron told him. "After dinner, when you usually--disappear".

"Oh. Hmmm...Well, if I had wanted you two to meet me, though, I simply would have told you. And why didn't the person who sent them think you'd just ask me what it was all about? Unless"--

"What?" said Hermione.

"Unless they wanted to make it look artless. Wanted you to know it wasn't from me. The question is, what would they expect you to do, knowing that the notes weren't really from me"?

"Stay in the tower?" Ron suggested, grasping at straws.

"Possibly. But I think we have to cover all possibilities. I think you--" he pointed at Ron, "should stay here, keeping an eye on the portrait hole in case someone has gotten a hold of the password and decides to try coming in here. Hermione and I can go early to the Charms classroom and hide under the Invisibility Cloak, wait to see if anyone shows up".

Ron and Hermione looked at each other, nodded. Then Ron looked like he had a thought. "Maybe George could wait with me by the portrait hole"...

Harry looked over at George, sitting with Fred and Lee Jordan and playing Exploding Snap. "I don't know," Harry said. "I don't want to give offense to George, but Ginny did a lot better at the duels than he did." Then he could have bitten his tongue. Ginny had done better than Ron, too.

Ron thought of this. "Did better than me too. But I don't want her involved in this." Then Harry thought of Draco Malfoy, and agreed. But not for the same reason as Ron; he unfortunately had started to think of Ginny as a security risk. If Malfoy managed to get information out of her, even against her will, everything would be compromised. Somehow, he was convinced that Malfoy had sent the notes. And she'd already freely given Malfoy information before they were even a couple; he remembered her spilling the "Viktor Krum Plan" to him in the Potions Dungeon. Ginny should definitely not be involved.

"Well," Harry said. "It's ten-thirty now. Hermione and I should probably be in the classroom by eleven-fifteen to play it safe. We'll need your help getting out the portrait hole, and then you need to bring down some homework, make it look like you're hanging out late to work, so people don't think it's weird that you're down here." Harry stopped; he closed his mouth, looking at the two of them, worried. This was the next step; target his two best friends directly. Lure them out of the tower...or just make them all paranoid and lose sleep while they sat around the common room and the Charms classroom waiting for an attacker who was never going to show. There were just too many possibilities, it was impossible to plan for them all. This is what he had been expecting, for months and months. It had finally happened.

It was a good thing no one knew about him and Hermione. But then, he realized, Malfoy knew about that, too, to a certain extent. Damn! Malfoy knew way too much...

At eleven, Ron opened the portrait hole and went into the corridor. Harry and Hermione climbed out, hiding under the Invisibility Cloak. She was shaking. Ron closed the portrait; he said good luck to the two of them, then said the password again and reentered the common room.

Harry and Hermione walked cautiously to the Charms classroom. Why the Charms classroom? Harry wondered. Could whoever sent the notes know there was some kind of significance that room had for them? He was fairly certain that Malfoy didn't know about those times. It was probably just a coincidence.

When they reached the classroom, the door was standing open, and they walked through the doorway together, huddled closely under the cloak so they would both fit. As they passed through the opening, they heard a crackling noise that sounded to Harry like static electricity, and Harry felt a strange thrumming in his body, as though his veins were now conducting live current, not blood. Static electricity? But that sort of thing was impossible here, wasn't it? he thought. Standing near Flitwick's desk, he turned to Hermione under the cloak.

"Did you feel that?" he asked softly. She nodded, her lips pressed closed. She looked confused. "What do you think"--

"We can't afford to talk," she reminded him quietly. "It will have to wait".

They went to the far wall and sat in the corner, under the window, so they had a good view of the door. The minutes passed with agonizing slowness, and the longer Harry sat with her under the cloak, the more aware he became of her pressed up against his, her arm brushing his...They hadn't been this close for this long since Christmas break. He put his arm around her shoulder and she pillowed her head on his chest. They had to be very, very quiet...

But then he made the mistake of looking down at her and finding her looking up at him; he had to protect her, he had to. Voldemort and the Death Eaters would never touch her, not if he had anything to say about it. He continued to look down at her, traced her jaw with his finger, and was both surprised and not surprised when she pulled his face down to hers, opening her mouth under his.

Yes, thought Harry. This is how it's supposed to be. He wrapped both arms around her, holding her tightly enough to make her part of him, feeling her arms snaking around him, her body's warmth against his. But they would have to stop for a minute, he thought. Before they couldn't control the noises emanating from deep in their throats, animal noises that had nothing to do with human speech or thought. They needed to stop before they wanted to do more, here in the worst place to do anything, with the possible exception of the Great Hall, with the entire school looking on...

He broke the kiss reluctantly, feeling her lips traveling along his jaw and up to his ear, then down his neck and along his collarbone as she pulled his robes aside. He shuddered; he would lose control in a second, if she kept that up. He still felt the strange thrumming throughout his body, as though he were leaning on Aunt Petunia's washing machine on Privet Drive. It didn't make sense, and it wasn't a response to what she was doing...He kissed her forehead, and with a greater show of self-control than he felt he really had, gently pulled her head onto his chest again, putting his finger over his lips and then showing her his watch. In ten minutes it would be midnight .

She sighed, sounding sad. He stroked her hair, having to be content with that, and they continued to wait. Five more minutes passed, and they heard footsteps in the corridor outside the classroom. The footsteps came closer and closer. Yes, thought Harry; it was definitely someone who was coming to the Charms classroom. But who?

When she passed through the doorway, Harry heard the same crackling he'd heard when he and Hermione had entered. What was that? he wanted to know. She whirled around, staring at the doorway, perplexed. Then she turned to look into the classroom again. She pulled out her wand and lit it, holding it up to see around the room.

"Harry? Are you here?" she said nervously .

It was Cho. Was that why she'd been talking to Lucius Malfoy at that Quidditch match? Did he have her under the Imperius Curse, told her to come after Ron and Hermione? But wait; he realized that she had said his name. She was looking for him, not Ron or Hermione. Perhaps someone had sent her a note from him also. Perhaps she too was being targeted. Malfoy! Why would he target her? He knew that Harry and Hermione were just trying to fix her up with Viktor Krum.

Harry looked at Hermione under the cloak. She raised her eyebrows and shrugged; she had no idea what to do any more than he did. If Harry emerged from under the cloak, it would be very difficult to avoid Cho seeing Hermione. Perhaps they should wait and see whether the person who sent the notes showed up, find out who it was, and if he tried to hurt Cho, then Harry could come out of hiding...

Cho pulled herself up onto Flitwick's desk, sighing, swinging her legs. Harry waited, his heart in his throat, wishing he had simply said thanks but no thanks when she'd asked him out in Diagon Alley in August. He should never have involved her. He remembered seeing her at the Quidditch match in his third year when he'd first really noticed her, noticed how pretty she was, and he was almost tempted to let her get the Snitch first, as a gesture of goodwill... Almost, but not quite. Oliver Wood would have killed him.

They all waited, Cho thinking she was alone, not knowing any better. Harry wanted very much to kiss Hermione again, to say this was not a good time would be a colossal understatement. The minutes crawled by. Harry checked his watch; it was twelve-twenty-five. Cho looked pretty grumpy by now. She jumped down from the desk and walked back to the door, maybe someone was just trying to get his girlfriend and best friends hacked off at him by making appointments that weren't going to be kept ?

She turned and looked at the room again, giving Harry the eerie feeling that she could see him. "Well," she said, "if he's trying to make up with me, he's doing a lousy job." She turned back to the doorway and walked through.

But as Cho was going through the doorway, she froze; the static sound was back. She seemed to be receiving some kind of shock throughout her body, as though she had tried to walk through an electric fence. Harry's heart was in his throat as he stood, making Hermione stand with him. He looked at her face; she wasn't exactly Cho's biggest fan, but now she looked concerned. He mouthed at her, What should we do?

She shook her head; she had no idea. Finally, Cho collapsed onto the floor in the corridor right outside the doorway. They walked toward the door, careful not to put any part of their bodies in the space between the jambs. There was some kind of field there that had been generated, a field that could be walked through safely when entering the room, but upon leaving...

They looked at Cho, lying motionless on the floor a few feet away. Harry stared at her back for a what seemed a long time, finally seeing some very slight movement. She was still alive; she was still breathing. However, he felt quite sure if he and Hermione tried to go through the doorway, they would be in the same condition as Cho. They were trapped.

Who had done this? Harry wondered. He was sure it was some kind of Dark Magic. Another question was, how were they going to get out? They absolutely had to get out. All they need was for Mad-Eye Moody to investigate; he would spot them right away, with his magical eye. It would look very incriminating for him and Hermione to be sitting, lurking in the room

where Cho had been right before she was--what? Zapped? Electrocuted? What had happened to her, precisely? Harry only knew he didn't want it happening to him. It was a clever trap; didn't require the person who had sent the notes to be present in order to ambush them. Walk in, walk out, put yourself into a coma. Very neat. Very evil.

Trapped, Harry thought again. He went over to the window, Hermione following him. He looked out; they were at least forty feet from the ground. No possibility of just hopping out the window. Maybe he could open one of the windows and summon his Firebolt...They could fly down. But it might attract some attention for his broom to come hurtling out of his dorm...

And then he realized that he didn't need his broom. He was nervous about it, but this was an emergency, and they had no other choice. He turned to face Hermione. "I know how to get us out of here," he said.

She looked at him expectantly. "Well?" she said after a long silence.

He removed the cloak from the two of them, folding it up and handing it to her. She frowned, putting it in her pocket, looking over her shoulder at the doorway; no one had come. He went to the windows; the first one he tried was stuck. So was the second. Then he realized that this was stupid, and pulled out his wand, saying, "Alohomora!" making the windows fly open suddenly, banging into the stone frame of the one next to it.

"Harry!" said Hermione. "We're a bit high up to be going out the window, don't you think"?

He smiled at her. "Not if you can fly".

She made a face at him; he could tell she was wondering what he was on about. But suddenly he was changing, and in a blink, she saw before her not Harry Potter, dark-haired Harry with his familiar green eyes, his much-mended glasses and his scar, but a beautiful tawny lion, its golden mane looking soft and wild, its tail swishing like a rope that was alive. Hermione gasped.

Then he spread his wings.

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Three: Flight

Harry looked up at Hermione. She was so pale in the moonlight, he thought she might faint. He changed back to his human form and caught her just before she fell into a student desk, pulled out a chair and sat her in it. Her mouth was working soundlessly, and she stared at him with her brown eyes wide and unbelieving. He started to wonder whether he had to slap her or something to bring her back to her senses.

Finally, she regained the power of speech. "Harry! When--how--when"--

"Take a breath, Hermione," he told her, trying to be calm enough for both of them, which was a good trick when his head was racing and all he could think was that any minute someone would come along and find Cho, and then they would see him and Hermione in the Charms classroom...

"We need to get onto the ledge and close the window behind us, Hermione. I've looked; it's a really wide ledge, practically a balcony. Then I'll change again and you can ride on my back. I'm going to see if I can get up to the Astronomy tower. We can get back into the castle from there".

"You're going to see if you can get up to the Astronomy tower? Harry, have you ever actually done this before?" He smiled; Hermione was back.

"Changing into a golden griffin, yes; flying, no".

She swallowed. "You've never flown before".

"Not without a broom. Or on a winged animal, like the golden griffin Hagrid had us studying. And there was the time we did hippogriffs".

Hermione hit her head with her hand. "Oh! That ride on Buckbeak..." Harry remembered how she'd hated that.

"You can hold onto my mane with your hands. You won't fall if you do that and put your legs around me very tightly," he said, then suddenly felt himself flush, thinking of her doing what he was talking about. Hermione didn't seem to notice; she looked at the open window as though it was the last place she wanted to go. She looked back toward the door to the room, as though she envied Cho.

But Harry had climbed up on the window sill and put out his hand to her. "We should go before someone comes." Hermione nodded and stood shakily, walking toward the window. She put her foot up on the sill and took his hand, swinging up in a single fluid motion. They closed the window behind them, shivering on the snowy ledge. He could see that she was trying not to look down. He could not resist looking down, however. Then, to get his bearings, he looked up instead; directly over the windows to the Charms classroom was a series of lion gargoyles, looking very similar to the bookends he'd given her for Christmas. He pointed them out to her.

"A good omen, do you think?"

She looked thoughtful, then turned to him, frowning. "I dropped Divination, remember?" But then she had to smile, and returned it.

"Ready?"

She looked apprehensive again, but nodded. He changed once more, then spread his wings; she swung her leg over his back, sitting behind the strong gossamer appendages. He felt her warm weight on his back, then her thighs and knees clamping hard on his flanks, her fingers sinking into his mane. Good, he thought. Hopefully she'll be safe.

Harry felt the purring motor within his body, felt the animal instinct emanating from his hide, his tail, his paws on the cold stone. He remembered the golden griffin from class, and thought about how it had taken flight. Finally, he decided that at the very least, with the wings, they could glide safely to the ground, even if he couldn't get more height than they had now. He looked up toward the Astronomy Tower; several stories up and at the far end of the castle from where they were it might as well have been miles away. He took a deep breath and leapt off the ledge.

They plummeted.

Hermione screamed; Harry couldn't seem to do anything with his wings. Finally, after what seemed a very long time but was probably only a second, he managed to locate the muscles to move his wings and to control their angle, so he could get lift, so he could get that differential in the air pressure above and below the wings. He was back at the same level as the Charms classroom, now a story above that, then a story higher. He was moving forward at the same time, soaring over the grounds. He heard Hermione gasp above him, leaning forward, molding her body to his and lacing her fingers more firmly into his mane, her knees starting to hurt him from digging into his shoulders.

Now he was really flying, banking over the lake, heading back to the castle, the Astronomy Tower below them. Harry wanted to go on flying; he'd never felt so free! It wasn't like using a broomstick at all. But that would have to be for another time. He'd gotten enough height, that was the important thing. He descended in tight, spiraling circles, coming closer and closer to the observation deck, until finally all four paws struck the flat surface which had been swept clear of snow for the third-year Hufflepuff and Slytherin class earlier that evening.

Once he had landed, Harry changed again immediately; he was almost as exhausted as when he had been blocking the Hara Kiri curse. Immediately, his back protested against having Hermione sitting on his spine, her legs clamped tightly around his ribcage. Her hands were in his hair; she removed them hastily, then climbed off him, kneeling by his side. Harry was still trying to get his breath.

He rolled over onto his back, smiling up at her. "We did it," he said weakly.

She was frowning at him, though. Her expression reminded him of when his mum had slapped Snape in the Potions Dungeon. "Tell me why I shouldn't hex you and put boils all over your face right now, Harry Potter? When were you planning to tell me about this?"

He swallowed. "Hermione, I wasn't supposed to tell anyone. You didn't tell anyone about your Time Turner, remember? I'm almost finished my training, except for learning flying--and I guess I just got a crash course in that. Without the crashing, fortunately".

She started to smile a little. "Fortunately," she agreed.

He pushed himself up into a sitting position; the pain of the transfiguration was hitting him now, and he wished he could just sink into a hot bath with some of Madam Pomfrey's fig-leaf pain reliever...

But they couldn't afford to think just of themselves right now. Cho was on the floor of the Charms corridor and they had to get help. "Hermione," he said, "we have to go back to Gryffindor Tower. We should get the map so we can see if anyone's moving around the castle before we try to go get help. Come on." He tried to stand then, and fell back to the ground. Hermione stifled a laugh.

"And you're telling me to come on? Here--" and she put out her hand. He didn't take it; instead he grasped her forearm and she grasped his, like acrobats in the circus, and she hauled him to his feet. He put his arm across her shoulders, leaning on her heavily.

"It's a good thing you're vertically challenged; just the right height to be a good crutch for me"...

"Hey!" she objected to the reference to her height.

"I said it was a good thing, didn't I?" She grimaced, helping him down the stairs. "And anyway," he went on, "you're not that much shorter than me. I'm only five-foot nine".

She didn't comment. When they reached the bottom, they put on the Invisibility Cloak again and proceeded to Gryffindor Tower. While they were still under the cloak, he pulled her to him and kissed her gently. She didn't let him go afterward but clutched at him, her head on his chest. He kissed the top of her head, leaned his cheek on her hair.

"What's going to happen?" she whispered.

"I don't know," he said quietly. She lifted up the edge of the cloak and said, "Demiguise!" to the fat lady, who yawned sleepily, and, eyes still shut, opened the portrait hole. Harry saw Ron leap toward the entrance, then relax when he saw it was her.

"Where's Harry?" he wanted to know.

"Here," he said, taking off the cloak. They both climbed in, closing the portrait. Ron looked at them expectantly.

"Well?" he said finally, looking like he was going to jump out of his skin. Harry and Hermione looked at each other, frowning.

"You and Hermione weren't the only ones to get notes," Harry said. "Cho got one too, and thought I was trying to make a date with her. She waited a while, and then when she decided to go, she--I'm not sure what happened. She sort of looked shocked. Then she collapsed on the corridor floor outside the classroom. She was breathing, but unconscious. When Hermione and I went into the room, it felt like we passed through something, some kind of field in the doorway, and we couldn't tell that Cho felt it too, when she entered. But it didn't have a bad effect on her until she went through it again... That's the only thing I ever encountered that was like it was when I was in the maze during the third task. There was this thing I passed through, and it was like having the Inverso charm put on me. That was why I knew it would be a good one for dueling; I remembered the feeling of hanging upside-down in the air in the maze. I probably wasn't, I was probably on the ground the whole time, but it sure felt"--

"Harry," Hermione interrupted him. "We need to get help for Cho".

"Right," Harry agreed.

"Wait!" Ron stopped him. "If Cho could enter safely, like you, but not leave safely--how did you two get out? Why didn't it affect you"?

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, Harry looking guilty.

"Tell him, Harry. Or show him".

Harry nodded. "Ron, I've been getting some--private tutoring from McGonagall. After dinner every night".

Ron made a face. "What's that go to do with--" he started to say, but suddenly, he wasn't speaking to Harry; he saw before him a lion, a real lion, fur and claw and tooth and mane and bright green eyes and wings...

And wings?

"H-Harry!" he stuttered, not even sure whether he should be calling this creature by Harry's name. Harry reappeared abruptly, and Ron wasn't sure whether he'd been awake too long and had hallucinated. He turned uncertainly to Hermione.

"Did--did you just see that too? Am I crazy"?

"No, Ron," she said, her face serious. "Harry is an Animagus".

"An Animagus"!

"A golden griffin Animagus, to be precise," Harry said now. "A good thing, too. Originally, I was just going to be a lion. But we never could have gotten out of the Charms classroom if I'd done that".

Ron was just staring at him, openmouthed. "Then--then how"--

"Flew," Hermione said simply. "We landed on the observation deck of the Astronomy tower, then came back down here".

"Can--can I see it again"?

Harry put his right hand behind his neck and rubbed it. "Could I not? I'm pretty achy. I'd never flown before"...

"You never flew before?" Ron yelled now. Harry and Hermione hushed him.

"Yes!" Harry yelled in a whisper. "I'd never flown before, and Hermione was riding on my back"...

Ron looked miffed now, perhaps thinking, as Harry had, about her legs wrapped around him...

"Well," he said, looking at her levelly. "I've picked her up. She's like a feather." Hermione coloured, looked away. Harry frowned.

"She wasn't on your back".

Ron couldn't argue with this, and clearly didn't want to think about Hermione being on Harry's back, so he shut up. Harry went to the stairs leading to their dorm; before he went up, he saw that Ron and Hermione were standing awkwardly near the portrait hole; Hermione was gazing at the fire, while Ron was gazing at her.

Harry shook himself. Focus, he thought. He retrieved the map from his trunk and hurried back downstairs, laying the parchment on a table and waving his wand over it while Ron and Hermione came over to watch.

"I solemnly swear that I am up to no good".

When the map appeared, they easily found the Charms classroom with the tiny dot right outside the doorway labeled "Chang." Then they saw three minuscule dots moving down the Charms corridor. Two were labeled, "Roger Davis" and "Niamh Quirke" and the third one was Professor Flitwick.

Harry heaved a sigh of relief. "Look, they've come looking for her. That makes sense. Niamh and Roger are the seventh year Ravenclaw prefects. He's Head Boy, sure, but he's still a prefect too. And they brought Flitwick, since he's their head-of-house".

They nodded. Hermione got a sudden revelatory look on her face. "Oh, Harry! What if the thing in the doorway isn't Da Magic? What if it's just some kind of-- security spell that Flitwick puts on his classroom"?

"I've been in there before at odd hours," Harry said, not mentioning that it was to snog with her. "It's never been there before".

"Maybe he just recently started doing it".

"I hope so, because that would mean he knows what happened to Cho, and should be able to reverse it. But even if Flitwick is the one who charmed the doorway, someone tried to lure you two and Cho there, probably knowing what would happen to anyone who entered the room, then tried to leave it. The source of the field may possibly be Flitwick, but I doubt that he sent the notes".

Then they noticed that the small Flitwick dot was moving into the classroom. "Maybe he's disabling the field," Hermione speculated, hoping. The Flitwick dot emerged from the classroom again, then all four dots moved through the corridors up and down staircases. They watched, fascinated.

"Do you suppose they revived her? You think she's all right?" said Ron.

Harry shrugged. Hermione frowned. "No," she said. "They're taking her to the hospital wing".

They watched the four dots enter the hospital wing after traveling together for a few minutes. They saw the Madam Pomfrey dot flitting back and forth, tending to Cho, whose dot moved to the vicinity of the beds. Madam Pomfrey moved back and forth between Flitwick and Cho, and then Flitwick also moved to the bed area. Harry assumed he was checking on Cho before leaving. But his dot stayed there; only Roger's and Niamh's dots left the hospital wing.

"What's going on?" Harry asked no one in particular. "Flitwick is still there"!

Hermione bit her lip. "Maybe he didn't put that field in the doorway to his classroom. Maybe it got him too"...

All three of them looked at each other in alarm. A teacher was hurt now. Funny little Professor Flitwick, young Will's great uncle. Flitwick who didn't even scold Neville for repeatedly flying him across the classroom...Probably the nicest professor they had. Sprout was nice too, of course, and Hagrid was their friend. But Flitwick didn't make them mess around with bubotubers or Blast-Ended Skrewts. He'd positively gushed about Harry's summoning charm during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. He'd also congratulated Harry on being captain of the Dueling Club, and he'd been a champion dueler in his youth. Harry didn't think it was possible to feel worse than when he had first heard from Sirius about how bad the tube station explosion had been, but now he found that he was wrong. This was different; he knew Professor Flitwick.

Had Voldemort expected Harry to somehow find him and throw himself on his mercy after the Underground blew up? Is that why he was coming after his friends now? But he doubted that Voldemort himself had entered Hogwarts. Someone here was doing his bidding. Perhaps someone who had recently received the Dark Mark...

"There's nothing we can do right now," he said firmly. "Cho and Flitwick are with Madam Pomfrey. She'll take care of them. We'll talk to Dumbledore tomorrow, tell him what we saw in the Charms classroom. I doubt anyone else will be going in there tonight. In the morning, we can stop by before going running and close and lock the door, put a sign on it about Professor Flitwick being sick, so no one will try to go in. We're probably the first ones up everyday, except for the house elves, so that should do the trick." He looked at Ron and Hermione now, at how tired they were, how scared. "We should all get some rest. This whole thing came as a surprise. We tried to deal with it--but obviously we didn't know what we were up against." He didn't say it aloud, but he wished he had gone to Snape when Ron and Hermione had told him about the notes. He would have known the right thing to do, Harry felt sure. Or what not to do, at any rate. Surely they hadn't.

He waved his wand over the map, saying dispiritedly, "Mischief managed." Someone had managed some mischief, thought Harry. And he felt sure that more was coming.

* * * * *

Professor McGonagall was waiting for him in the hall outside the common room when he and Hermione came down to the next morning.

"Potter!" she said simply, looking very stern. "Come with me." He looked over his shoulder at Hermione, who was frowning. She went down the staircase they usually took to get to the Great Hall; he followed McGonagall to her office, stiff, straight shoulders looking uncompromising and forbidding.

When he was sitting before her desk, she fixed him with a cold eye, and he shivered. "Harry," she said, using his first name for the first time in a very long time (he could probably count the times on one hand), "I'm very disappointed in you. You're a prefect, you're doing so well in the Dueling Club and in your Animagus Training. Then your girlfriend breaks up with you, and you do something like this"...

Harry frowned. "What? Something like what? What are you talking about?" Had Cho Chang died? Had Flitwick? No, he decided; she wouldn't be sitting in her office with him, calling him Harry if she were accusing him of murder. But she was certainly accusing him of something.

"How did you know about her breaking up with me?" he asked quietly. She gave him that look Sirius had given him when he tried to make him think he and Hermione had been sleeping in separate beds.

"Practically everyone in the school who was in Hogsmeade yesterday knows about it, and the rest know about it from those who were there. Word travels fast around here".

Especially word about Harry Potter, he thought bitterly. Some people probably couldn't wait to gloat about him being dumped, not having any idea he'd been trying to get dumped for months. "I still don't understand"--

"Cho Chang was found last night in the corridor outside the Charms classroom. Her roommates told Davies that she'd received a note from you, asking her to meet you in the Charms classroom at midnight. They saw your snowy owl deliver it. When she hadn't returned and it was after one in the morning, Niamh Quirke convinced Davies and Professor Flitwick that they should go looking for her. They found her unconscious; no rejuvenation spell they tried worked at reviving her. Professor Flitwick went into the classroom to see whether anyone was there, then left the room, and when he passed through the door again, he was stricken in the same way as Chang, and has also been unconscious ever since. Davies and Quirke took them to the infirmary, and it is my understanding that Madam Pomfrey has still been unable to reverse the effect of--of whatever it was you did to them".

"Whatever I did?" Harry tried not to yell, but it was difficult in the face of such an accusation.

"Davies and Quirke determined that whatever happened to them, it had something to do with passing into the classroom and then out of it again. They closed and sealed the door, to protect others. Charms classes are of course canceled until further notice. What do you have to say for yourself, Potter"?

He was back to being Potter. He didn't know whether that was good or bad. "Can I ask you something, Professor McGonagall"?

"What"?

"Have I ever before made you think I would do such a thing"?

Her face softened toward him momentarily. "No," she had to admit.

"Well, I didn't do this. Can we--can we meet with Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape? Then I can explain everything to you".

"Why Professor Snape"?

"Well--we're getting along better these days. Sort of. I just think it would be a good idea".

She lit the fire in the grate and threw in some powder from a bowl on the mantel, saying, "Severus Snape." It took about a minute before Snape's face finally appeared in the fire, his eyes not quite opened, squinting up at McGonagall.

"What? Why are you pestering me at this hour on a Sunday?" he said testily.

She ignored his tone. "Severus, please come to the headmaster's office immediately. I am bringing Harry Potter".

Snape's eyes were open wider now; he noticed Harry sitting in the chair before her desk. "Potter? What's he done now

"You will find out," was all she would tell him. The call was abruptly terminated. Snape's face disappeared. She extinguished the fire and marched Harry into the corridor. As they walked to Dumbledore's office, Harry decided to casually strike up conversation.

"How's Rita? I guess it's a good thing Dumbledore asked her to work for him, since she was able to get the samples from the Krums"...

"Yes, it was. She's actually more useful than I would have--" Then she stopped and stared at him. "How did you know?"

"You can trust me, Professor McGonagall. Really. And you know about--my godfather, don't you?" She looked back at him appraisingly, nodding. "And you know who really betrayed my parents?" She nodded again. He breathed a sigh of relief. They resumed walking. He could feel her eyes on him as they approached the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore's office.

"Chocolate-coated pumpkin pasty," she said to the gargoyle. The wall opened and they went up the moving spiral stairs to Dumbledore's office. He was waiting for them; a few minutes after they had entered, Snape arrived.

"Well," Dumbledore began cheerfully. "I don't think we've all been in the same room at the same time this year except the breakfast meals! And yet--we probably should have had a meeting before this. Pity it has to be now. Harry? Can you tell us anything about last night?"

Harry swallowed. Dumbledore didn't think he had anything to do with what happened to Cho and Flitwick, did he? "After my--my training, I"--

"Training?" Snape spat. "What training?"

Dumbledore looked at McGonagall. "He's almost done, isn't he Minerva? Surely another teacher can know now, particularly Severus".

She nodded, then turned to Snape. "Harry has been receiving Animagus training from me. It's been--what, Harry? About five months?--and he's almost done. Albus and I have talked to the Ministry of Magic about delaying his registration until he graduates, for his own safety. You understand why we didn't mention this before?"

Snape nodded reluctantly, looking at Harry. "I'm sorry I'm interrupted. Go on," he said to Harry grumpily; he looked even more upset than Hermione that he hadn't known. So much for building trust, Harry thought.

"Well, when I got back upstairs, I found out that someone had used Hedwig to deliver notes to Ron and Hermione asking them to meet me in the Charms classroom at midnight." He described to them the different theories they came up with, and the plan for Ron to guard the portrait hole while he and Hermione waited in the classroom in the Invisibility Cloak.

"Harry," said Dumbledore gently. "You could have come to me or Professor McGonagall or Professor Snape for help. You didn't have to do this yourself".

Harry grimaced. "I thought of that later. I'm sorry. I need to remember to--to rely on others more." Most headmasters, he thought, would have told him that he should have come to them, not he could have. He felt worse than ever.

He described how surprised they were when Cho showed up, that he hadn't known she'd received a note, the way she passed out through the doorway again and then fallen over, unconscious.

"How did you get out of the room, then?" Snape genuinely sounded like he wanted to know, through his surliness. He hemmed and hawed, then gave in.

"Don't be mad, Professor McGonagall, Professor Dumbledore. I didn't want whatever happened to Cho to happen to me or Hermione. I--I had to show her my--my Animagus form. So we could use the window to get out." He looked at Professor McGonagall with a smile now. "I flew us out of there and up to the Astronomy Tower. It was--amazing to fly like that"...

McGonagall was actually smiling now. "You did it? You flew? On the first try"?

"Well--" Harry said reluctantly. "Actually, I fell, at first. But I recovered in time".

"Flew?" Snape spat. "And you were able to carry a fifteen-year-old girl? What are you, a sea eagle"?

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled at Harry. "Show him, Harry".

Well, it was an order from the headmaster. So Harry stood and pushed his chair out of the way. He was getting very far at the change. In a matter of seconds, he felt his paws land on the floor, felt his tail swishing, the mane around his face, the motor inside him pulsing insistently, a dull ache through all his bones .

"A lion?" Snape said, confused. "But you said you flew"...

So Harry spread his wings, turning his head to see them; the early morning light coming in Dumbledore's windows made iridescent colors appear in the window-pane-like segments. He looked up at Snape, satisfied to see him speechless.

He changed back into his human form, looking at them all. He sat in his chair again, stiffly, his joints aching. He didn't go on; he didn't feel like revealing the existence of the map to Professor McGonagall. Snape knew about the map already, but he wasn't sure about Dumbledore. He didn't want to risk losing his map. He was lucky he'd gotten it back from Lupin in third year, and from Crouch, when he was masquerading as Moody. It was too useful to lose. These were allies, but still--

"So, you returned to Gryffindor Tower and went to bed, leaving that poor girl in the corridor?" McGonagall said accusingly.

"No; I took Hermione back and went to the Charms corridor in the cloak," he lied. "I saw Roger and Niamh and Flitwick were coming, so I left; I figured they would take her to the hospital wing. I had no idea Professor Flitwick would wind up in the infirmary too...I'm sorry I had to show someone that I'm an Animagus".

McGonagall looked at him shrewdly. "You didn't show anyone else, did you"?

"No," he lied, thinking of Ron and Neville. Neville was accidental, but Ron wasn't. He was just tired of having secrets from them, and Hermione knew now. It was getting too tiring keeping track of who knew what.

"Well," she said, as though relieved. "I'm glad you did that instead of something stupid like trying to levitate yourselves down. You probably would have wound up a mile over the castle"...

"I know it's hard to control that spell. It's not exactly my favorite. Although, it is one of Hermione's. I'm surprised she didn't suggest it".

"Hmmp! Miss Granger knows as well as you do that it is unpredictable when applied to humans. The usual result is the person shooting straight up into the air with no control whatsoever"...

"Now, now, Minerva," Dumbledore broke in. "We've established that Harry did the right thing. The questions we are faced with now are, who cursed the doorway of the Charms classroom? Who used Harry's owl to send his friends notes that seemed to be from him? And why"?

They all looked around at each other, at a loss. Harry was about to say something, only about twenty times, but lost his nerve each time. The silence stretched, until finally, Dumbledore said, "Well. We'll all think about that. I won't assume a student yet that anyone has managed to get into the castle from the outside. Of course, that would mean a student or teacher had done this. Also not a pleasant thought".

McGonagall nodded, as did Snape. Harry grimaced. Dumbledore stood. "Sorry to cut short your morning run, Harry. Go down now, while you still have a little time before breakfast. I have something else to discuss with Professors Snape and McGonagall." Harry nodded and left, wondering what that could be about. Maybe it was just school business.

He went down to the Great Hall and found Hermione sitting at the Gryffindor table, looking down at her hands. He sat next to her, put his hand on her shoulder. She didn't look at him .

"Hermione? Have you done any running yet?"

She shook her head, still not looking at him. Finally, she spoke. "It's all my fault. Cho. I should have nixed the whole idea from the start. We never should have involved her. I'm not--not especially fond of her, but she doesn't deserve this..." She swallowed; he could see how eaten up she was. Hermione was too principled not to feel responsible about something like this.

"No," he said. "It was my stupid idea. Don't blame yourself. I'm--I'm not feeling particularly like running today. What I want to do is"--

"What"?

He drew his lips into a line. "Find Draco Malfoy and bash in his skull. No magic involved. Just lots of hitting and blood and real pain. No illusions." His voice was hard; she looked at him, her eyes a little scared. He knew he didn't usually talk like this; he felt changed somehow, after the last several weeks, after the Westminster tube station and now the trap in the Charms classroom. He didn't feel like the same person anymore.

They sat in silence, staring in opposite directions, not touching. After they'd been sitting like that for a very long time, Harry heard a step near the entrance to the hall. He turned his head quickly; the thin, pale figure stood in the doorway, elegant black school robes with a silver prefect badge over a crisp white shirt and black trousers, as though he were ready for inspection, his fine pale hair still slightly damp from being washed, his eyes empty and scared. Scared? Harry thought. He'd better be scared. Of me.

Draco Malfoy strode over to them, starting to speak when he was about ten feet away. "Potter. We have to talk".

Hermione looked like she felt at a disadvantage, wearing her running clothes, even though at this time of year it wasn't revealing; she had a sweatshirt and sweatpants on with a terry cloth sweatband holding her hair off her face. Harry somehow felt it was to his advantage that he was wearing his sweats and a sleeveless T-shirt; Malfoy looked at his bare arms as if wondering what Harry could do if he were hacked off enough, perhaps remembering the incident on the train.

"So. Talk." Harry was terse, cold.

"Not here"...

"All right," Harry said, standing. He walked over to the anteroom where he had Animagus training, Hermione and Malfoy following. When they reached the door, Harry opened it and waved the other two through. Malfoy made a face at Hermione.

"Get out, Granger. This is between me and Potter".

"Hermione knows everything, Malfoy. She stays. Ron knows too, by the way".

Malfoy did the impossible and turned even paler than usual. "Everything"?

"Well--not everything. He knows about Christmas night." They were all in the room now, and Harry closed the door.

Malfoy gave a sigh of relief, but still eyed Hermione suspiciously. "Why'd you tell them"?

"I'm the one asking the questions this time, Malfoy. Why did you use my owl to send those notes to Ron and Hermione and Cho? What did you do to the doorway of the Charms classroom"?

Malfoy swallowed. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I don't know".

"What don't you know"?

"I didn't know about any bloody notes, but I know now that something was done to the Charms classroom doorway and I don't bloody know who did that either!" he shouted at Harry, sounding very frightened. Not knowing suddenly seemed much more frightening to Malfoy than any physical pain his father might be able to inflict upon him.

He went on. "Snape called all of the Slytherins into our common room a few minutes ago. He said all of the heads-of-house were doing the same thing--except for Flitwick. Dumbledore was handling Ravenclaw. Snape said that Cho Chang and Professor Flitwick were in the hospital wing, unconscious, because someone had put a curse on the doorway to the Charms classroom. He said that whoever did it would most likely be expelled; it had all the appearances of Dark Magic".

He paused, having been speaking very fast, very nervously. He looked at Harry now. "You said something about notes and Snape didn't mention anything about notes".

"Last night, someone went up to the Owlery and used Hedwig to send notes to Cho, Ron and Hermione asking them to come to the Charms classroom at midnight to talk to me. The notes looked completely genuine, as though I'd written them myself. Ron and Hermione asked me why the Charms classroom, why midnight, and I told them I hadn't sent the notes. We didn't realize Cho had received one. Evidently, there is some kind of field that someone has put on the doorway of the classroom so that you can pass into the room, but when you leave, it knocks you out. At least, I think it just knocks you out. Cho and Flitwick are in comas, and Pomfrey hasn't been able to bring them around. They're still alive, but no one can wake them up".

Malfoy paced, running his hand through his hair. "I cannot believe this"...

"What can't you believe"?

He looked at Harry and Hermione as though deciding how much to tell them. "I wrote to my dad, told him about Moody seeing the Mark. I did something stupid; I asked him how he could let me get the Mark when that ex-Auror with that dark eye is working here."

Harry remembered when he'd been out in the middle of the night the year before, taking his Triwizard clue, the large golden egg, to the prefects' bathroom. He'd wound up with his leg stuck in a trick step, under his Invisibility Cloak, while Filch and Snape and Crouch (looking like Moody) stood around arguing about the egg he'd dropped. Crouch had looked at Snape's left forearm, covered by his nightshirt, and said, "There are some spots that don't come off." At the time, Snape had looked afraid of someone he thought was an ex-Auror who seemed to doubt whether he had really changed sides. After Snape and Filch had gone, and Crouch had helped Harry remove his leg from the step, he had said, "If there's one thing I hate, it's a Death Eater who walked free." Harry later realized that he'd meant a Death Eater who didn't go to jail as he had, showing complete loyalty to Voldemort, but who had turned around and given evidence against other Death Eaters. People like Snape and Karkaroff, who had made deals. Perhaps especially Snape, the one who had recruited Crouch when he was still in school...

Harry looked at Malfoy. "What did he say"?

"He said that if I was too incompetent to keep Moody from seeing my Mark, he would find someone else to do the work I had expected me to do, and that the Dark Lord would be very disappointed in me. Then I started getting these owls from someone here at Hogwarts; they were school owls, different one each time. The notes that were sent asked me to get some samples of your writing. So I did; I took some old homework out of your bag when you weren't paying attention in Hagrid's class. Potions requires too much vigilance to avoid the cauldron going wrong. You really ought to watch your stuff more carefully, Potter".

"Obviously".

Hermione spoke for the first time. "Who sent you the owls?" she wanted to know, sounding impatient.

"How the hell should I know?" he shouted at her, still pacing. Harry felt like knocking him down and kneeling on his stomach, starting to rain down blows upon him...

"Whoever it is, I don't think they're in Slytherin. The other Slytherins were looking pretty surprised when I got mail from school owl at breakfast, every time it happened. None of them are smart enough or good enough at acting to pull that off convincingly. Hufflepuffs are unlikely, I suppose, but I wonder sometimes whether that's a red herring--haven't any Dark Wizards ever come from Hufflepuff? There has to be someone; even Ravenclaw and Gryffindor have produced them".

"Not as many as Slytherin house," Harry said tensely, still restraining himself.

"Yeah, yeah. House fight for some other time, Potter. This is important. I'm in as much danger as you now, you know".

"My heart bleeds. I'm still not convinced that you're not making all of this up. Maybe if you could give me some idea of who it might be"...

"The only lead I have is--I think it's a prefect".

Hermione looked very alert now. "Why"?

Malfoy drew his lips into a line. "I always sit in the same place for the prefects' meetings. Last time, a piece of parchment belonging to you that I had sent back with one of the school owls was on my desk after the meeting. I didn't even see how it got there. Someone at the meeting managed to do it. In a bit of space where there wasn't already writing, they'd written 'THANKS'".

"What did the handwriting look like?" Hermione wanted to know. Malfoy reached into the pocket of his robes.

"Take a look".

Harry and Hermione examined it; it wasn't very helpful. Just large block letters. Not really handwriting at all. Harry recognized a corner of his Hamlet essay.

"It's possible that whichever prefect it was did it because someone else asked them to. It doesn't mean our other junior Death Eater is a prefect," Hermione pointed out. Harry was a little annoyed with her.

"Just because someone is a prefect doesn't make them beyond reproach, Hermione".

"And that includes Head Boys and Head Girls," agreed Malfoy, surprising Harry. "Potter--that Head Girl, Spinnet, from your house. Do you think she's okay"?

"You mean do I think she could be a Death Eater? I dunno, Malfoy--do you think Voldemort's recruiting Muggle-born witches now"?

"Oh. She's Muggle-born? And she duels like that? The three of us and Ginny are the only ones who were able to beat her".

Hermione drew herself up to her full five-foot-three inches and glared at Malfoy. "I'm Muggle-born, Malfoy. Remember dueling with me?" she said softly, dangerously. He backed up a step.

"I just mean--are you sure she's Muggle-born? Couldn't she just say that to throw people off"?

"Well, let's see," said Hermione, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Her parents raise thoroughbred race horses in Devon and she was going to train to be an Olympic equestrienne until she got her Hogwarts letter, so yes, Malfoy, I'm fairly certain her parents are Muggles. Katie Bell and Angelina Johnson have visited her on holiday. She's legitimate Muggle-born".

Malfoy looked thoughtful, smiling. "Spinnet, riding a horse...there's an image"...

Harry glared at him. "I'll tell you-know-who"...

"You'll tell the Dark Lord I said that about Spinnet"?

"I call him Voldemort. You know who I'm talking about".

He made a face. "Well, if I weren't trying to be so damn good when I'm with her, my mind wouldn't be wandering like this..."

Harry shook his head. "First Parvati, now Alicia"...

Hermione was baffled. "What about Parvati? Who are you talking about"?

Harry looked at her. "I thought you said you'd guessed who Ginny was going to meet".

Hermione sighed. "Oh, is that all you're talking about. You'd better be good when you're with her, Malfoy. She won't be back until April".

"And you'll keep on behaving yourself even after her birthday, if you know what's good for you," Harry warned. Hermione looked at him strangely when he said this.

"All right, all right. Enough about my private, er, thoughts. What about Head Boy? Is Davies all right?" Harry's and Hermione's faces fell. They looked at each other nervously. Malfoy looked back and forth between them. "What? What? Oh, come on".

"It's just that--" Hermione began.

"He's so--" Harry ventured.

"I don't know how to put it"--

"All right, all right!" Malfoy interrupted. "So. You don't trust him. You don't know why, but you don't trust him. Does that about sum it up?" They both nodded.

Then Harry thought of something. "When he and Niamh and Flitwick went looking for Cho, Roger didn't go into the classroom"...

"Yes, but Niamh didn't go in either. I trust her," Hermione said.

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "Why do you trust her"?

Hermione made a face. "I just do. I don't know"...

"And how do you know what Davies and Quirke did?" Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked like she was biting her tongue. Harry saw an expression of understanding dawning on Malfoy's face. "Oh--were you using that parchment thing again? To track their movements. Wish to hell I had one of those things"...

"Keep wishing, Malfoy. It's not going to happen. And even without that, we could have figured it out; I mean, Roger and Niamh aren't in the hospital wing like Cho and Flitwick, are they"?

Malfoy nodded. "Well, you want to know a reason why I don't trust Davies?" They looked at him expectantly. "Who do you think really should have been Head Boy this year"?

Harry and Hermione thought hard. "Well," Harry said, "Not Fred or George. They weren't prefects already, anyway".

"And none of the Slytherins. No offense. I'm sure there have been Slytherin Head Boys, but--" Hermione contributed.

Malfoy sighed deeply. "You two are so thick. Diggory! He was the golden boy, the front runner! But since he was killed the Dark Lord, that opened the way for Davies! Don't you see? Davies is in his debt"...

Harry's eyes opened wide. "Yes! But the question is--just because he technically owes being Head Boy to Voldemort killing Cedric, does that necessarily mean that he would feel obliged to pay that debt"?

Malfoy shrugged. "That's all I have to go on. I'm clean out of ideas now".

Hermione had been looking fiercely at the fireplace. "But whoever this person is who sent the notes, they didn't do a very good job, did they? I mean, they were also trying to lure me and Ron to the Charms classroom, and we didn't fall for it. Couldn't you write to your father and ask for another chance, point out how this person failed"?

Malfoy thought about this. "Trouble is--I wouldn't know about the other notes unless I'd been talking to you. And then he would know I'd been talking to you; that's no good. I'd be in even worse trouble".

Harry was the one pacing now, scowling. "We have to come up with a way to communicate with you. Maybe I can send you a school owl; the Slytherins have already gotten used to seeing you get stuff from them"...

Malfoy shook his head. "No, you prat. Whoever's really been sending them will see if I start getting school owls from someone else. Don't be stupid".

Harry fought the urge to respond. The three of them were silent, brooding. They heard a sound of footsteps in the Great Hall, indicating that some students were starting to come in for breakfast. Hermione went to the door and opened it a crack. She waved the boys over.

“Not that many people yet. If we’re careful, no one will notice us coming out of here”.

She went first, then Harry. Malfoy hung back. Harry tried to get him to come, but he said, “In a while. Give anybody time who saw you two come out of here to forget about it.” Harry nodded. He and Hermione went to sit down at the Gryffindor table. It seemed a long time later that Malfoy came strolling out of the door casually, went to the Slytherin table and sat down. Harry glanced around the hall. Had anyone seen? Then he found that he was face to face with Ginny. He hadn’t even noticed he’d sat down next to her. She was frowning at him.

“Harry, were you and Hermione talking to Draco?” she whispered. “What are you doing to him now?” she accused. Harry faced Hermione across the table, talking to Ginny out of the corner of his mouth, very softly.

“It wasn’t about you. Prefect stuff. Don’t worry about it”.

But while they were eating, Ginny kept throwing him looks as if she wasn’t sure what she could believe. She wasn’t the only one throwing him funny looks; the entire school seemed to be aware of the “fact” that on the night that Cho Chang broke up with Harry Potter, he tricked her into going to the Charms classroom at midnight and ambushed her with a curse that had put her, and then the beloved Professor Flitwick, into a coma.

The heads of house hadn’t said that Harry had done it; they’d said that no one knew. But the word had spread from Cho’s Ravenclaw roommates that she’d gotten the note from Harry and had assumed that he wanted to apologize and make amends. No amount of naysaying from the teachers was adequate to quash the rumors about what Harry had done in a fit of pique after Cho had dumped him so publicly. Even the other Gryffindors were giving him funny looks .

Harry squirmed and tried to finish his breakfast as quickly as possible without looking too guilty. It was worse than second year, when everyone thought he was the heir of Slytherin. But he wasn’t guilty of anything then, except being a Parselmouth. And now he did feel a bit responsible for what had happened to Cho, for involving her in the Viktor Krum Plan and letting her and everyone else think he was interested in her. All it had done was to make her a target. That was how he should have known it wasn’t Malfoy who’d done it; Malfoy knew all about the Viktor Krum Plan .

They had to figure out who was sending Malfoy the owls. Harry had left Sandy upstairs when he had planned to go running; he decided to make sure he was wearing her as much as possible in future so that she could warn him about anything important that was going to happen. Such as becoming a scapegoat who was accused of attacking the most popular student and the most popular teacher in the school....

* * * * *

“Harry Potter”.

“Yes”?

“Why are we here”?

“I’m hiding”.

“Again”?

“Yes”.

“Should you be somewhere now”?

“Prefect meeting”.

“You do not like the meetings”?

“I hate them”.

“But your custom is to attend them”.

“Yes”.

“Then my question should have been, why have you gone in the past?”

“I’m supposed to”.

“How long will we be here”?

“I’m not sure. I’ll check the time”.

Harry pulled out his wand and lit it. He held up his watch to the light. It was just after nine o’clock. The meeting had been going for about half-an-hour. After his Animagus training, he had retrieved Sandy and pretended to Alicia that he was going to be at the meeting soon; the Gryffindor prefects usually walked there together. Instead, Harry went to the third-floor corridor and hid once more in the room where Fluffy had once held sway, as he had hidden from Hermione during the Christmas holiday. He had been sitting in the dark, letting the quiet cold seep into his bones, rather enjoying the fact of the hard stone floor, the complete lack of comfort, in an I-deserve-to-suffer sort of way.

But he preferred not to think of himself as a martyr; Cho and Flitwick and the people who had died in the Underground were martyrs. They were Voldemort’s victims and didn’t even know it. He was Voldemort’s target. He knew it. He knew that he was to blame for Cho and Flitwick being in the hospital wing. He also knew he could not withstand the accusing stares of the other prefects at the meeting, even though he was not specifically guilty of the thing of which he was accused. It was like Cedric all over again...

Going to Dueling Club that afternoon had been bad enough. For the second week, they were screening the four new members. All of them but Pansy Parkinson were going to be staying in the club. Unfortunately for some of the people who had been ranked at the bottom after the first four weeks, that meant they were no longer members. Justin Finch-Fletchley and Colin Creevey were cut, as was Millicent Bulstrode (Hermione refrained--just barely--from doing a dance of glee).

Liam Quirke was rather put-out about Justin being cut, and appeared ready to complain to Snape about it, but he had just squeaked in at number sixteen, so he looked like he decided not to press his luck. The trouble was, three of the new people were just too good to let the others stay. Fred Weasley had won a surprising fifteen out of nineteen duels in his weeks, putting him at number five, after Harry, Hermione, Ginny and Alicia. And Roger Davies’ brother Evan was next, number six, with fourteen wins. Malfoy had only thirteen and was ranked seventh now .

Roger was very miffed about being eighth, but at least now he was directing his ire at his brother, Harry thought. Snape had eliminated their earlier duels with the cut members in order to recalculate the standings; Malfoy hadn’t won against Fred or Evan, whereas he had against the cut members, so his wins went down. The other new member was Lee Jordan who had performed well on a respectable nine out of nineteen duels, and was ranked right after Roger. Ron was somewhat disgruntled about having moved down to twelfth, after Crabbe and Angelina.

Harry had avoided eye-contact with Ravenclaws--indeed, with most people--during the duels. Fortunately, he only needed to duel once, and otherwise, only needed to be present to vote for the winners. All of the duels were pretty clear cut, except for Fred and Evan, who were very well matched, and Harry went with Fred partly out of house loyalty, but mostly because he had disarmed Evan (who nonetheless received a number of votes from Ravenclaws).

“Harry Potter,” Sandy said again.

“Yes, Sandy”?

“How long will we be here”?

“Oh, sorry. My mind wandered. We could be here for another hour”.

“Will it be time for sleeping then”?

“Not quite. I have an essay to finish writing for Charms--” he started to say, then realized that he actually didn’t need to bother with that. He swallowed, trying not to think of poor little Flitwick...

Suddenly, the door he was leaning against swung open into the corridor, and Harry fell backward. He was lying flat on the corridor floor now, the back of his head aching, looking up at a very smug Draco Malfoy standing over him.

“So, Potter,” he drawled, “this is where you come to hide from your adoring public”.

"Yeah," Harry replied, still lying down. "The adoring public that wants to flay me alive, behead me, and feed my body to the giant squid in the lake".

"Ah, the price of fame..." Malfoy was enjoying himself.

"What the hell are you doing here, Malfoy? How did you find me"?

"That parchment of yours"...

Harry sat up, panicking. "The map? How did you"--

"Oh! It's a map!" He smiled. "Didn't mean to tell me that, did you? Don't get your knickers in a twist, I still haven't actually had a chance to look at the thing".

Harry stood up slowly, glaring at him. "Is there a reason for you to be here Malfoy? Other than annoying me? You don't actually need to show up in person, you know. Just the fact of your existence is bloody annoying".

Malfoy grinned. "I know. I go to bed every night confident in the knowledge that I can irk you just by being. But sometimes that gets boring and I feel the need to do some active annoying. Spice up my life. Necessary when you have to attend those damn weekly prefects' meetings. I'm starting to hate Davies more than you, and that's a good trick".

"If you hated me, you wouldn't be here, Malfoy".

"Au contraire. Being here means I don't have to be there".

"You still haven't said how"--

Malfoy sighed. "All right. Don't go thinking I've softened, because I haven't. Like I said; being here means I don't have to be there." He looked up and down the corridor. "Do you think we could discuss this someplace that isn't quite so public".

Harry moved aside and let Malfoy enter the small room. He lit his wand again and closed the door. Seeing how dim the room was with just the one light, Malfoy took out his wand and lit it too. He looked around, frowning.

"There's no place to sit".

"I was sitting on the floor." Harry did so again. Frowning and grumbling, Malfoy did the same, awkwardly, as though he weren't used to it. But then he, Harry thought, didn't grow up in a cupboard under the stairs.

"There are cultures around the world where everyone sits on the floor, Malfoy. Squatting is actually pretty good for you".

"I'll leave that to you, Potter. Anyway, the prefects' meeting. We were just getting started. Davies had called the meeting to order, and then he announced that the first agenda item was a question: Should a person remain a prefect when they have lured someone to a classroom in the middle of the night and attacked that person with Dark Magic"?

"What?" Harry choked out.

"That's what your girlfriend said. And Spinnet gave him a backhanded slap. On the arm, unfortunately. I can't get that horse thing out of my mind now...Anyway, she told Davies to shut up, then looked around the room for you. She hadn't noticed until then that you weren't there. She said that someone being accused of something had the right to be present to face their accusers. Davies said that you clearly were ducking the meeting because you didn't want to face your accusers, and I was getting sick of it all, plus I wanted out of the meeting myself, so I volunteered to come find you".

"You volunteered"?

"Did you miss the part about getting out of the meeting, Potter? Anyway, Granger came after me because she said she knew how to find you, and I'd just be wandering around the castle all night. I personally had no objection to the wander-around-the-castle thing, but I was wondering how she expected to be able to find you, so I went along with her up to Gryffindor Tower. She made me stand down the corridor while she gave the password--suspicious little thing, isn't she? and maybe ten minutes later, she came out and told me to look up here for you. She went back to take notes at the

meeting. Afraid that Bulstrode would bollix it up. Which she would, trust me. I merely assumed she or Weasley used the parchment you used before when you told me Filch was in the entrance hall and some other people were in the Trophy Room. Oh, and I never said--thanks for the tip about MacMillan and Abbott in the Trophy Room. I got quite a show, and they were none the wiser”...

“Malfoy”!

“Oh, cut the holier-than-thou crap, Potter. At least I admit to being a voyeur. Who knows what you’ve seen in that Invisibility Cloak of yours. Wish I had one. Have to do something to liven up my boring existence. Anyway, Granger was right. Here you are, hiding out like a bunny and twice as ugly. No, wait; that’s an insult to bunnies everywhere. Ten times as ugly; no twenty times”...

“I get the picture, Malfoy”.

“Do you? I can say it a few more times if you like”.

“Would you like me to open that trap door and push you in it?” Harry said, gesturing toward the rough wooden door which he’d first seen Fluffy standing. Malfoy frowned, not having noticed it before.

“What’s that”?

“Don’t you remember first year, when Dumbledore said this room was off limits”?

Malfoy looked thoughtful for a moment. “Vaguely. You’re sure it was this room”?

“Yes. Because Ron and Hermione and I came in here”.

Malfoy’s jaw dropped. “What was in here”?

“A three-headed dog named Fluffy. Belonged to Hagrid. He was guarding that trap door. Want to know what’s down there if you go through it”?

“I kind of wanted to know how you got past a three-headed dog, but then again--maybe I don’t”.

“Well, after you go through the trap door, you fall for quite a while, finally landing on a lovely plant called Devil’s Snare”

“Devil’s Snare! All right, Potter, that’s enough. Are you going to come down to the meeting or not”?

“You’re really all that anxious to go back to the meeting?” Harry checked his watch. “There’s still more than half-an-hour to go”.

Malfoy looked like he’d forgotten something. “Oh. That’s right. Avoiding the meeting. Funny, Spinnet looked like she suspected I just wanted to duck out; Granger didn’t seem to get that”.

“She was probably just worried about me. Wanted to know where I was herself”.

Malfoy looked confused now. “And she trusted me to come find you? What if I had put that curse on the Charms doorway? She’d have been leading me right to you”.

“Hermione’s not stupid. She knew you hadn’t done the Charms doorway. And she knows I can handle you when necessary. Care to have the sensation you’re upside-down in the air again”?

Malfoy scowled, gripping his lit wand tightly. “Care to have tentacles growing all over your face”?

Harry smiled. “You know, Malfoy, it’s not so bad hanging out with you sometimes. Especially when the alternative is a prefects’ meeting”.

Malfoy nodded. “I’d take another class with Hagrid’s Blast-Ended Skrewts over a prefects’ meeting”.

Harry laughed. “I’ll tell you a secret; Ron and Hermione and I hated the Skrewts as much as the rest of you”.

"I knew it"!

"Sssshh! Just don't tell Hagrid. I wouldn't want to hurt him".

"What do you see in that overgrown, hairy"--

"Only the most loyal friend I've ever had," Harry said firmly. "He took me away from my horrid aunt and uncle, he told me I'm a wizard, he hand-delivered my Hogwarts letter and he bought me my first-ever birthday present. Do you have a friend who's done things like that for you? Completely changed your life?"

Malfoy looked down at his hands, silent for once. Then he looked up at Harry, his face strangely exposed in the flickering wandlight.

"Yes." He said finally. He swallowed and looked down again. "Ginny".

Harry's mouth was dry. Malfoy was getting so attached to Ginny. It scared Harry. So much was hanging on their relationship. What if, at some point, she simply decided she was tired of him? What would Malfoy do then? Some people would be suicidal, Harry knew; however, in Malfoy's case he felt certain that the correct word would be homicidal. And he didn't think Ginny was the person Malfoy would feel like killing...

Harry checked his watch again after a few minutes of silence between them. "Only about twenty minutes left. We might as well leave here. It'll take about that long just to get out of this wing and back to the stairs to Gryffindor Tower. And then you have to get all the way down to the dungeons to the Slytherin common room"...

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "How do you know where the Slytherin common room is"?

Harry stopped moving abruptly, trying not to give anything away, then deciding that it was long ago, what did it matter? "Well--I've been in there".

"You have? When"?

"Second year".

"Didn't anyone notice"?

"No".

"Were you in that damn Invisibility Cloak"?

"No".

"Listen Potter, give me something to go on. Okay, why were you in the Slytherin common room"?

"I wanted information".

"What information"?

"I wanted to know whether you were the heir of Slytherin. Turns out you're not. End of story".

"End of story? When you can come into my common room any time you want"?

"Did I say that? It was actually quite difficult. Took weeks and weeks of planning, and finally, Hermione wasn't able to get just Ron and I".

"Weasley was in there too? Oh, now I will have to make sure we completely decontaminate the place"...

Harry smiled. "Just think. You don't know what has been touched by me or Ron"...

He stood up, enjoying needling Malfoy. Malfoy also stood, in one graceful motion, without help. Harry opened the door and looked up and down the corridor; the torches flickered on the walls and the wind scoured the leaded windows, but one was in sight. He gestured for Malfoy to follow him and closed the door after he had exited .

They walked to the stairs silently; their feet echoing eerily in the otherwise empty corridor; they passed door after door rooms they'd never seen, rooms that could hold anything. Harry didn't wonder that even Dumbledore didn't feel that he really knew all of Hogwarts' secrets. Did anyone even know what any of these rooms held, or what they were for? he wondered. It might be useful to start investigating more about the castle, he realized. Especially if there was a Death Eater in Hogwarts other than Malfoy who was using obscure curses to ambush people going in and out of classrooms...

* * * * *

Harry went up to bed as soon as he returned to Gryffindor Tower. When Ron opened his bedcurtains to check on him, feigned sleep. He heard Ron go to the door of the room, yell down the stairs, "He's in bed! Asleep! Now you go to bed, already! Good night!" Must be Hermione he's bellowing at, Harry thought. She was probably driving Ron starkers obsessing about where he was. Confident he wouldn't be bothered any more, he rolled over and went to sleep.

The next morning, he rose to run as usual, and when Hermione started to ask him about where he was during the meeting, he simply told her he didn't want to talk about it.

"Well, some of us had to sit through a meeting where you were basically tried in absentia! A lot of good Malfoy was; she told him where to find you, he didn't come back either," she complained. "Luckily, Alicia was able to stop Roger from turning it into a kangaroo court and move us on to other topics".

"Like detentions and house points"...

She flushed while doing her warm-up exercises. "Yes," she admitted reluctantly.

"Hermione, have you ever given someone detention? Or taken away house points? After all, we're allowed to, as prefects".

She frowned. "No. I suppose I've seen you and Ron get too many detentions, and felt too awful when I've caused points to be taken from Gryffindor to want to do it to someone else. Guess I'm just an old softie".

Harry grinned at her. "We'll have to toughen you up before you're Head Girl. You've got two years"...

She smiled with pleasure, looking down. "You really think I'll be Head Girl"?

He looked at her levelly. "No, I really believe it will be Millicent Bulstrode, Hannah Abbott or Mandy Brocklehurst. Honeysuckle Hermione! Who else would it be? Look who the other fifth-year girl prefects are"!

"Oh. So you're saying that of course I'll be Head Girl because they're all so lame"...

Harry closed his eyes in frustration. "No, no, that's not what I meant at all"...

Hermione smiled sunnily at him and stood. "Got your mind off your other troubles, didn't I? Ready to go"?

Harry shook his head at her. "You're very sneaky, you know that, Hermione Granger"?

"I'm sneaky? You should talk, Mr. Going-Off-With-McGonagall-To"---

"Sssshhh! Come on, someone could come down any second"!

She kissed him on the cheek, then opened the portrait. "I'll be good. I promise." She climbed out, while Harry shook his head again, laughing .

After he showered, he started going back down to the Great Hall for breakfast, but his feet were somehow taking him to the hospital wing. He realized that he hadn't gone there yet to find out how Cho was. Would that make it seem like he was guilty or innocent? he wondered. No. Stop. It doesn't matter what others think. It's the right thing to do, to check up on her and see how she is, and Flitwick. It's my fault they're both there, he thought.

When he reached the door to the infirmary, he hesitated for a moment before turning the knob. His hand was shaking. Finally, he grasped and turned it, opening it slowly. He saw a hulking dark shape on the far side of the ward, sitting in a chair next to one of the beds.

It was Viktor Krum.

Harry backed up and peeked through the crack between door and jamb. Viktor! What was he doing here? Harry wondered.

Viktor held Cho's hand as she lay back in the bed, oblivious, her skin very pale. Her lashes were very dark on her cheeks, her hair fell back from her brow, and Viktor stroked it with one hand, still holding her other hand. He spoke tenderly to her. Harry assumed it was Bulgarian. It sounded quite mellifluous, not as Harry had imagined Bulgarian at all. It rolled out of Viktor smoothly and fell on Harry's ear not unlike the Welsh he'd heard his mother singing. Of course, he knew, many people thought Welsh an awkward language.

Harry stared in wonder at Krum gazing at Cho. Flitwick lay in another bed, his little feet clearly only reaching about halfway down the mattress, judging from the small shapes under the blanket covering him. Harry had never seen him like this in repose. His face was usually so animated, he always seemed to be smiling. He had such fun teaching! He never seemed to be not having the time of his life.

Now Krum stood, leaned over Cho and kissed her on the forehead. Harry had never felt guiltier in his life, not even when he saw Cedric's body. He was responsible for putting Krum together with Cho, and for her being targeted, and for Flitwick getting caught in the crossfire. All of it was his fault and he just wanted to have the earth open up and swallow him, he felt so awful.

How could he have thought Viktor Krum was Voldemort's heir? He remembered how Krum had talked to him about Hermione the previous year; how concerned he was about whether there was something between them, because Hermione talked about him all the time. Well, thought Harry, he certainly seemed to be over Hermione. That's a relief. One good thing about all this...

But then Viktor was walking toward the infirmary door. Harry closed it quietly and dashed down the corridor, hiding behind a suit of armor, hoping Viktor would be going down the stairs several yards before the armor. He did, and Harry waited until his footsteps had receded before emerging from his hiding place, breathing a sigh of relief. He looked down the corridor at the infirmary door. Somehow, he felt like he would be some kind of intruder, going in there now. Viktor really seemed to care about her. He must have heard about what had happened and had come here to see her. It was quite touching, really, even if they had found each other by being manipulated by Harry and Hermione.

He went down to breakfast, finding Hedwig waiting for him on Ron's shoulder.

"Where've you been?" Ron wanted to know.

"The hospital wing".

"You okay"?

"Not for me. I was visiting. At least, I was going to..." as he spoke, he took the parchment from Hedwig and gave her some bacon before she flew off to the Owlery. "But Viktor Krum was there, so I didn't go in".

"Viktor!" Hermione said with surprise. Ron looked equally surprised. Harry lowered his voice.

"Told you the plan worked, didn't I? They must have gotten even closer after we left the Three Broomsticks with the elves. He was up there sitting by her bedside, talking to her in Bulgarian. He kissed her before he left".

"He kissed her!" Hermione was indignant.

"On the forehead".

"Hermione," Ron hissed at her. "What are you getting upset for? You wanted to be rid of him!"

“Yes, but he was supposed to break up with me, not cheat on me! Technically this still makes me his girlfriend, and now anyone finds out he’s visiting her and kissing her in her coma, I look like a stupid little prat, ignorant of what he’s doing behind my back”...

“Who cares?” Ron insisted. “If you broke up with him now, he probably wouldn’t stalk you or anything, right? He’s moved on.” Hermione grimaced at Ron, unwilling to admit he was right. Harry thought she might be thinking about the Rita Skeeter article from Witch Weekly that had run during the Triwizard Tournament, depicting her as some sort of “scarlet woman” (Ron’s words) toying with the affections of both Krum and Harry. The worst thing about the article (even worse than the howlers she received in the owl post) was that Snape read it aloud in class, causing the Slytherins to roar and Hermione to turn beet red and look like she wanted to crawl into her cauldron and liquefy, becoming part of her potion. Somehow, Harry didn’t think Snape would refrain from doing it again, even though he and Harry had developed a new kind of relationship. He still seemed determined to show nothing but contempt and severity to any students not in Slytherin, especially when other Slytherins were around.

“I don’t want my private life to wind up in the press again,” she mumbled, eating her porridge. Harry took a bite of toast and unrolled the letter Hedwig had delivered to him. Maybe he could change the subject. He hadn’t expected Hermione to react this way; much of the time, she didn’t seem to care what other people thought.

“It’s from Dudley,” he told Ron and Hermione, relieved that it would be something unrelated to the wizarding world, to take his mind off his troubles. It was written on lined paper clearly torn from one of Dudley’s notebooks.

“Dear Harry,

“It’s been a while since you wrote. I had this letter ready for you for the last week! Next time, write sooner, okay?”

--“Dudley”

Harry set that piece of paper aside, feeling vaguely guilty for having neglected writing Dudley for so long; he could only write back when Hedwig showed up, after all. He’d finally written an innocuous letter about being captain of the dueling club. Harry read the letter now that Dudley had been waiting to send.

“Dear Harry,

“Have you heard about the Westminster tube station? I wasn’t sure if that kind of news would get to you where you are. Bloody disaster! Completely blown up! I say either IRA or Pakistanis. Or maybe someone else. I don’t actually know. Could be those crazies who were sending tear gas into the Tokyo subways, who knows? Maybe they’re just going to target underground trains around the world!”

“Anyway, the really weird thing is that the word POTTER was on the wall in the station, in green, just like your eyes! How weird is that? Did I already say it was weird? Okay, but you have to admit, it really is! I wonder why someone put POTTER on the wall like that? Probably every person in England named Potter is wondering, too.

“Anyhow, we’ve given up on mice in biology class and we’re using rats in the mazes now. Bigger brains. We all have these white rats with pink eyes and ears and tails. I think they’re albinos. My roommate and I keep ours in the same cage in our room. I think his is pregnant and mine did the deed with her. Does that mean I’ll be a grandpa? Ha ha!”

“That Sneakoscope thing has been quiet lately, so either it’s broken or my roommate isn’t stealing from me. Could be some other prat, I suppose. I’m trying to get up the nerve to ask Julia out for Valentine’s Day. I’ve lost forty-five pounds since school started! I think she’s noticed. I hope so. Wish me luck!”

“Dudley”

Harry looked up at Ron and Hermione. He really did not need to be reminded of Westminster. He thought about it all the time. They looked pityingly at him, not saying anything.

They finished breakfast and went to class. Each class blurred into the next for Harry; the week passed almost without him noticing, and Sunday rolled around again, with Dueling Club. There were four more new people: Neville, Parvati and Padma Patil and Susan Bones, from Hufflepuff.

Both Harry and Hermione dueled against Parvati, Padma and Susan, winning against all three of them. Of the new people, Ginny only dueled Neville and Padma, winning both duels. Ron and Malfoy only beat Padma and Susan; when each of them was dueling Parvati, they looked somewhat distracted by her. Malfoy seemed to be swallowing a lot and moving somewhat slowly. Ron appeared to be looking straight into her eyes as if mesmerized, and when his wand went flying out of his hand and he was hurled backward, it was as though he were expecting it, even waiting anxiously for it. After the vote went to Parvati, Ron and Parvati retreated to the circle perimeter again, smiling at each other, speaking in low tones. Harry saw Parvati cover her mouth, as though Ron had said something that made her laugh. Then he saw Hermione's face; she was watching Ron and Parvati too, frowning. Hermione had not voted for Parvati, despite the fact that she had disarmed Ron.

When he was dueling Neville, on the other hand, Ron did not seem to expect he would lose. He was quite nonchalant about his attack, and when Neville dodged his disarming charm and sent the same back at Ron, Ron knocked over a dozen club members and staggered to his feet, looking dazed, staring at Neville as though he'd never seen him before. Neville smiled at him, but Ron was definitely not smiling back.

At the end of the club meeting, Neville and Parvati had done the best of the new members, with only four losses each. Harry smiled at Neville and waved as he and Ron and Hermione left the Great Hall; dinner would not start for almost two hours, so they had planned to visit Hagrid. Ron looked back at Parvati with her sister Padma; suddenly, they didn't seem so identical, Harry thought.

He and Ron and Hermione were in the entrance hall, putting on the cloaks they'd brought with them, when Neville ran out of the Great Hall and called to Ginny. She stopped; she had been about to climb the marble stairs.

"Ginny!" he said again. "Would you--would you like to go for a walk before dinner?" She looked dumbfounded. Harry saw Malfoy standing at the head of the stairs leading down to the dungeons. Ginny turned her head in his direction for a moment, then back to Neville, looking confused.

"Oh, um, all right," she stammered. "But I don't have my cloak"...

"Neither do I. Let's go get them, and then we can have a short walk"...

Ginny nodded, following him up the steps. She looked over her shoulder at Malfoy for a moment, raising her eyebrows in a helpless way. Malfoy scowled, then descended the stairs. Ron was watching Ginny and Neville disappear up the stairs, also frowning. He didn't appear to have taken any notice of Malfoy. Hermione hit Ron on the arm playfully.

"She's almost fifteen, you know," she reminded him. "And Neville's harmless. He spent the entire Yule Ball stepping on her feet. You didn't object to her going out with him then"...

"That was different. The whole school was there." He was still frowning. Harry and Hermione hustled him out the front door and into the snow, laughing.

"Let's see, will you let her start dating when she's--twenty?" Hermione made a snowball quickly and tossed it at Ron. He didn't duck in time, getting an ear full of frosty coldness.

"Hey!" Ron complained.

"Twenty-five?" suggested Harry, throwing his own snowball that hit Ron in the arm.

"Thirty"?

"Forty"?

With each suggestion, Harry and Hermione threw a snowball at Ron, laughing. He had started fighting back, and the three of them were soon exchanging fire randomly, Harry aiming at each of them, Hermione taking turns throwing at Harry and Ron, Ron fighting back against the two of them. They somehow managed to get down to Hagrid's cabin in the midst of this traveling snowball fight, laughing uproariously the whole time. (By the time they reached the cabin, Ginny's potential dating age had become three-hundred and seventy).

Hagrid was glad to see them. Harry was last to enter the cabin, following Ron and Hermione. Before he did so, he felt a strong urge to turn around.

Ginny and Neville were walking together by the edge of the lake, not touching. He could see their lips moving, their breaths were white smoky clouds punctuating the dusk. He found himself focusing on Ginny in particular, the way her hair spilled over her collar, the gold and red looking russet and chestnut in the dim light, her pale face inscrutable at a distance. Neville was a few inches taller than her--taller than me now, Harry realized, since he and Ginny were the same height. Ginny stumbled momentarily; her boot went deeper into a drift than she expected, it seemed, and Neville put his hand on her arm, helping her, and after that they walked with her arm linked in his.

"Harry!" Hagrid called to him from the fire. "Close the bloody door!" Harry reluctantly did so, watching Neville and Ginny walk arm in arm around the lake through a slowly shrinking opening, until he had finally closed it all the way. But as he sat in Hagrid's cabin, drinking tea, listening to the others discuss the dueling, he still saw them in his mind's eye, strolling through the snowy twilight.

* * * * *

There were still no Charms classes during the next day. There was a rumor going around that Dumbledore had hired a substitute, but he wouldn't be able to start until March. Hermione fretted, spending the Charms time in the library, studying. "We still have the O.W.L.s to think about, remember?" she prodded Harry and Ron. Ron rolled his eyes.

"You don't even appreciate having a free period"...

"No, what I don't appreciate--and I'll bet he doesn't either--is poor Professor Flitwick being in a coma".

She looked at Harry grimly; they still had no idea who had sent those notes, and Dumbledore himself was stymied about the doorway to the Charms classroom, which was still sealed off to prevent anyone else becoming comatose. They had also had no luck finding a way to communicate with Malfoy that didn't risk discovery by the other Death Eater. Harry had asked Snape to pair him up with Malfoy in Potions, and he had done so (in a humiliating incident involving ground newt and a reducing potion gone wrong). But Malfoy didn't know anything new, so it wasn't much help.

After classes were done for the day, they went back up to the common room. Harry, Ron and Hermione were sitting by the fire, reading history and trying to stay awake (or at least Ron and Harry were struggling to stay awake) when they heard Parvati squeal excitedly from across the room.

"Oh! Lavender! It's beautiful!" She was holding up a delicate-looking violet sweater with pearlized buttons down the front.

"Happy birthday!" Lavender said to her, grinning. Ron frowned, stood up and walked over to them.

"Birthday? I thought I heard you saying 'Happy Birthday' to your sister yesterday".

Parvati looked at him levelly. "Yes. Yesterday was her birthday. And today is mine. She was born just before midnight, I was born just after. Which even makes us different signs; she's Aquarius and I'm Pisces." Harry thought to himself, That makes sense. It partly explained why they were in different houses .

Ron was looking at her strangely. Parvati went right on looking back. Even Lavender seemed discomfited by this. "Why don't you try your sweater on?" she asked Parvati, who finally turned to her friend.

"Yes, I will. Excuse me," she said to Lavender and Ron, walking toward the girls' stairs carrying her present. When she returned, she was wearing some jeans and the sweater, which turned out to be rather low-cut. The color went perfectly with her skin and hair; Harry could see that Lavender had chosen wisely. He could also see that Ron was looking flush and that Hermione had noticed.

Ron swallowed, staring at her. "It looks--really nice," he said lamely.

Parvati didn't seem inclined to pass judgment on his lack of originality. "Thanks. Thank you again, Lavender," she said suddenly, as though remembering it was her friend who had given it to her and not Ron. If Malfoy saw her in that sweater Harry thought, he'd really want to have use of Moody's magical eye.

"Do you--do you want to play chess?" Ron asked her awkwardly. She smiled at him like she had a secret, agreeing.

Harry and Hermione sat near the fireplace until dinner, ostensibly continuing to read, but Hermione was really watching Ron and Parvati out of the corner of her eye, and Harry could also not resist stealing glances at them. Was Ron just trying to get a rise out of Hermione? he wondered. Then again, he genuinely seemed like he might be attracted to Parvati. Seamus, Dean, Lee and Fred had noticed her new sweater the moment they had come into the common room, all of them goggling at her, and Lee had had to push Fred up the stairs to the dorms, he was staring at her so hard, a lump in his throat.

During the week, Harry noticed that where Ron usually sat near Harry and Hermione in classes and Parvati sat near Lavender, Lavender was more often on her own while Ron and Parvati sat together. When Argent began mewling softly in Binns' class, Parvati took the kitten from him surreptitiously, holding her under the desk, stroking her with her finger softly while Ron tried to look back at Binns innocently and answer questions about Boris the Bewildered. Hermione started to get quite snippy with Ron, until she hardly spoke to him at all when it wasn't absolutely necessary.

Sunday rolled around again very quickly, it seemed to Harry, and the last screening day for the Dueling Club had arrived. After this, the membership would be set, and they would be spending more time learning defenses and counterurses and dodging techniques, eventually learning to duel in larger numbers than one-on-one. Snape told them they would do even matches of two-on-two and three-on-three, but eventually they would also do uneven matches of two-on-one, three-on-two and even three-on-one.

As they prepared to start, Harry noticed that Niamh and Liam's little sister Orla was sitting on one of the tables that had been pushed to the wall. Justin sat next to her, watching. Harry wondered whether they should be present; Liam was ranked pretty low, and could very well be eliminated in this meeting. Would he want Justin and Orla watching his humiliation, if that's what happened? Or were they there to encourage him? Harry put it out of his mind. The only person he still had to duel was Neville; otherwise, all he would be doing was voting on other duels, so he was mostly going to be a spectator too, during this meeting.

Neville, Padma, Parvati and Susan were still being vetted. Neville dueled Parvati first, disarming her quickly. She looked surprised, then returned to the circle, standing next to Ron. It was certainly becoming more and more difficult to find one without the other. They stood very close together, it seemed, and looked at each other quite a lot, Harry thought.

The next time Neville dueled, he beat Crabbe. He had a triumphant gleam in his eye as he saw the wands go up for him and Harry couldn't help feeling that Neville was starting to come into his own. He tried to put out of his mind the walk around the lake with Ginny. She had just been polite, saying yes, since she supposedly wasn't seeing anyone. If she had said she was seeing someone, people would be interested to know who it was.

When Ginny defeated Parvati, Ron surprised Harry by voting against his sister. It was the first time he had not voted for her. Parvati beamed back at him. But Ginny had won cleanly, and received the most votes. She also defeated Susan, a little later, although Susan then turned around and bested Evan Davies (Harry thought Evan might have a little crush on Susan).

Harry saw Justin and Orla wincing when Parvati beat Liam. Soon after, it was Hermione's turn to duel Neville. She smiled at him before they bowed; Neville did not smile however. Harry watched through narrowed eyes. Something about Neville seemed different somehow. He realized he hadn't seen him much during the previous week. Had he been spending more time practicing?

He pointed his wand at Hermione, crying, "Egami rorrim!" Hermione looked down at herself in confusion, then shrugged; the spell didn't seem to have had any effect on her. Harry had never heard of it before, and had no idea what it was supposed to do. He assumed Neville had muffed it.

But when he shifted to Hermione's left, Hermione turned and looked as though she were pursuing an attacker on her right. She pointed her wand, but it was at the spectators; Roger and Evan Davies and Malfoy were potentially in her sights, and they started moving out of the way cautiously.

"Expelliarmus!" she cried, the sparks shooting out of her wand harmlessly, as she wasn't even facing Neville and Malfoy and the Davies brothers had dodged out of the way. She made a face; what did she think she was doing? Harry wondered. Perhaps Neville's spell had worked after all. Neville smiled now.

"Impedimenta!" he said, then walked over to her and plucked the wand from her hand. He received a unanimous vote. After the spell was lifted from her, Hermione returned to the circle, still looking slightly disoriented.

“What was that?” Harry whispered to her. But she put her finger to her lips to silence him. After about five more duels, Neville went again, this time defeating Alicia. Then Parvati bested her twin, who turned around and beat Niamh Quirke a few duels later. After another handful of duels, it was Neville’s turn again, this time against Roger Davies. Harry was nervous about Roger; Neville was doing really well, and Roger always took losing very poorly. He very much wanted to see Neville beat Roger, but he was concerned about what lengths Roger would go to win himself.

It wasn’t a pretty duel. Neville and Roger had the longest duel yet at about fifteen minutes, using painful Passus Curses on each other and Confundus-class charms. They also made repeated attempts to disarm each other, only to dodge or miss of the way. Finally, one of Neville’s disarming charms landed squarely on Roger, who flew backward into Angelina and George. They helped him up, but he was quite ungracious about it and did not even thank them. Angelina looked like she might put another hex on him, but George put his hand on her wand arm, smiling and shaking his head, silently reminding her what a git Roger was. She smiled back at George and put her wand away.

After several more duels, Neville defeated Parvati, and then Malfoy, who looked as upset as Roger, although they hadn’t duelled for as long. That was followed by Padma beating Lee Jordan, Susan Bones defeating Crabbe, and Parvati losing to Niamh Quirke. It was Neville’s turn again. Snape called out the name of his opponent.

“Potter”!

Harry stepped forward. Neville looked at him levelly. Neither of them smiled. Harry felt that other duelers had underestimated Neville. He did not plan to make the same mistake. They bowed to each other, eyes on the floor for only a split second before raising them to look at each other again. They stepped back and held their wands at the ready. Harry looked into Neville’s eyes, trying to see the intent there, trying to discern when the moment of action would come. Neville looked right back, revealing nothing.

They circled each other slowly; Harry was dimly aware of the existence of the other people in the circle. They had receded into some kind of middle distance for him, present and yet not. Harry watched Neville’s mouth, too, and his throat, trying to determine the second that he started to utter an incantation of any kind.

Harry saw it then, and a moment later it had happened; Neville said, “Expelliarmus!” and pointed his wand at Harry, but Harry was ready and had already dodged the sparks from the wand, immediately aiming his wand at Neville.

“Locomotor mortis!” he cried, and he could see that the leg-locker curse had hit Neville squarely. Neville was locked in place now, but looking no less determined. He produced a series of blue-bell flames that danced around Harry .

“Fluvius!” Harry cried, aiming the stream of water coming from his wand at the flames, putting them out, then having a thought, and aiming the stream of water at Neville. Neville rocked back slightly, then pointed his wand at the arc of water.

“Frigidarium!” he said, and the arc of water became an arc of ice, frozen in midair for a moment, before it broke free of Harry’s wand and fell to the stone floor with a deafening CRASH! as though every delicate piece in a crystal shop had been shattered. Harry held onto his wand firmly, shocked by the noise, while he was vaguely aware that Neville had taken the leg-locker curse off himself.

Neville aimed his wand at him again. “Bracchio suo passus est!” Harry gritted his teeth, feeling the pain in his arm for a second only, before his mind floated free, knowing that it wasn’t real, physical pain, but a mere trick. He willed himself to return to his senses and aimed his wand at Neville.

“Reverso”!

But Neville merely smiled. Why is he smiling? Harry wondered. Neville pointed his wand right at him, not appearing to be affected by the charm.

“Inverso”!

Damn! Harry thought, as the world seemed to turn over. He looked between his feet; there was the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall. He looked up; there was Neville, and, appearing to be in a circle floating upside down, the spectators staring at him. He thought it looked like Orla Quirke and Justin Finch Fletchley ran out of the Hall, but it was difficult to tell. He closed his eyes to get his bearings. I know which way is up, he told himself. I know which way is up .

He pointed his wand at himself, at his glasses, saying, "Impervius!" Then he pointed his wand above his head, not trying to aim at Neville now, saying, "Pluvius!" this time. Immediately, rain began to pour from the enchanted ceiling, soaking Harry and Neville and sending the spectators running into the entrance hall, except for Snape, who hovered nearby, rain running down his face and hair and robes. Harry smiled, then took the Inverso charm off himself. He felt like he was standing on solid ground again, although he was also being pelted with rain, facing an equally soaking-wet Neville. Neville stared back at him. They circled each other, water streaming down their faces. Harry's glasses repelled the water.

Harry could tell Neville was tired of being wet. Finally Neville gave in and pointed upward, saying, "Dessicatio!" The rain immediately stopped and they were both dry again. But while Neville had been preoccupied with that, Harry had taken opportunity to attack him again.

"Mano suo passus est!" he cried, pointing at Neville's wand hand. Neville made a pained face and moved his left hand to grasp his right, so that he wouldn't drop his wand. Even in the midst of his pain, he pointed his wand at Harry, holding it onto it with both hands to steady it. After the rain had stopped, the other club members had come back into the Great Hall and with them, it seemed the rest of the school, students and teachers. Had Orla and Justin gone to get them?

"Tracheo suo passus est!" Neville cried, pointing his wand. Harry's neck seized up, and he clutched at his throat with his left hand, dropping to his knees, resisting the urge to release his wand so he could put both his hands around his throat. He closed his eyes and moved out of himself again, moving past the pain, past the illusion.

He quickly pointed his wand at Neville again, crying, "Expelliarmus!" wanting the fight to be over finally, but Neville dodged it nimbly, pointing his wand at Harry and sending another passus curse his way, aimed at his left leg. Harry sidestepped and they spent a while then, it seemed, hurling curses and Confundus charms and hexes at each other and dodging them.

Harry wasn't sure how long they'd been dueling. He was vaguely aware of Hermione watching with her fist in her mouth, Snape pacing back and forth, frowning, the crowd of students beyond the circle standing on tables and chairs to see, the hubbub in the hall growing to a deafening pitch.

Finally, Neville did the same thing he'd done to Hermione; he aimed at Harry and said, "Emagi rorrim!" Harry frowned. He didn't feel any different. Wait--he looked down. His wand was in his left hand now. How had that happened? He looked up; he had thought he was facing the east wall of the hall, with the doorway leading to the entrance hall to his right, but now the doorway was on his left. What had Neville done? He didn't feel particularly disoriented, yet he didn't feel right either, and he knew he hadn't taken his wand from his right hand and put it in his left.

Trying to ignore how unnatural his wand felt, he aimed another disarming charm at Neville, who was standing to his left. Neville seemed to absorb the charm with no effect; he was not flying backwards, his wand was not zooming into Harry's hand. What had gone wrong?

Neville pointed his wand, but it looked to Harry like he was pointing it at Snape for some reason. "Petrificus Totalus!" he cried, and Harry blanched; he was putting a full-body bind on Snape!

But then Harry felt all of his joints stiffen and it was a great effort not to fall over. He couldn't move; HE was the one in the full body bind. But Neville wasn't pointing at me, he reasoned in his head, watching Neville move toward him and triumphantly pluck his wand from his hand, holding it over his head.

The duel was over. Harry was disarmed.

Snape took the spells off Harry and Neville returned his wand to him. The hall was utterly quiet.

"Vote!" Snape cried. "For Longbottom..." One by one, then in waves, the club members raised their wands for Neville, and every last one of them held his or her wand in the air. Snape stared around at the circle twice, three times, checking to be sure, before saying loudly, his voice ringing through the packed hall, "It is unanimous! Eighteen votes"--

"Nineteen," Harry said loudly and clearly, raising his own wand now, looking at Snape, and then Neville, starting to smile. Snape gave a very slight nod of the head, preparing to amend his words.

"Nineteen votes for Longbottom!" he decreed, the last syllable of Neville's last name suddenly lost in the roar of acclamation that emanated from the gathered students and teachers as everyone let their feelings be known. The sound bounced around the hard stone walls and floors, threatening to reach a deafening pitch, and in the midst of it, Harry pu

his wand in his robes and stepped toward Neville, his right hand extended. Neville paused for only a second, also pocketing his wand and taking Harry's hand, shaking it.

"Thanks, Neville," Harry said with a smile, leaning in towards him so he could be heard .

Neville smiled back now. "Any time, Harry. Any time." He slapped Harry on the back and they walked toward Ron and Hermione, who were going as wild as anyone else. Hermione, hugged Neville and Harry, and Ron clapped them both on the shoulder, shaking his head and grinning. Harry's head was starting to hurt from the noise in the Great Hall, but he was getting the impression that it wasn't going to die down for quite a while. Harry had a feeling that Neville would remember this day for the rest of his life, and Harry knew that he would too.

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Chapter Twenty-Four: Awakenings

The next day, the Dueling Club standings were posted. Harry and Hermione paused for a while, perusing them before going into the Great Hall to run .

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
Dueling Club Standings

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Name

Potter, Harry [captain]
Granger, Hermione
Weasley, Virginia
Weasley, Alfred
Longbottom, Neville
Davies, Evan
Malfoy, Draco
Spinnet, Alicia
Davies, Roger
Bones, Susan
Jordan, Lee
Quirke, Niamh
Johnson, Angelina
Weasley, George
Patil, Parvati
Weasley, Ronald
Wins

17
17
15
14
12
11
11
11
8
7
6
6
6
6
6

Losses

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"Who's Alfred Weasley?" Harry asked her, perplexed.

"Fred".

"Fred is short for Alfred?" Harry made a face.

"Well, I suppose it could have been short for Frederick. But it's not. You understand who Virginia is, I hope"?

"Of course"...

--"Or did you think 'Ginny' was short for 'Gingivitis'?"

Harry glowered at her. She laughed.

"Sorry. Dentist humor. My background creeping through." Then they both laughed together and went into the Great Hall to run.

Harry, Hermione and Ginny had each lost to Neville, but he'd lost to some people in his first week, so their standings were unaffected. And after this, they would all be learning together.

Harry had looked forward to talking to Neville about the dueling, but Neville hadn't wanted to stay after the meeting was over. He said he needed to work on Potions before dinner. Ginny looked irked; Harry thought she might have been planning to go down to the dungeon with Malfoy, and now Neville would be there.

Neville was definitely doing better in Potions--perhaps from all that extra time he was putting in, Harry thought. Harry had also put in some extra work, and was hopeful that he'd get O.W.L.s in basic and intermediate potions both. Snape still seemed to go out of his way to humiliate him in class, but the grades he was getting on paper were quite respectable.

Later that morning, just before dismissing the Potions class, Snape stood at the front of the room and announced, "For those of you in Gryffindor, the headmaster wishes you to know that you should report to the Great Hall for Charms class next period. Evidently, the substitute professor has decided to grace us with his presence early. And Slytherins should report to the Great Hall for Charms at your usual time, directly after luncheon".

Harry's heart sank; great, no free period. And it was someone Snape didn't like, evidently, based on the sneer on his face. When Harry was younger, that would have made him pretty happy and optimistic. Now, however, he was actually getting along with Snape and trusting him. Harry also realized, quite suddenly, that Snape hadn't liked or trusted Quirrell and he was right--Quirrell had been trying to kill Harry. Then there was Lockhart-- tremendous waste of space, thought Harry. Huge fraud. And another person Snape hadn't liked. Of course, Snape hadn't liked or trusted Sirius or Lupin, but after what Harry had seen in the Pensieve, he wasn't too surprised. (Snape seemed to be moving past that now). Then during the previous year, Snape hadn't liked Crouch because he thought he was Moody, and Crouch hadn't like him because Snape had become a spy, and he knew it.

In a way, Snape had a pretty good track record for judging who to trust and who not. Harry could imagine the new professor being quite like Lockhart. "Grace us with his presence," didn't exactly sound like a ringing endorsement. How odd to be looking to Snape, wanting to know what he thought about things, what he thought of people. Harry would never have guessed it, a year earlier.

Harry, Ron, Hermione and the other Gryffindors ascended the stairs to the entrance hall with trepidation, unsure of what to expect from this substitute, who could be the person responsible for preparing them to be tested on Charms for their O.W.L.s, if Flitwick didn't awake soon. If Snape didn't like him...

But when he entered the Great Hall and saw who the teacher was, Harry was shocked. Dumbledore! No, wait, he thought that's not Dumbledore...

The fifth-year Gryffindors entered the hall cautiously, eyeing their new instructor suspiciously. He looked like Dumbledore and yet not. He was just as tall and had the same twinkling blue eyes, even the same style of half-moon spectacles; he had the same silver-white hair, but when he turned, Harry noticed that it was only shoulder-length, not cascading down his back, like Dumbledore. He had the same kindly face, marked with deep smile-lines around the mouth and eyes, but his skin was darker, more leathery, as though he spent a great deal of time in the sun. The lower part of his face was hidden by a close-cut white beard and mustache. He wore a tall purple wizard's hat with silver and gold moons and stars embroidered on it, which matched his robes. He held his wand loosely, as though he didn't particularly care where he waved it. At the moment he was using it as some sort of conductor's baton, directing them into the hall, pointing out who he wanted them to be. Silver sparks flew out of the tip as he did this.

"All right, class. Am I correct in assuming that you are the fifth-year Gryffindors"?

They nodded. Harry looked down at his silver prefect's badge, and at Hermione. As the prefects, should they be taking more of a lead? But he felt as unsure and dumbfounded as the others, confronted by this Dumbledore-yet-not-Dumbledore.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Aberforth Dumbledore. Yes, the headmaster is my brother. Now, some of you may have heard that I was in a spot of trouble some years ago for practicing inappropriate charms on a goat"...

Seamus and Dean could not prevent themselves from sniggering, trying to cover it up with their hands, but unable to stop. Ron's eyes were bulging and his mouth was clamped tightly shut; Harry thought he would lose it in a minute, the thought of which was starting to make it difficult for Harry not to burst out laughing. He caught Hermione's eye, though, and her stern look was enough to calm him again. He determined that he should not look at Parvati or Lavender, whom he could hear tittering behind him. Neville was the only other person besides Hermione seemingly unaffected by the goat remark.

"Yes, well," he said, then cleared his throat, clearly aware of the effort some of them were having to expend in not laughing. "All charges were dropped, although it did keep the Daily Prophet gossip mill spinning for some time. And I still maintain that 'inappropriate' is in the eye of the beholder"...

Ron lost it now, laughing openly. Hermione glared at him. He clapped his hand over his mouth, a horrified look on his face. But then Harry saw that Aberforth Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling. Finally, he smiled.

"Just my way of breaking the ice. I'm not really a teacher, per se. I do specialize in Charms, of course. Or rather, a cross between Charms and Herbology and Animal Husbandry. But what you need for now is a Charms teacher, so I'm here a favour to my brother. Now, as you probably already call him Professor Dumbledore, calling me Professor Dumbledore as well would probably make everyone's lives needlessly confusing, yes? Therefore I have received permission from my brother to tell you that you may call me Aberforth. You do not need to call me 'Professor' Aberforth, after all, I'm not one really, and this position is strictly temporary." He put his wand away and clapped his hands together, smiling in anticipation. "Now! Why don't you introduce yourselves to me and tell me what you know about Confundus-class charms?"

Harry was relieved that when he told Aberforth who he was, he didn't make a big deal out of his scar and the whole Voldemort thing. Instead, he noted that Harry was captain of the Dueling Club, according to the parchment in the entrance hall. Harry proceeded to have the most fun he'd ever had in Charms--and that was saying something, because Harry had always enjoyed Flitwick's classes. Aberforth would put the charms on them and then show them how to see past the confusion so that they could still function effectively. It was a little like Defense Against the Dark Arts, without the pain. Harry realized that Neville had already started learning this; that was why the Reverso charm hadn't seemed to have any affect on him when they dueled. But the end of class, Harry could function completely normally under the Inverso charm even while having the sensation of hanging upside-down in the air, he could accurately point his wand at a target (after about thirty tries).

They stayed in the hall after class, since it was time for lunch. The fifth-year Gryffindors were already sitting at their house table, excitedly discussing the Charms class, when the rest of the students started pouring in. Harry looked up at the staff table. Dumbledore was smiling at his brother and beckoning him to sit next to him. Harry looked at the two men, so alike and yet with subtle differences.

Dumbledore always seemed to be hiding--something. Harry would ask him questions, and he'd give answers, but they never seemed to be quite complete. Or he'd ask a question to which Dumbledore simply didn't want to give an answer, and Harry had to be content with that (although he usually wasn't).

Aberforth, on the other hand, seemed completely open and straightforward, nothing hidden. The chief characteristic they shared, Harry felt, besides their looks, was their sense of humour. Perhaps that was why Snape disliked him, Harry thought. A sense of humour wasn't high on Snape's list of priorities.

When there were only about ten minutes left before afternoon classes would start, Will Flitwick came hurtling into the hall and ran to the Gryffindor table. There was a space open next to Harry, and Will slipped into it, banging his rucksack down and reaching for a roll before he was even sitting. He bumped into Harry as he positioned himself, mumbling something that might have been, "Sorry," through the bite of bread he was already chewing.

"S'okay," Harry said, trying not to laugh at him. His normally pale cheeks (puffed out with food now) were quite pink; he pushed his gold curls off his sweaty forehead and reached for a chicken leg to put on his plate, taking a large bite out of it first.

"Where've you been?" Harry asked him, smiling. Will tried to speed up his chewing so he wouldn't have to answer with his mouth full. After what looked to Harry like a rather painful swallowing process, Will was ready to speak.

"Hospital wing. Visiting my uncle." He said this with not a trace of recognition that the vast majority of people in the school were blaming Harry for Flitwick being in a coma. Harry swallowed and looked down at his empty plate.

"Sorry, Will," he mumbled. Will swallowed another larger piece of chicken after chewing it only briefly.

"What're you sorry for, Harry? You didn't do anything".

Harry jerked his head up, staring at the eleven-year-old boy who had stated this as unequivocally as if he'd been saying the sky was blue and Snitches were gold. Then he realized that everyone else at the Gryffindor table was staring, too. He looked back at them all, a strange maturity, Harry thought, in the way he met the eyes of every person there.

"Well, you all know that, don't you? You don't honestly think Harry could have done anything to hurt my uncle, or Cho Chang"?

Harry waited for the affirmations to come; but Ron's and Hermione's voices were feeble and too late; they knew, of course, but to say how they knew would be to tell far too much.

Now Will was standing glaring at them all, his blue eyes frowning stormily. "Is that what you think? Is that what you all think?" His voice had risen, the high-pitched, young timbre cutting through the murmur of luncheon conversation, which ground to an abrupt halt. "Is that what everyone thinks?" he said, looking around the hall, his voice carrying to the farthest corners. "You all think Harry Potter hurt my uncle?" Silence greeted him, as even people Harry knew didn't believe this didn't dare to speak.

Will's voice grew louder. "Whoever did this to my uncle was a coward. Harry Potter is not a coward! Most of you watched him lose a duel here yesterday. Did he hide afterward? No! He voted for his opponent along with everyone else! He duelled with You-Know-Who! He won the Triwizard Tournament! He deserves the respect of everyone here, of everyone in the wizarding world! Harry Potter has not done anything wrong!"

The echo of his treble voice took half a minute to die away. Harry looked at the other Gryffindors. After what seemed like a long minute of silence, Alicia stood; she nodded, and the others at the table, first through seventh years, also rose. She said softly, "Go on then, Harry. We're all behind you." He stood also, striding toward the door, flanked by Hermione and Will on his right, Ron and Parvati on his left, the rest of the Gryffindors walking in his wake.

The other houses watched this show of Gryffindor solidarity in silence. Once they were in the entrance hall, his housemates fell on him, some hugging him, others pumping his hand or slapping him on the back. Harry almost felt like crying; for two weeks he'd been living under a cloud, and now this outpouring of support was almost unbearably touching. This is what houses are for, he thought.

He smiled at the other Gryffindors, waving to the ones moving off to go to their afternoon classes. He saw Ginny look over her shoulder at him. He frowned; her expression was hard to read. He realized she had not joined in the hugging or backslapping. She had kept her distance from him. She did believe he was innocent, didn't she? Could she have traveled out of the Great Hall in the pack with the other Gryffindors just to avoid calling attention to herself? Harry swallowed, watching her go, wishing her opinion did not mean so much to him. But that was something he could not help.

* * * * *

On Thursday, Ron asked Neville to stay in the Divination classroom for a few minutes after class so he could try doing another Tarot reading for him.

"I need the practice," he said. "You know, for the O.W.L.s".

Neville looked skeptical. Since when had Ron cared about O.W.L.s? his expression seemed to say. Ron went to the shelves near the fireplace and took down a Tarot deck; they were still trying to plumb the mysterious depths of Augury, still staring listlessly at the insides of dead birds. The Tarot cards hadn't been used in a while.

As Harry was leaving, he heard Ron ask Neville, "All right. When's your birthday again?" Harry could tell Ron was trying not to smile. Neville looked unsurprised that Ron did not remember his birthday.

"Today. Um, February twenty-ninth, that is," he stuttered.

"Today? You don't say. Happy birthday, Neville. Right then. We'll just do you a birthday reading"...

Harry smiled, going down the ladder. Ron knew very well that it was Neville's birthday. Ginny had gotten wind of it and organized a party, as she had for Hermione. Was Ginny still interested in Malfoy? he had to wonder. He had mixed feelings about this. Perhaps Ginny was just organizing the party as Neville's friend, not a potential girlfriend. She'd talked Ron into being the delaying tactic, keeping Neville from coming back to the common room until they'd gotten everything ready.

When Harry arrived, Ginny and Hermione were still running around frantically. "Harry!" Ginny said imperiously. "Get out your wand! Fix those falling streamers by the stairs!" He did as she asked--or rather commanded--trying not to show how amused he was by her perfectionism. Hermione charmed the glass punch bowl so that it was suddenly frosted over; then she etched fairy-like designs in the frost with a wave of her wand. Over the mantel hung a banner declaring, "Happy 4th Birthday Neville".

Harry frowned. "Uh, Ginny? I believe Neville is sixteen".

She laughed. "He's sixteen years old, but this is only the fourth birthday he's ever had. Because it's the Leap Day! You know, it only rolls around once every four years".

Harry was nodding with understanding before she was finished. Neville would certainly be surprised, he thought.

Suddenly, a loud voice in the corridor was giving the password. Ron was heard very clearly saying, "Kneazles!" Harry fought the urge to shout, "Gezundheit!" as an answer.

The portrait swung open, and Ron climbed through. A moment later, Neville followed, but he didn't have a chance to climb in under his own power; he was dragged in bodily by a half-dozen people, while practically everyone in the house shouted, "Surprise!" or "Happy Birthday!"

Bowled over, Neville was grinning broadly, until he looked up and saw the banner over the mantel, and then he was laughing outright. Oddly, Harry couldn't remember seeing Neville laugh before. Surely he had, Harry thought. That's ridiculous. But if he had seen him laugh, it had been a very long time.

When the first excitement was over and Neville had been given a place of honour by the fireplace and a very silly hat to wear (a large stuffed vulture was on top), the presents were brought out. Harry had pitched in most of the money for a Wizarding Wireless for Neville (Ron, Ginny and Hermione were going to pay him back) and as soon as Neville saw what it was, he turned it on so there would be music for the party. He also received a glass terrarium from Seamus, Dean, Lee, Fred and George, for his toad Trevor to live in style. Neville fetched Trevor and placed him in it, and Trevor seemed quite taken with the artificial pond with its little sandy bank and smooth, round stones, ferns and other foliage. It was also stocked with a number of choice insects which could not leave the terrarium, and Trevor started pulling them into his mouth with gusto.

After the gifts, the refreshments were passed round, and then George and Angelina started dancing to the wireless, and a little by little, other people joined in. Neville asked Ginny to dance after Ron and Parvati started. Harry remembered Ron dancing with her at the Christmas party (although at the time, he was unsure whether it was Parvati or Padma). Harry somewhat self-consciously asked Hermione to dance.

Harry held her loosely, his hands on her waist, her hands on his shoulders. He noticed that Parvati was wearing her birthday sweater from Lavender again. Ron was holding her closely, his hands caressing her back. Harry saw that Neville and Ginny were dancing loosely as he and Hermione were. That was something of a relief, as it seemed to indicate they were still just friends. On the other hand, Harry thought, Hermione and I are not really just friends any more...

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ron and Parvati move toward the portrait hole. He had an idea of what they might be going off to do, and it occurred to him that he and Hermione hadn't done that for a while. He whispered in her ear, letting her know what he was suggesting.

"Where?" she whispered back. "The Charms classroom is out of the question"...

"How about Transfiguration? It's not far," he breathed. She nodded.

"You go first. I'll wait--oh, ten minutes. That should be safe." Harry murmured agreement. When the song ended, he separated from her and went up the stairs to his dorm to get the Invisibility Cloak. He tucked it under his robes, almost dropping it when climbing out of the portrait hole, but he saved it in time. Ginny looked at him coldly as he left. What was with her lately? he wondered.

Once he was in the corridor, he looked around carefully before donning the Invisibility Cloak, hoping he would not run into Moody. He proceeded carefully to the Transfiguration classroom, so he wouldn't accidentally collide with someone coming around a corner suddenly.

As he neared Transfiguration, Sandy hissed to him, "A bull wants a fish..." Harry frowned. A bull? A fish? Whom had Sandy called a fish before? Parvati. Harry had a feeling he knew who the bull was. They must be nearby, Harry thought for Sandy to be seeing anything. He hissed to her, "Thanks for the heads up, Sandy, but while I'm wearing my Invisibility Cloak, I need to be as quiet as possible".

"I understand".

"Thanks, Sandy".

He reached the Transfiguration classroom. The door was open; the moment he entered, he saw them in the far corner, partially concealed behind a stack of extra chairs. Ron had his arms around Parvati, his hands were on her bare back under her thin violet sweater. Harry could see her smooth golden brown skin; in fact, he could see almost her whole back. She didn't appear to be wearing anything under the sweater. Subtle, Harry thought. Then he remembered Hermione the day he'd first kissed her—but that wasn't planned. Parvati seemed to know exactly what she was doing. Well, Harry realized, she'd started to notice Ron after the Gryffindor/Slytherin match in the fall. Padma had too. Perhaps the two of them had reached some sort of agreement about who was going to "get" him.

But the question in Harry's brain was, Why had Ron suddenly decided to be with Parvati? After all, Hermione was on the verge of being rid of Viktor, and he hadn't seen any indication that Ron had suddenly stopped caring for her or being attracted to her. In fact, Harry was well aware of the fact that Ron's hormones were in as much of an uproar as his own. He had caught him on more than one occasion looking at a Muggle skin magazine that Dean kept stashed under his mattress. (Harry had also had a look at it). But then he remembered Ron's panic when he'd tried to speak to him about Hermione, his fear that she'd either laugh in his face or that if they did try to be a couple and failed, everything would change. Why didn't I ever think of that? Harry wondered. It simply hadn't seemed like a problem to him. Parvati, on the other hand, was very pretty, attracted to Ron, and not exactly Ron's friend; a rejection or failed relationship with her wouldn't be the same as with Hermione.

Hermione! She would be here soon, Harry thought. He looked over at Ron and Parvati again. Ron had moved his hand down below her waist; she was clutching him around the middle as they kissed; he could see their tongues shooting out. Then Ron moved his mouth down her throat, down the low V of her sweater, while she threw her head back, an animal-sound escaping from her which Harry did not associate with Parvati. Her hands started to move lower on Ron as well, and Harry's mouth went dry.

Then he remembered Malfoy saying, "Who knows what you've seen in that Invisibility Cloak of yours," and admitting to spying on Hannah and Ernie. I am not like Malfoy, he insisted to himself. He carefully backed out of the room, waiting for Hermione, wanting to make absolutely certain she did not see Ron and Parvati. He tried to resist the urge to look again to see why Ron was making that moaning sound...What if McGonagall were to come in? he wondered.

Harry felt like he was waiting years for Hermione to show up. Finally, he heard a step at the end of the corridor. She was walking forward briskly, swinging her arms, her prefect's badge gleaming, her black robes billowing behind her. Harry smiled at the sight of her. He walked down the corridor to meet her, well away from the Transfiguration classroom. Somehow he managed to forget he was wearing his Invisibility Cloak. He kept expecting her to stop any second. She seemed to be looking right at him. Then they collided painfully, both falling onto the hard stone floor.

"Ow," she groaned, wincing. "Harry, watch where you're going. I was almost at the Transfiguration classroom"...

"That's the problem." he whispered, helping her up, then adjusting his cloak again. "Someone else thought of it first. I thought we could go up to Fluffy's old hangout".

"You mean where you were ducking the prefects' meeting"?

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry about that "--

She sighed as she walked, speaking lowly, trying not to move her lips too much. "I can't really blame you. Roger was being a real prick".

"Hermione!" Harry said in shock, then clapped his hand over his mouth.

"Harry, if there's one person who does not inspire me to watch my language, it's Roger Davies. And if there's another person, it's Draco Malfoy".

"Where?" Harry said, looking around anxiously.

"I didn't mean he was here, silly. Oh, be careful; are you in front of me? We're coming up on one of those trick steps Neville always used to forget".

"Thank goodness for Neville!" Harry said softly. "Davies was so happy about him beating me he was less of a prick than usual at Sunday night's meeting".

"Harry, Harry, Harry," Hermione said softly. "Language".

"Hey, if you can say it, I can say it." He smiled under the cloak.

When they reached the door, Hermione opened it quietly, looking up and down the corridor. She lit her wand and held the door open so Harry could slip past her. She closed the door and he removed the cloak, practically throwing it on the floor. She looked at him with a helpless, open expression that made him catch his breath. She slid her hands around his neck and he pulled her to him, covering her mouth with his, feeling her open her mouth, clutching at her desperately. She dropped her lit wand and it went out.

They held each other in the total darkness, mouths ravenous, hands more adventurous than in the recent past. It's amazing how brave you can be in the dark, Harry thought as he drew her down onto the floor. They were sitting side by side against the door, turned to each other, mouths linked, her hands in his hair, his on her back, slowly and cautiously moving one to the front, remembering that night in the common room when they were interrupted by Ginny and Malfoy.

Suddenly, Hermione pulled away from him. "Ow," she said, grunting softly. "why do stone floors have to be so hard?" she asked rhetorically.

"It's not so bad in here," Harry said, reaching out to find her again, running one hand lightly down her leg.

"It's not being in here, really," she said, although he thought part of the problem was being in such a comfortless place. "It's that fall I took downstairs. I feel so sore now".

"Well then you shouldn't be sitting on a hard stone floor. Come here, sit on my lap".

He wished he could see her face. He heard her hesitate. "Well, all right," she finally said, and crawled into his lap, sitting on him sideways, her legs extending to his right.

"Is that better?" he whispered in her ear, making her shudder from his mouth being so close to it. She put her right arm around his shoulders.

"Much. It's just that--I'm so sore," she said again.

"How's this?" he said softly, moving his left hand down below her waist, caressing in light circles. He leaned forward and found her ear again, kissed it lightly, then moved his lips down her jawbone, down her neck, feeling the insistent pulse beneath the skin.

"Oh, Harry," she sighed, sinking her fingers into his hair again. Whether it was because of his hands or mouth, he didn't know, but he kept on, wanting to hear her sound like that again.

He tried not to think about Ron and Parvati and what Hermione might have done if she'd seen them. He lifted her chin and found her mouth again. He didn't want to think about them right now. He just knew that he wanted to kiss her and hold her and touch her, and as it went on he became sadder and sadder, because he knew that soon they would have to stop. He didn't want her to remember being with him on a cold stone floor in a dark room the first time; he wasn't sure how to manage it, but he wanted it to be special.

Finally, he decided it was time to stop, before they couldn't. He fumbled for his wand, lit it so he could see to fasten his robes, fasten hers, straighten his glasses. She was beautifully flustered in the dim light, her hair in her face, sweat beading on her forehead and upper lip. She stood up to brush down her robes, and he tried not to sigh with relief too loudly when she got off him. Having her sit on him had been both wonderful and excruciating. He also stood, shaking out his robes. She stooped to get her wand, then handed him the Invisibility Cloak. She seemed so practical and businesslike suddenly. He pulled her to him again, opening his mouth suddenly, feeling her respond immediately, losing that core of reserve she wore like a suit of armor most of the time. He ended the kiss, looking down at her, running his thumb along her bottom lip. She looked back at him as though she might lose her composure at any moment.

Harry looked away from her; that look was almost the end of his own self-control. He opened the door, clutching his Invisibility Cloak, and then put it on. They walked back downstairs, Hermione looking for all the world like she was alone, Harry walking unseen beside her, aching for her and very, very grateful that she had not seen Ron and Parvati.

* * * * *

Harry was glad he and Hermione had taken some time to be together on Neville's birthday. Now that he was done his Animagus training (McGonagall just wanted him to check in once a week) he was able to concentrate on Quidditch more. They had a match against Hufflepuff coming up on March sixteenth, only about two more weeks to prepare. The weather had already started to warm a bit. Harry felt that might be a red herring, as it had snowed in April in years past, but as the day of the match approached, the warm spring-like weather persisted, and Harry was optimistic about a fair day.

After Will Flitwick's show of support, many of the students had evidently decided that he probably had not cursed the Charms classroom doorway. Harry decided to go visit the hospital wing on a regular basis, talk to Cho and Flitwick, in case they could hear anything. Hermione went with him, looking very concerned about little Professor Flitwick. A possible solution for their comas was mandrake root, but Sprout's mandrakes wouldn't be mature for another month or two. Someone had Spellotaped Flitwick's many get-well cards to the wall behind his bed, as well as a banner saying, "We miss you Prof. Flitwick." Cho always seemed to have fresh flowers on her bedside table, Harry noticed. They were replenished every day, although he never saw it happen.

A few days before the Quidditch match, Harry thought he saw Viktor Krum leaving the entrance hall after he finished breakfast. Harry had left before the others; now that the weather was warming, he just wanted the chance to stand on the front steps and breathe in the fresh almost-spring air, look at a real blue sky scattered with fluffy white clouds, rather than the enchanted ceiling in the Great Hall. But as soon as he saw Viktor, his plan changed. He waited for Ron and Hermione by the front door and asked them to go down to Hagrid's without him and give his apologies for being late. Hermione looked like she was about to ask why, but Harry turned from them and headed for the marble stairs. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Ron take her arm and draw her away, out the door.

When he entered the infirmary, he saw again the fresh flowers on Cho's table, and he went to look for Madam Pomfrey in her office, but she wasn't there. He went to a door on the far side of the office which had frosted glass in it etched with the legend APOTHECARY. Harry had never been here before. He thought he saw a shadow moving about on the other side of the door and rapped gently on the glass.

He heard steps approaching the door, which was opened by a flustered-looking Madam Pomfrey, wearing a voluminous grey apron over her black robes, her face flushed with heat, wiry grey hair escaping from a sloppy bun. Harry saw a large bubbling cauldron hovering in the air above a purple fire, shelves with as many potions and potions ingredients as Snape's office, if not more.

Madam Pomfrey looked quite harried. Harry thought quickly. The way to get information, he knew from talking to McGonagall, was to behave as if you already have it.

"Madam Pomfrey, would you be sure to tell me if Viktor Krum doesn't come to see Cho in the next few days? I promise you, if he doesn't, him I'd make sure she still had fresh flowers if he couldn't make it. The Cannons might be stepping up their practices".

She told him what he wanted to know without hesitating for a moment. "I'd be happy to tell you if he doesn't come, Potter, but I'll be surprised if that happens. Not a day has gone by since she's been in here but he's bringing her flowers and sitting by her bedside talking to her... usually more than once a day." He's been coming every day, Harry thought. He had suspected, but now he knew. He thanked Madam Pomfrey and returned to the infirmary to look at Cho and Flitwick before leaving.

A side effect of people knowing she'd broken up with him but not blaming him for her current state was that girls were suddenly asking him out. There was a Hogsmeade weekend coming up on the twenty-third, one week after the Quidditch match. After the most recent Dueling Club meeting, Susan Bones had shyly asked him if he wanted to go with her to Hogsmeade. He was shocked; she'd never said two words to him in Herbology. He had deflected her invitation by saying he wasn't ready to date again yet, thanks. Perhaps she thought he was harbouring hopes of making up with Cho when she awoke. Mandy Brocklehurst then waylaid him after the prefects' meeting and asked him out for the same Hogsmeade weekend. What was so important about that weekend? Harry wondered.

He soon found out. A large parchment went up in the entrance hall announcing a traditional Scottish ceilidh on the day of the Hogsmeade trip, to be held in the town hall where they'd gone to the opera. Admission would be ten Sickles. The w

known wizarding bagpipe group Screaming Haggis was on tour, and they were stopping in Hogsmeade after playing Glasgow and Edinburgh but before going up to the Orkneys. Harry learned that ceilidh was pronounced “kelly” when Dumbledore announced it at dinner the evening after the parchment went up. But Harry was still mystified.

“What’s a seelid--I mean, a kelly?” he asked Hermione across the table while they ate.

“A ceilidh,” she said it more like kay-lee, “is a gathering, a dance. With traditional Scottish reels and that sort of thing. You know, lots of bagpipes, usually some sword dancing. And the men are supposed to wear kilts”.

Kilts! Harry thought, alarmed. Had Susan and Mandy been asking him on a date that would require him to wear a kilt? But soon, Susan and Mandy were the least of his problems. A fourth-year Slytherin girl he didn’t know asked him to the ceilidh. He turned her down. She had a thick Scottish burr and he could barely understand what she said. He did think, though, that it took guts for a Slytherin to ask him out. Then, to make matters worse, Katie Bell cornered him in the common room and asked him to the same dance. He deflected her, stuttering nervously the whole time. But the really difficult refusal came when Alicia trapped him in the Quidditch changing room after practice the day before the match.

She put her hand on his arm and stopped him leaving after the other players had left. No one seemed to miss them. He looked at her quizzically.

“Alicia, what--” he started to say, when she pushed him up against the wall and slid her hands up around his neck. The next thing he knew she had pulled his face down to hers and put her mouth against his, then an insistent tongue was trying to slip between his teeth...

He sputtered and pulled back, the taste of her still in his mouth. He swallowed and looked at her. She appeared as perfect as ever. Her straight blonde hair shivered around her chin, her crystal-blue eyes looked at him curiously. Her smooth porcelain skin had not a blemish or freckle, and he could easily picture her in a riding habit, nodding imperiously at a groom holding her mount. But for some reason, he pictured her in an old-fashioned habit with a large skirt and fitted black jacket, a lace jabot at her throat and a jaunty black bowler with black netting pulled down over her aristocratic face as she sat side-saddle on a gleaming chestnut thoroughbred...

She took advantage of his mind wandering to kiss him again, and this time she was more successful; he found himself kissing her back, hands holding her shoulders, mouth on auto-pilot for almost ten seconds before he came to his senses and pushed her away.

“Alicia! Stop!” he said when he had his brain back.

She was smiling knowingly. “Your words say stop, but your actions”--

“Alicia! You--you caught me by surprise. This isn’t about the ceilidh, is it? Because I’m not going with you”.

She looked rather hurt. “Yes, I was going to ask you to the ceilidh--” she said, tears in her voice. He knew he shouldn’t have said that; he should have let her ask him out, then tactfully turn her down. He realized he probably seemed awfully conceited to assume she was going to ask him to the dance.

“I’m sorry, Alicia, I didn’t mean to--” but she backed up from him, laughing and yet seeming like the laughter was to stave off her tears.

“What was I thinking?” she asked, as if she was talking to herself, not him. “What made me think I could--that Harry Potter would”--

“Alicia!” he shouted to get her to look at him. “Are you all right”?

She looked at him, rather dazed, then shaking her head as if to clear it. When she spoke, she sounded closer to normal.

“Harry--I’m sorry. I don’t know why I did that. I just--I just felt this compulsion--I know that’s not a good excuse, but you’re not seeing anyone now”--

“And I don’t want to,” he said, trying to soften the edge of his voice a little. “I’m just--not ready to do that again, not yet”--

She nodded, swallowing, wiped her eyes delicately, so that there were no longer unshed tears there, ready to spill over her cheeks. "I understand".

But did she? wondered Harry. In a way, he was seeing someone else, but it seemed more tactful to wait and see whether Cho and Flitwick could be wakened by the mandrakes before going public with a new relationship—especially with one of his best friends.

Alicia whispered, "Can we just pretend this never happened"?

Harry nodded. "Of course. Total amnesia".

She smiled. "Almost as good as a memory charm." Then, looking at him wistfully for a moment, she turned and ran out of the changing room. Harry let his breath out, not having even realized he was holding it. Clearly, he needed to figure out what to do about the damn ceilidh.

* * * * *

Gryffindor beat Hufflepuff by a respectable two-hundred ten to thirty. Gryffindor was now in the lead for the Quidditch Cup with five-hundred and twenty points. Slytherin only had two-hundred and ninety from their match against Hufflepuff, since they were scoreless against Gryffindor. And Hufflepuff had a paltry one-hundred-ten points and no wins after three matches. Ravenclaw only had two-hundred and ten, but unlike Slytherin, they still had two matches yet. The schedule had been rearranged by Madam Hooch so that Ravenclaw was playing in the late April match and the final match of the year in early June; everyone was hoping that Cho Chang would be recovered and ready to play Seeker by then, with little Flitwick looking on and cheering for his house team.

Even though the Quaffle had only gotten past him three times, Ron was enormously chagrined about this. The new Hufflepuff captain was Ashraf el-Madi, who played Chaser. He had scored the thirty points, looking venomously at Ron the entire time. Harry thought el-Madi seemed more like a Slytherin than a Hufflepuff. He had given Harry a funny look when they shook hands before the match. Harry had shuddered afterward; he was glad el-Madi was a seventh-year. The Hufflepuffs would have to choose another captain next year.

The rest of the team just wasn't up to el-Madi, however. Ernie Macmillan struggled as the Keeper, letting Gryffindor score on him six times. Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones were the other Chasers; Susan wasn't bad, but Hannah wasn't any better at Quidditch than she was at dueling. The Beaters, a fourth year named Drumm and a sixth year named Carson, were almost more of a danger to their own teammates than to the Gryffindors. They reminded Harry of how Hermione had played at the Burrow. Four times Justin had almost been struck by Bludgers hit by his own teammates.

Harry felt in his element again. Even though it wasn't shaping up to be very difficult to play Hufflepuff, Harry didn't want to be lackadaisical about catching the Snitch. If Justin got to it first, Hufflepuff would still win. When Harry spotted the Snitch, he zoomed for it on his Firebolt, executing a perfect roll before going into the dive, as Justin followed half a field behind. Harry flew around the pitch, holding the Snitch over his head, smiling.

When both teams landed and Harry shook el-Madi's hand again, he couldn't help but notice a sadness in his hooded eyes that seemed to have little to do with losing at Quidditch. Perhaps his hostility earlier had simply been loyalty to his house rather than a Slytherin-like quality. All of the Hufflepuffs seemed pretty subdued. It wasn't just that they were out of the running for the Quidditch Cup, Harry suspected. They'd all looked like they'd been carrying a heavy burden all year. Cedric should have been their captain still, and their Seeker. Instead, Ashraf el-Madi had been tapped to be captain, and Muggle-born Justin, who was small and lithe but had never played Quidditch before, was now their none-too-sharp-eyed Seeker. Perhaps el-Madi resented Harry for living when Cedric was dead. Harry himself felt this way quite often.

The other Gryffindors seemed to get the idea that this wasn't the sort of win to be gloated over. This wasn't beating Slytherin. They walked back to the castle talking quietly, Fred and George clowning rather half-heartedly, no one discussing the match. Ron walked with his arm around Parvati's shoulder, her arm around his waist. They both looked rather serious somehow. Harry trailed behind everyone else, and Hermione noticed and slowed her pace.

"Are you all right, Harry?" she said softly, putting her hand on his arm. He didn't look at her, nodding. "If you say so," she murmured, obviously unconvinced. "Oh, I almost forgot. You know the ceilidh? Viktor says he can't come. I had hoped he would show up to break up with me, or maybe I could break up with him. But now—anyway, everyone else is going, and it sounds like fun"...

“Actually, I was going to ask you. But to tell the truth, I’ve been fending off all of these invitations from other girls. Rather amazing. I mean Cho did break up with me, but she is in a coma now. You’d think they’d be a little more sensitive.” The he notice Hermione’s face. “I didn’t mean you too! It’s just that--well, we’ll have to tell people we’re going as friends. You’re still with Viktor, technically, and I’ve been telling all these girls I don’t want to be in a relationship again already--that I ever really felt like I was in one--oh! I almost forgot!” He stopped and turned to face her. “Hermione, I--well, it was really me--okay, it kind of was, but I didn’t start it--oh, dammit! Here!” He extended his foot out toward her. She stared down at it.

“What am I supposed to do”?

“Mash it! Stomp on it! Go on”!

“Harry, what are you talking about”?

He sighed. “Listen, don’t be mad at her. And don’t tell anyone. Alicia is one of the girls who asked me out. And she--she kissed me”.

Hermione took this in, looking strangely calm. “And”?

“And, well, I kind of kissed her back for a few seconds. But then I put a stop to all of it”!

Hermione continued to look at him with a strange calmness. “So that’s it?” He nodded. “Harry, I’m not going to mash your foot. It certainly doesn’t sound like you were trying to get Alicia to kiss you. I’m fine”.

“You’re fine?” he said, incredulous.

“Harry, I know that--that I once said I wanted this too much, that I felt out of control, but that’s not true anymore.” She looked at his face for a moment, then, as if realizing how this sounded, she got a horrified look on her face and plunged on. “Oh, Harry, I don’t mean--I mean I still want us to be together. I just don’t feel--I don’t know how to put it--insane? Desperate? None of this is probably coming out right. I feel confident that everything will work itself out. That’s it. I think I lacked that confidence before, and it made me feel rather frantic about us. In the last month, I’ve felt a kind of calmness come over me. I just feel that we’re inevitable, somehow, and to expend a huge amount of mental energy obsessing about us would just be a waste. I have no doubts about us, Harry. I know we’re going to be fine. I don’t care how many girls throw themselves at you. I think I know you pretty well by now, Harry, and you haven’t given me any reason to worry.” She paused. “Well, except for one thing”...

“What”?

“Well--you do seem rather--odd about Malfoy and Ginny”.

Harry tried to keep his face impassive. “You tried to warn him yourself about his behaving himself with her”.

“That was because of her age. You told him he had to keep behaving himself after her birthday as well. And the way you said it”--

“I thought you said you didn’t care how many girls threw themselves at me”?

“Yes, but Ginny isn’t one of those girls, is she”?

Harry looked at her, a lump in his throat. “I’m just thinking of Ron. He’ll be mad enough when he finds out about them--that goes for you now too. We’re both keeping this from him. I’m just trying to keep what he doesn’t know to a minimum”.

But although she nodded, Harry could see she was unconvinced. It wasn’t surprising. Harry didn’t feel particularly convinced by his own words. He reached out for her hand and she gave it to him. He took a deep breath before continuing.

“I’ve been meaning to mention something to you, Hermione. There’s this potion, it’s called Prophylaxis Potion”--

“Yes. I know all about that.” She sounded very calm again, like she’d forgotten about Ginny.

"You do"?

"Don't worry Harry. When the time is right"--

She squeezed his hand, then released it. They were at the door to the castle. She walked in ahead of him, and he stood watching her, having difficulty breathing suddenly. Maybe this would happen after all, Harry thought. Perhaps she was right, and everything would work out. He certainly hoped so.

Then, he realized that if they were going to the ceilidh in one week, he would need a kilt. Suddenly, wearing a kilt to go a dance with Hermione didn't seem like such an onerous task. But how to get it ?

Then he remembered what he had done when he needed a Pensieve, and Muggle newspapers: he'd contacted Sirius. But he didn't have time for Hedwig to fly all the way down to Manchester and back. How to do it?

As he passed the doorway to the Great Hall, he had an idea. He stopped and turned, walked into the enormous room, enchanted ceiling showing the same brilliant blue sky he'd just been playing under. His steps sounded very loud and echoed as he briskly crossed the hall, and he hesitated for only a moment before opening the door to the passage Snape had shown him .

He lit his wand and closed the door behind him, carrying his broom carefully and descending the stairs lightly, instinctively walking on tip-toe. When he reached the hidden passage that he and Snape had accessed by going behind the tapestry Harry was momentarily flummoxed; where had Snape touched the wall again? Harry leaned his broom against the wall, he could run his left hand over the slightly damp stones, still holding his wand up so he could see .

Finally, part of the wall gave way; he put his shoulder to it and felt it pivot, groaning and complaining. When there was enough space for him to pass through, he turned himself sideways and slipped into Snape's office, carrying his broom, putting his wand away first. He breathed a sigh of relief and started to brush himself off, then looked up and into the inquisitive eyes of Severus Snape, sitting at his desk.

"And to what do I owe this visit?" Snape's oily voice met his ears. Harry felt himself redden. He'd been accused of breaking into Snape's office in the past, and now here he was actually doing it. He'd been hoping to use the powder on the mantel to call Sirius without Snape knowing about it, but now--

"I, um needed to talk to you and I didn't want to take the chance that someone might be in the Potions Dungeon and see me coming in," he lied, although, he thought, that could have been how it happened...

"What did you need to see me about"?

"Well--all right. Not really you. I needed to contact Sirius and I was hoping you'd let me use your fireplace to do it".

He nodded. "And why do you need to speak to Black"?

Harry fought the urge to shuffle his feet and look like a four-year-old. "Because--he's my godfather and I need a kilt for ceilidh next week".

Snape sat up and looked concerned. "You're going? Are you sure you want to do that"?

Harry frowned. "Is the band that bad"?

He sneered. "I don't care about the damn band. We have some intelligence that there might--there might be some Death Eater activity"...

Harry's eyes opened wide. "Are you positive? Because a lot of the students are planning to go. Would they all be in danger"?

Snape sat back and put his fingers together, his brow knit in thought. "On the other hand, perhaps it wouldn't be a bad thing for the captain of the Dueling Club to be there. If anyone could probably manage Death Eaters...Are you taking a girl"?

“Hermione”.

“Well, there you go. The two top students in the club. And you’ll be prepared, since you’ll know ahead of time. But don’t tell the other students; I don’t want to create a panic. We’ve had other leads go south. It’s unclear whether one of our informants is actually a double-agent, giving us bad information on purpose. Four times in the last two months while Black was sent on a wild goose chase, elsewhere Muggles were being tortured or just played with by Death Eaters. The Ministry dispatched their Memory Charms people to take care of the aftermath, but Fudge is still ignoring the root problem. There is yet to be anything in the Daily Prophet about the Dark Lord returning, or about these Muggle attacks. Let alone the Westminster tube station”.

“I didn’t know about those attacks,” Harry said, feeling a little left out.

“Black didn’t see the need to tell you about every little bit of mischief they’re up to, and I concur. You need to focus on school, on learning everything you can. On the one hand, I hope that everyone at the ceilidh will be safe. I’m going myself. But you’re right; you’ll need a kilt. Black should be able to get you the right clan. He’ll know”.

“I’m Scottish”?

He nodded. “I seem to remember your father mentioning something about his mother, or grandmother”.

Harry nodded. Then he remembered something. “So, do you have a Clan Campbell kilt?”

Snape had been looking for something in a desk drawer, but now he snapped his head up; Harry had never before mentioned to Snape anything that he’d learned in the Pensieve. He had brought up the goblet of blood with Sirius, but never with Snape.

“Yes,” he said softly. “I have one”.

Harry looked toward the fireplace, wanting to dissipate the awkwardness. He put his hand near the powder on the mantel. “May I?” he asked. Snape nodded.

He threw some into the fire, saying, “Remus Lupin”.

After a few moments, Lupin’s face appeared in the flames. Harry smiled; he hadn’t actually seen him in some time.

“Harry! How are you? Looks like you’ve been playing Quidditch. Was it a practice or a match”?

“Match. We won. Against Hufflepuff. Two-ten to thirty”.

“Excellent! I’ll get Sirius.” His head disappeared.

In a few more moments, Sirius’ head appeared in the flames. “Hello, Harry. Why the call”?

“Well, you know the ceilidh in Hogsmeade next week? I’m going. So I was hoping you could get me a kilt. Snape said you knew what the right clan would be. I didn’t even know my dad was Scottish”.

“Clan MacGregor. Very nice tartan, red and black primarily. Are you going with Hermione”?

Harry looked down, colouring, then caught Snape’s eye; he seemed interested that Sirius knew about Hermione. “Yes”.

“All right, I’ll get a length of tartan for her to wear around her shoulders. Women don’t wear kilts; they drape the tartans themselves and hold it in place with a large sort of brooch with the clan crest on it”.

Harry hesitated now. “Sirius--are the Death Eaters going to attack the ceilidh? If that’s a possibility, shouldn’t Dumbledore cancel the Hogsmeade trip”?

Sirius sighed. “I don’t know what to think, Harry. I feel like we’ve been getting as much good information as bad lately. I mean, look at your situation; someone managed to bewitch the door of the Charms classroom in Hogwarts! How did someone infiltrate Hogwarts”?

Harry was perplexed. "I didn't tell you anything about that." He thought of Malfoy and the mystery of who had sent him school owls.

"Yes, and I'll be hacked off at you about that another time. Severus told me".

"Sorry," he mumbled .

"At any rate, I'll hopefully see you there".

"Where"?

"At the ceilidh. And there will be other operatives there as well. Hopefully we'll be so well-covered that the Death Eaters won't dare pull anything. Plus, this will be a wizard gathering, not Muggle. I don't suppose you've ever been to a wizard ceilidh, Harry"?

"Never been to any kind of ceilidh".

"Well, it used to be that only the men danced. But Scottish magical folk gave women more freedom and equality than Muggles pretty early on. Now the only wizard-only dancing is with the swords. Although, I suppose that if a witch wanted to join in the sword dancing, no one would stop her".

"But Sirius--how will you be there? You'd be recognized, thrown back into Azkaban"!

Sirius smiled cryptically and flashed his eyes at Harry. "I didn't say I would look like myself, did I?" Harry caught on; Polyjuice Potion.

"Be careful," he cautioned him. Sirius took the warning in the affectionate way it was intended.

"I will," he said to his godson gently. "Well! If I'm to get you and Hermione some Clan MacGregor gear, I'd better get going. I know the perfect place in Sloane Square in London. I'll Apparate there and back this afternoon and you should have your kilt, tartan and everything else you need by tomorrow. And I don't need to get you a dirk; you can use that kilt I already gave you. It's a magical dirk".

"What does that have to do with the ceilidh? Not that I mind having another weapon"...

Sirius smiled. "I'll also send a book so you know how to dress yourself properly. The dirk goes in your sock. Perhaps you can explain it to him, Severus".

Snape nodded, and Harry tried not to laugh; if anyone had ever told him he'd be getting advice on how to dress from Snape...

"Well, I'd better get shopping then, Harry. Good bye for now. See you both next Saturday." And he was gone. Harry thanked Snape and left through the secret passage again, grateful that Snape gave him a way to contact Sirius that was faster than owl post, but also somehow grateful that he wasn't also in Clan Campbell, like Snape. He wondered what tartan Sirius would wear. And what face.

* * * * *

The next day at breakfast, Lupin's owl delivered a large package to Harry from Sirius with his kilt, plus something called a sporran, some diamond-patterned socks, and several other alien-looking things he supposed he'd have to look up in the book Sirius also included about the Scottish Clans. A paper-wrapped parcel inside Harry's larger package had Hermione's name on it. She was surprised, opening it after moving her breakfast dishes aside .

"Oh," she breathed when she took out a beautiful length of the red and black MacGregor tartan. Harry put out his hand and felt the material; it was a heavy wool, but silky soft. The kilt was slightly rougher. There was also a silver-colored brooch with a lion's head in the middle, wearing a crown; it was flanked by a unicorn and a stag. Harry held it, looking at the stag wistfully, tracing it with his finger.

"Prongs..." he said softly, under his breath.

Unfortunately, Katie and Alicia were sitting across from them at the Gryffindor table that morning. Alicia eyed Hermione a rather unfriendly way now.

“What’s that for?” she wanted to know, nodding at Hermione’s tartan.

Hermione looked at her as though she had no knowledge of her kissing Harry and asking him to the same dance.

“Harry and I are going to the ceilidh. As friends. But since I’m not Scottish, I’ll be wearing his tartan”.

Alicia and Katie looked at each other knowingly; perhaps their suspicions were just fueled by jealousy, but Harry started worry about how much longer they were going to be able to keep things covered up. It was getting very awkward, and here they were, preparing rather publicly for what amounted to a date.

“As friends?” Katie said, sounding doubtful.

Hermione nodded, then started speaking rapidly. “You know, it’s quite fascinating how most Scottish wizards didn’t start wearing robes until the wearing of the tartan was outlawed after Culloden, in 1754. Before that, you couldn’t really tell a Scottish Muggle from a wizard, unless you actually saw him Apparate or do some other kind of magic. And did you know that Robert the Bruce was actually a wizard? Well, of course, that explains Bannockburn. I mean, if he hadn’t been a wizard...I’ve been reading this book from the library, ‘Great Scottish Wizards’, and it’s just amazing how many of the most famous Scots were magical”...

Alicia and Katie rolled their eyes and rose to leave. Harry smiled. Hermione really knew how to clear a room when she wanted to (and sometimes, when she didn’t want to). Of course, the really foolproof tactic was for her to start reciting ‘Hogwarts: A History’ verbatim, but any obscure book would do.

On her other side, Ron was wincing. “Is there any book in the library you haven’t memorized?” He was sitting with his arms around Parvati. Hermione looked at him coldly.

“Is there any book in this school you’ve actually opened?” she responded, then rose, taking her package from Sirius, leaving the hall. Ron followed her with his eyes, his expression inscrutable, then turned to Harry.

“So. You’re going to the ceilidh”.

Harry nodded, unsure whether he meant ‘you’ as singular or plural. Ron made a face. “Couldn’t pay me to wear a kilt. A kilt. I’m always hard up for money, so that’s saying something. We’re just going to hang out at Honeydukes and the Three Broomsticks.” Harry realized after a second that Ron’s ‘we’ included Parvati. He was still getting used to this. It felt rather odd. Parvati also looked relieved, as though a ceilidh were the last place on earth she wanted to be.

This was confirmed for Harry when she said, “Bagpipes...” and shuddered in revulsion.

“I rather like bagpipes,” Ginny said. She’d been sitting next to Katie. Next to her, Neville got a strange expression on his face. He turned to her now, looking a bit nervous.

“In that case--would you--would you like to go to the ceilidh with me, Ginny”?

Ginny looked at him, her mouth open. Ron was frowning. Harry wondered what she would do. She looked like she was afraid to hurt Neville’s feelings in front of so many people. She finally mumbled, “All right,” looking like she’d been tricked into it. Neville smiled.

“Thanks. I have to find out from my gran if she can send my dad’s old kilt. I don’t even remember what clan it is. I’m sure there’s a length of tartan too. Unless you have your own clan”.

She shook her head. “No. Yours will do fine”.

He smiled again and rose to go. Ginny remained, looking helplessly at Harry. She checked to see that Ron was speaking in low tones to Parvati before whispering to him, “Oh, dear. What do you suppose I should tell--you know who?” she whispered.

Harry hoped nobody present could hear Ginny; they might think she was talking about Voldemort. "If he's going," he said softly, "then he could probably cut in at some point. You two might actually have a chance to dance together".

Ginny looked thoughtful. "Hmm. I hadn't considered that. Do you think he would go"?

Harry sighed. "Well if you tell him you're going with Neville, do you think you could keep him away"?

Ginny smiled. "You have a point. I mean, though, he isn't Scottish, is he"?

He nodded, taking a piece of bacon from his plate. "Clan Campbell," he said casually, biting the bacon. Ginny was perplexed.

"How do you know"?

He looked guiltily at her. The Pensieve wasn't even something he could really tell Ginny about...But he managed to answer truthfully. "I heard Lucius Malfoy mention it once".

Ginny didn't have to know that the Lucius Malfoy in question had been twenty years younger, and that he'd heard it in a Pensieve. Ginny seemed satisfied. Harry thought, that's two more. Three, counting Malfoy. He agreed that if Hogwarts students were going to be there, having many of them be members of the Dueling Club was an excellent idea. He wished he could warn more of them besides Hermione that they needed to keep on their toes, however. But he didn't dare. He would just have to hope that it would be all right .

* * * * *

On Thursday afternoon, Harry and Ron were staring dispiritedly at the entrails of yet another dead chicken, having, over time, grown inured to gazing at the mess. Trelawney came over to their table and leaned over, looking at their bird. "Ah," she said in that misty voice of hers. "I know what I see. The question is, do you see it?" She looked at Harry expectantly, she'd been waiting all year for him to display his Inner Eye again, to no avail, since he had stopped wearing Sandy to Divination for a while. Even though he was wearing her now, he was determined to ignore any of her predictions unless she told him something of life-and-death importance.

Harry squinted at the bloody mess in front of him, trying to look thoughtful. Ron had that I'm-just-going-to-make-it-up look on his face. Harry couldn't wait to hear what he would say.

"What do you think?" he said to Ron, trying to keep a straight face.

Ron looked like he was pondering a question for the ages. "I think--that the sleeping will awake and feel refreshed. A curse will be lifted." Yeah, thought Harry; those of us sleeping in here will awake refreshed and the curse of being in Divination class will be lifted as soon as the bloody bell rings. Once when he'd told Dumbledore he'd fallen asleep in Divination, the headmaster hadn't even been surprised. He seemed to expect it.

Trelawney frowned. Harry could tell she knew she was being played. She didn't comment, but moved on to Lavender and Parvati, who had also grown used to the dead chickens, even going so far as to volunteer to strangle their own, which gave Harry the willies. Some dueler I'll be, going up against Death Eaters, he thought. Girls can bring themselves to strangle a chicken, but I can't.

After class was finally over, they found Hermione waiting for them at the foot of the ladder that led down from Trelawney. She was practically hopping up and down with excitement. "Harry!" she said excitedly. "They're awake"!

He frowned, confused. "Who"?

"Cho and Flitwick! I just found out! Let's go!" She pulled his hand and Harry looked at Ron helplessly.

"See you in the common room," he called to him. Ron nodded. He didn't seem inclined to come with them, which Harry thought was just as well. He saw Ron put his arm around Parvati and start walking along to Gryffindor Tower while he pulled along the corridor to the hospital wing by Hermione.

When they reached the door to the infirmary, Harry hesitated before putting his hand on the knob. Hermione was in no mood for that, however, and she put her hand on the knob instead, turning it and rushing inside. Harry followed her, as

she started across the room. Little Flitwick was sitting up in his bed, talking with Will and some Ravenclaws who had already come. He waved cheerily to Harry and Hermione. A curtain had been drawn around Cho's bed, which was where they went now. But when they pulled back the curtain, they found Viktor Krum kissing Cho Chang on the mouth, holding her face in his hands. They stood still, struck dumb. Viktor turned, becoming the same color as the bedsheets. Cho looked embarrassed.

"Herm-own-ninny! And Harry! I--uh"--

Hermione smiled at him. "It's okay, Viktor. I--I knew you were coming every day to see her. I kind of suspected"...

Cho Chang looked at Viktor. "Every day?" Viktor got his colour back, and then some, looking down at his feet. Cho smiled and laced her fingers through his, and he looked down at her, covering their linked hands with his other hand. Then Cho looked at Harry, horrified. "Oh, Harry--I'm sorry"--

He gave her an understanding look. "You already broke up with me, remember"?

She looked confused, then looked as though she remembered again. "That's right. And--hey! Why'd you send me that note? Are you the reason I've been asleep for--how long has it been, Viktor"?

"Forty days".

"Well," Harry began. "Yes and no".

"Yes and no what?" Cho demanded.

"Yes I'm the reason you've been asleep for forty days, but not because I sent you the note. I didn't send it, in fact." He explained to her how Ron and Hermione had also received notes, and he had prevented them from going. He hadn't known she'd received a note, so he hadn't been able to warn her. "We still don't know who did it," Harry told her. "But you clearly did the right thing to break up with me. I wondered for a while if I ever should have gone out with you, whether it would make you a target"...

She grimaced. "I'm the one who asked you out, Harry. I had my eyes wide open".

He nodded, not wanting to argue with her. Viktor looked at Hermione again. "I am sorry for the way things worked out, Herm-own-ninny"...

She patted Viktor on the arm, smiling. "I'm not. You two look pretty happy." Cho and Viktor gazed at each other; they did actually. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all, Harry thought. He felt a kind of matchmaker-smugness come over him. He and Hermione decided to leave Cho and Viktor alone when they started to kiss again, clearly forgetting they weren't alone.

Outside the curtain, they saw that Flitwick's visitors had left, so they went to talk to him.

"Harry! Hermione! How nice to see you again. How nice to see anyone again!" he chuckled. Forty days of bedrest didn't seem to have disagreed with him. Harry, however, was having trouble meeting his eyes. Flitwick noticed. His voice became uncharacteristically commanding. "Harry. Look at me." Harry raised his eyes to the little wizard's and swallowed. "Will told me people had been blaming you for what happened. He told me about Ron's and Hermione's notes. Of course you wouldn't do such a thing. This is not your fault. Although, I would like to find out who did it. Quite ingenious. A very simple burglar alarm charm, actually, slightly obscure; it's been superseded by more complex charms for the same purpose, so it isn't used very much any more. It simply puts the victim into an enchanted sleep for forty days, after which they usually wake up in prison, having been tried while asleep. Did you know you could be tried for burglary under wizarding law while you are asleep? The law only requires that the accused be present; not conscious." He laughed, and Harry and Hermione laughed with him. "I half expected to wake up in a cell at the Ministry of Magic, convicted of robbing my own classroom!" he crowed.

"But why couldn't Professor Dumbledore or Madam Pomfrey wake you and Cho?" Hermione wanted to know.

"For the very reason I just said; it's an enchanted sleep. There is absolutely nothing that can be done before the forty days are up. One just has to wait".

“Then--it’s not dark magic”?

He frowned. “Not even close. It’s harmless stuff. Inconvenient, I’ll grant you. I hope you have been keeping up with your O.W.L. preparation”...

“Of course,” Hermione assured him. “And Aberforth was teaching for the last three weeks”...

He sat up straighter now, frowning more deeply. “Aberforth Dumbledore?” Now he grimaced. “Well! Thank goodness I’m awake now!”

Harry was perplexed. What did the other teachers have against Aberforth? Was it that ‘inappropriate charms on a goat’ thing? He’d noticed in the three weeks Aberforth had been teaching that the other teachers avoided him like the plague and Professors Sinistra and Vector appeared to be staring venomously at him and whispering behind their hands at mealtimes. Snape definitely did not like him; Harry heard him deliver more than one cutting remark in his direction. Even though he was Dumbledore’s brother, even McGonagall and Sprout looked askance at him. Now Flitwick, it appeared, was none too pleased to hear that Aberforth had been covering his classes. Boy, Harry thought, people in the wizarding world can sure carry a grudge for a long time...

Harry and Hermione bade Flitwick goodbye, and when they were in the corridor outside the infirmary once more, they couldn’t help but grin foolishly at each other. Hermione slid her arms up around his neck and he bent down to kiss her; they were each free! Cho and Viktor were together, she and Flitwick were unharmed and feeling just fine, and as the kiss deepened and Harry pulled her closer to him, he thought that he couldn’t remember when he’d had a better day.

“Ahem!” came a familiar throat clearing. As Harry jerked himself away from Hermione, he was ready to face--

Aberforth Dumbledore. When Harry saw it was him, and not his brother, he heaved a sigh of relief. Aberforth looked mildly amused at the scene he’d interrupted. “Hello Harry, Hermione. You’re--blocking the door to the infirmary.” His eyes twinkled so like his brother’s that Harry wondered whether they were twins. Albus Dumbledore a twin! Why had it never occurred to him before? The differences between them were superficial; hair length, the cut of the beard, Aberforth’s tan...It made a certain amount of sense. Harry wondered, however, when he would ever get up the nerve to ask either of them. Certainly this was not the time.

“Are you sure,” Hermione asked Aberforth diplomatically, as though he hadn’t just caught her exploring Harry’s tonsils, “that you want to go in there? Professor Flitwick seemed a bit--agitated to learn that you’d been teaching his classes”.

Aberforth looked merely amused. “I daresay he would be. I don’t intend to let him get to me, Hermione. I’ve developed pretty thick skin over the years.” Harry and Hermione stepped out of the way and Aberforth opened the door of the infirmary. Then, before closing it, he turned to them again.

“Well, this will probably be goodbye. From what you say, Flitwick will want to get right back to teaching his own classes tomorrow.” They each said goodbye to him; Harry felt he really would miss him. He was so easy to be around, having all of Dumbledore’s easygoing qualities, but none of his authority as headmaster.

“Good luck on your O.W.L.s,” he said to them finally. “And Harry--” Harry turned to him again. Aberforth winked one blue eye. “I’ll see you soon.” Then he closed the door to the infirmary .

Two seconds later they heard Flitwick cry, “Aberforth Dumbledore, what have you done to my classes?” Harry and Hermione smiled, walking away down the corridor, refraining from laughing until they’d gone a respectable distance. Then, as they went back to Gryffindor Tower, Harry puzzled over the last thing Aberforth had said. “I’ll see you soon.” Even when he was leaving, he’d said. He thought of saying something to Hermione, changed his mind. Oh well, thought Harry. He probably just meant he was going to the ceilidh or something. Harry was starting to look forward to that more and more for himself. He smiled at Hermione, walking beside him. They would actually be going together, almost like a couple. This would be a good weekend. If there were no Death Eaters.

* * * * *

After classes on Friday, Harry, Ron and Hermione went to the library together. Harry and Ron were doing research on the History of Magic essay which Hermione had already finished (they’d been putting it off, as usual). Harry and Ron wanted to be done with it before the Hogsmeade outing, if possible. Hermione was reading more about Scotland’s wizarding past, trying to get some idea of what the ceilidh would be like. Finally, she had gleaned everything she could on the subject.

"I'm going back to Gryffindor Tower. I want to see if Ginny can help me drape my tartan correctly. I'll see you two at dinner, I suppose"?

Harry looked down at the three inches he'd written so far for his three-foot essay; Ron had written even less. Harry sighed. "If we're lucky, we'll have these done by then".

She smiled at him. "Well, at least you're making a start, finally. You can always finish on Sunday." But after she left Harry thought, When Sunday? During Dueling Club? Or the prefects' meeting? He was starting to feel just a bit overextended. At least Ron didn't have to go to the idiotic prefects' meetings. But if Harry told him how lucky he was, he would just think Harry was patronizing him again, complaining about being rich, famous Harry Potter. Harry sighed. He was feeling like he was walking on eggshells with Ron more and more often.

After a little while, they heard a group of students come into the library and sit on the other side of the bookcase behind which Harry and Ron were seated. They didn't seem to be in the library to study.

"I heard Susan asked him," came a familiar voice; a little like Parvati's, but with more of an edge to it. Must be Padma, Harry thought.

"Didn't you ask him, Mandy?" said another voice. Harry thought it might be Niamh Quirke. Which would mean these were Ravenclaw girls, gossiping in the library. Mandy would be Mandy Brocklehurst.

"Yes," Harry heard Mandy's reluctant admission. "But he also turned down Alicia Spinnet and Katie Bell, I heard".

Harry had been hoping against hope that they might be talking about someone else. But as soon as he heard this, he knew it was no good. He looked at Ron, measuring his meager essay and frowning; had he figured out yet what they were talking about? He wished he could perform some sort of silencing charm without Ron noticing.

Unfortunately, the girls went on. He heard Niamh's voice next. "So is he going or not"?

"Yes. With Hermione Granger," Padma answered her. Ron's head jerked up. He looked at Harry with wide eyes. Harry widened his eyes as well, acting as though he hadn't previously known who they were discussing.

Harry and Ron heard Niamh snort in derision. "Like I couldn't have seen that coming".

Padma said, "Parvati said they're going as friends".

Another snort from Niamh. "Your sister had better watch herself. That Ron Weasley's probably going to throw her overboard soon as Harry Potter's done with Hermione Granger. He's just the type, isn't he, to wait for his famous friend's cast-off? He'd probably be with Cho Chang already if she hadn't taken up with Viktor Krum, and don't get me started on him"...

Padma chimed in, "Oh, I agree about Hermione Granger. I mean, he went to the Yule Ball with me, then spent the whole time ogling her. He's been panting after her for years, but he was really so obvious that night. Classic dog in the manger..."

Harry dared to glance at Ron. He had never seen him so angry. His face was almost as red as his hair, and his nostrils were flaring; his jaw was clenched, as though he had to try very hard not to spit out a hateful retort to what they had just said. Instead, in what Harry felt was a great show of self-control for Ron, he threw his things into his rucksack and prepared to storm out of the library. Harry threw his things into his bag as well, and also rose to leave. Ron stopped before going, glaring at the girls, who were startled to see him. Niamh had been about to say something else, but looked like she had changed her mind when she saw Ron's face. He too looked like he might say something, then turned and left, steam practically coming out of his ears.

Harry remained, staring them down, breathing through his nose, also feeling the anger roiling through him. "In future," he said to them formally and stiffly, "I would recommend not gossiping about people who are sitting less than ten feet away. In fact, not gossiping at all is something you might try." They looked back at him, Mandy terrified, Padma still looking alarmed at the way Harry and Ron had seemed to materialize from nowhere. Niamh alone was trying to maintain her composure, staring back at him. He looked her in the eye now.

"See you in Dueling Club, Niamh," he said softly, hoping it sounded like the threat it was. When he saw the change in her expression, he knew she understood. Yes, Niamh, he thought. Be afraid. You have no idea...

Actually, he hoped he could calm down a bit by Sunday, if not quite a bit sooner. He stormed out of the library, having trouble seeing, he was so angry about the thoughtless things they'd said. He felt that if he'd stayed any longer, the threats of them would have been floating on the ceiling, like Aunt Marge tripled. He looked around the corridor. Ron was gone. Harry strode quickly in the direction of Gryffindor Tower, hoping that was where he'd headed.

When he reached the corridor where the portrait of the fat lady was, Harry was almost run over by Neville, who looked disheveled and disoriented. His eyes were wild. He gripped Harry by the shoulders and shook him slightly.

"Harry I'm going to make a potion, but I'm out of Eupatorium fistulosum---do you have any?" Unfortunately, at the same moment he mentioned the plant, Sandy said something about a bull and a fish, and Harry's head felt split in two. He was confused, sputtering his reply.

"What? No. Why don't you go ask Professor Sprout"?

Neville hit his head dramatically. "The greenhouses! Of course! I could kiss you"!

Harry backed up, taking Neville's hands from him. "Please don't. I have to go--" but Neville hadn't waited to hear even that brief sentence; he'd already run off. Harry stared after him. Boy, he thought, every time I turn around, Neville's trying out a new personality. Now it's scary raving lunatic. Great.

Shaking his head, he climbed in the portrait hole after giving the password. He had thought about stopping to ask Sandy to repeat what she'd said, but he was in too much of a hurry. There was no one in the common room but Lavender, sitting in an armchair near the stairs as though she were pulling guard duty.

"Hey, Lavender," Harry said by way of an off-handed greeting as he passed her, preparing to climb the steps to his dorm where he hoped Ron might be.

"Harry!" Lavender said abruptly and very loudly, almost in a panic. "Don't go up there"!

Harry stopped, turned around and looked at her with his brow furrowed. "Why not"?

"Well, um--" she paused, looking like she in fact wanted to tell very much, but he had to earn the right to be told, or show how much it mattered to him.

Just then, Ginny and Hermione came down the stairs from the girls' dorms, chatting about the ceiling. They stopped abruptly when they saw Harry glaring at Lavender. But he needn't have worried; Lavender had a larger audience now, and a choice one at that.

"Well," she said to Harry, speaking far louder than necessary, so even if Ginny and Hermione had wanted to avoid hearing her, it would have been very difficult. "Ron came storming in here, looking really hacked off. Parvati and I were just talking. He grabbed her and stood her up. Then he kissed her, and I mean kissed..." she paused for dramatic effect. "Then he whispered something in her ear, and after that she was practically dragging him to the stairs going up to the boys' dorm. But he wouldn't let her walk; he picked her up and carried her up the stairs." Lavender looked triumphant, delivering this news, particularly to Ron's two best friends and his sister.

Harry wanted to do violence to her even more than he had wanted to hurt the Ravenclaw girls. But then she went on, making matters even worse.

"I daresay tomorrow, she'll need to go see Madam Pomfrey for some Prophylax"--

"Oh!" Hermione cried, her face horrible to behold. Harry had never seen her look like this. She ran to the portrait hole and was out of the common room before he could think.

SMACK! Harry turned. Ginny had stepped toward Lavender and slapped her across the face. Lavender stared at Ginny in shock, her hand to her cheek. Because of the redness that appeared now where she'd been struck, it suddenly occurred to Harry what a beige person she was; beige hair, beige skin, beige eyes, even. She was so completely ordinary; she

could blend into the wallpaper seamlessly in any modern doctor's office. She was so ordinary that that in itself was almost extraordinary. But not quite.

Lavender looked back and forth between Ginny and Harry; she would find no quarter there, she could tell. Finally, she pushed past them and ran up the stairs to her dorm. Harry heard the door slam. Well, she wouldn't be disturbed. Hermione had run off, and Parvati was--Harry swallowed painfully as he remembered--preoccupied. He didn't look at Ginny. He started toward the portrait hole.

"Leave her alone right now," Ginny said suddenly. "Give her time." He looked at her for half a minute, marveling at how she'd grown up, both inside and out. But he didn't agree with her on this.

He shook his head and went through the portrait hole. When he was in the corridor again, he looked around frantically. Where could she have gone? She had too much of a lead. He could go back for his map--but that was in his dorm. Damn.

He leaned against the wall, then sank down onto his haunches. Maybe Ginny was right; if she wanted to be with someone, she would have waited for me. She needs time. We all need some time...

Harry put his head in his hands, trying not to think of Ron and Parvati up in their dorm, and also trying not to think of Hermione thinking of it.

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Five: April Fool

On the morning of the ceilidh, Harry and Hermione went running around the Quidditch pitch for the first time in months. Harry was glad spring had finally arrived. Even a brisk highland spring was better than no spring at all. As he and Hermione did their warm-down exercises, he watched her closely. Her face was screwed up in concentration as usual. When they were done, he put his hand on her arm and looked in her eyes.

"Hermione," he said softly. She looked back at him, but it seemed to be through a veil, a transparent wall that was nonetheless a barrier. She was hiding.

"What"?

"Are you okay? About--yesterday. And--and Ron. And Parvati".

She gazed back at him, not speaking. Then she had a smile on her face that looked more unnatural than anything Harry had ever seen.

"Of course I'm okay. It was--a bit of a shock at first. But--well, they're both over the age of consent. She's already sixteen, he'll be sixteen soon. He's still our friend, Harry. Nothing will ever change that." But her voice shook, as though she weren't so sure.

Harry nodded as though he believed her. "I've been thinking, Hermione. Maybe we should tell Ron about us. Before anyone else. I mean, I think it would be pretty awful if he didn't find out until the rest of the world, don't you? He's with someone now"...

Hermione stared into space. When she spoke, Harry got the impression her eyes were actually focused on some spot miles in the distance. "Whatever you say, Harry. That makes sense".

There was silence between them. After a while, pulling idly at some new grass just outside the sandy path, Harry said, "I couldn't believe how angry Ron was about what Niamh said. I never expected it to lead to him and Parvati"--

"What does Niamh have to do with anything?" she said suddenly, looking right at him now. He swallowed, trying to decide how much to tell her.

"She and Padma and Mandy were in the library gossiping. Niamh was telling Padma that Parvati should be careful of Ron because that he was only with her because she was my 'cast-off.' You know, because we went to the Yule Ball. Ron was--not really hacked off, because it was about a thousand times worse. He looked murderous. That's when he went charging

to Gryffindor Tower." Harry couldn't bring himself to tell her that they'd also already designated Hermione a future Harry Potter cast-off, destined to be inherited by Ron.

Hermione looked more detached and analytical now. She nodded. "He had something to prove".

Not that Parvati seemed to mind, Harry thought. Lavender did say she was dragging him to the stairs...

Hermione seemed calmer, knowing what set Ron off. Harry peered at her again. "And he certainly seemed happy at dinner last night. The last time I saw him looking like that was after Malfoy's performance as the amazing bouncing ferret".

"Yes, he did seem happy," she said absently. She raised her face to Harry, as though she'd just made a resolution. "You know what? I'm happy for him. I really am".

"So am I," Harry said firmly. Did he dare hope that she meant what she said? "We should tell him so," Harry added, standing up and extending a hand to her. She took it and swung herself up.

"Yes. We should," she agreed, then let go of his hand and strode purposefully toward the castle. Harry followed closely behind, wanting to ask her another question, and not daring.

But, Hermione, are you happy for Parvati?

* * * * *

Harry and Hermione went back up to Gryffindor Tower after lunch to change for the ceilidh. Most of the students attending the ceilidh had waited to go; many of those not attending had left for Hogsmeade after breakfast, Ron and Parvati among them. After dressing, Harry met Hermione in the common room.

Upon closer inspection, Harry found that the MacGregor tartan was actually red with very deep green, not black as Sirius had said. There was also a narrow white windowpane check overlaid on the red and green pattern. Harry was wearing a simple white button-down shirt with a deep green waistcoat Sirius had sent, plus a sporran (somewhat like a wallet) hanging in the front of his kilt, and the red and green argyle socks and black ghillie shoes Sirius had also sent. He wore his dirk in a special leather holster around his right calf; his wand was in a long pocket that seemed made just for it on the left side of the front of his kilt, so he could just reach across with his right hand to be armed quickly. Sandy was wrapped around his left upper arm, on top of the thin white shirt, which was slightly open above the waistcoat.

Hermione wore a simple bottle-green dress that swung around her calves and that went perfectly with the deep green in the MacGregor tartan, which was draped artfully around her shoulders and fastened with the brooch that had the crown lion flanked by the unicorn and stag. Around the lion's head was what looked like a belt with a large buckle, also crafted in silver metal. It bore the clan motto in Gaelic; according to Sirius' letter it meant, "My race is royal." The MacGregors had been Kings of Scotland in an earlier time, and his grandmother's name was in fact King, one of the septs of the Clan MacGregor. Elspeth King had married Henry Potter, and they'd given their son the name of other kings of Scotland, James. What had happened to Elspeth and Henry? he wondered. He knew now about his mother's parents, but what about his father's?

"Do you have your wand?" he asked Hermione softly, as they approached the portrait hole. She surreptitiously pulled back her left sleeve a couple of inches, showing him a clever holster for it that was strapped to her forearm. He nodded and she covered her left arm again. She also had a small wallet that was attached to the belt of her dress, containing the ten Sickle entrance fee to the ceilidh. His money was in the sporran. They needed to maintain the appearance of going to friends; Harry would have been happy to pay for her, but he knew she was right about this and had not argued.

Harry heard someone else arrive in the common room and turned to see who it was. Neville was ready to go, wearing a kilt with a black and white tartan with some thin red and yellow stripes running through it, a black shirt, black-and-white diamond-patterned socks, a sporran and--Harry noted--a dirk in his sock. If he had his wand, Harry couldn't see it. Ginny also arrived in the common room now, in a black dress with Neville's largely black and white tartan around her shoulders held by a silver brooch for whatever clan Neville was. Her red hair went beautifully with the simple plaid; she had pulled it into one long braid, tied with a black velvet ribbon at the end, tendrils curling around her face. Harry had never seen her look lovelier.

Neville appeared to be quite pleased with her himself, smiling broadly at her. She smiled back, unsure. But now the common room was filling with others preparing to go to the ceilidh; George and Angelina in a blue and green tartan with

red and green windowpane overlay; Alicia in a similar blue and green tartan, but with a white and yellow overlay; Dean Thomas in the same tartan as Alicia--were they going together? Harry wondered. But no; Dean had asked Katie, it turned out, who was wearing a very loud tartan of red, green and yellow broad bands, giving the impression where the red and yellow intersected of there being orange blotches scattered on the fabric. Harry winced at the combination. Then He spotted Colin in clan MacGregor, but not before Colin spotted Harry.

"Harry! Is that your family's tartan or Hermione's"?

"Mine," Harry told him.

"That's great! Do you know what that means? We're kinsmen! We're in the same clan! Oh, I cannot believe I'm in the same clan as Harry Potter"...

"Um, who are you going with, Colin"?

Colin looked even more smug now. "I can't believe I got up the nerve; I asked that fifth-year prefect from Ravenclaw. And she said yes! Can you believe it? I was afraid to, since I'm only fourth year, but I guess she really wanted to go, and didn't want to be alone"...

"Mandy's nice," Hermione said, her mouth twisting as she looked at Harry and widened her eyes, silently begging him to agree with her. They would not be guilty of gossip as the Ravenclaws had been.

"Yeah," was Harry's brief answer. He nodded toward the portrait hole. "We should go, don't you think"?

They all tramped out into the corridor and down the stairs to the entrance hall, the other students chatting merrily, the other meeting dates from other houses running ahead. Harry and Hermione looked at one another apprehensively, thinking about the possibility of a Death Eater strike. Their first almost-date, and it might turn into a terrorist attack. Oh joy, thought Harry.

In the entrance hall, Colin ran up to Mandy and started talking at her very quickly. Mandy looked like she might like to give a word in edgewise, but Harry felt it was unlikely. Then he saw Alicia go over to--he felt like rubbing his eyes--Draco Malfoy, who was wearing the same blue and green tartan with the yellow and white overlay. So that was clan Campbell, he thought. Malfoy had a black leather sporran, blue and green argyle socks with the requisite dirk, black ghillie shoes very like Harry's, a pristine white shirt with a Campbell tartan four-in-hand necktie, an embroidered green waistcoat and a black velvet jacket with gold braid trim, as well as a tartan tam-o-shanter with green ribbons. Harry smirked; he looked a bit foppish, but in a way, he could also carry it off. Only Malfoy, he thought.

Malfoy was looking at Alicia in a very admiring way; her dress was rather tight, and it was still easy to see this despite the tartan fabric loosely arranged on her shoulders. Harry looked to see whether Ginny had noticed them. She had; then she caught Harry's eye and looked away, and after that she seemed determined to behave as if Neville were the center of the universe.

Roger Davies also appeared in the entrance hall, in another blue and green kilt, this one with a red windowpane overlay. He didn't appear to have a date; must be meeting Fleur in the village, Harry thought. Blaise Zabini and Niamh Quirke appeared to be partners, in a blue and green tartan with a red and yellow overlay. Hannah and Ernie were going as well, in two different tartans (Ernie's was the same as Katie's), but Fred had asked Susan Bones, and they were wearing the same pattern, which turned out to be the same one that Professor McGonagall was wearing.

She positioned herself next to Harry and Hermione in the throng walking down to the village, speaking softly to them. Hermione looked at the red, white, green and blue tartan around her shoulders (she wore it with her usual robes and pointed hat), saying, "So, is that the clan McGonagall tartan, professor"?

McGonagall frowned. "Heavens, Hermione. I thought you would have realized that there is no clan McGonagall. It is an Irish name. My mother is a MacBean; that is what I am wearing. Note the brooch".

She stopped for a moment so Hermione could look at the silver brooch with a cat surrounded by the sort of belt-with-buckle that seemed to be on all of the clan crests. The motto was in English--almost. "'Touch not the cat bot a glove,'" Hermione read, before they all went on walking. "What does that mean"?

"Bot' means 'without,'" McGonagall told her. Harry thought it was interesting that there was a cat on the family crest. Did we really choose our Animagus forms? he wondered not for the first time. He remembered how he had felt manipulated by Dumbledore, just a bit, concerning the golden griffin.

Then, looking around the crowd as they approached the outskirts of the town, he realized that Snape wasn't with them. Harry frowned. Maybe he wasn't coming after all. Hermione was talking to McGonagall again.

"Are you--meeting anyone at the ceilidh, professor?" she asked, then colored. The idea of McGonagall having a personal life was frankly disturbing to Harry. He really didn't want to know.

"As a matter of fact, I am. An old friend." Then she leaned in toward the two of them, saying softly, "I understand you both know there could be trouble. You have your wands?" They nodded. "Of course, we're all hoping nothing will happen"...

"Of course, professor," Hermione said to her softly. The three of them turned and surveyed the nearly three-dozen students making their way down the High Street to the hall. Harry, Hermione and McGonagall joined them. Outside the building were large parchments bearing the legend SCREAMING HAGGIS 1996 TOUR and an illustration of a squashy tomato sort of thing with what looked like tubes emerging from it at several points. It was drawn with a rather cartoonish mouth (no eyes, ears, nose or other features) open very wide in what was, presumably, a scream. Was that supposed to be an oatmeal-stuffed sheep's stomach? Harry wondered. Screaming haggis indeed.

There was something of a bottleneck at the door to the hall as everyone had to pause to pay their ten Sickles, but as soon as they were inside, they heard the wail of the band warming up; two pipers were on the stage adjusting their holds on their sets of pipes, while a fiddler tuned his instrument and a cellist tuned hers, and the drummer wandered around positioning various types of percussion instruments, some of which bore only a passing resemblance to a drum, Harry. The hall was empty in the middle; the seats where they'd sat for the opera had been mostly cleared away, a few left ringing the perimeter. Although it was the middle of the afternoon, the windows of the hall were opaque glass, so hundreds of candles floated overhead, lighting the space.

As the students trickled in, Harry saw that there were also a number of people from the village and possibly elsewhere who had come out for the ceilidh. Then across the room, he saw a tall figure with a red ponytail who smiled with recognition and came striding over to see them, hand extended.

"Harry! Hermione! Good to see you. I just Apparated into the village," Bill Weasley said jovially. Speaking more softly, he said, "Have you seen--Snuffles yet? I'm not clear yet what he's going to look like, are you?" So he also knew Sirius was going to be here, Harry thought.

"No sign of him yet," Harry said quietly. Then, in a more normal tone, he said, "Isn't that Black Watch? Is that the Weasley family tartan"?

"Oh, mum and dad aren't a bit Scottish. Snuffles got this for me, to have something to wear".

Harry nodded. "He told me we'd be well covered here. How many operatives you figure there will be"?

Bill shrugged. "No idea. Where's Ron"?

"At the Three Broomsticks, probably. He and Parvati didn't want to come".

"Who"?

Harry hesitated. Ron hadn't told anyone at home about having a girlfriend, evidently. And now they'd gotten rather serious very quickly. He suddenly remembered Ron saying at the Christmas party that his mother would kill him if he ever got a girl into 'trouble.' Except that he hadn't finished saying it, stopping with embarrassment. Harry sincerely hoped that Parvati had gone to see Madam Pomfrey.

"Parvati is in our year. Gryffindor. She and Ron are--" Harry paused again, not wanting to spill too much. On the other hand, Bill seemed the least likely person (after the twins) to tell Mrs. Weasley anything about Ron's and Parvati's extra-curricular activities. As the pause lengthened, Bill looked like he comprehended.

"Oh! I see," he said, and Harry thought he really might. Well, that saved him from having to say anything else, thank goodness. Hermione had looked away during this exchange. "Well," Bill went on, "if there's trouble, I'd just as soon not have to worry about another member of my family. I see that George and Fred are here".

"And Ginny came with Neville Longbottom," Hermione said, pointing them out in the crowd. At that moment, Ginny spotted Bill and came over to them.

"Bill! What are you doing here?" she smiled up at him after giving him a hug.

"Ginny! What, are you getting taller again? Didn't I talk to you about that?" He smiled at her, then Harry heard him say softly, "Making sure you're all right".

Ginny bristled, and Bill quickly amended that. "I mean you as in you and Ron and Fred and George. All of you. Dumbledore asked me to. Just a precaution. Charlie and Percy are with Mum and Dad." She looked a little less upset now, but a flush from her initial indignation still showed on her freckled cheeks.

"This is Neville," she said then, realizing that she ought to introduce him to her oldest brother. "Neville, this is Bill".

They shook hands, each of them looking a little like they were squeezing too hard. Bill smiled. "Nice to meet you Neville. You know that if you ever hurt my baby sister I will personally kill you." He smiled broadly, having said this in the friendly voice imaginable. Neville looked at him with his mouth open. Ginny's eyes were wild.

"Bill!"

Now George had come over with Angelina and Fred with Susan Bones. They'd heard what Bill had said. Bill laughed, clapped Neville on the shoulder. Neville winced. "Just kidding, Neville! Just kidding!"

Fred and George looked at Neville very seriously (especially for them). "No he's not," they said in unison.

Neville looked nervously back and forth between Ginny's brothers. Harry remembered what Ron had said about what Ginny would think if he had gone on a date with her and shaken her hand at the end. "What I'd think if you went out with Ginny and did that is that maybe you'd decided you wanted to go on living after all." A girl with six brothers. And Percy and Charlie were no less protective than the others. Talk about having to run a gauntlet.

Just then, a large man with a broad, muscular chest barely contained by his rough-woven shirt leapt up onto the stage before the band. His chestnut hair curled messily on his head, becoming an unruly sort of curly beard and mustache long on his face. More curly hair showed on his chest where his shirt was unbuttoned. He'd rolled up his shirtsleeves to the elbow, revealing strong, sinewy forearms, and his socks covered very muscular legs as well. His kilt was of a complicated intricate-looking blue and green tartan overlaid with a white windowpane pattern. His sporran looked well-worn, as did his shoes. Harry thought he wore his kilt as though it were an everyday garment, not the costume it was for the rest of the world. He wondered briefly whether this meant he wore nothing under it, in the traditional way. Harry knew he would never dare do that; he hoped no one would be checking.

The large chestnut-haired man helped a handsome middle-aged woman with lustrous brown hair swing up onto the stage beside him. The tartan around her shoulders matched his kilt. Harry turned to Hermione. He'd noticed her looking at Bill's legs when they'd first seen him (Bill had seen her looking and seemed highly amused) and now he saw open admiration in her eyes as she looked at the man on the stage. That's right, Harry remembered. She looks at men's legs. Okay, he thought, there's certainly enough of that available today.

The man on the stage spoke now with a broad Scottish accent. "All right! Welcome to the Screamin' Haggis tour and to the Hogsmeade ceilidh! Now, since there's such a number o' ye here from the school, I thought we'd start fairst with a wee dancin' laysson. I'll wager most o' ye have never done this before. I'm Ian Lucas of Clan Lamont, as ye can see, and this here's m'lovely bride o'twenty year, Mary. We'll be demonstratin' some reels and other dances, and you lot'll do what we do. Aye? Are ye up fer it"?

The crowd roared its assent, and Harry began to relax, rotating around the floor with Hermione in his arms, and sometimes other girls, as they switched partners, swinging round by the elbow, then back to the start again. He'd been a bit worried about looking like a fool, but learning the dances first made his fears drop away, and before long his face was actually hurting from laughing and smiling so much, as he whirled Hermione, then Angelina, then Hannah, then a girl he

didn't know, then Hermione again...

When the lesson was over, Ian Lucas said, "Aye, that's the stuff. Y'all look ready fer the band! Take a wee break fairst get some drinks from the bar in the anteroom. Oh, and you young lads and lasses--just butterbeer for ye! Leave the ha stuff to those of us who've already ruined our livers." He smiled and laughed, jumping off the stage, his kilt flying. Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked like she was about to choke.

"What is it, Hermione?" he asked, concerned.

"Oh, nothing," she answered, her voice higher than usual. "It's just that--um"--

"What"?

"Well, he, uh, certainly believes in being traditional".

Harry thought for a moment, his brow furrowed. Then he realized what she meant, what she must have seen.

"Hermione"!

"Well, it wasn't like I made him walk over a mirror or anything! I heard that's what they used to make them do in the military".

Harry watched her eyes follow Lucas off the dance floor. He couldn't afford to appear even the slightest bit concerned about where she looked; and actually, he was starting to find it somewhat amusing in a discovering-just-how-libidinous Hermione-was sort of way. He merely smiled at her now. "Do you want a butterbeer?" he asked, making her jump.

"Oh! Yes, please. I'm already thirsty, just from the lesson".

"Okay, two butterbeers. And--" he took off his waistcoat, "could you find a place for this for me? I'm already too hot to wear it".

Hermione took it and looked at him appreciatively. Harry felt her eyes and smiled back at her, feeling vindicated for not having let it get to him when she'd been looking at Bill Weasley and Ian Lucas.

"You know," he said quietly, "people aren't going to believe we're here as friends if you keep looking at me like that".

"Oh, sod that," she started to say, then sighed and nodded. "All right, all right. But Harry"--

"What"?

"You just--look like you were born to wear that. With just a few more shirt buttons undone, of course".

"Hermione"!

"And there's just one problem when we're dancing"...

"Just one? I felt like I was treading on everyone's toes".

"The one problem is, when I'm dancing with you," she lowered her voice and smiled mischievously, "I can't see your legs".

He laughed. "Well, I'm going over there now to get us some butterbeer, so you can see them the whole time I'm walking there and back".

"You can bet that I'll be looking".

He knew she would. He made his way through the crowd to the bar. But when he returned, he found that she was not in fact ogling his legs. Hermione was with the cellist, who was standing holding her instrument while Hermione spoke very rapidly to her. Then Harry was utterly amazed; Hermione sat down on a chair, took the cello between her legs, touched the strings delicately with her left hand while holding the bow reverently with her right, and began to play.

It was a haunting, sad melody that Harry knew he'd heard before. She played only a dozen measures or so, reluctantly standing up and handing the cello back to the witch from the band. As the cellist returned to the stage, Harry walked over to her in shock, handing her the bottle of butterbeer, which Hermione opened as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He took a drink himself before he said, "Hermione! I didn't know you played the cello!"

She looked at him, smiling mischievously. "There's a lot about me you still don't know, Harry Potter." He smiled back at her; that wasn't a double entendre, not at all. "I used to play before Hogwarts. But it wasn't really feasible to bring it with me to school, so I don't play much any more. When I saw it--I just got nostalgic".

"What were you playing"?

"Bach. Air on the G-String." She looked at his face, then hit his arm playfully. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Harry!" He laughed.

"Oh, think you're psychic now, do you"?

"I think I know how teenage boys think"...

He said softly to her, "And you'd be right." They both laughed guiltily, then tried to sober up as McGonagall walked over to them with her friend. Harry was shocked to see it was a man. He couldn't have been a day under sixty, but Hermione was regarding him with as much appreciation as she had Bill and Lucas and Harry. His salt-and-pepper hair and beard were meticulously groomed, and his hazel eyes looked around the room as though nothing in the farthest corner could escape his notice. Harry didn't know when he'd ever seen anyone who looked so alert. He wore a Campbell kilt.

Suddenly, the man said in a low voice, "So, Potter. What are they charging for the drinks? Double the going rate, I suppose?" The voice was completely unfamiliar, but the tone--

"Is that you, Professor Snape?" Hermione whispered with wide eyes. It was indeed Snape. Harry hadn't realized he wouldn't come as himself. Whose likeness had he borrowed?

"What should we call you?" Harry asked softly while opening his butterbeer.

"Duncan MacDermid. My uncle." Harry nodded. He looked around the hall as people stood in small groups, drinking and talking, waiting for the band to start playing. Was Sirius here yet? he wondered. If so, what did he look like?

But Harry didn't have a chance to wonder at this for long. The fiddle player and cellist started tuning up again, then the pipers. The drummer seated himself on a stool, holding a large drum between his legs. The cellist also sat, but the others all stood. The drummer started by hitting the edge of the drum with his knuckles, producing a hollow, sharp noise. The pipers started the low undertone emanating from their instruments, that drone that was supposed to have driven the enemy to distraction in the days of yore, when pipers led armies into battle. Then it began in earnest, as the pipers started to play a fast, high melody and the cellist produced a kind of basso continuo under the drone, and the fiddle danced an obligato above the pipes. And under it all the persistent whack! whack! of the drum, interspersed now with the softer sounds of the drum being struck in the middle of the taut skin.

Couples started moving onto the dance floor. Lucas and his wife led them all in a lively reel which, as far as Harry could tell, had him dancing with every girl or woman present at some point, as they changed partners and the kilts whirled and feet stomped and laughing, sweaty faces smiled at the strangers they had linked hands with. They were united in the dance, the skirling pipes were in their blood, it mattered not whether a person was actually Scottish.

After a couple of reels and a strathspey, the band quieted a bit and played a lilting waltz; Harry and Hermione danced near Ginny and Neville; Draco Malfoy was also nearby, his arms around Alicia. They actually made a very striking couple, Harry thought. Then he saw that Draco Malfoy's eyes looked quite alarmed, and Harry twisted his head around to see why.

Lucius Malfoy had entered the hall, resplendent in his clan Campbell kilt with all the trappings, escorting his wife, who wore a sweeping dress and the tartan around her shoulders, the clan crest brooch on her shoulder glittering in the candlelight. Seeing him now made Harry remember seeing him in the Pensieve, in his twenties, recruiting Snape. Snape was probably right not to come as himself, Harry thought.

He looked back at Draco Malfoy and Alicia. Upon seeing his father at the entrance to the hall, he dutifully left the dance floor, taking Alicia with him. Harry managed to dance Hermione over near the door, so they could hear what was going

"Father! Mother! I didn't expect to see you here," Draco Malfoy said to his parents; he didn't sound like it was a pleasant surprise. "This is Alicia Spinnet," he introduced her to them. Alicia smiled charmingly, but this was met with a cold, icy stare from Lucius Malfoy.

"Spinnet?" the elder Malfoy said suspiciously.

"She's Head Girl," his son said helpfully; he sounded just a bit like he was bragging. Harry wondered how many Alicia-a-horse fantasies had gone through his head since he'd met her in the entrance hall at the school.

"Yes, I knew that," he said, still somewhat grumpy. "But your parents--they're Muggles, aren't they"?

Alicia swallowed and looked at her date. "Yes, sir," she said timidly. It was a good trick to rattle Alicia, Harry thought, but he certainly didn't admire Lucius Malfoy for it. Quite the opposite.

Harry whispered in Hermione's ear; she nodded and let go of him, and they walked over to the Malfoys.

Lucius Malfoy was saying rudely, "I can't believe they couldn't find any pure-bloods to be Head Gi"--

"Hello, again, Mr. Malfoy. Mrs. Malfoy," Harry said in a rather loud voice. "Sorry to interrupt, but I was wondering if I might dance with Alicia? You won't be without a partner; Hermione doesn't mind dancing with you, do you Hermione"?

She smiled at Harry. "Not at all." Draco Malfoy, confused, tucked her arm in his, preparing to return to the dance floor. Before that, though, Hermione turned to his parents, smiling brightly and saying, "My parents are dentists".

Harry tried not to laugh at the thunderous look on Lucius Malfoy's face as Harry moved in circles holding Alicia. She looked relieved to be away from the Malfoys.

"So. You came with Malfoy," he said to her while they danced. She looked up at him, reminding him very much of that awkward moment in the Quidditch changing room.

"Why do you care"?

"It's just that--I'm surprised. Because he knows how his father feels about Muggle-borns. This almost amounts to a rebellion, for him".

Alicia looked over at Draco Malfoy's parents, who were socializing with some other older witches and wizards who were not dancing. Then Harry glanced at Hermione, who had managed to steer Draco Malfoy over to where Neville and Ginny were dancing. She separated herself from Malfoy and said something he couldn't hear to Neville and Ginny. Then the dancing couples were different again, Neville holding Hermione, not looking altogether disappointed, and Draco Malfoy holding Ginny, who was blushing into her hair. Harry frowned; she needed to stop being so transparent. He looked at the elder Malfoys again. He thought it was possible that Lucius Malfoy would rather his son were with a Muggle-born girl than a Weasley.

When the song ended, the band segued seamlessly into a different waltz, so the couples continued dancing. Harry looked about the room over Alicia's head, still trying to figure out where Sirius was. He saw Roger dancing with Fleur, Fred with Susan Bones, George with Angelina, Bill with a witch he didn't know. Then he realized that Bill, Fred and George were looking very agitated about Ginny's dance partner. Her partner had also noticed.

Ginny and Draco Malfoy worked their way over to Harry and Alicia. After a few moments of dancing next to each other, Malfoy stood still, taking his arms from around Ginny.

"If you don't mind, Potter, I think I'd like my date back".

Harry stepped back from Alicia, thanking her for the dance, and then he realized, I'm dancing with Ginny now. He took her in his arms; he had very little choice but to look in her face, since she was so tall, unlike Alicia. He swallowed, trying not to think about how it felt to hold her, his hand at her waist, his other hand wrapped around hers, her long fingers lightly

wrapped around his shoulder. She looked at him, too. Her gaze was impassive. Harry again found that he had a hard time looking away from her. But something was bothering him.

"So," he said, trying to make small talk. "What tartan is that"?

"Neville's gran was named Gillespie, which is clan MacPherson." They danced in silence for a few minutes. Then Harry couldn't take it anymore.

"Ginny," he said softly. "Are you mad at me"?

She opened her mouth in surprise, then closed it quickly. "Harry, of course not. Why are you saying that"?

"Well, it just seems like when you look at me--I don't know. You probably just have a lot on your mind, I suppose." He made an excuse for her so she didn't have to do it herself. But he wasn't convinced. She looked down.

"Harry, I--I haven't been very honest with you and I just thought that if we actually spent much time talking, I would be".

Harry frowned. "What? You say that like it would be a bad thing to be honest with me".

She also frowned. "It would be. Because--because I've been helping Draco. With his plans to expose his father. And you're not supposed to know what they are. And I--I keep wanting to tell you, but I know I shouldn't--" she trailed off. Of course she thought Harry. That explained so much.

"So," he said softly, "do you know who sent the school owls"?

Her face looked blank. "What school owls"?

Harry frowned again. "Never mind. I'm relieved to know you're not mad at me, that's all. When Will was so great and all the other Gryffindors stood up with me, you wouldn't come near me, and I thought you thought--that I'd done it. To Flitwick and Cho".

She nodded. "I see. No, Harry, I can honestly say that I never once thought you did anything to Professor Flitwick or Cho Chang".

He looked at her face, so close to his as they danced. Her eyes still looked very sad. "Ginny, I have to say, you don't exactly look happy".

She looked directly into Harry's eyes now. "Why should I be? Sneaking around because I'm afraid everyone will hit the roof when they find out about me and Draco, worrying about him, worrying about getting his father away from him so he can't hurt him anymore...and worrying about Ron, and--and you--" She looked down and away. She worried about him, he thought, feeling a warmth inside his chest, trying not to smile, since she still looked pretty miserable.

"You sound like you're under a lot of stress," he told her. She nodded in agreement.

"I'll just be glad when all this is over"...

The song ended and they separated, clapped with the rest of the crowd. The band struck up another fast tune. She went to look for Neville and Harry moved to the perimeter of the hall, where Snape was standing, looking like his uncle. He was talking to Ian Lucas, or rather, Lucas was talking at him jovially, while Snape looked rather miffed. Somehow, his trademark sneer managed to penetrate his uncle's features. They both took swigs from hip flasks, Snape's a shining silver, Lucas' a dirty leather-encased specimen.

"So!" Lucas said, putting his arm around Harry's shoulders. "Ye're Harry Potter!" Harry smiled feebly and nodded at him. He looked for Hermione on the dance floor; she was swinging arms with Bill. He nodded at her and she nodded back, her face flushed with the dancing. He turned to Lucas.

"I'm glad we had a chance to learn the dances first--" he started to say to Lucas, who slapped him on the back hard, so hard that Harry almost lost his glasses. He pushed them up his nose and tried to stand upright again.

"I noticed ye're wearin' clan MacGregor. Ye know, don't ye, that clan Lamont and clan MacGregor are forever linked, do ye"?

"No, I don't really know anything about"--

"Wail--" Lucas began, ignoring Harry, still grasping his shoulder. "Ye see, a long time ago there was a wizard o' clan Lamont who was travelin' through the MacGregors' country an' stopped at an inn fer the night. Now, doonstairs in the p he and the other men praysent got to drinkin' quite a lot, and Lamont kilt none other than the son of MacGregor of Glenstrae, head of the clan, whilst tryin' t'disarm him. When he flew back'ard, 'e struck 'is 'ead on a pike in the wall. We right through 'is brain. No magic can revairse that. 'Course, now mos' books abou' clans say 'twas 'is dirk. Wail, 'e hightailed it outa there faster'n a jackrabbit in heat! Wen' over the moors, with the mob from the pub hot on his tail. Pro all too shitfaced to Apparate withou' splinchin' themselves.

"Now, in those days, people still held great store in the code of hospitality o' the Highlands. If a stranger is at yer door askin' for sanctuary and succor, ye give it, no quaystions askit. Ye don' tell yer name and ye don' ask 'is, in case it tairn out yer enemies. So this Lamont comes to a hoose and says t'the man standing in the door that he's slain a man, save from the death which now pursues'im. The man takes pity on 'im and takes 'im in, tells 'im 'e'll always be safe under 'is roof. Wail, no more'n a few minutes passed when the mob from the pub is at the door, askin' whayther MacGregor's se the fugitive, tellin'im, 'That's the man kilt yer son'!"

Harry looked at Lucas shrewdly; what was he up to? he wondered. Making friends by telling Harry that one of his ancestors killed one of Harry's?

"Wail," Lucas went on, "MacGregor stands there weepin' over 'is son, but 'e tells'em they mayen't have the man; he'd asked fer sanctuary and received it, and they wasn't to harm a hair on 'is head. 'E even gave 'im safe passage to 'is 'omeland. Later on, durin' the great proscrition against the MacGregors, they wasn't to use the MacGregor name nor wear the tartan, and the Camerons and Campbells--" he gave Snape a hard glare "--were gettin' rewarded fer going ou and killin' as many MacGregors as they could find. Any man who kilt a MacGregor was held scaithless; he wasn't punished, but actually rewarded! And the MacPhersons fought with'em against the Camerons, but it was the Lamonts v gave 'em sanctuary, who gave'em succor, because of the MacGregor who protected his own son's killer".

Lucas looked at him closely and then Harry opened his eyes wide.

"Snuffles?" he said softly. Lucas grinned widely.

"Aye, there's some'at call me that." Then he spoke lowly to Harry without the broad accent. "How are you Harry? Have you seen anything suspicious?" The bagpipes were so loud now that Harry had to lean in to hear him.

"No. Who--whose body are you in"?

"The name really is Ian Lucas. Cousin of mine. And that's not really his wife; that's Arabella, another operative. I am actually clan Lamont. Black is one of the Lamont septs. And, see there?" He pointed to a man across the room also wearing the MacGregor tartan. "Mundungus Fletcher. Another operative. Plus Remus and Moody are at the pub. Going meet them later to regroup".

Harry looked onto the dance floor, seeing Arabella/Mary Lucas dancing with a man he thought he'd seen in the pub. He turned back to Sirius.

"Why did you tell me that story? Is it true"?

"Yes".

"And--and is that what you think I did? Took in my parents' murderer? Because I do not blame you for"--

"Harry." Sirius looked at him levelly. "Do you blame yourself for what happened to Cedric Diggory"?

Harry didn't answer him for a good long minute; they just looked at each other. "Yes," he finally said.

"Then I don't have to tell you, do I"?

Harry grimaced; no, he didn't have to tell him how consuming guilt could be. How ironic that history seemed to be repeating itself, though. A Lamont kills a MacGregor, receives shelter and forgiveness, and in turn protects the MacGregors when they are in need. And the Campbells were enemies of both clans...

"Does--does your cousin really talk like that"?

Sirius made a face. "He'd probably say I'm overdoing the accent. But there's people here who've met him; I need for them to think I really am him".

Harry's mouth felt dry. He eyed Sirius' flask. "I don't suppose there's any hope of that being nonalcoholic--" he started to say, but Sirius pulled it closer to him.

"Polyjuice Potion!" he said softly. "And that was the last drop. Soon I'll have to go." Harry stopped; of course. The ceiling was certainly going to be longer than an hour; it was actually getting to be quite late in the afternoon.

Suddenly a great whoop! went up from somewhere and the middle of the floor cleared; the band started up "All the Bluebonnets Over the Boarder," the swords went down, and a wizard enchanted them so that human hands didn't have to hold them; they moved of their own accord. Lucius Malfoy led the way now, picking his way through them expertly, and Draco Malfoy joined him in the sword dance. Snape-as-MacDermid looked resigned and joined his kinsmen as they skillfully avoided the sharp edges of the swords and held their hands over their heads. Draco Malfoy had taken off his jacket, waistcoat and necktie and unbuttoned his shirt a little, but left his cuffs securely fastened at the wrist. Harry looked at Ginny standing only about ten feet away. Harry ached, seeing how she gazed at him. Her fifteenth birthday was just over a week away.

Hermione had come to stand with him. Harry turned away from the sword dancers to tell her that Lucas was actually Sirius. She immediately reddened and looked away from him upon learning this.

"What's with her?" Sirius wanted to know.

"Um," Harry stalled. "Long story".

Sirius shrugged. He looked around the hall, at the crowd watching the sword dancing, some more wizards joining in. Sirius frowned.

"I don't understand. There are people here I'd bet my life were Death Eaters--and not just Lucius Malfoy. Yet they're not making any trouble. Either we were given bad intelligence again, or--

The building suddenly shook with a large crash. The band stopped playing and everyone looked around, bewildered. The hovering swords clattered to the floor. Harry went running to the anteroom at the entrance to the hall, then outside, Hermione and Sirius right behind him. Further down the High Street, he could see smoke and flames coming from the direction of the Three Broomsticks.

Ron and Parvati were at the Three Broomsticks.

Harry ran toward the mayhem without thought; he had hoped that he could be prepared; he'd worn Sandy, who was too far away from the pub to be able to see this coming; he'd brought his knife from Sirius, he had his wand. And still it had done no good.

As he reached the smoking ruins of the pub, he heard someone say, "MORSMORDRE!" in a shaking voice, and the Death Mark flew up into the sky over the rubble. Harry ran in the direction of the voice. Around the corner of the next building, he saw him; a tall wizard in a hooded cloak, a mask on. He jerked around upon seeing Harry; the mask kept Harry from seeing his expression. He tried to move quickly, tried not to be distracted by not knowing who this was.

"Stupefy!" he cried, pointing his wand at the wizard before he could Disapparate. The stunned wizard fell to the ground. A moment later, Harry heard someone else growl the stunning curse, and he turned to see who was trying to attack him.

But it wasn't him they were putting the curse on; he saw Mad-Eye Moody with his wand pointed at another hooded, cloaked and masked Death Eater who had been coming up behind Harry. Remus Lupin was with him. Moody used his wand to move his stunned prisoner over near the man Harry had laid out. He grunted and kicked his man with his wooden leg absently.

"Hmph! He sent amateurs. Or they're out of practice. Not to mention they think we're stupid. Good job, by the way, Potter. You got here fast".

Harry looked at him in amazement. "You--you did too".

Moody shook his head. "Nah. We were in the pub." Oh, that's right, Harry thought. "But I saw these two through the back wall, figured out what they were up to".

"Alastor and I quickly put cushioning charms over the entire pub, so that anything falling would go down slowly and softly," Lupin said. "We'll still have to move this rubble out of the way"--

--"bloody pain in the ass"-- Moody interjected.

--"but the people underneath shouldn't be injured," Lupin continued. "C'mon. How are you at levitation charms"?

"Not as good as Hermione, but she's coming now." Lupin nodded.

Harry saw Hermione coming down the High Street with Bill, Sirius, Snape, McGonagall and Arabella, as well as a number of other people who'd been at the ceilidh. Suddenly, Arabella stopped; Harry stared. Her hair was changing colour, and so was her face. She put her hands up to her face, held a strand of hair before her eyes, then turned and ran the other way down the High Street. Her potion must have worn off, Harry thought. But as her face was changing, something about her seemed familiar...

Moody watched over the stunned Death Eaters while Lupin and Harry went to meet the approaching crowd. Harry went to Sirius and Snape before Hermione. "Moody and I stunned the Death Eaters who did this. He's with them behind that shop there," he pointed and they strode over in the direction he and Lupin had come from.

Hermione had tears running down her face, and Bill had frantically started waving his wand, first producing a stream of water to extinguish some flames licking at the fallen wood, then levitating the chunks of pub up and away from the site of the magical explosion. Harry tried to reassure both of them by telling them about Moody's and Lupin's cushioning charms, but it was still slow going to move so much debris.

Suddenly, Harry heard seven loud pops! near him and he looked up to see Dobby and Biddy and the other free elves. "Harry Potter!" Dobby cried. "What is happening? We is having a picnic outside the village for our day out, and we is hearing a big boom! What is happened to the pub"?

Harry looked at his little wrinkled face grimly. "Death Eaters," he said simply. Dobby nodded.

"We is here to help, Harry Potter. Tell us what to do".

Harry looked at him gratefully. "Well, you're pretty good at hover charms. We need to move all this mess and find all of the people who were in the pub when it went".

Dobby gave him a kind of salute, and before long, the house elves were doubling the speed at which they were able to remove the broken beams and other building fragments. They found students, shocked that they weren't gravely injured, feeling their arms and legs just to be sure they weren't mistaken. They found professors, people from the village, a few witches and wizards who'd just Apparated in for the day. Just when Harry was starting to think that Ron and Parvati had already left the pub before the explosion, Hermione and Quiff the house elf moved a large beam and saw Parvati's face sprinkled with plaster dust, and she called Harry over so they could move some other pieces of furniture and building debris. When she was no longer trapped, Hermione pulled her to a standing position and then threw her arms around her in a thorough hug. Harry saw her shocked face over Hermione's shoulder, as she slowly returned the hug. Then Hermione held her at arms' length.

"Are you all right, Parvati?" Somehow her question seemed to have nothing to do with what had happened to the Three Broomsticks.

Parvati nodded. "I--I thought you might hate me now, Hermione..." she said softly, tears starting to roll down her dusty cheeks. Hermione smiled at her through her own tears.

"No. How could I? We've been roommates for--what? Five years? And--and Ron is one of my best friends. I want him to be happy".

Parvati looked like she might really bawl now; she seemed incredibly touched. Harry looked at the ruins of the pub; there was nothing like a disaster to bring people together who might otherwise be trying to tear each other apart, he thought. But they had yet to find Ron.

"Potter!" a familiar voice called. Most of the people from the ceilidh were on site now, moving rubble and helping the various pub patrons to their feet. But apparently, Moody and Lupin had missed a part of the pub with the cushioning charms. Harry ran toward the voice; it was Draco Malfoy, who was moving piece after piece of shattered wood rafter and chunks of plaster still embedded in thin wooden lath strips. He had uncovered Ron's ashen face. Harry cursed and put his wand away; he couldn't think about magic now. He felt as he had when Dick had had his leg crushed by the rocks in the Dursley's garden. He lifted the chunks of building from Ron and hurled them away, and Malfoy did the same, also not using his wand. Harry didn't see Lucius Malfoy anywhere. Of course, he'd been dancing in the middle of the hall when the explosion had occurred; dozens of people were watching him. An ironclad alibi.

He and Malfoy worked side by side to free Ron, then each took an arm to try to draw him out of the rest of the rubble. They dragged him clear, laying him flat on the High Street, where there was no debris to get in the way. Harry took out his wand again to do a rejuvenation charm, but Malfoy waved him away. Instead, he took out a hip flask and held up Ron's head, tilted the flask so some of its contents would run into Ron's mouth. Harry was about to yell, but then realized that of course Malfoy didn't have Polyjuice Potion in his flask.

Ron immediately started to cough, and Malfoy sat him up more, slapping his back. Ron opened his eyes, staring wildly at Malfoy and then Harry, then back at Malfoy. He nodded at the flask and Malfoy handed it to him again, and this time Ron took a long swig, his head tilted back. When he was done, he handed it back to Malfoy, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, saying hoarsely, "Thanks".

Harry crouched by his side. "Where were you Ron? Moody said he saw two Dark wizards skulking around, and he and Lupin put a cushioning charm on the pub to keep falling debris from hurting people. But they must have missed where you were".

Ron swallowed, looking flushed now after his drink. "I was in the corridor on the way to the loo. Then everything just--fell apart".

Malfoy smirked. "In the corridor, eh? Well, you're lucky you weren't already in there, busy relieving yourself"...

"Enough, Malfoy!" Harry hissed at him. Malfoy smiled benignly at him, and to his surprise, Ron laughed.

"It's okay, Harry. You think that didn't cross my mind? I could use a laugh anyway. Oh, and thanks for the drink, Malfoy".

The two of them helped Ron to his feet; he was several inches taller than both of them, so he was able to lean on their shoulders for support, as though they were live crutches. He could walk, but Harry could tell that he felt very weak. He had a dark bruise on his temple and a deep gash going from his right ear to the corner of his mouth, plaster dust sticking liberally in the blood. He would need attention soon to fix that, Harry thought, or else he'd have a scar.

Then Ginny was running toward them, throwing her arms around Ron and weeping, followed by Bill and Fred and George putting their hands on his shoulder, looking concerned. Then Harry saw her approaching, walking next to Parvati, saw raw emotion on her face. She started moving faster, then she was running, and Harry thought she would knock him over with the force of her embrace.

Hermione threw her arms around Ron, sobbing, and he gathered her to him, looking like this was why he was glad not to be dead. He put his cheek on her hair and now there was blood and plaster dust on the top of her head. Bill looked fascinated; Parvati did not look happy.

She pulled back from Ron, crying freely. "You're all right. You're--" she choked and couldn't speak for a second. He smiled down at her, his arms still around her. Harry felt tears prickle against his eyelids. He was standing so close to them; he could see the look in both of their eyes. But now Hermione was mastering herself again.

She cleared her throat and said softly, "I talked to Parvati. I'm--I'm very happy for you both. I--I just want you to be happy. You're my best friend," she finished, looking up at him. But now, the happiness that had glowed in Ron's eyes when she

had flung her arms around him evaporated. He swallowed and looked over at Parvati, who was walking toward him shakily. Hermione backed up some more and let Parvati come forward and put her arms around Ron, pillowing her head on his chest. Ron looked over her head at Hermione. Harry could see that he didn't want her to be noble about this. He wanted to return the Hermione who had flung her arms around him, who had given him that look. Not this detached friend putting his girlfriend into his arms.

Suddenly, Rosmerta came up to them, covered in more plaster dust, her hair and eyes wild, holding Pinny and Zenana by their ears. She thrust them at Harry as though they were pieces of dirty laundry.

"Are these yours?" she demanded shrilly. "I thought I told you to keep those things out of my pub! Now look at it!"

Moody had come around the corner from where the stunned bodies were. "Rosmerta, leave the damn elves out of this. They didn't do anything except help get humans out of the wreckage. This was the work of Death Eaters. Who will be punished".

But now Rosmerta was staring at Sirius, who no longer looked like Ian Lucas. Her mouth was open. Harry swallowed. "Sirius Black!" she screamed. "It was Sirius Black! Get him!"

Harry's heart was in his throat; he looked at Draco Malfoy, who goggled at Sirius. Everyone froze except Sirius, who, realizing that he looked like himself again, ran behind the shed where the bodies were. No one else moved; Rosmerta tried to follow him, but then a large black dog came from the direction Sirius had gone, getting in her way. She ignored the dog; after it was gone she rushed behind the shed, then emerged again, looking at them all wildly. "Where is he? It was Sirius Black, I tell you! If anyone blew up my pub, he did!"

They all looked at her as if she were unbalanced, except for Draco Malfoy who was still clearly in shock. She looked from face to face, her mouth hanging open. "But you all saw! He was here!"

Harry heard a familiar voice say, "Mobilicorpi!" and Snape came around the corner looking like himself (except for the fact that he didn't normally wear a kilt). The stunned bodies of the Death Eaters accompanied him, floating.

"I'm afraid, Madam Rosmerta, that these two men are the ones who destroyed your establishment," he said, sounding even more oily than usual, Harry thought. Now he removed the mask from the first one. "Ah, Nott," he said, upon seeing his face.

He removed the other man's mask and Moody grunted, saying, "Avery. Well, that explains the incompetence. Not that we're not grateful for it".

But Madam Rosmerta wasn't done pointing fingers. "And you!" she said, seeing Lupin. "I don't want your kind in my pub either! Filthy werewolf"...

Moody looked like he wanted to put a good hex on her. "Shut it, you! You didn't mind him being in the damn pub when you were paying you good money for your overpriced drinks! Well--" he said, waving his arm over the pile of rubble that used to be the Three Broomsticks. "You can ban anyone you want from your bloody pub now. Feel free".

She looked at him with raging eyes, then turned and stalked off. Harry looked at Ron and Hermione, wondering, but then Sandy distracted him, saying, "A large black dog awaits." Good, thought Harry; Sirius wasn't totally gone. He wanted to talk to him. It was such a shock to turn and see his real face. Would Rosmerta alert the Ministry of Magic? And what about Malfoy? Harry could tell that Dumbledore must have filled in Moody about Sirius. Perhaps Moody could allay any fears about the Ministry about Sirius having been in Hogsmeade.

Moody came to him now, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "You all right, Potter"?

They all started walking slowly down the street and in the direction of Hogwarts. "No," Harry told him truthfully as they walked. He looked over at where Neville and Ginny and Hermione were walking, then at Ron and Parvati. "I feel like I'm constantly looking over my shoulder, like I'm becoming a bit paranoid." He could have bitten his tongue as soon as he said it; Moody had a reputation for being the most paranoid person in the wizarding world.

Moody laughed now. "Potter, if someone really is out to get you--then it's not paranoia. It's called facing facts. And hopefully, being prepared." He smiled at Harry, but Harry had to look away. He could not take Moody smiling at him. It looked too strange.

He glanced at Draco Malfoy, who was walking near Snape, giving him a strange look through narrowed eyes; would he catch on to the fact that he hadn't seen Snape at the ceilidh, yet here he was, walking along in a kilt as if this were how always went to Hogsmeade? Harry thought about Malfoy also seeing Sirius. Would he put two and two together about large black dog?

Then Harry put his hand to the back of his neck; it was as though he could feel someone looking at him. He stopped, making Neville plow into him. He mumbled an apology, then went to the side of the road and started walking back toward the village, until he was clear of the somber parade of Hogwarts students and teachers returning to the castle, many of them limping and dusty from the pub explosion.

Standing alone at the edge of the village, staring at Harry, was Lucius Malfoy. Harry stood in the middle of the road, glaring back at him. The elder Malfoy looked every bit the aristocrat, every piece of metal on his ensemble glittering; he looked at Harry like a lord who was sure of obeisance.

Harry both feared and hated this man and wondered what he was up to, what Draco Malfoy knew, what Ginny knew. He felt he understood more about the son every time he saw the father; how could you not develop a thick skin when your own father thought nothing of torturing you?

Harry continued to gaze at the man who had spawned Draco Malfoy. He would not back down. The tall, pale-haired figure gazed back impassively, minute after minute. Harry did not waver; he felt he could wait all day.

Finally, Malfoy pulled out his wand. Harry quickly pulled out his too, a defensive reflex. But before he knew it, Lucius Malfoy was gone; he had merely been preparing to Apparate. He had presumably returned to Malfoy Manor. Harry continued looking at the space where he'd been; it was right at the edge of the village. He wouldn't have been able to Apparate if he'd been any closer to Hogwarts. Harry finally turned and ran to catch up with the others, still clutching his wand.

* * * * *

"Surprise! Happy Birthday!"

Ginny leaned against the doorway to Hagrid's hut in shock, staring around at her friends, laughing and putting her hand to her chest. When she'd recovered, she shook her finger at Zoey Russell, one of her roommates, who was looking sheepish.

"Oh, you! I told you I didn't want anyone making a big deal"--

"Now, Ginny," Hermione cut in. "Don't blame Zoey. You've been doing so much for other people, I thought you should have a nice little party too. Zoey, Annika and Ruth just helped get you down here." Before Ginny had arrived, Hermione told Harry that Ginny had been told there was extra work they all needed to do for Hagrid's class. Hermione smiled at Ginny's fellow fourth-year Gryffindors. There were more than seventeen people crammed into Hagrid's very modestly-sized hut, and Ginny registered this.

"Little, Hermione? I think it stopped being little long before I got here".

"No problem!" Fred said. He and George levitated Hagrid's large table out the door and into the front garden, then magically stretched it by a couple more feet. Harry and Ron and Colin moved all of the seating outside that Hagrid possessed, and Angelina and Parvati conjured up some more seats to provide a place for everyone.

Soon Ginny was in a place of honor at the head of the table, opening presents. George's and Fred's gift was first. She unwrapped a large box that turned out to be chocolates. She smiled and thanked them, and started to pass it around the table. Everyone present looked alarmed as it approached them and hastily sent it on its way, until it got to Neville. He casually picked up a light-brown chocolate and bit into it. Everyone stared. Nothing happened. Ginny laughed, looking the twins.

"Oh! That's the joke, isn't it? There's nothing wrong with them!"

George and Fred smiled, looking at Neville mischievously, saying "April Fool!" But Harry thought, No, that's not it. It's coming...wait, just wait...

And yet, Neville was still fine. He shrugged and took another chocolate out of the box, put it on his plate. No one else would have anything to do with the sweets. Ginny moved on to her other presents. She exclaimed over everything and thanked each person or group of people who'd gone in on a present. Then she reached for Harry's gift. She tore off the paper and looked at the framed photo.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Colin; it's another one of yours, isn't it"?

Colin smiled bashfully; he was really getting to be quite the popular photographer. Harry had chosen a shot of Ginny flying around the Quidditch pitch holding the Snitch at the end of the Gryffindor/Slytherin game. Her hair moved in the breeze in the photo, her robes flapped behind her, her face glowed. She smiled at Harry, looking like she was suppressing a reaction that might be too extreme.

"Thank you, Harry," she said levelly, completely in control. Then there was one gift left. She frowned around the table; Harry could tell she thought she'd opened gifts from everyone already. Who could this be from?

She opened it. A lovely silver barrette was nestled in a tortoise-shell box, cushioned in velvet. It looked heavy and solid and it was etched with a detailed image of a dragon. A Welsh Green, by the look of it, Harry thought. He grimaced to himself; no need to wonder who that was from.

He could tell from her blush that she knew too, but she took a note from the tortoise-shell box and read it, then stuffed it into her pocket. She closed the box with the barrette and looked up at them all.

"Well! Thank you again, everyone. This was really lovely," and she rose to go. Hagrid patted her shoulder; since it was Hagrid, this was the same as shoving her back into her seat rather violently, although they were all used to Hagrid not knowing his own strength and she merely winced.

"Ye can' go yet! There's cake still!"

Uh-oh, thought Harry. He hoped Hermione didn't let Hagrid bake the cake. But she was emerging from the hut now, carrying a chocolate confection that looked more likely to be a product of the house elves in the kitchens. Hagrid had made tea, which was fine--he couldn't botch that. But the moment that Neville took a sip of tea, he sprouted a duck bill and white feathers and started quacking excitedly; apparently the chocolates were designed to be triggered by tea.

Fred and George were laughing fit to kill, and Ginny was trying to say, "Fred, Forge--I mean, Fred, George--" but she was laughing too hysterically to be coherent, and even Neville seemed to be enjoying himself until he molted and the duck bill suddenly dropped off into his cake.

"They're called Ducky Dreams," George told them all.

"No, they're not, they're called Drake Dreams," Fred insisted. Hermione frowned.

"That rhymes with Canary Creams. Is your whole product line going to rhyme?" she asked them. They looked somewhat abashed as they admitted that this was in fact their plan.

"What's next?" Ron wanted to know. "There aren't that many words that rhyme with 'cream.' There's only beam and ream and--" he faltered.

"Team," Angelina said laughing.

"Gleam!" Katie said triumphantly. They were all laughing hysterically, suggesting ways that Fred and George could create ridiculous confections with these words in the names, and what they might do to those who dared to eat them.

After they calmed down again, they were actually able to eat the birthday cake and have some tea, many of them taking seconds on the cake, which was chocolate with raspberry filling. They'd probably all ruined their dinners.

Harry was sitting with Hermione and the other fourth-year girls, whom he did not know very well. He got the impression that when they were in the common room, they were avoiding him. He was finding it hard to talk to Annika Olafsdottir now.

"Can you pass the cream, Annika?" he asked her.

She swallowed, handing him the small chipped jug. After he'd poured it into his tea, he tried to hand it back to her, but she wouldn't take it, so he tried handing it to Ruth Pelta instead. She took it cautiously.

"It's okay," he told them. "I don't bite. Not usually." He smiled at them. Annika laughed now, colouring.

"I'm--I'm sorry. It's just that I still can't get over you being you. I've been in Gryffindor for almost four years, and I'm still unable to say anything coherent to Harry Potter"...

Ruth rolled her eyes. "Annika, he does not want to feel like he's on display all the time. He probably just wants to be left alone".

Harry looked at Ruth; she was a brown-haired girl with hazel eyes and a slightly olive complexion.

"Is that why you never talk to me?" he asked her.

She raised her eyebrows. "I just thought you'd think it rude, someone who didn't know you just walking up to you as if just because you're famous and everyone knows who you are, you want to know everyone else. I didn't want to be presumptuous".

Harry nodded at Ruth. "Thank you. But you have no idea the level of presumptuousness that's been reached around here..." he smiled, remembering all of the girls who asked him to the ceilidh. Ruth didn't look away from him; she was a very direct person.

"Well, I should go soon so I can study a little before dinner. My mum sent me another Hebrew lesson by owl post; hopefully I can finally have my bat mitzvah this summer"...

Hermione looked at her. "Seriously"?

She sighed. "I'm two years behind because ever since I came to Hogwarts, I've been doing it by correspondence. My mum and dad are both rabbis. They weren't even sure they were going to let me come to Hogwarts when I got the letter. But my mum decided to be very philosophical about it, finally. Said that I had a gift; it would be rude to throw it back in God's face. The important thing is what you do with your gifts. And now, I'm the only one in Ancient Runes who can make head or tail of the Hebrew and Aramaic spells, so I'm one up on everyone else." Hermione looked envious.

Then Harry was startled by Sandy hissing at him; he listened, thinking, Not again....No one but Hermione seemed to have noticed Sandy's hissing; he thought she might be paying special attention, listening for the sound, now that she knew about Sandy's Sight. She raised her eyebrows at him, but he shook his head; it wasn't a good time to say anything. No that he wanted to tell her about this, anyway.

"I can't even make out the Icelandic runes, and my dad's from there," Annika said dejectedly.

"I think that's psychological," Ruth told her, sounding like Hermione to Harry. "You don't get on with your dad, so you don't want anything to do with his heritage".

"Well how would you feel if your dad had saddled you with a last name like 'Olafsdottir'"?

Hermione smiled; Harry had heard her go on about her first name enough times. Ruth rose to go, and Annika and Zoey went with her. They all wished Ginny a happy birthday again before going up to the castle together, walking closely together. Annika shyly waved at Harry before leaving. He thought they made a rather tight little group; hard for Ginny to really penetrate. But then, he realized, she was used to boys. With six brothers, she'd never really learned how to get on with girls. And in her first year, she'd been rather isolated as well. She had spent her time confiding in Tom Riddle, in the diary, not bonding with her roommates. She was still not really integrated into their world; Harry remembered the many times he'd seen small knots of friends scattered around the common room, chatting happily, and Ginny, alone in a corner with a book. That's probably why she's at the top of her classes, he thought. No social life to distract her. That's probably also why she and Malfoy get on, he realized. Two isolated, lonely people...

Harry finished his cake and looked up to see Ginny furtively edging her way toward Hagrid's hut. The rest of the people at the table were chatting animatedly and eating cake and drinking tea and making up silly names for Fred's and George's

product line; no one but Harry noticed that the birthday girl was slipping away. Of course, he knew to expect it, thanks to Sandy.

After she'd been gone for several minutes, Harry also slowly rose and edged toward the door of the hut. Hermione was talking to Neville now about what it had felt like to change into the duck. Harry thought it was possible that Parvati saw him, but he blinked and it seemed she was once more laughing at something Fred was saying, while Ron draped his arm over the back of her chair. While Neville was talking to her, Hermione was looking at Parvati strangely; it wasn't hostile Harry thought, but...at least she's not taking any notice of what I'm doing, he thought. He slipped into Hagrid's hut.

He looked around the strangely empty room; without the large table in it, it actually seemed quite commodious. Then he heard voices, and he moved carefully across the room to the back wall. One of the windows flanking the back door was open a crack, although the rough, dirty curtains still hung in front of the glass. Harry recognized the voices; he lifted the edge of the curtain to peer through the dirty glass and saw exactly what he expected to: Ginny was behind Hagrid's hut with Draco Malfoy. A ram and a dragon. He hadn't had to guess what Sandy had meant this time.

Their arms were around each other and Ginny was smiling at him. "That was the non-verbal thank you," she said. Harry grimaced; that must have been a kiss. He wasn't sorry to have missed that. In retrospect, he'd probably rather see his mum kiss Snape. "Now the verbal thank you: it is beautiful and wonderful and thank you".

Malfoy looked more consumed by her every time Harry saw them together. His grey eyes seemed to be constantly moving over her, devouring her with his mind, as though he were memorizing every freckle, every small line, every eyelash and even the half-moons on her fingernails. He leaned down again and pressed his lips to hers, finding her real and responsive, drinking him in, sliding her fingers into his wispy hair. Harry looked away, then back. What was Malfoy doing with his hands? Harry felt a rage wash over him as Malfoy raised his left hand and placed it purposefully over her right breast, just placed it there, not moving. Not missing a beat, Ginny simply moved her hand from his head to his left hand, and removed it from her breast, placing it back around her waist, never breaking the kiss while doing this. But Malfoy would not be deterred; instead of her chest, he now moved the same hand down below her waist, cupping her bottom in his palm, continuing to kiss her. Again, she reached for his wrist and this time pulled the hand up to have it in a more neutral location.

He broke the kiss and pressed his mouth to her neck as she tipped her head back so he could get more of it. Harry felt his pulse racing. Malfoy was moving further down, and now had begun to unbutton her robes, which fell to the ground. His fingers plucked at the buttons on her blouse. She suddenly came to her senses and pushed him away, turning toward the hut to button her blouse again; Harry had a glimpse of a simple white bra with a small fabric rosebud nestled in the valley between the cups. But it was only a glimpse; he ducked down below the windowsill instinctively when she turned.

He heard her talking to Malfoy, so he inched back up to the window, lifting the curtain again.

"Draco; we've talked about the hands"...

Malfoy took her in his arms again, not saying anything in response to her complaint. He moved his mouth down her throat again and she made a gurgling noise, grabbing at his shoulders as though she would have collapsed otherwise. He succeeded in undoing one of her blouse buttons again, moving his mouth lower, and now one of her hands was sliding down his chest, coming to rest on his waist.

Harry reached for his wand, feeling his knuckles strain on it as he gripped the wood fiercely. If Malfoy did anything that she didn't want and she couldn't hold him off, Harry wanted to be ready. He knew he shouldn't be watching this, but at the same time he felt that he must, he couldn't risk her being in danger.

Malfoy had undone the buttons on his own robes and they slipped to the ground. He moved his mouth up to her throat again, then his mouth was on hers once more, and as the kiss continued the hand she had at his waist of his pants slid down his side, and she was running her fingers along the side of his thigh, down to the knee, then back up, past his hip to his waist, then back down again.

Harry felt like he couldn't breathe. He could see how twitchy her hand was making Malfoy. He had his mouth on her throat again, concentrating on one spot, while she kept stroking his leg and driving him--and Harry--mad.

This had been continuing for several minutes when Malfoy pulled his mouth away from her throat; there was a bruised patch of skin where his mouth had been, and it was unfortunately shaped exactly like a mouth. He was unbuttoning her blouse yet again, putting his hands inside it, moving his mouth down...

Harry looked down at his hands. He tried to think of other things. He thought of the Daily Prophet article that had come after the explosion at the Three Broomsticks. There had been an old photo of him from the beginning of the Triwizard Tournament; he was small and pale and scared-looking. It looked laughable; the article said that Harry Potter had apprehended a Death Eater, along with retired Auror Mad-Eye Moody. A weak-looking little boy and an old man. How much of a threat could these Death Eaters have been, really, to be taken by them? That was the upshot of the article. No mention was made of Voldemort's return; it was as though these Death Eaters were simply having a lark, and got caught. There was no image of the smoking rubble, although there was a quote from Madam Rosmerta with her assertion that it had been Sirius Black who had masterminded it; those caught were merely his stooges. Great, Harry thought. Sirius is accused of yet another thing he didn't do.

They had talked briefly when he had returned to Hogwarts after the ceilidh; they'd come here, to Hagrid's hut, where Sirius could change into his human form again. Because the Polyjuice Potion had worn off, he would have to lie low for a little while, especially avoiding Hogsmeade. And he would have to hope that Ian Lucas wouldn't be questioned either. People in the wizarding world knew he was Sirius' cousin. He might be in trouble for aiding and abetting a fugitive. This was such a mess, Harry thought. The only good thing was that two Death Eaters would not be coming to Voldemort's side when he summoned them. That was something.

He dared not look out the window; he could hear moaning from each of them, tiny gasps occasionally. What should he do? he wondered. She seemed to be letting him, now. He felt ill. He should go. She was going to do it; she was going to give herself to his enemy. He took the basilisk amulet out of his shirt and held it in his fist. He had a sudden urge to tear it from around his neck and throw it into the fireplace. But somehow, the moment he touched it, he felt calmer. I need to trust her, he thought.

He raised his eyes to the dirty window, lifting up the corner of the curtain again. She seemed to be trying to shove him away now; his head was between her breasts, but as she succeeded in pushing him on the second try, Harry could see that her bra was still on, another bruise forming on her chest in the V between the cups. She buttoned her blouse for the second time.

"I--we--have to stop. This is just-too much"--

"Listen, I'm sorry Ginny, it's just that--well, it is your fifteenth birthday".

She stared at him openmouthed, putting her Hogwarts robes on again. "And you thought my little birthday present to you was going to be sleeping with you?" It looked to Harry like that was exactly what Malfoy thought. He opened and closed his mouth like a rather stupid-looking fish, Harry thought. Ginny bent down, then thrust Malfoy's robes at him.

"Just because I'm fifteen doesn't mean I'm ready for this, Draco".

"You say that," he said, getting that argumentative tone Harry knew so well. "But what your body was saying was very different".

"So what? So you know how to do things that--that make me respond certain ways. I'm still governed by my brain. And my brain is just not ready for this yet. I know boys' brains are between their legs"--

"Hey"!

"Oh, come on. I have six brothers. And I'm not deaf. The things I hear at home! You know how sometimes Muggles who see magic don't even need memory charms because they just convince themselves they imagined it? Well, my brothers seem to think I'm like that when they're talking about what it's like to be a boy, about sex, about all that. I hear everything I remember and file it all away. You should have heard one of them going on and on when he was waiting for his balls to drop...I won't tell you which one."..

"Ginny!" Draco Malfoy actually sounded horrified on behalf of all of the Weasley boys. Truthfully, Harry was too. He wondered if it was Ron...

"Oh Draco! You really don't understand, do you? I'm not a prude; I'm just not mentally ready to have sex".

Malfoy grimaced at her. Harry did, too; there was just something so uncomfortable about hearing a girl talking about the things boys were concerned with, the things they hoped girls didn't know. He thought, Malfoy will have to be a right wanker, waiting for her...

"Well," Malfoy said, his voice shaking. "When do you think you'll be ready"?

She stared at him. "How should I know? I just turned fifteen. I know that it used to be that when a witch turned fifteen it was considered a very big deal, her parents would throw a big party for her and invite wizards who might be interested marrying her, and sometimes the girls would get married while they were still in school, and they'd go to be with their husbands during holidays instead of their parents. But that was a long time ago; nobody does that anymore. Just because I'm fifteen doesn't mean I'm on some kind of schedule, like a bloody train! Maybe this was a bad idea; maybe I'm too young to be in a relationship like this. I'm just frustrating you"...

Both Malfoy and Harry felt panic then. If she and Malfoy weren't together, what would happen to the plan for putting Lucius Malfoy into Azkaban? Malfoy, however, looked panicked for a different reason.

"No, Ginny! It's my fault. I shouldn't be putting so much pressure on you." Harry was shocked to hear him taking blame. Then he was shocked to hear his own name. "I have to ask, though; is this something to do with Potter"?

She rolled her eyes and threw her hands into the air. "No! This has nothing to do with Harry! This is about me! I am just not ready"!

Malfoy drew his lips into a line, mumbling an apology. He kissed her on the lips, briefly, softly, like that first tentative kiss in the Potions Dungeon. Then, without another word, he turned and stepped into the forest, and Harry could see him skimming the edge of it, until he was out of sight. Then Harry realized that she would probably be coming back into the hut. He ran across the room and had his hand on the door when she came in from the back, stopping in shock when she saw him.

"Uh, hi! There you are, Ginny. I just came in to look for you".

She looked skeptical. But she didn't contradict him. "I just felt like sitting out back, alone. I like to look at the forest." She was standing only about a foot away from him now, and he couldn't fight the urge to suddenly move his lips to her cheek, making only a brief contact with it.

"Happy birthday, Ginny," he said softly. She looked at him with wide eyes.

"We should go back out," she said shakily. He nodded and opened the door. When they returned to the large table, only Ron, Parvati, Neville and Hermione were sitting there with Hagrid. Everyone else had gone; it was almost time for the evening meal, but the sun wasn't ready to go down yet. The days had started lengthening again; they were hurtling toward midsummer and the end of the school year. Suddenly, it seemed that his fifth year had gone very fast. Harry felt he had crammed a huge amount of material into his brain, and wondered whether he would remember any of it when he took the O.W.L.s. Perhaps McGonagall would give him full marks for Transfiguration just because he'd learned to be an Animagus.

He wished he could transform now and run into the forest; Hermione was looking back and forth between him and Ginny with a furious expression; she had noticed the bruise on Ginny's neck. He sat next to her and whispered, "She met him behind the hut." Hermione nodded when she heard this, but she still looked at Harry oddly. He fingered the basilisk amulet again. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a fair-haired figure emerge from the forest on the far bank of the lake; then the figure skirted the lake, went behind the greenhouses, and up to the castle. What if something had happened and I hadn't been there? he wondered. Then he looked at Ginny; he remembered that she was ranked third in the Dueling Club and that Malfoy hadn't beaten her dueling (although he wasn't convinced that Malfoy was trying, actually). She can take care of herself, he tried to tell himself. She would never let him do anything she didn't want to do. The question that bothered him was--

What did Ginny want to do?

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Six: Addiction and Withdrawal

Life seemed to return to normal. Harry rose everyday, went running with Hermione, went to class, did his homework, and withstood Snape continuing to humiliate him in public while actually giving him quite good grades. He went to Dueling Club and prefects' meetings and checked in with McGonagall once a week. He also held Quidditch practices, but Ron was actually the one who was coming up with the strategies and plans for beating Ravenclaw in the final match of the year, June. Harry was glad that Cho Chang was all right and would soon be playing Seeker again. The next match was at the end of April, when Ravenclaw would play Slytherin. He hoped she mopped up the floor with Malfoy (although he had no intention of letting her beat Gryffindor).

Flitwick was enjoying his return to the classroom. Harry had asked Dumbledore whether there was any indication yet of who had put the alarm spell on the classroom doorway; he said there was not. He wanted to ask him what he had asked Snape, whether his ability to conquer pain spells came from Voldemort, but he stopped himself every time. He just got a bad feeling that it was going to be yet another question that Dumbledore didn't feel like answering yet.

Lupin hadn't left Sirius' side since the day of the ceilidh. Sirius went with him to work every night, not just when Lupin was a werewolf. Lupin was worried about Sirius being alone if someone from the Ministry of Magic tracked him down; he wasn't worried for himself, he was already persona non grata in the wizarding world. He was strictly an unofficial operative, working for Dumbledore because he had asked him. Most of the time he was just a werewolf who had to work as a night watchman at a warehouse to pay his rent and buy food.

The world also seemed to have forgotten the Westminster tube station. Harry felt that there was too much that people were willing to let go. They didn't think about the people who had no choice, the people who lost loved ones in the tube station, or Madam Rosmerta having to rebuild the Three Broomsticks (although he didn't like her very much, he expected that the village would miss the pub a great deal). Of course, Dumbledore had said after that day that all Hogsmeade visits were canceled until further notice. Harry supposed that was to be expected, and he had warned them that might happen in September.

Harry wondered if this was what it was like for his parents when they were at school and Voldemort was still in power. Constant wondering, waiting for the next disaster, not knowing whether it would touch you personally or be something you could afford to tuck into the back of your brain because that wasn't your sister who lost her eye, your father who was killed or tortured.

In the first class they had with Moody after the ceilidh, he was uncharacteristically quiet and reserved. He looked at them all when they had trickled into the room and taken their seats.

"Today," he began, "we will not be doing any hexes, curses, defense strategies or counter charms. What I want to do today is to find out whether you are a different person now, having seen some evil close up?"

He walked slowly around the room, his wooden leg clunking loudly on the floor. His good eye looked at each of them in turn, his magical eye for once seeming to be in sync with it. Ron looked uncomfortable; the gash on his cheek had healed pretty well, but there was a very fine line visible because of his freckles; there was a kind of border now, on his cheek, a line where the halves of some of his freckles didn't match up. He had decided to grow his facial hair to hide this, and now he had the beginnings of a bright red beard and mustache, which Harry had heard Parvati complaining about. She obviously didn't share Hermione's opinion of red beards.

"Well?" Moody barked, making them jump. "Who was at the Three Broomsticks when it blew? I was there, but I was busy watching the damn Death Eaters and trying to keep people from getting killed." Only Ron and Parvati raised their hands. Moody came over to them; they were sitting together, near the windows. He looked Parvati over; she seemed very uncomfortable about this. "You look none the worse for wear," he said in a dismissing tone to her. Then he took Ron's chin in his wrinkled hand and turned his head so he could see his right cheek. "Almost undetectable scar. Good. But how did it make you feel, when the roof fell in, when you were lying under the rubble? How will this affect your attitude toward the Dark Arts and people who practice it?"

Ron looked at Parvati, then at Moody. Harry watched him. Ron hadn't ever really gone through something like this before. He sacrificed himself to get Harry and Hermione across McGonagall's enchanted chessboard when they were in first year, but it was Harry who faced Quirrell and a weakened Voldemort. And Ron was on the other side of the rockfall in the Chamber of Secrets while Harry fought the basilisk to save Ginny. He'd been pulled into the tunnel leading to the Shrieking Shack by Sirius in his dog form, and he broke his leg and came face to face with Wormtail, but it was a sick, frightened Wormtail, and Ron had still been getting his mind around this little man being the pet rat he'd let sleep in his bed. He'd never been caught in a terrorist attack until now, he'd never really faced Voldemort, or even a memory of the sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle, as Ginny had.

Ron looked down. "I don't know. I know that I think some things about Death Eaters even more strongly than I did before..." he said softly.

"Like what?" Moody spoke in a medium tone, as though they were having a private conversation. Ron shrugged.

"Well, I always thought they were real cowards, hiding behind You-Know-Who's power, and masks and hooded cloaks. Sneaking around and making a building fall on a bunch of innocent people seems like just another cowardly thing to do."

"Are you more vigilant now that this has happened to you?"

Harry remembered Crouch saying 'CONSTANT VIGILANCE!' when he had been pretending to be Moody. Ron looked irritated.

"How could vigilance have saved me on Saturday? There was nothing to see inside the pub; you only saw them because of your eye." Ron had never spoken to Moody this way before, but Moody didn't seem to be upset about it.

"Exactly. How could vigilance have saved anyone? Anyone without a magic eye, that is." He smiled briefly. "That's what terrorism is. It catches people by surprise, and even if you are not caught in the attack, the psychological effects can be just as damaging. If you are a member of the group that was attacked, you are now terrorized because you need to watch constantly about someone attacking you. That's the real purpose of terrorist attacks around the world. Moslems attack Jews, Jews attack Moslems, Protestants attack Catholics, Catholics attack Protestants, bigots of all kinds attack people with dark skin or some other characteristic they don't like. And the next thing you know, any person who shares that characteristic is having nightmares, worrying about whether they'll be next, or someone they love. That's the real effect of terrorism. The name says it all; it attacks us with our own terrors. Boggarts love to swarm in an area where there's been a terrorist attack. They hide in out-of-the-way corners and wait to be uncovered by people clearing rubble or looking for bodies. And people in those situations are going to be hard pressed to be able to laugh, to say, 'Ridikkulus!' That's the real cost".

Parvati looked down at her hands on her desk and swallowed. She whispered, "I keep having nightmares. I'm under the beam again, and I'm calling and calling, and no one hears me"...

Ron put his hand over hers; she looked at him and tears started running down her cheeks. "And I didn't know where you were," she was saying to Ron now with a catch in her throat, "Or whether you were all right"...

Ron pulled his chair closer to her and put his arm around her shoulders and she put her head on his shoulder, crying freely, while he held her and rubbed her back. Harry could not watch. He looked at Hermione, who had a stricken look on her face, worse than when she had seen that Ron was all right. She turned to Harry then, and the need in her eyes was overwhelming; he swallowed and tried to look away, but he couldn't. When Moody spoke again, he jumped.

"Now, this time, no one died, or even had particularly dire injuries. But now that Voldemort's back, it's just a matter of time until he touches all of your lives in some more tangible way. You've got to face it when it comes. Whether that means getting injured yourself or dying, or surviving, you've got to face it. Of those three, which do you think would be worse?"

Seamus, who had been at Honeyduke's when the Three Broomsticks blew, shrugged casually and said, "Dying".

Harry had a feeling this was not the answer Moody was looking for and braced himself for the old man to bellow, "WRONG, FINNIGAN!" But oddly, it didn't happen. Moody was very subdued today. He stared at Seamus for a full minute while Seamus squirmed in his seat, awaiting what he must also think was an inevitable shout of contempt. But the contempt was very quiet this time.

"Dying," Moody muttered, shaking his head. "No imagination...You probably also think dying is worse than getting a kiss from a Dementor, don't you?" Seamus squirmed some more. "I'd say," Moody went on, "that being injured--depending on the nature of the injury--and surviving without a scratch are neck and neck, and dying is dead last. So to speak".

Lavender looked annoyed, doodling with her quill and grimacing. She glanced over at Ron and Parvati, who seemed to be in their own little world; Parvati was still crying on Ron, and he was patting her back and murmuring to her, his eyes wet with unshed tears.

“AND WHERE WERE YOU?” Moody bellowed at her suddenly, making everyone jump again. Lavender jerked her head up at him, turning from her usual pale beige to pale ivory.

“I—I didn’t go to the village on Saturday,” she whispered. Moody nodded.

“And now you probably think you missed all the fun. Typical. But when I say ‘surviving,’ I mean BEING there and not getting injured. If you’re injured, okay, you’ve got issues. You’ve got to get yourself mended up, or--” he pointed to his ear and leg, “get replacement parts.” He clunked back to his desk. “But if you’re there, and the bloke on one side of you died and the bloke on the other side of you is in hospital, missing half his brain, and you’re physically fine, what you’re going to be dealing with is survivor guilt. Why did he die when I didn’t? Why is she going through the rest of her life with one arm when I’ve got two? And of course, the big question: Why am I alive?”

He leaned against the desk. “We’re facing dark times. You’ll come face to face with evil and you’ll have to choose a side. You’ll have to get past survivor guilt and fear of dying and being maimed just to get up and go through your daily routine. It won’t be easy. But you’ve got each other,” he said, walking over to Ron and putting his hand on his shoulder. “That’s the most important weapon you have. I’ve had you attacking each other with curses and hexes, sure, but when all is said and done, you’re all still friends, aren’t you? Members of the same house, united”.

He came and stood in front of Harry. “That little Flitwick boy is one to watch, isn’t he Potter?” Harry looked up at him and nodded, his throat tight. “More balls than all of the Death Eaters put together, in my humble opinion.” Earlier in the school year, many of them would have been shocked by his language, but they were used to him now. He definitely was unlike any teacher they’d ever had—even Crouch, when he’d been pretending to be Moody.

“He wasn’t afraid to speak his mind and stand up for someone he knew had been falsely accused. We need more people to show that kind of strength of character right now. We need to be united and strong. We’ll have losses and scares, sure. And you’ll be there for each other, helping each other through the bad times. But don’t let it paralyze you or they’ll win. Most of all, keep fighting the darkness within you, the urge to say, ‘Oh, what the hell. What does it matter?’”

Then his voice became softer, but more adamant. “It matters”.

He turned and walked to the front of the room again, moving his magical eye over each of them in turn. His voice had become softer. The room was utterly still.

“It’s all that matters”.

* * * * *

Easter break came. Five of the first years were staying: Andy & Amy Donegal, Will Flitwick, Jules Quinn, and Gillian Lockley. Ginny’s roommates were all staying, but Ginny and Ron were going home. Fred and George were staying, finally getting somewhat serious about their N.E.W.T.s; Angelina and Alicia were staying for the same reason; Seamus and Neville planned to stay, as well as Colin and Katie. Harry and Hermione were of course staying, but Parvati and Lavender were not. Harry heard Ron and Parvati talking about going out in Ottery St. Catchpole during the holiday. He hoped there were more things to do there than in Hogsmeade. Harry knew that Draco Malfoy was also going home, and he wondered whether he and Ginny might also be meeting up in the village near the Weasleys.

Halfway through the holiday week, Harry was up late reading by the fire in the common room; Hermione was working on her Potions essay at a far table while Neville and Seamus played Exploding Snap and George and Fred speculated on how bad the N.E.W.T.s would be. There was a comforting low murmur of conversation in the room, punctuated occasionally by explosions coming from the direction of Seamus and Neville. For once Neville wasn’t down in the dungeons working on his potions; he told Harry he was giving himself the week off, he wanted to actually relax during the holiday. Neville wasn’t Seamus’ first choice of a person to play with, but Dean was gone for the week, so he had sighed and asked him. Neville had never played before (no one had ever asked him before) so he jumped at the chance. Harry thought he looked odd and jittery. There was something not quite right about his skin tone and eye colour...

Harry had dozed off over his book, his Christmas gift from Ron. When he jerked his head up, there was no one left in the room. He checked his watch; it was almost two in the morning. Why hadn’t Hermione at least woken him up and told him to go to bed? he wondered. He yawned hugely and stretched, picking up the book, which had fallen on the floor and cracked its spine. He frowned at it; that’s not good, he thought.

He heard a footstep on the girls' stairs and looked up; Hermione was coming into the common room. "Harry? Haven't you gone to bed yet?"

"Fell asleep reading." He showed her the book; she came over and examined it, also frowning.

"Broken spine," she murmured. "That's not good." Harry smiled. Sometimes he thought she was psychic. He looked at her now, in her night shirt and dressing gown, hoping that she wasn't, or she'd know that he was thinking about--

Suddenly she smiled at him and crawled into his lap. Well, there goes the idea that she's not psychic, thought Harry, as she pulled his head down to hers in a deep kiss. He grunted happily; they'd had a little more opportunity to go off on their own for some kissing since the holiday had started, but while the rest of the school was awake, there was always the risk of being caught together in an incriminating situation.

He wrapped his arms around her now, hugging her to him as closely as he could, feeling her hand stroking his leg, remembering Ginny doing that to Malfoy. He moved his mouth down and she helped him, undoing a few buttons on her night shirt. Harry sighed at the result; her mouth was in his hair, her breathing changing as he moved his mouth farther down.

"Harry?" she said softly. He didn't answer with words; he gave her a kind of "huh?" noise while he was otherwise using his mouth. That seemed good enough for her though, as she continued. "You know what I really miss? Lying in the same bed with you to sleep".

He brought his face up now, looking at her, wondering what exactly she was suggesting. He swallowed, remembered the night of New Year's eve, before Sirius interrupted them. Could he actually manage to do that again? Without going insane?

His heart was thudding painfully in his chest. "That--that would be nice. Except that we're not the only ones here now. Neville and Seamus are upstairs asleep".

She smiled coyly at him and stroked his cheek. "But I've got my dorm all to myself"...

Harry hadn't thought of that. Heart louder now, more painful. Buzzing in his ears. He swallowed. "But--what if someone sees me coming out of there in the morning"?

She shrugged. "Go up to your dorm and get your Invisibility Cloak." Of course! he thought; his brain felt like it was on overload. How was she so calm? Unless--she really did mean she just wanted to sleep beside him. That was probably all she had said. That was all she wanted, some cozy cuddling. Harry felt he should demur, insist it was wiser for him to sleep in his own bed. He did not want to spend the night being frustrated (although there was no guarantee he would not spend the night in his own bed being frustrated).

But he couldn't bring himself to reject her plan. He nodded, his throat tight. "I'll meet you up there in a few minutes." She smiled and kissed his cheek, then stood up, buttoning her night shirt. She went up the stairs to the girls' dorms without looking back. Harry thought about just plain running; going out the portrait hole, down the stairs, out of the castle, changing into a golden griffin and jumping into the sky, soaring over the lake, and forest...

But instead he walked on unsteady legs up to his dorm and undressed for bed, leaving on only his drawers, tying his dressing gown loosely and padding back downstairs barefoot, carrying the cloak. Before he went up the stairs to the girls' dorms, however, he had a thought. He drew Sandy out of his sleeve and held her up to speak to her.

"Sandy"?

"Yes, Harry Potter"?

"I'm not going to wear you to sleep tonight. You'll be warm; I'll leave you here by the fire".

"Why"?

"Well--I'd rather not get into that. You don't mind, do you"?

"I am merely curious about why".

“Sorry, Sandy”.

He put her down on the hearthrug. If he didn't do this--but he put the thought out of his mind. Somehow, leaving Sandy here made it all seem so premeditated, like murder. He swallowed again and stood, putting the cloak on and going to the girls' stairs.

When he reached the door for the fifth-year girls, Harry realized he'd never been here before. He opened the door cautiously. Hermione had put the candles out, but there was an almost-full moon brightly illuminating the room. He took the cloak, then the dressing gown. He sat on the edge of the turned-down bed; the others were neatly made up, deserted looking. He had never felt more nervous in his life. Where was Hermione?

The door opened and she entered; he supposed she'd been to the lavatory. She turned and took out her wand, said something Harry couldn't hear, waving the wand at the door. Locking charm, thought Harry. She put her wand away and turned around, still standing by the door as if she were also a bit nervous. Then she had a determined look on her face and Harry smiled; that was the Hermione he knew. She smiled back, still visibly nervous. Maybe they shouldn't be putting this kind of pressure on themselves, maybe they should just lie down and go to sleep, maybe...

Hermione untied her dressing gown and let it fall open; it was the only thing she was wearing, and Harry gasped in surprise; he couldn't believe how beautiful she was. The idea of sleeping fled from his brain. He had tried to imagine her many, many times since Dudley had first handed him the photograph she had sent him. He had mentally removed the bikini in his mind, wondering...but this was so different. This was real. She was real. She was standing before him expectantly, almost looking like she would cry if he didn't do something, and the thought made him step across the distance between them swiftly and take her in his arms, pull her mouth up to his, push the dressing gown off her shoulders, clasp her to him tightly.

Her hands shook as she hooked her fingers into the waistband of his drawers, pushing them down. He pulled his mouth away from hers and pressed it to her neck as he felt the cool air touch him and the fabric land on his feet. He kicked them away, loosening his hold on her, but only to move his hands over her, to explore every inch of her as he moved his mouth further down her body and she threw her head back, making, he thought, the most wonderful sounds, her hands wandering over his body.

They stood like that for what seemed a long time, hands and mouths roaming all over, pulses racing, sweat beading on hot skin only to be licked off ravenously. Then, Hermione looked up at him with wide eyes.

“Harry,” she whispered. It seemed a time to whisper. “I want you to take something else off”.

He gave her a lopsided smile. “Sorry; I should have thought of that,” he said, removing his glasses, moving to put them on the table.

He was on his way back to her when she said, “No. That's not it. Harry--take off the basilisk”.

He stopped and looked down at the amulet on his chest, then back at her. Her curls were wild, her body was limned by the moonlight, looking amazing, and he swallowed, knowing that even as she stood before him like this, and he stood completely defenseless before her, she was somehow still unconvinced that he wanted her, only her.

Harry lifted the chain over his head and placed it deliberately on the table, next to his glasses, then went to the bed, holding out his hand to her. She walked purposefully to him, throwing her arms around him again.

This seemed so right now. Harry was glad that they'd managed to wait this long. But even as they touched and kissed their heartbeats increased, Harry wondered, how had they waited? How had they not done this before, how had he not moved his mouth up her legs, her hip, her ribcage, her breasts, her neck? How had they not ripped each other's clothes off and attacked each other in the corridors of the castle, in the classrooms, in the Great Hall? How had they shown so much restraint?

Time seemed to randomly slow down and speed up. Harry felt he could never grow tired of moving his hands and mouth over her, playing her like an instrument, feeling her hands and mouth on him, a never-ending surprise...After a while, Hermione threw back her head and arched her back; he looked up at her, moved up and took her mouth again; her breath like an inferno, her moans an aria of desire. She gazed up at him, shaken, trying to get her breath. “Oh, Harry,” she whispered. “That was--I mean--my head”--

He smiled, wanting her more than ever. "We're not done yet," he said softly, kissing her chin. She nodded slowly.

"I know. I just meant--top of my head--blown off--" she gasped.

"In a good way, I hope".

She grinned. "Understatement," was all she said before pulling his mouth down to hers again. Then she broke the kiss, looking up at him. "You know, you sound like you've done this before," she said slyly. "Would you like to tell me something"?

Now it was his turn to be sly. "Nothing to tell. Except that I have"--

"What"?

"Done this with you before. In my mind. Only about a million times"...

"Oh, is that all? I thought teenage boys thought about it constantly"...

"And teenage girls don't"?

Her eyes were unfocussed with passion as she reached down and gently wrapped her hand around him, making him gasp. "Only about a million times"...

He pressed his mouth to hers again, then moved it down her throat. She began the process of wrapping herself thoroughly around him, her arms and legs, locking her ankles together in the small of his back as she finally pulled him into her, making him widen his eyes. He had never felt so vulnerable--and so safe, so protected, so enveloped.

Harry flashed back to the Yule Ball, the pretty girl with Viktor Krum, and then really seeing her, seeing that it was Hermione. He realized that he'd never thought of her as pretty until then. And her kissing him on the train platform before they separated for the summer...She definitely wasn't under any curse then. She hadn't kissed Ron. Other images unbidden came into his mind; Hermione running in the park in Surrey; Hermione working in the garden on Privet Drive with him, smudges of dirt on her cheeks, sweat running down her neck and then further down still...

Harry had wanted her last summer, he'd wanted her all year, and now they were finally together, really together, and it like it was always meant to be, even though he hadn't seen her, not actually seen her, for four years.

Time lost all meaning. Finally, he started to cry out, then lowered his mouth to hers, and she groaned against his tongue shuddering throughout her body, and a moment later, he collapsed, kissing her shoulder, her neck, her earlobe, her jaw...It was like the polar opposite of the Cruciatus Curse. He had known pain coursing through his body; now he knew what it was like to feel the exact opposite in every fiber of his being.

Hermione's mouth was pressed against his shoulder, a warm suction. He raised himself to look down at her, then moved to lie at her side, still staring at her, stroking the side of her face. She beamed back at him. Harry was happier than he ever remembered being, feeling like he would never stop smiling.

"How's the top of your head?" he asked impishly.

"Flying somewhere over the Forbidden Forest," she answered softly, then laughed out loud; a real laugh, not a giggle or a twitter. She had a woman's laugh, he realized, not a girl's. It was wonderful and throaty and made him want her all over again.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered. He was surprised when she scowled.

"Harry, you don't have to say that just because"--

"Hermione, stop it. You are. That's that. If you argue with me, we might not do that again," he teased. An obvious lie.

She smiled now. "Threatening me with frustration already? Giving me a taste of Harry Potter and then taking it away?" Now it was her turn to look mischievous. "I thought it was women who were supposed to use sex as a weapon".

He laughed, gazing back at her. "No threats. No games. Just two very happy people, feeling very, very lucky".

"I second that," she agreed, pillowing her head on his chest and throwing her leg across him, her arm on his stomach. He looked down at her as she closed her eyes, a peaceful expression on her face, and he closed his own eyes, acutely aware of every point of contact between his skin and hers, thinking how wonderful it was, how amazing and perfect.

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Harry woke up near dawn. The pale light in the room made it possible for him to see where his drawers and dressing gown were. He extricated himself from her carefully and dressed, putting on the basilisk last. He picked up the Invisibility Cloak and went to sit on the edge of the bed, watching her sleep. He'd watched her sleep before, but this was different. This was a much bigger deal than kissing in the Charms classroom or being on the hearthrug late at night, or even just sleeping side by side in his bed during the Christmas holiday. This was huge.

He stroked her arm, then shook her gently, whispering her name. She finally stirred, looking where he'd been lying beside her first, then, as she became more oriented, she realized that he was sitting on her other side. She pulled herself to a sitting position, trying to keep her eyes open. The sheet fell to her waist, and Harry drew in his breath.

"Hermione, I was going to tell you I have to go, but you don't exactly make it easy, sitting there with--so little on"--

She smiled, then leaned over to kiss him. "I believe the word you're looking for is 'naked.' Actually, I was going to put on a nightshirt and get some more sleep." She stood up, walking to her wardrobe unselfconsciously, while Harry swallowed and fought the urge to tear his own clothes off again.

When she was covered up by a long T-shirt, she sat next to him on the bed and laced her fingers through his.

"I'd say let's meet for running at seven, but we've already had our workout, don't you think?" Harry grinned. "But don't go down to breakfast without me, okay? I want to spend as much time with you as I can while it's still the holiday".

He kissed her lightly, still smiling. "Of course. I wouldn't dream of eating a single meal without you." He paused then, wondering how to put this. "Hermione, I need to ask you a couple of things. Did you--did you go to see Madam Pomfrey for"--

"Yes," she said simply. "Two months ago".

"Two months ago"!

She smiled shyly. "I didn't have the nerve to do anything about it until last night. And even then--I was really nervous. I kept waiting for you to run screaming into the night"....

He stroked her hair with his hand. "Oh, Hermione...as if that would ever happen".

She looked up at him her eyes glistening. "What was the other thing you wanted to ask"?

Harry wasn't sure he should ask this now. It seemed to show such a lack of faith. But--he had to know. "Hermione--you don't feel like you're--under a spell, do you"?

She thrust her fingers into his hair and pulled him to her in a long, languid kiss. When she ended the kiss she looked in his eyes. "Only under the spell of Harry Potter," she said firmly.

He swallowed and looked at her. "Did I mention that you don't make it easy to go"?

She grinned. "Good. Except that you really should, before Neville and Seamus wake up".

"I know." He rose and donned the Invisibility Cloak. Hermione picked up her wand and went to the door, undoing the locking charm she'd put on it. She cautiously opened it and glanced around the landing.

"Deserted. Go ahead".

Before he left, he reached out with his hand for just a moment, then quickly slipped out the door. Hermione squeaked a little when she felt the contact, then laughed.

“Being groped by the Invisible Man,” she said musingly. “Kinky”.

He smiled under the cloak, having to make an effort to suppress his laughter. He felt positively giddy. He padded lightly down the girls’ staircase, wanting to skip, and then he went up the boys’ staircase cautiously, hoping Neville and Seamus would still be fast asleep, hoping they hadn’t checked his bed, then the common room. He hoped a lot of things.

But the two other boys were still snoring softly behind their bedcurtains when he entered the room. He removed the cloak and placed it carefully in his trunk, then removed his dressing gown and climbed into bed. Without her in it, it seemed absurdly large and lonely. Harry pulled the covers up to his chin, remembering her, remembering the night. But that only lasted for a few seconds before he was fast asleep, a large smile plastered across his face.

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Harry woke up again at eight o’clock. He opened his bedcurtains and saw that Seamus was dressed and ready to go out the door.

“Oh! Morning, Harry. Thought you’d sleep in. You were downstairs pretty late, weren’t you”?

Harry nodded. “Fell asleep reading. But I’ve slept enough now.” He rose and went to the wardrobe. Seamus left. While dressed, Harry listened to Neville breathing peacefully in his sleep. Was Ginny possibly considering breaking up with Malfoy? he wondered. Did she think Neville would be less pushy about a physical relationship? Harry could see that she might. He had a hard time picturing Neville groping a girl. Just hold out a little longer, Ginny, he thought. Until Malfoy’s in Azkaban...

But now his thoughts turned from Ginny to Hermione, who was only about seven months older than Ginny. Not only had she been ready, she pretty much orchestrated the whole thing. And she thought he’d run screaming into the night! But then, he remembered hiding from her during the Christmas holiday. He’d had his share of jitters as well.

He left Neville still snoring away behind his bedcurtains and went down to the common room. He collected Sandy from the hearth. When he picked her up, he said happily, “Good morning, Sandy”!

“Good morning, Harry Potter. Why did you not wear me last night”?

“Well, Sandy--I spent the night with Hermione, and I kind of wanted it to be just the two of us”...

“You have spent the night with her before, with me on your arm. Why did you not want me with you last night”?

“This was different”.

“How was it different”?

He frowned. “It just was. I’m not sure how to explain it to you, or if snakes even have any way to understand”...

He looked up and saw Hermione at the foot of the girls’ stairs, her prefect badge on her robes like him, a glow about her that made him think, Surely someone will notice...

“My ears were burning,” she told him.

“What? You couldn’t understand”...

“No. It’s all just hissing to me. But I had a feeling I knew what you were talking about anyway”.

“I wasn’t--I mean”--

She smiled at him, and laughed. “Don’t get so jumpy on me now, Harry! I was just joking around.” He smiled back at her, putting Sandy around his arm again. No one’s going to mistake that glow, he thought. Everyone will see...

But no one did. They sat on opposite sides of the Gryffindor table to eat breakfast. Harry tried not to meet her eyes too often. He grunted thanks when she offered him some of her Daily Prophet to read. He didn't really want to read it, but then he saw that there was a section he'd never noticed before, the financial section, called Your Daily Profit. He skimmed the stories about the up-and-coming wizard businesses, and those that were slipping into bankruptcy (one of the textbook publishing houses was up to its neck in red ink). I'll have to get Sirius to invest some of my money, he thought. Better than it just sitting in a vault.

He wanted to fly on his Firebolt for some reason, but he realized Hermione would probably not be interested in sitting around and watching him fly. But maybe she'd want to fly with him. He thought of their brief flight together, when they escaped from the Charms classroom through the window. He'd flown since then, to demonstrate to McGonagall that he could. They'd gone down to the edge of the forest after dinner one night, and after transforming, he'd spread his wings and leapt into the sky, going higher and higher, finally feeling the tree tops brushing his stomach as he flew over the forest.

He almost changed back and plummeted out of the sky when he saw the clearing deep in the forest where the giants were living. He spent a few minutes circling overhead, just watching them move about their campsite, a fire in the center where several were sitting, cooking, some of them off to the side looking like they were tanning hides; Harry didn't want to know what animals the hides were from. They didn't notice him up in the air above them, and he was glad, although he shouldn't have worried; he was too high up for them to reach him. He'd flown back to McGonagall and changed back without telling her what he'd seen. He knew that the teachers knew about the giants, but he knew that the students weren't supposed to know.

It had been exhilarating; he felt like it was worth the aching he experienced in his bones afterward, to be able to do that. He remembered the first time he'd ever flown a broom, how he felt so at home in the air. Now he knew why; he was born to do this, to soar on a thermal with his wings at just the right subtle angle to catch the warm wind, spiraling toward the ground in a carefully-controlled descent...

After breakfast, Harry and Hermione walked into the entrance hall, close together but not touching. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, saw her looking back and couldn't suppress a small smile from curling up the corners of his mouth. Hermione looked like she was trying not to grin maniacally. He walked toward the doors and then went outside, sensing her right behind, following him. No one else came outside. Harry slipped into the shrubbery near the doors, ducking behind a tall topiary that had been cut to resemble a hippogriff. That seemed very appropriate, somehow. Hermione was with him in a matter of moments. He pulled her to him, and she slipped her arms around him, one hand behind his neck, the other in the small of his back, but as the kiss deepened, that hand slid down, making Harry moan against her mouth. He pulled away from her, smiling, and she kept her hand right where it was.

"Miss Granger," he said in a teasing voice. "Are you trying to compromise my virtue?"

"Already done," she reminded him, kissing the base of his neck. "Anyway, lately, I've been trying to avoid touching you in certain places--and I don't exactly have to bother doing that anymore, do I?"

Harry showed that he agreed by leaning down to kiss her again, letting his own hands wander into previously-forbidden territory. After a minute, Hermione came up for air, saying, "Not that this isn't nice, but are we going to spend our holidays snogging and groping in the bushes? There are more comfortable places where we can--um--do more--" she was planting kisses on his neck again while moving her hands once more.

"Actually," he said, trying not to go insane from what she was doing, "I was wondering if you'd like to go flying".

She pulled back at him and looked like she was considering this. "Hmm. That might be a good idea. I really have to get over my acrophobia sometime; someday I'll be able to Apparate, but in the meantime, I really should get more comfortable with a broom".

"Well--I wasn't talking about brooms".

She frowned at him, then widened her eyes when she realized what he meant. "Oh, no you don't, Harry Potter! I am not doing that again!"

"Hermione, it worked out fine"...

"You were a basket-case afterwards! What if you pushed yourself too hard and changed back while you were a hundred feet in the air? You'd be killed! Not to mention your passenger. Besides, you've got Sandy, haven't you"?

"I've flown two-hundred feet in the air now, Hermione, and McGonagall is convinced that I'm fine. Oh, come on. It'll be fine. I can leave Sandy somewhere so she won't be alarmed".

Hermione drew her mouth into a line. "I'm sorry Harry, I just--can we just work on me and brooms right now"?

He sighed and kissed her on the forehead. "Of course. I'm not putting pressure on you".

She leaned against his chest and looked up at him. "No," she said musingly, "You never do. That's why I had to go and seduce you." She laughed then, in that wonderful throaty way he remembered from the night, and he kissed her soundly before leading her out of the shrubbery, her fingers laced in his. They went up to Gryffindor Tower; Harry was going to his Firebolt and ask Fred or George whether Hermione could borrow one of their brooms, so she wouldn't be stuck with one of the poky ones the school kept for students who didn't have their own.

But when he entered his dorm, he heard a strange sound. It seemed to be coming from Neville's bed. Frowning, he walked to the bed and pulled back the curtains, shocked by what he saw.

Neville was shivering and sweating all at once, a strange bilious green color; his eyes were an eerie yellow; Harry suddenly realized that he didn't know what color Neville's eyes were supposed to be, but he was quite certain it wasn't yellow. He was wearing blue cotton pajamas that were soaked through with sweat, and he was staring straight up, his mouth wide open in a silent scream as he continued to shake and sweat.

Harry felt panicked; he did the only thing he could think of; he ran to the door and bellowed down the stairs, "Hermione!"

He went back to Neville's bed; he was convulsing now. It seemed to be some kind of seizure. He was afraid to touch him or make a sound. He felt paralyzed. All he could do was stand and watch this boy he'd known for five years suffer.

He heard her feet on the stairs, could hear the note of panic in her voice as she cried out, "Harry! Are you all right?" Of course, she'd think it was him, he realized. But when she was in the room, she saw where he was standing, and ran to Neville's bedside.

"Neville!" she cried, going to her knees. She immediately put her hand on his head, then felt for the pulse in his neck.

"His heartbeat is irregular; it's galloping, then jumping about, then galloping again," she said after holding her hand there for half a minute. Harry marveled at the way she wasn't afraid to jump right in, to put her hands on him, when he was terrified. Not for himself, but in case something he did caused Neville harm. We'll take the cup together... he remembered saying...

"We need to get him to the hospital wing," she said urgently.

Harry thought. "What if we stun him? It might put him into a kind of--" he floundered for the meaning he was looking for.

"A stasis? Good idea. And then we could use that Mobilicorpus spell to get him there." So that's what they did, and when they emerged into the common room with Neville's body, everyone present looked up, shocked. Alicia had been sitting at a table with Angelina, preparing for N.E.W.T.s; she came running over when she saw them. The twins were by the fire, also doing N.E.W.T. preparation, also clearly alarmed by Neville's state. As far as they knew, he was the closest thing their sister had to a boyfriend.

"We stunned him so we could move him to the hospital wing," Hermione told them all.

Harry said hoarsely, "When I went in our room, he was making strange noises, and sweating and shaking, and--and he looked like that--" he said, referring to his green cast and his yellow eyes, which were still open.

"We'll come with you," George and Fred said, and Alicia and Angelina were right behind. The six of them escorted Neville's body to the hospital wing, and Harry's head was spinning the whole time with gruesome thoughts.

There are six of us, his brain said. The same as the number of pall bearers you need to carry a coffin. Neville will be all right, said a different voice in a different part of his brain. Don't talk about pall bearers. Does he look all right to you? his

brain said now. Harry felt his head had been split down the middle; it wasn't his scar, it wasn't Voldemort. He felt like he didn't know how to handle this, that Neville of all people should be a victim of--of what? What had happened to him, and who had done it? His throat was tight; he couldn't swallow.

When they reached the infirmary, George opened the door and Harry and Hermione guided Neville in. Harry ran to find Madam Pomfrey in her office, but she wasn't there. He thought he heard a noise in the Apothecary, so Harry opened the door, not bothering to knock. Instead of Madam Pomfrey, however, Harry found Snape reaching for a jar labeled Powdered Spleenwort, which he presumably was going to add to the bubbling cauldron that hovered over a purple fire.

"Oh!" he said with relief as soon as he saw Snape. "I'm so glad it's you! Come quick. It's Neville".

Snape put the jar down on a work table with a loud thunk and strode through Madam Pomfrey's office and into the infirmary in the blink of an eye. Hermione had put him in one of the beds and had taken the traveling spell and stunning charm off him. He lay there as he had before, in his own bed, twitching and sweating, pale green skin offset by eerily yellow eyes. Snape leaned over him; he put his ear to his chest and then put his fingers on his neck, as Hermione had. He looked in Neville's eyes, looked at his skin, then in his mouth; his tongue was swollen terribly. It was amazing he hadn't choked on it.

"Longbottom!" he shouted in his face, holding his head still with both hands over Neville's ears. He looked in Neville's eyes; they moved slightly. "What do you see, Longbottom?" he said in a fierce whisper.

Neville opened his mouth; a hoarse rasp that had the sound of a death rattle in it was all that came out. "Scorpions. Beetles. All over my body. All over the wall..." Suddenly, he started gagging, then his whole body was convulsing. Harry clenched his jaw, unable to stand the sight of Neville like this. His voice had sounded horrible--not like Neville at all.

Snape pulled out his wand and whispered, "Reducio," waving it over Neville's mouth. The gagging stopped, but the seizure continued. Snape looked up at Alicia, who was watching with her fist in her mouth.

"Does Professor McGonagall know?" he said to her suddenly. She shook her head. He pointed at Angelina. "You. Go tell her. You--" he pointed at Alicia. "You're Head Girl--you remember the password to the headmaster's study?" She nodded. "Go get him. Now".

Alicia and Angelina turned and fled. Fred and George still hovered nearby, looking more serious than Harry had ever seen them. "And you two!" he barked at them suddenly. "Make yourselves useful for once and find out where in the bloody hell Madam Pomfrey is!"

"I'll check the greenhouses," Fred said, running toward the door.

"I'll check the library," George called over his shoulder as he also ran out.

"Just find her!" he bellowed at their backs. Hermione was sitting on the opposite side of the bed from Snape, holding Neville's hand steadfastly, murmuring meaningless but soothing-sounding reassurances to the senseless boy. He had stopped convulsing and Snape was checking his pulse again. Harry saw how solicitous Snape was with him, how careful. Perhaps he'd been hard on Neville all this time for the same reason he'd given Sirius for being hard on Harry--to toughen him up. What had happened? Harry wondered. What was wrong with him?

"What's wrong with him?" Harry asked softly. As soon as he thought it, he couldn't not say it.

Snape didn't look at him; he stayed focused on Neville. "Withdrawal. I'm not sure what he became addicted to, but he's definitely in withdrawal. I have a few guesses, but if we could just find out what he was taking"--

"I know who'd know," Harry said suddenly. Snape turned and raised his eyebrows. "Ginny Weasley and Draco Malfoy were usually working in the dungeons at the same time as Neville. They might know".

"Snape nodded. "Use my office," he said, turning back to Neville. Harry strode quickly from the room and then ran down the corridor, down the marble stairs, through the blurs that the entrance hall and Great Hall had become, to the door to the secret passage to Snape's office, down the steep stairs. This was why he'd started running, he felt. To help a friend in need.

He panicked momentarily, unable to find the right place on the damp stone wall to apply pressure. Then suddenly, it gave way and he shoved his shoulder against the wall, squeezing into the room.

"Incendio!" he cried with rather more feeling than he should have, as he pointed his wand at the fireplace. His emotions were a runaway train. He reduced the roaring flames that had sprung up in the fireplace to a reasonable level, then, with a shaking hand, threw some powder from the bowl on the mantel into the fire. The flames burned green now, and he said more loudly than was necessary, "The Burrow".

After a few moments, Mrs. Weasley's face appeared.

"Harry!" she exclaimed. "How nice to see you! How's your holi"--

"Mrs. Weasley! I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have to talk to Ginny! It's urgent!"

Mrs. Weasley looked unnerved by his behavior; he was always unfailingly polite with her. "Of course," she said softly, then called for Ginny. Mrs. Weasley's head disappeared from the flames, to be replaced by Ginny's. Her hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail.

"Harry, what"--

"It's Neville. He's in the hospital wing with withdrawal symptoms. Snape wants to know what potions he's been taking, because whatever it was, he became addicted and then stopped, and now he--oh, Ginny, he looks like death--" he whispered.

Ginny blanched. "Well," she said shakily, "He was always working on the same two potions. One was called something like Youth Or Souse, Youth Are So"--

"Eutharsos Potion"?

"Yes, that's it. I don't know what it's for. And the other was some kind of memory-enhancing potion. Name On Iss, or something"--

Harry had a sudden image in his mind of the page from the Potions text. "Mnemonis Potion"?

"Yes! That's the one. I'm quite sure that's it. Oh, Harry, how bad is it? Will he be all right"?

"I don't know. I need to go tell Snape. Thanks Ginny".

Her face disappeared from the flames and Harry was about to extinguish the fire when he had a sudden thought. He threw some more powder into the firebox and said, "Alastor Moody." After a few moments, Moody's disfigured face appeared in the flames.

"Yes, Potter?" he said kindly, on seeing who it was.

"Come to the infirmary right away, Professor. It's Neville Longbottom".

Moody didn't answer him. His face had already disappeared. He knew Moody didn't see the point in small talk at a time like this. Good, Harry thought, he'll be there fast. Then he wondered how fast, thinking about how far Moody's office was from the infirmary, and thinking about his wooden leg. Well, Harry reckoned, maybe that's why he ended the call so quickly.

Harry put out the fire and squeezed out into the passage again, pushing the wall back into place behind him. He realized suddenly that it would have been much easier to find people if he'd simply gone to get his map. Why didn't he think of that? Or George or Fred? They were all so addled by this unexpected turn of events; Harry felt like he had no brain any more, he was operating on pure animal instinct.

He sprinted up staircase after staircase, finally arriving again at the door to the infirmary. When he pushed it open, he saw that Madam Pomfrey had finally arrived. Dumbledore and McGonagall stood by her side as she poked and prodded Neville, while Snape looked on. Hermione and the twins had retreated to a spot near Pomfrey's office door along with Angelina and Alicia. Fred discreetly put a piece of parchment into Harry's hand; he looked at it before stuffing it into his

pocket. The map. So they had thought of using it. He nodded at Fred. Not enough people gave the twins credit for being smart, he realized. You don't just think of all those pranks without being fairly bright. Hermione turned to him with an anguished look on her face. He grimaced, then went to the adults standing around Neville's bed.

"It's two potions," he told them. "Eutharsos and Mnemonis".

Snape blanched. "Eutharsos Potion is addictive if it is taken in large doses, or too often. And the main ingredient in Mnemonis Potion is ginkgo biloba, which discourages blood clotting. There are other anti-coagulents in it as well. And if a person takes enough of it"--

"What?" Harry wanted to know.

"They lose the ability to form clots at all. Worse than hemophilia".

"And in combination"?

He turned and looked at Neville again. "That's what we don't know".

Madam Pomfrey backed up from Neville and motioned to Snape, Dumbledore, McGonagall and Harry to join her in her office. Harry glanced over his shoulders at the others, who were not being included in the conference. Being treated as another one of the adults was slightly unnerving; there was something so comforting about being permitted to continue one's childhood, to let older, wiser people handle the crises. Then he thought of the night, and what he and Hermione had shared. He thought of Voldemort in the graveyard where the elder Tom Riddle was buried...He'd left childhood behind forever.

In the office, Madam Pomfrey turned to them, looking very grim. "He's in withdrawal from the Eutharsos Potion. That's my opinion. The Mnemonis Potion is not known to be addictive, although as Professor Snape noted, it can have a disastrous long-term effect. My main concern is that he has only begun the withdrawal process. This is merely the first stage, the greenish skin tone, the yellow eyes, the hallucinations. As it progresses, he will have violent outbursts, followed by crying and laughing jags and suicidal tendencies. We need to keep him restrained and someone should be with him at all times. Should he injure himself and bleed, there is the risk that his abuse of the Mnemonis Potion could lead to his bleeding to death if someone is not on hand to bind up the wound immediately with the right charm. I would feel more comfortable having him transferred to St. Mungo's"--

"No!" Snape said suddenly. Harry looked at him in surprise. Neville's parents were in St. Mungo's. Because of Barty Crouch Jr., whom Snape recruited. Harry looked at him searchingly. "He should be with familiar people. I--I will make up a schedule for his friends to sit with him, and any teachers that wish to participate as well. We should of course contact his grandmother." He nodded at McGonagall, who looked like she was taking umbrage at having him make important decisions about a student in her house, although she didn't argue about those decisions. Dumbledore nodded at him.

"I agree. Are you all right with that, Poppy? If we have coverage around the clock"?

She looked at Dumbledore as if she wished he weren't the headmaster, so she could argue with him. "All right," she said reluctantly. They filed out of the office. As Dumbledore explained to the others what Neville needed, Harry felt like he was in a fog. He remembered Neville asking him about Eupatorium fistulosum on the day before the ceilidh. Now he remembered why the name of that plant was familiar. It was the main ingredient in Eutharsos Potion. Harry was glad he had only taken it once. Snape had taken it too, when he was in school. Had he also become addicted to it, and gone through withdrawal? Or had he only taken it the one time?

He was vaguely aware of Hermione and Alicia volunteering to canvass all of the students who were still at the school for the holiday, to see who was willing to take their turn at Neville's bedside. Harry turned and looked at Neville again during this frenzied planning. He slowly walked over to the bed and picked up one of Neville's hands; it felt awful, cold and clammy. What if he had decided to take dose after dose of the same potion? That could be me lying there right now, he thought.

"I'm right here, mate," he said quietly to the only one in the school who had beaten him in the Dueling Club. That was probably the potion, Harry realized. But he didn't begrudge him the win; Neville would probably never have another moment like that the rest of his life, if he had a rest of his life...

No. Harry pulled his brain back from this thought. He'll be fine, he will. He has to be...

He sat in the chair where Hermione had been, still holding Neville's hand, as if he could will some of his good health to seep into Neville's body that way. Behind him, he heard the others depart, heard Madam Pomfrey go into her office and close the door. He was alone in the infirmary with Neville. Without saying anything, they all knew he'd volunteered to take the first watch. He sat staring at Neville, memory after memory of him flitting through his mind. At one point, he heard Sandy hiss something at him, but he couldn't process it, his mind was whirling, so that he was surprised when he looked up and saw Moody standing at the foot of Neville's bed. That's what she had been telling him; Mad-Eye Moody was coming (although she'd said a cyclops with one leg).

He nodded at Harry. "How is he, Potter?" he said in a low, gravelly voice. Harry explained the two potions to him, the withdrawal process, the round-the-clock vigil that would have to be kept. "But Pomfrey says he'll recover"?

"Yes. He just--" Harry's voice caught.

"That's all right, Potter. Don't try to say more. I understand you found him." Harry nodded. Moody heaved a great sigh. "I found them." Harry looked perplexed for a moment, but then he realized what Moody meant. Neville's parents. After he'd been tortured with Cruciatius by Barty Crouch, Jr. and his Death Eater friends.

"They'd been shopping in Diagon Alley for Christmas presents for their son. He was with them. Not quite two years old at the time. Roly poly, healthy little tyke. Happy as you could wish. When I found them behind a pub in Knockturn Alley, he was bawling away, trying to get his mother to pick him up. Poor Gemma! She just stared up at the sky, like Frank. I remember going to their wedding...I was at school with Frank's mother, Verity. She was Verity Gillespie then. Verity was heartbroken over what happened to Frank and Gemma. She adored Gemma. Brilliant, beautiful...she'd have adopted him if she could have. No mother-in-law/daughter-in-law tension there!" Moody sighed. "A beautiful, picture-perfect family".

Harry turned and looked at Neville again, at his sickly complexion and eerie eyes. He tried to picture him as a happy toddler, and couldn't.

"I just went to visit them, you know, Frank and Gemma. On Monday," Moody went on. "And now their son will be there too"...

"No!" Harry cried, as vehemently as Snape had. "He'll be fine. He has to!" The tears he'd been holding back finally ran down his cheeks and into the corners of his mouth. He didn't bother wiping them away. He clasped Neville's hand convulsively and glared at Moody. "He'll be fine"!

Moody frowned. "Now, Potter, I'm sure you want to think that. He's your friend; you've known him now for five years"...

"But that's just it," Harry choked. "I haven't known him. None of us have. Seamus and Dean are friends, and Parvati and Lavender, and Ron and Hermione and I...Neville was always the odd man out. I only just last year found out about his parents by accident, and Dumbledore didn't want me to tell anyone. I don't think--I don't think any of us really knows Neville".

Moody nodded. "There's always some like that. Keep to themselves. Well, with what happened, it's not surprising. Especially when that idiot from the Ministry showed up"...

"What"?

"Well, it was a big deal at the time. Frank and Gemma Longbottom! They were the only husband-wife Auror team I knew that could figure out how to balance the work and home situation. They were amazing together. We all figured it must have been a complete ambush for anyone to do what they did to them. And then this idiot shows up, Longlegs, Lockleg, Longheart"...

"Lockhart? Gilderoy Lockhart"?

"Yeah. That's the git. Memory charms specialist at the Ministry. Fresh out of school. Decides if he doesn't step in, little Neville, having seen his parents tortured, would be traumatized for life. I tried to stop him, but I couldn't completely, not before some damage was already done. I don't know how bad it would have been if the git had been allowed to do a full fledged charm on a not-quite-two-year-old. Probably wouldn't have had two brain cells left to rub together. I managed to get him sacked after that, thankfully".

Harry stared in disbelief. And Lockhart had almost put memory charms on him and Ron when they were down in the Chamber of Secrets. Thank goodness for Ron's broken wand, he thought, looking at Neville again. So it was a bad Lockhart memory charm that had been hampering Neville's thought processes all this time. And it had finally seemed that he'd gotten over that problem. He must have taken a huge amount of that Mnemonis Potion, Harry realized.

Moody patted him on the shoulder and said, "You're a good friend to him, Potter." As he turned to go, Harry thought, Neville wasn't. But from now on, I will be...

* * * * *

Harry wasn't sure when he dozed off. His head was on the mattress beside Neville's leg. Neville twitched his hand and Harry in the face. He jerked up and looked around just as the door to the infirmary opened. How long had he been asleep? he wondered. He checked on Neville, who looked the same as before.

Hermione walked over to the bed and put her hand on Harry's shoulder, leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Go get some rest," she said softly. "It's my turn now." Harry checked his watch; it was two o'clock. He looked at the windows, at the spring light and the flowering tree branches visible through the glass. It was only early afternoon. He looked at her, feeling suddenly an overwhelming desire to kiss her, to see her naked... He stopped himself from continuing this line of thought. How could he be thinking that, when Neville... Harry stood and gave her his chair, went to stand at the foot of the bed, looking at Neville, before turning to leave. His hands shook; he felt that he was in withdrawal almost as much as Neville was. Somehow, between the previous night and the morning, he had the feeling that nothing would ever be the same.

The rest of the holiday passed in a blur of sitting by Neville's bedside or sitting around the common room with other shocked-looking people who barely talked, sometimes saying something about Neville, "Remember when" stuff, that always seemed to trail off and resulted in someone starting to cry. Harry was sitting by Neville's bedside on Sunday night before the new term was to start when Ginny came running into the infirmary; she dashed to the bed, standing on the side opposite where Harry sat, taking Neville's hand and looking into his face with an alarmed expression that conveyed all the fears they all held for him.

She asked about his progress shakily; Harry tried to dispassionately tell her the things Madam Pomfrey had explained to Hermione, which she had explained to him. Hermione was impressed that there didn't need to be intravenous fluids for nourishment; such things were carefully Apparated into his body, and the waste was carefully Apparated out as well. Harry grimaced when she told him this, thinking about how many things he took for granted just because he was conscious and walking around and fully-functional. Neville was also levitated for about half the day, floating just an inch or so above the mattress and pillow, an hour on and an hour off, so he wouldn't get bedsores. He hadn't progressed to the second stage of withdrawal yet. Harry dreaded that, dreaded having to restrain Neville and prevent him hurting himself. He'll be all right, he had to keep telling himself. He'll be all right.

"I'm taking this watch," Ginny told him softly. She held Neville's hand and looked at Harry. In spite of his current condition, Harry couldn't help think that Neville was very, very lucky just now. He nodded at her and rose to go, not saying goodbye. She moved to sit in the chair he'd vacated, holding Neville's other hand now, pushing his hair back from his forehead tenderly.

The summer term began, and it seemed so strange for Neville not to be in class with them. Many of the teachers were also taking turns at Neville's bedside; once when Harry went into the infirmary, McGonagall was there, another time Flitwick. Hermione told him she found Professor Sprout crying silently while she held Neville's hand. Snape and Moody were also taking turns.

One day, Harry was going into the infirmary to bring Ron his Transfiguration homework, since he had missed class to spend time with Neville, and before he could put his hand on the knob, the door flew open and Draco Malfoy came out. Harry tried to stem the wave of anger he felt coming over him when he saw him, remembering the way he'd treated Ginny on her birthday, remembering that he was in the dungeon with Neville and never said anything about the potions he was making.

Malfoy looked at him warily, closed the door of the infirmary. Then he nodded curtly at Harry.

"Potter".

"Malfoy".

He looked back at the door, then at Harry again. "I was just--visiting Longbottom. There weren't any slots open on the sign-up sheet...but then, I thought I probably shouldn't be on there. No other Slytherins were. Have to think about my reputation".

Harry felt the anger in him starting to get out of control. "He could have died because of you!" he whispered fiercely. Malfoy's jaw dropped.

"Me"?

"You knew what potions he was making"...

"So did Ginny! Neither one of us knew that stuff was addictive".

"One was addictive. The other simply removes your ability to form blood clots. A paper cut could result in him bleeding death".

"Oh, surely not"--

Harry pushed him up against the wall. "If he doesn't recover"--

Malfoy pushed him off. "You'll what?" he shouted. "Stop me from--" then he remembered they were in a public place. He whispered, "Stop me from putting my father in Azkaban? Stop him from turning you into a Death Eater"?

Harry had no response. He stared at Malfoy; if possible, he hated him more than at any other previous time in his life.

"I was just sitting in there," he pointed at the infirmary, "Having a civilized conversation with Weasley, of all people, who you might remember, I found covered in exploded pub and helped rescue. Don't you get on me about Longbottom! He" he faltered. "He's not such a bad bloke. Even if he is after Ginny. I never would have wished this on him. Don't you think I'd wish I'd known he was doing something dangerous? Don't you think I'd have stopped him"?

"Would you? Do you care about anyone? Ginny turns fifteen, and all you can think is 'shagging time!' Is that how you treat people you care about"?

Malfoy looked shocked. "Did she tell you that"?

Harry opened his mouth, then shut it. "Never mind".

Suddenly Malfoy shoved him up against the wall and spoke very close to his face. "My relationship with Ginny is between the two of us. You do not talk to me about her. Not if you want my father"...

Harry pushed him off, sending him staggering into the opposite wall. He held his arm painfully.

"Stop telling me you're not planning to do anything to your father. You want him where he can't touch you. That's all the motivation you need".

Malfoy glared at him. "Maybe. But watch your back; maybe the act I'll catch him in--the one that will get him sent to Azkaban--will be your murder".

And with that, Malfoy went tripping down the stairs, leaving Harry seething outside the infirmary. He had dropped Ron's homework. He gathered it up, his head whirling as he wondered how capable Draco Malfoy was of carrying out that last threat...

Then, after the first week of the term, Neville entered the second stage. George was sitting with him when he starting flailing around; he gave George a bloody nose and a black eye, and from then on, he was tied securely to the bed. He was eating food now and sometimes talking, but usually it degenerated into incoherent raving, sometimes even cursing followed by crying and wailing, followed by hysterical laughter.

On the last Saturday of the month, Slytherin and Ravenclaw played their Quidditch match; Slytherin won. Harry watched listlessly as Roger Davies and Draco Malfoy shook hands again at the end. He was trying to think of Neville, and instead kept thinking of Hermione walking across her dorm room with nothing on...

By the end of the weekend, he had stopped the violent outbursts, but he was still restrained. A week after that, Madam Pomfrey took the restraints off and allowed him to go for escorted walks on the grounds. Finally, a couple of days later, he was pronounced recovered, and released from the infirmary.

Harry would never forget when Neville returned to the common room. He moved slowly; he was very thin and pale, but his eyes were dark blue again. Fred and George escorted him to an armchair, Ginny came and sat down on the floor next to him with her cat, MacKenzie, who was now more than six months old and had the personality of a kitten still, while still having the body of a full-grown cat. Mackenzie climbed up the arm of the chair and crept onto Neville's lap. He looked nervous about this, but cautiously reached out to pet the cat, who purred and rubbed the side of her face against his hand. Harry watched with his heart in his throat.

Once back in the classroom, Neville seemed to be a little more alert than he had been before he started taking the Mnemonis Potion, but not as alert as he was on it. Harry realized that that was the other secret to Neville's dueling success; the ability to remember a large number of obscure spells and the ability to think very quickly (because of the potion) when deciding which one to use next. Neville dropped out of the Dueling Club. Harry tried to talk him out of it, to no avail.

Neville's first Potions class after he was released from the hospital wing was more than a little tense. Snape did not comment on his absence or the reason for it, but Harry did think it was significant that he was paired up with Malfoy, and that the two of them had been placed at the front of the class, closest to Snape.

Snape was writing the name of the day's potion on the blackboard: Euphemos Potion, page 477 in the potions text. Harry started; that was the potion Ginny and Malfoy were making on the day he had made Eutharsos Potion. The day he asked Snape about his mother...

"Potter!" Snape's sharp voice brought him out of his head again. "Give your potions text to Longbottom and Malfoy. They have both forgotten theirs today. I see Granger has hers, so you can share that one".

Harry sighed and carried his book to the front, handing it to Neville, then walking back to the rear work station he was sharing with Hermione. He marveled at Snape's ability to make it seem like Harry was the one at fault for not knowing his potions text was needed up front, delivering it before it was asked for. He also managed to make Hermione sound like she was at fault for having her potions text. There was a time when he would have castigated Neville for not having his book. Now he mostly seemed intent on ignoring him.

Harry remembered Snape sitting by Neville's bedside, sometimes checking his pulse, feeling his forehead. Harry wondered how much he blamed himself for what happened to Neville, both when he was a baby and his addiction to Eutharsos Potion. Then Harry realized that Snape may or may not have known about Lockhart's overenthusiastic memory charm work. If he knew, that might explain why Snape didn't like Lockhart. Then Harry realized that no one really needed an extra reason to dislike Gilderoy Lockhart.

Harry was brought out of his head again by hearing his name, but this time he heard his first name, not his last. It was Neville. He was handing a small cardboard rectangle to Malfoy, who gaped at it. Both boys turned to look at Hermione and Harry. Sandy hissed at Harry.

"Much will be revealed." What did that mean? he wondered. But he didn't dare start talking to her.

Malfoy handed the rectangle to Crabbe, behind him, who squeaked, a noise Harry had never heard him make. Harry looked around, wondering where Snape had gone; Then he saw that the office door was open. Snape must have gone to get something. What was Crabbe holding? Why had Neville said his name? He wasn't actually addressing Harry. Crabbe leaned over to Goyle, next to him, showing him the rectangle. Goyle's jaw dropped. He turned and handed it to Parvati in the row in front of Harry and Hermione. She gasped. She turned it over and read softly; this time Harry heard "Birthday" and Hermione's name.

Oh, no no no no no, he thought desperately. Tell me I didn't leave that in my potions text...

As if in a dream, he watched Parvati hand it to Ron, who was working beside her, with a smirk on her face and an appraising look aimed at Hermione. Harry's stomach clenched as he waited for Ron's reaction. He saw Ron standing utterly still staring at it; he turned it over and moved his lips while silently reading the inscription. Slowly he turned and looked at Harry, stony-faced, then Hermione. He dwelled on Hermione, though.

His expressions were a succession of hurt, betrayal, sadness and anger. Oddly, anger seemed less than the other emotions. Hermione had only met his gaze for a moment, then looked down, colouring.

Harry didn't see Snape come out of the office, but suddenly he was standing next to Ron, holding out his hand expectantly with a grim set to his sallow face. Ron promptly handed the photo to him; Snape's eyebrows rose, and the look of surprise Harry saw on his face was one he'd only seen a few other times. He looked at Hermione, who was still staring down at the table, starting to seem like she was going to cry from embarrassment. Then Snape did it; Harry had felt it coming.

"Happy Birthday, Harry," he read from the back of the photo, his voice dripping with irony, "With love from Hermione".

He held it out to Harry as though it were covered in dung. "I believe this is your property, Potter." Harry took it hastily, shoving it into his rucksack, feeling a heat moving up his face starting from his neck. "And," Snape continued, "Twenty points from Gryffindor for bringing--inappropriate material to class".

Harry sputtered with the injustice of it; Neville and Malfoy forgot their books and he was the one who got points deducted from Gryffindor. Hermione held her lips in a grim line, shaking her head at him almost imperceptibly.

"All right," Snape said now. "For arguing with a teacher--" although he hadn't said a word "--that will be a detention. Tonight at eight o'clock right here".

Harry was seething now; he had to remind himself that he and Snape were on the same side, they were allies. He looked up to see Malfoy looking smugly at him, then turning a frankly lascivious gaze on Hermione. Harry remembered the Hogwarts express and his reaction to Krum kissing Hermione. Neville also had turned to look at Hermione, as well as Crabbe and Goyle. Of the boys who'd seen the photo of her in her bikini on Corfu, only Ron would not look at her now.

It was worse than the time Snape had read the Rita Skeeter article in class. Harry went through the rest of the class in a daze, only speaking to Hermione when he absolutely had to in order to make the potion. It was bad enough he felt like he wanted her all the time, especially since they hadn't so much as kissed since he found Neville; seeing the photograph again, and knowing that others had seen it was almost unbearably distracting...

When class was over, Ron and Parvati strode out before anyone else, arms around each other's shoulders. Ron avoided looking at Hermione still. Harry and Hermione looked at each other for a moment, then packed up their potions supplies and cauldrons, the last ones to leave.

"Potter!" Snape said imperiously as he was going out the door. Harry waved Hermione on.

"I'll catch you up".

She nodded and went out; it looked to Harry as though she couldn't bear to meet Snape's eyes. Harry stood waiting, his stomach still roiling with anger from the reprimand he'd received earlier. If only I'd remembered I was using that photo as a bookmark...

When they were alone, Snape said tersely to him, "Good potions work today, Potter. Twenty points for Gryffindor." First Harry thought, Has he gotten into the Euphemus Potion? Now he can't say anything that's not nice? Then Harry realized that that would balance out the points he'd taken earlier. "And--your godfather wanted to speak with you tonight, at eight. My office".

Ah, thought Harry, that explains the detention. The anger that had been like a clenched fist in his stomach suddenly evaporated. He had to stop reacting this way. Snape had no choice but to put on a good show for the Slytherins. And the photo! If he had let it pass without comment of any kind, it would have been most un-Snape-like, which was proving to be a very convenient word, to Harry's mind.

"Yes sir," was all he said to Snape before shouldering his bag to leave. Hermione was waiting for him in the corridor.

"Oh, Harry," she said, tears in her voice, "Why did you have to leave that in your potions text"?

They walked up the stairs to the entrance hall. "I'm sorry, Hermione," he whispered. "When Snape told me to give my book to Neville, I forgot it was there"...

They had arrived in the entrance hall now. It was deserted except for one person: Ron. He stood before them, all six-foot-three of him, looking like a volcano getting ready to blow.

"Would you like to explain to me," he said to Harry, "Why in the bloody hell you have a photo like that in your bloody potions text?" He turned to Hermione. "And why you gave it to him in the first place"?

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Unmasked

Harry and Hermione stared at Ron. He looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Well? Why did you give that photograph to Harry"?

Hermione had been a wreck all through Potions after the photograph of her in the bikini had been passed around. But now it looked to Harry like she was back to herself; he could almost see the wheels spinning in her brain as she prepared to answer.

"I didn't!" she cried. Harry opened his mouth in shock. This he was not expecting.

"What do you mean, you didn't? That was your handwriting on the back. I'd know it anywhere. And what did With love from Hermione mean"?

"Oh, for pete's sake, Ron! Have you--" she turned to Harry "--or you ever received a card or letter from me that wasn't signed that way"?

Ron was clearly thinking about that. "No, I suppose not. Still"--

"Anyway, all I wanted to say is, now I know what happened to that photo! I've been missing it since last summer"!

"What?" Ron and Harry said together.

"See, I had a pile of photos, and I thought I'd send one to Harry with his birthday card and present, so I chose this nice shot of the three of us in front of the house where we were staying on Corfu--really amazing, it was built right into the hill with steps going up to the top carved right out of the"--

"Hermione!" Ron interjected.

"All right, all right. I had a couple of copies of the photo I was actually planning to send Harry. I turned over one of them and wrote on the back. Then I did a few other things: wrapped the present, wrote out the card. When I came back to the photo, I thought it felt a little thick, and I discovered that there were two stuck together. I pulled them apart and put the one I'd written on inside the birthday card. I suppose I never looked at the front. I just assumed it was the one I'd selected. I was in a hurry. We were running late. I sealed the envelope and got everything ready to send by owl post. Snuffles helped. I only missed the photo Harry has much later; I assumed I dropped it somewhere. Then, after Bulgaria, worrying about where it was didn't seem to be important any more".

Ron looked like he acceded this point; some things did pale in comparison to being kidnapped by dark wizards. He turned to Harry.

"So why are you still carrying it around"?

Harry swallowed. They had been planning to tell Ron, and now Hermione was lying to him. Should he tell the truth? He wondered. He looked at Hermione. Would she ever forgive him if he did? If he told Ron now that they were a couple, chances were it wouldn't be true in about ten seconds...

"Ron," he said, having made his decision. "When I got the birthday card, I opened it and that fell out. Dudley picked it up and started--reacting to it. Then he asked me if she was my girlfriend. Well, I was so sick and tired of that from the year before--you know, Rita Skeeter and all--so I just grabbed it from him and told him no, she wasn't my girlfriend. My potions text was on my desk; I just opened it anywhere and threw the photo in and slammed it shut. I never looked at it. Today was the first time I'd ever actually seen it".

Ron looked at them through narrowed eyes. "So you're saying that you didn't know you sent it to Harry," he turned to Harry, "And you never looked at it"?

"That's right," Harry said, while Hermione nodded, her face grim. Ron looked skeptical. "Because if you two were--you know--you could tell me. I'm not a baby. I could take it".

Harry's throat felt tight. We should have told him! He looked at Hermione. Now. Now. Let's tell him now! he thought.

But Hermione laughed. "Oh, Ron! We know you're not a baby".

"It's just that--you seem to spend a lot of time together, and"--

"Well, we go running in the morning, sure, but we'd be with you more if you weren't seeing someone, so that mostly leaves just the two of us. Not that we begrudge you spending time with Parvati," she said a little shakily. "But--well, we kind of miss you".

He smiled now at both of them. Harry felt dreadful. "You're right, I haven't been around much. What say we all go down and see Hagrid after classes today, like old times? I was going to spend some time with Parvati, but I'll make an excuse".

Harry smiled feebly. "Sure," he said, sounding more 'sure' than he felt. He started to hoist his rucksack onto his shoulder when Hermione stopped him.

"Harry, now that I know where that photo has been--could I please have it back"?

He stopped in shock; he put down the bag and burrowed in it to find where he'd stashed the photograph after Snape had handed it back to him. He gave it to her and she thrust it into the pocket of her robes. She donned her own bag again and turned her back to them, heading up the marble stairs.

"Come on, you two! We're already late for Charms"!

Ron clapped Harry on the shoulder as they started to follow her.

"Hey--sorry about all that. Just me being stupid".

No, thought Harry. Just you being spot on.

"S'okay," Harry said indistinctly as they followed Hermione up the steps.

* * * * *

After Moody's class, they took their books back to the common room, then went down to Hagrid's hut (after Ron spoke to a disgruntled-looking Parvati for a minute). He was delighted to see them and started getting the tea things ready as soon as they were in the door. Hermione helped him, getting out the milk jug and some cups and saucers while Harry and Ron set out plates and checked Hagrid's pantry cupboard for the least rock-like cakes and biscuits available.

They all sat down to eat and drink their tea, laughing merrily about Hermione's inability to not reel off the history of the English and tea or Harry's and Ron's inability to correctly judge the right moment to start drinking, inevitably getting burned tongues with the first sip, resulting in slightly lisping speech for a while.

Then they settled down and looked at each other seriously. Harry raised his tea cup and the others followed suit.

"To Neville," he said quietly.

"To Neville," Hagrid, Ron and Hermione responded, clinking teacups with Harry and each other. They all drank, then continued with quieter conversation. When it was close to time for the evening meal, they cleared up the tea things and prepared to go back to the castle.

"Coming to dinner, Hagrid?" Hermione asked him. But suddenly, Harry realized he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Hagrid eat a meal in the Great Hall.

"Nah, I--I have other plans," he said dodgily.

Harry said, "Oh, going to see your mum"?

Hagrid nodded. "How could I not? Ye know, now that she's here an' all, after all this time"...

"Of course you should go eat with your mother," Hermione said with feeling.

"I do kinder miss the meals in the Great Hall..." he faltered, looking at them guiltily. "The elves do sech ripping puddings"

Harry smiled at him. "Any time you want us to nick you something from the kitchens, just let us know. We're happy to".

"Definitely," Ron agreed. Hermione made a face at him.

"You just like the house elves waiting on you hand and foot..." she said just a touch snidely.

"What's wrong with that?" Ron sounded defensive.

"Say, Ron," Hagrid interrupted. "Ain't yer birthday comin' up soon"?

"On the fifteenth".

"That's only a week away! Tell yer what, we'll have another nice little party here like fer yer sister, and ye won't have to worry 'bout folks surprising ye 'cause I'm telling ye now".

Ron shrugged. "Sounds good to me. That was great cake we had for Ginny's party".

"I'll get Biddu to make the same again, if you like," Hermione said.

"Sounds like a plan," Hagrid said, showing them to the door. "Thanks fer comin' ter tea".

"Give your mother our regards," Harry said as they were leaving.

"I will!" He started to go, then opened the door again. "Say--you three haven't seen something flying round the school groun's lookin' a lot like a golden griffin, have ye? Mum insists one was flyin' over the giants' camp a couple of times, but don't see how. I mean, they don' like this part of the world; Dumbledore had that one brought in special"...

Ron and Hermione both looked at Harry, who looked very guilty.

"Uh, no," said Ron. "It was probably something else. I mean, what are the chances"?

Hagrid laughed. "Yer right, Ron. Only--it's hard to tell me mum she's wrong 'bout anythin' when I been waitin' so long to see her. Nex' time she mentions it I'll jest change the subject".

"Good idea, Hagrid," Harry said shakily. They all said goodbye to him and he shut the door. They looked at each other and heaved a collective sigh of relief. They started walking back to the castle.

"What have you been doing, Harry?" Ron wanted to know as they walked. "Buzzing the giants"?

"No, just practicing my flying, so it feels more natural".

Ron stopped and stared at him. "What's that like?" he asked softly, sounding a little awed. "Flying under your own power, no broomstick"?

Harry looked over Ron's shoulder at the evening sky, at the pink-tinged clouds scudding low over the tree tops on the horizon. "It's like--a dream. You know, the kind of dream where you imagine you can just lift up your arms and fly. Only I'm not asleep..".

Hermione grimaced. "For me, it was more like a nightmare"...

Ron laughed. "So, not going to try out for the Quidditch team openings next year"?

Hermione smiled sarcastically. "Very funny".

They started walking toward the castle again. Ron looked like he was thinking about saying something, then hesitating, then finally coming out with it. "Tomorrow morning, do you think"--

"What?" Harry said, lengthening his stride to match Ron's long legs.

"Could I come running with you two"?

Harry stopped now. "Running? You"?

Ron looked down at him, obviously offended. "Yeah. What's wrong with that"?

"Aren't you the one always calling us mad for getting up early to run"?

Ron looked slightly embarrassed. "Parvati's been telling me I'm too skinny," he said quietly. He glanced at Hermione, then back to Harry.

Harry shrugged. "Sure. We do warm-ups at six-thirty".

"Six-thirty!" Ron made a face. Harry laughed.

"Or," Harry said, "You could use an engorgement charm on your muscles and wind up looking like the Incredible Hulk".

"The what"?

"Sorry. Muggle comic book. Was a television show for a while".

Ron shook his head, and they resumed walking for a few more paces, but then stopped again when they were right outside the doors to the entrance hall.

"Harry," Ron said slowly. "I just wanted to say again--I'm sorry for the way I reacted this morning. You know, about that photo"...

Hermione jumped in, a nervous quaver in her voice. "Well, honestly, Ron, you could have used your brain! If Harry thought that a picture like that were in his potions text, do you really think he would have given the book to Neville, especially when he was working right next to Malfoy"?

Ron looked at her with a strange expression at first, then began laughing. He shook his head and put his hand on Harry's shoulder.

"She has a point, Harry. Even you aren't that daft"...

"Ha ha," Harry laughed unenthusiastically.

Still laughing, Ron entered the hall, Harry and Hermione behind him. Harry frowned at her; this was getting worse and worse, he thought. Ron's going to feel like a complete idiot when he eventually finds out. Harry hadn't been with her for almost a month, but he was starting to feel like it would be worth it to lose her by telling Ron the truth. Although then he would probably lose Ron too, and no longer have any best friends...

* * * * *

Promptly at eight o'clock, Harry reported to Snape's office. He went in through the classroom this time, rather than the secret entrance. Everyone knew he had detention, there was no point in sneaking around.

The door to the office was open, but he closed it upon entering. Snape was grading essays; he put the one he'd just be marking on a large pile to his left, then grabbed one of the two to his right. He was almost done. He didn't look up or say anything to Harry, who went wordlessly to the wing chair by the fire and sat to wait.

When Snape put the last essay into the pile of graded parchments, he looked up at Harry. "The headmaster and Professor Moody will be away for a few days next week, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth. Defense Against the Dark Arts classes will be canceled and Professor McGonagall will be in charge of the school," he said tonelessly. Harry swallowed.

"Why will they be away"?

"Avery's and Nott's trial. Moody's doing preliminary testimony on the fourteenth, the actual trial is on the fifteenth, and, necessary, the sixteenth will be used for jury deliberations. Unless they simply come back with the verdict on the fifteenth and frankly, I don't see how they can take more than a few minutes to decide this one".

Harry nodded. "Won't Lupin have to testify too"?

"Remus doesn't signify. Moody left him out of his report. He's unofficial. For that matter, Moody made out he was just visiting the village for the day, having a drink, when his magical eye allowed him to see what Avery and Nott were up to. And since you came along after the fact, Dumbledore convinced the Ministry to leave you out of it, too".

"What will happen to them if the verdict doesn't go their way"?

"They will go to Azkaban, although their sentences may be light due to the cushioning charms preventing any dire injuries".

"You say that like Moody should have let people get hurt to get the Death Eaters in trouble for doing something worse".

"No. But there are undoubtedly things that they have done that are worse, that had worse consequences. Things we may never know about".

Harry nodded. He couldn't see them getting much for blowing up a pub that fell like pillows upon the people within. Maybe they'll have to make restitution to Madam Rosmerta, he thought. Do wizards have lawsuits? he wondered. He realized he was dreadfully ignorant of wizarding law.

Suddenly, Sirius' head appeared in the fireplace. "Harry! Thanks for getting him here, Severus. How are you, Harry"?

He smiled at his godfather. "Fine." His voice shook a little; he was actually not feeling particularly well since he and Hermione had told Ron what he now thought of as The Great Flaming Lie. Rather like The Great Fire of London. Which, he felt, would prove to be the lesser disaster by the time this was over. His stomach had been in knots all day, not particularly helped along by the stale biscuits he'd had at Hagrid's, plus Hagrid telling them about his having been seen flying by the giants.

"Are you sure?" Sirius seemed to see something in Harry's face which disturbed him. Harry looked at Snape in desperation.

"I'm afraid I rather embarrassed Harry and Hermione in class today. Purely for the purpose of giving him a detention, to get him here at this time. I'm sure he'll get over it." He looked at Harry with one eyebrow raised, and Harry knew he'd better get over it now. He smiled feebly.

"I'm fine. Just--like he said. A bit embarrassed," he told Sirius, who smiled sympathetically.

"Severus has to worry about his reputation, you know, Harry. You're mature enough to understand that".

"Why did you need to talk to me, Sirius"?

He sighed and looked as if he'd rather be kissed by a dementor. "Harry, I know you won't want to hear this, but--I want to pull you out of school for the rest of the year".

"What"?

"Hear me out. I said that I want to. I'll give you my reasons in a moment, but if you don't want to, that will be that. But I want to tell you my thinking first. Please"?

Harry nodded, his throat tight. Whatever it was, it had to be bad for Sirius to want to take such a drastic step. "Lucius Malfoy is getting very aggressive about recruiting younger people for the Death Eaters. Percy Weasley has been targeted".

"Percy"!

Sirius nodded. "He received an owl post last night. He is to report to Knockturn Alley next Saturday to meet someone who will take him to another location to hear his answer. There's no chance of replacing him with an operative in disguise--since our little debacle on Christmas night, the Death Eaters are doing elaborate tests now to ascertain the true identity of anyone attending a meeting. If he goes and agrees, he gets the Dark Mark and becomes a Death Eater; if he goes and refuses, he gets killed. If he doesn't go"--

"What"?

"Well, we know of two families already that have been destroyed because a young man and a young woman who recently graduated from Hogwarts were being recruited. They aren't even bothering with torture first, to coerce them. Just one chance is being given. One was a girl who finished the same year as Percy, Penelope something"...

"Penelope Clearwater"?

"Yes. Did you know her"?

Harry swallowed. "She's Percy's girlfriend. Last summer, Ron told me they were seeing each other again. What happened"?

"Well--" he sighed. "She received the letter, same as Percy. But she didn't tell anyone. Just panicked, then locked herself up in her flat when the time came and quietly killed herself. Left a note explaining why".

"No!" Harry felt tears streaming down his face. He remembered Penelope, in her black robes and prefect badge. She had been petrified by the basilisk at the same time that Hermione was. Percy was probably devastated, and now he was also being recruited.

"That's not all. When she didn't show, Malfoy sent Death Eaters over to her parents' house. They were all killed. The Dark Mark was over the house. We don't know who did it precisely. Mother, father, grandfather and a little brother. There was a big age difference between him and Penelope. He would have started at Hogwarts next year. Memory charms specifically eradicated witnesses' memories of the Mark. The Ministry is still determined to cover up Voldemort's return to prevent a panic. I say, sometimes it's appropriate to panic"...

Harry was crying freely, hearing of the destruction of the Clearwater family. "Who else?" he choked.

"A young man who was actually a Slytherin. Used to be captain of the Quidditch team. Marcus Flint".

"Flint? Flint refused to become a Death Eater"?

Sirius shook his head. "You can't judge a wizard just by his house these days, Harry. Evidently he was quite a good Quidditch player, got a job as a reserve player with Pride of Portree, the team over on the Isle of Skye. The Prides are very good, have a very loyal following." He bowed his head. "All the poor kid wanted to do was play Quidditch, you know. His own dad is a Death Eater, turns out. He went to Skye, where the team was having practice, and tried to bring his son to Malfoy. Wound up killing him instead. There were witnesses. He's gone underground; there's a manhunt on now for him, but the Daily Prophet won't have anything about it until tomorrow morning--this just happened last night--and I'll be sure you they just depict it as a family squabble or something. Trouble is, because Marcus didn't show up, some Death Eaters went over to the Flint house and his mum and a houseguest staying there are dead now. Malfoy didn't know Marcus' dad was going to try to fetch him to comply. Obviously the elder Flint knew what would happen if Marcus didn't. Now he's on the run from Malfoy and Voldemort and the other Death Eaters as well as the Ministry. And I thought I had it bad...of course, I didn't kill my own son while trying to convince him to become a Death Eater, so I'm not going to waste any time feeling sorry for him".

Not that it did Karkaroff much good to run from Voldemort, Harry thought. He took a deep breath. He removed his glasses, wiped his eyes with his sleeve, then replaced them. Even the families of Death Eaters weren't safe. He realized that Draco Malfoy had had no choice but to get the Dark Mark on Christmas night. Otherwise, he too would probably have been killed by his own father. He thought of poor Marcus Flint, whom he had never liked, but who had stood up to his father and refused to be a Death Eater, and died because of it. Somehow, he thought, people had to find out about what really happened to him. People had to know what really drove poor Penelope to kill herself, and who killed her family, who fired the Dark Mark over their house, and the Flint house.

"Percy," Harry said with a shaky voice. "What's he going to do? And--what about the other Weasleys?" He felt like he was going to throw up. He thought of the Burrow with the Dark Mark over it; he thought of Bill, tall and handsome and laughing at the ceilidh; he thought of Charlie with the dragons when he'd done the first task at the tournament the year before; he thought of the twins and Ron and--

And Ginny.

"Why don't you have Lucius Malfoy yet?" he demanded, practically sobbing it. Sirius heaved another great sigh; he had dark circles under his eyes, Harry noticed.

"It's not for lack of trying, Harry. Our operatives know Malfoy is doing these things, but we don't have any solid evidence to nail him. The Ministry is being very pigheaded about wanting to find benign, non-Voldemort-related explanations for everything that's been happening".

"When they thought you'd killed that street of Muggles and Peter Pettigrew, they just hauled you off without worrying about evidence".

Sirius grimaced. "Those were different times. And it's quite possible that even if a pack of Aurors swooped down over Malfoy Manor this second, all they'd find is an apparently respectful wizarding household with old money, maybe a few more Dark Arts artifacts than there should be, but nothing connecting Lucius Malfoy to anything illegal. He's covered his tracks well, has Malfoy. Quiet a puppeteer".

Harry tried to regain his composure, only partly succeeding. "Why do you want to take me out of school? Shouldn't you be worrying about Percy and the Weasleys"?

Sirius looked at him, not speaking. Harry looked back at him, then turned to Snape, who looked grimmer than Harry had ever seen him--and that was saying something.

"What"?

Sirius began to speak slowly. "Harry. Brace yourself. One of our operatives saw a piece of owl-post being prepared that you should receive tomorrow morning. It will be a letter in a black-bordered parchment envelope. With a wax seal shaped like the Dark Mark." Harry sucked in his breath. "Yes," Sirius nodded at him. "It's official. You are being recruited".

His head was swimming. "How long will I have?" he choked out.

"I don't know. Percy received his letter last Saturday, so he'll have two weeks total. I rather get the impression they may accelerate your--schedule".

"But even if you take me out of school, what good will that do? What about Ron and Hermione? Won't they still be in danger? And then there's the whole Weasley family"...

"So you won't leave Hogwarts"?

"Leave? It's safe as bloody houses here, Sirius. We should move the whole Weasley family in to protect them. And what about the Grangers? Are they still safe?" He saw Sirius look toward Snape. Harry turned to him.

"I assure you that the Grangers are perfectly safe and that no one save I knows where they are," Snape said softly.

"You"?

"I am their secret-keeper".

Harry's jaw dropped open. They were hiding using the Fidelius Charm, and Snape was their secret keeper! Well, Harry thought, certainly no one would suspect Snape of being the person to fill such a role.

"Percy has met with Dumbledore," Sirius told him. "If your deadline falls after his, he is willing to get the Dark Mark and undercover for us. Considering that he's probably grieving for Penelope, I think that's a very brave thing to do. He is, of course, concerned about protecting his family. The question is, how soon will Malfoy want you to decide"...

Snape stood and walked to the mantel. "Harry can come here after breakfast and before class tomorrow morning and we can call you and discuss it once we know what is in the letter. Perhaps Percy Weasley can contact Malfoy, indicate that he will comply, take care of it sooner than next Saturday".

Sirius looked like he was thinking about that. "Seems risky. Malfoy might suspect he's up to something. He likes to control the schedule. He'll be suspicious of someone like Percy wanting to move up the date for his getting the Dark Mark".

Harry's hands were shaking. It was all happening too fast. He'd wondered for months when Voldemort or Malfoy would make their move, and suddenly they were, and he wasn't prepared. He didn't even feel sane. He felt mostly like collapsing into a puddle on the floor. Then he had a thought. It formed in his mind slowly, then took full form and became an actual plan.

"Harry?" Sirius said. "You look odd. Are you all right"?

"Malfoy".

"Yes, Malfoy's doing all this, we just can't prove it"...

"No. I mean Draco Malfoy".

"Draco Malfoy"?

"Well, you know he's been trying to figure out a way to catch his dad in some act that will get him put away in Azkaban a very long time. I need to talk to Malfoy--to Draco, that is, and get him to fix the schedule. You're right, Percy asking to get the Dark Mark early would be suspicious. If he does go undercover, he shouldn't look too eager. But Draco Malfoy could tell his father that there's a particularly opportune time to come and get me...only it would be a trap".

"I forgot about Malfoy's son....And he certainly wouldn't want his dad to harm Ginny's family, from what you told me of those two. Well, he certainly has the motivation to keep the Weasleys safe. The question is, can he do it? Will his dad listen to him"?

"That's what I don't know".

Sirius sighed again. "I think the first thing we have to do is see what's in your recruitment letter tomorrow".

Harry nodded. Snape looked down at Sirius' head in the firebox. "Will that be all, Sirius"?

"That's all for now. Good night, both of you. And Remus says hello. Talk to you tomorrow".

"Good night, Sirius," Harry said softly before his head vanished. He looked up at Snape. The Grangers' secret keeper. He'd had the thought before that he should have been his parents' secret keeper. He hoped the Grangers would be all right...and the Weasleys.

Snape looked back impassively. "I've more essays to grade, Potter. Move along with you. Get back to Gryffindor Tower".

Harry nodded and went to the door. Then he remembered something and stopped, turning around. "Oh--if anyone asks what I did for detention, what should I tell them"?

Snape sat at his desk and looked thoughtful. "Tell anyone who asks that you had to chop roots or something for my stores. Surely you can think of something"?

Harry nodded; Snape was on edge. Perhaps he was remembering being recruited by Malfoy during his seventh year.

“Good night, sir. And--thank you”.

Snape whipped his head up; his dark eyes shone in the candlelight. He looked surprised, and--Harry was having a hard time identifying the emotion--touched.

“You’re welcome,” he said evenly. “Good night, Harry”.

Harry turned and left, closing the door behind him. He was climbing the marble stairs leading up from the entrance hall when he stopped and realized that Snape had called him “Harry” when talking to him and not about him for the first time. He smiled to himself. Snape was starting to grow on him. He and Sirius didn’t even trade gibes any more; they were perfectly civil to each other, even when making suggestions for action on which they didn’t agree.

He continued up the stairs, wishing he could use a Time Turner to go back to the morning, again and again, live this day over and over, never having to go forward, never having to get to tomorrow morning’s owl post and a certain black-trimmed parchment envelope...

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The next morning, they walked considerably more slowly back to the castle after Ron came along with them for his first run. The warm-down exercises had helped Ron somewhat, and he was able to imitate the pull-ups Harry was doing on the Quidditch bleachers, but he wasn’t succeeding in hiding how winded he felt as he walked beside the two of them, while they were breathing normally and looking quite refreshed from the run. Ron tugged ineffectually at the heavy front door to the castle, then stepped aside as Harry pulled on it and it pivoted open.

Then Harry, Ron and Hermione stopped dead; Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were loitering idly near the foot of the marble stairs. Funny, Harry thought; first time I’ve seen all three of them together outside class for a while. He wondered whether the two large boys had already been recruited. Malfoy looked up with an evil grin when he saw the three of them, then primarily focused on Hermione in her running clothes. Now that it was warmer, she had gone back to using a running bra and very tight bicycle shorts. After almost a year of running practically every morning, Harry thought she looked more incredible than ever, and Malfoy was registering this on his face also. I wish Ginny could see that, he thought. Then Malfoy’s evil grin shifted to the exhausted Ron.

“So! Weasley! I saw that you got a real good look at that photo. Commit it to memory? Because I know that I can conjure up in my brain--” he tapped his temple “--any time I want. And Potter, well...of course he can picture even more any time he wants...”

Harry froze at Malfoy’s words and looked at Ron, who was turning red. If he thought Ron didn’t have the strength to attack Malfoy after the morning run, he got rid of that idea as soon as Ron dove at Malfoy. He grabbed him by the upper arms and pushed him up against a wall. Crabbe and Goyle started after him, but Harry pulled his wand out of his sock and pointed it at each of them in quick succession, putting the Impedimenta curse on them. Now they were both still heading toward Ron and Malfoy, but very, very slowly, so that their movements were indiscernible.

Malfoy swallowed while up against the wall with Ron inches from his face. “What did you have to do that for?” he said to Harry.

Harry gave him a lopsided ironic smile. “Yeah, I suppose slowing those two down is kind of redundant, isn’t it?”

Hermione guffawed, and then after a moment Harry joined her. Harry had not told them about the post he was expecting; he had tried to be cheerful all the previous evening and all morning, not letting on that anything was wrong. Ron was still looking very serious. He told Malfoy, “Harry and Hermione are friends. Not that you’d understand being friends with a girl. You think they’re only good for one thing”.

“What would you know about my personal life? And remember--your sister is my friend. So if what you’re saying is true, you should be seeing a lot more action from your sister than I have been...oof!”

Ron brought his knee up into Malfoy’s groin; Harry flinched involuntarily. He thought he would probably react that way even if it were Voldemort getting a knee in the groin. The very thought was just too...

"You don't talk about my sister! And you don't talk to my sister, ever again, you dirty, slimy little snake"...

Harry heard Sandy hissing at him, but he was distracted, so he asked her to repeat what she'd said. Maybe it was important, something that was about to happen in the entrance hall...

"I said, tell your friend that snakes are some of the cleanest creatures there are," she said with an injured tone to her voice.

Ron whirled on hearing Harry speak Parseltongue, and then hearing Sandy's hissing. "What is it?" he wanted to know. she--?" Ron looked at Malfoy, whose arms he was still holding against the wall; he didn't want Malfoy to know about Sandy's Sight.

"Nah, it's not that. She's just--a little upset about what you said. She wants you to know that snakes are actually quite clean".

"Oh. Can you tell her I'm sorry"?

"He's sorry, Sandy," Harry hissed to her.

"I heard him. We're also not slimy," she hissed with that hurt voice again.

"Yes, yes," Harry said a little impatiently. "He's very sorry, Sandy".

Malfoy scowled. "Do you wear that damn snake all the time, Potter"?

Harry scowled back. "Do you wear that face all the time, Malfoy"?

Even Ron laughed now, stepping back from Malfoy and letting him go. Malfoy rubbed both upper arms simultaneously. Harry, Ron and Hermione walked up the marble stairs together.

"Hey!" Malfoy called after them. They turned; he stood at the foot of the stairs where Crabbe and Goyle were still making infinitesimal progress toward where Ron had been back when Harry had put the curse on them. "Aren't you going to do anything about them"?

Harry looked back and forth between Crabbe and Goyle, who looked like very ugly statues. "I see no difference." He smiled at Ron and Hermione, who were laughing again, and they continued their progress up the stairs, hearing Malfoy behind them saying, "Finite Incantatem!" to remove the spell from his companions. Harry still felt heavy-hearted, but he did his best to put on a cheerful face, he laughed with the others while feeling hollow inside. The three of them going running together was a good idea. He was glad Ron had joined them; he felt like they were pulling him back into the fold. Perhaps when they did tell him about their relationship, he really would be okay about it...and hopefully, he could find a way to convince Malfoy to accelerate the schedule for putting his father away.

* * * * *

Harry was having trouble eating his breakfast. He kept looking at the food on his plate, thinking, This is my favorite breakfast, but he couldn't eat a bite. He looked up at the open windows just under the enchanted ceiling, showing a pleasantly blue spring sky with a few fluffy white clouds scudding across it. Finally, it happened; one small dark owl flew out a window, then several more owls fluttered in, then all at once it was the usual storm of wings and feathers and packages and scrolls of parchment, as the messengers winged their way toward their destinations. Then Harry spotted a falcon, or an owl, carrying a large crisp parchment envelope edged with black. Here it comes, he thought, his heart in his throat. It didn't; the falcon swept over to the Ravenclaw table and dropped the envelope in--Roger Davies' hands. Harry opened his eyes wide. Maybe it hadn't been Roger sending the school owls to Draco Malfoy before, but he was certainly being recruited now. This was getting worse and worse. He looked at Roger's face; he was sitting next to his brother Evan, who seemed to be asking him about the mail he'd received. Roger shrugged and shoved it into his rucksack, evidently planning to read it later. Perhaps, Harry thought, Sirius' intelligence was wrong and I'm not the one being recruited today. We need to help the Davies family, Harry thought, before they all get killed...

But suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his right shoulder; it was another falcon, digging his talons in (Harry was sure he'd drawn blood) and then dropping a large cream-colored parchment envelopment with a black border on his lap. Harry

winned again as the bird dug its claws in even more to prepare to take off again. Harry didn't watch it go; he looked down at the envelope.

*Mr. H. Potter
Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry
The Great Hall
Gryffindor Table*

He broke the black wax seal, taking note of the image of the serpent and skull that had been pressed into it. Then he opened the large creamy envelope and pulled out a heavy piece of parchment. There were only ten words on it.

Touch your wand to this page and say your name.

Harry looked around. Everyone seemed to be too busy to take any notice of him. Hermione was reading most of the Daily Prophet, except for the Quidditch page, which Ron was perusing. Will was wolfing down his food hurriedly as usual. Ginny had her nose in a book, while next to her, Amy and Andy bickered good-naturedly. Colin Creevey was talking football to his brother Dennis, and Harry saw with interest that Jules Quinn was staring at Dean Thomas' sister Jamaica (who was very pretty, Harry thought, even at eleven). Ruth Pelta was asking Zoey Russell about their Arithmancy homework, and Fred and George and the other seventh years were talking about the upcoming N.E.W.T.s.

Harry surreptitiously pulled out his wand and said softly, "Harry Potter".

The words on the page disappeared. New words slowly formed in place of the earlier instructions.

*Unable to verify identity due to whispering.
You must use a normal voice.
Change your location if necessary.*

Then this message too faded. The parchment was blank. Then the original message slowly reappeared, looking as if it had always been there.

Harry looked up at the staff table. He met Snape's eye. He met Dumbledore's as well. The headmaster nodded at him. Snape rose and went to the door to the secret passage. Harry put the letter in his rucksack and stood, swinging it on his back.

"Tell Hagrid I'll be a little late," he said to Ron, striding out of the Great Hall before Ron could answer. He practically ran down the steps to the dungeons.

Snape's office door was open. Harry walked in, not waiting for an invitation, then closed it, also not waiting to be told. He took the letter out of the bag and laid it on the desk blotter. Snape read it in a quick glance, then looked at Harry. He took out his wand and touched the page.

"Harry Potter," he said in the closest thing to a normal voice he could muster, considering how unnerved he felt. The ten word message disappeared once more and the page was blank. Then, slowly another message appeared.

You have been chosen to serve the Dark Lord. Be in the Hogwarts library at six-forty-five on Friday evening. Come alone. You will receive further instructions at that time. Touch your wand to this parchment when you are done reading and say your name once more.

Snape stared down at the parchment. He drummed his fingers on the desk impatiently. Then he threw his hands in the air. "Gah! How long do we have to wait for another message to appear"?

Harry looked down at the parchment. "What do you mean"?

"What do you mean, 'what do you mean'?" Snape asked, then looked slightly embarrassed by how silly that sounded. "The parchment is still blank. How long do we have to wait for a new message"?

Harry looked down at the parchment, then back up at Snape. "It looks blank to you"?

Snape looked jolted. "It doesn't look blank to you?" he asked Harry, then looked down at it again.

"No," Harry answered. "It says I'm supposed to be in the school library at six-forty-five tomorrow night to get more instructions".

"It does? Is that all"?

"Well, it also says I've been chosen to serve the Dark Lord and to touch my wand to the paper and say my name again when I'm done reading it".

"It must be charmed so that only you can see it once your identity is verified...well, do it. Touch it again and say your name; let's see what happens".

Harry touched the letter with his wand and said his name again. Immediately, black flames arose from the letter and envelope, consuming them both. Not even ashes remained to show that they had ever existed. Even the wax seal was gone. The parchments that had been sitting nearby on Snape's blotter were unharmed; the blotter itself was not scorched either.

"Well," Harry said, staring down at the desk. "There's not much to tell Sirius, is there? I'd better get to Hagrid's class. Perhaps you could call Sirius for me?" Snape nodded and moved to the fireplace. Before he left, Harry remembered Rogers' letter. "Professor--" he said suddenly, turning back. "I almost forgot. It looked like Roger Davies also got a letter was also delivered by a falcon".

Snape, if possible, looked paler. "You didn't say yours was delivered by a falcon. Lucius Malfoy keeps falcons. He's recruiting our Head Boy while he is still in school?" He rubbed his hand over his chin, frowning, deep in thought. "I'll talk the headmaster about keeping an eye on him".

"And his family," Harry said. "They'll be in danger".

Snape looked levelly at Harry. "Only if he refuses." Harry swallowed. Snape said that as though it were unlikely.

"Are there Death Eaters in his family"?

"Not that I know of. I just--have a bad feeling about Davies".

"What about his brother Evan? Do you think they'll try to recruit him too"?

Snape shook his head. "Too young"--

"He's in fifth year, like me and Draco Malfoy. And he's a prefect too, and an even better dueler than Roger".

"You and Draco Malfoy are in the Prophecy. That is different".

Harry nodded, accepting this. "Well, tell Sirius I'm sorry I missed him. We're reviewing the last three years of Care of Magical Creatures for the O.W.L.s, so I'd better go now"--

"Don't--" Snape said abruptly. Harry jerked his head around. "Don't tell anyone about that letter. Anyone".

Harry nodded. He meant Hermione. And Ron too. He wondered whether Snape suspected how deeply involved he and Hermione had become. Then Harry remembered Snape looking at the photograph from Corfu. He probably suspected. For Harry, it was actually becoming a bit of a dim memory. It was as though he'd dreamt it all...

When he reached Hagrid's hut, the fifth year Gryffindors and Slytherins were seated on benches laid out in a semi-circle before Hagrid's garden, taking notes about unicorns and hippogriffs. Harry tried to catch Draco Malfoy's eye before sitting down, but he wasn't looking in the right direction. He took a seat between Ron and Hermione which they'd saved for him. He listened dimly to the things Hagrid said; only doodles seemed to come out of his quill. Mostly he looked back and forth between Ron and Hermione. He hadn't told Snape or Sirius, but he had already decided, like Percy, that he would do whatever was necessary to ensure their safety. Even--

Getting the Dark Mark.

* * * * *

Harry walked to a table in the far corner of the library and sat down. He checked his watch. It was six-thirty. He'd eaten dinner quickly, then slipped away and run up the marble stairs to the library. The day had lasted forever. First there was Potions, with Snape throwing him worried glances and Hermione giving Crabbe, Goyle and Malfoy the evil eye whenever they started ogling her, which was far too often for both Harry and Ron. They were still needling her about the photo; Neville had apologized to her for handing it to Malfoy in the first place, but the damage was done.

Charms was wall-to-wall O.W.L. review, and Harry was pleasantly surprised by how many spells were second nature to him now, especially after he'd absorbed so much for the Triwizard Tournament and now the Dueling Club. But he couldn't help stealing looks at Flitwick, still wondering who'd put that spell on the Charms doorway.

He could barely choke down lunch, and then Transfiguration was more review, and Moody's class was also. This was a little more difficult, though, since they hadn't had the same teacher the whole time, as they had for the other classes. Hermione was the only one who knew anything about werewolves, Moody discovered, and nothing particularly useful had been learnt from Lockhart during their second year. For reasons Harry understood all too well, Moody didn't even want them to use the Lockhart books for reference, which they could have done, Harry thought. Even though he hadn't banished any banshees himself, Lockhart had quite accurately written down the methodology used. Harry thought he might refer to the books anyway, without telling Moody. He could skip over the self-aggrandizing bits. After all, he'd already paid good money for the books, and there was information in them he'd need to know.

Harry looked around the deserted library. It was six-thirty-five. He was on the verge of going into spasmodic table-drumming mode if someone didn't show up soon. He reached out toward the shelves nearest him and pulled a random book down. He flipped open the cover and started to read, just for something to do. The book was, not coincidentally, about dark wizards and some of the things they'd done. Harry opened the book in the middle and started reading.

One of the most feared dark wizards of the sixteenth century was well known in the Muggle world as well, but not as a wizard. Pere Juillet De Pems Marvolo was a direct descendent of Salazar Slytherin and commanded great respect in the Loire Valley, where he was the abbe of St. Jean Batiste, a Benedictine monastery. Marvolo began his reign of terror with scourges to clear Jews out of the local countryside in 1537, exactly twenty years after Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses at Wittenberg, progressing to a minor inquisition that targeted any remotely heretical sect, including many of Luther's followers, and evolved into witch burnings (although all of the accused were known by the magical community to be Muggles).

Like many clerics of the day, wizard or Muggle, Marvolo kept a mistress and fathered a number of illegitimate children, whom he openly acknowledged. He had hoped to advance to the position of cardinal, and thence to the papacy, but with the rise of Lutheranism and later the Council of Trent came a desire in the Church to at least appear to frown upon such practices as priests keeping mistresses and supporting families. In 1560, three years before the Council of Trent finally came to a close, Marvolo was stripped of his post as abbe and excommunicated.

Having lost the means to acquire power in the Muggle world (we may be grateful he did not become pope) Marvolo took on a new persona. Rearranging the letters of his name, along with his clerical title, he was able to turn "Pere Juillet De Pems Marvolo" into the statement, "Je m'appelle Sieur Voldemort," or, in English, "I am Lord Voldemort".

As Voldemort, Marvolo swept across the French countryside, wreaking havoc and leaving behind his mark: a serpent and a skull. The magical authorities were at a loss for what to do about Marvolo. Finally, an Auror who had been hunting him for years killed one of his sons before Marvolo's very eyes. Marvolo immediately performed the Enuma Elish spell to resurrect him. The Auror's eyewitness account:

"He summoned the large snake which accompanied him everywhere and spoke to it in Parseltongue. The huge creature put its tail in its mouth, forming a circle around the Dark Lord and his dead son, whom he clasped in his arms. He raised his wand to the heavens, saying, 'Enuma Elish! Tiamat! Apsu'!

"As he spoke the words, a terrible rumbling emanated from the heavens. Dark clouds gathered overhead and lightning flashed with the final word of the Dark Lord's incantation. A bolt of lightning struck the ground at his feet and seemed to create the fissure which now opened there. The ground opened wider and wider, the sound of thunder from overhead becoming so deafening that I had to cover my ears. Then, his son in his arms, he jumped into the abyss. I waited, but he did not return. He did not succeed in saving his son, or himself. The rift in the earth healed itself and the great serpent slithered away. I spread the word in the countryside that the dreaded Voldemort (for I no longer feared to speak his name) was no more, and there was great rejoicing in the wizarding world".

Some twenty years later, the same Auror claimed to have spotted Marvolo in an auberge in Lyons, and tried to convince the magical authorities that he had been mistaken about Marvolo being gone. However, even if it was the wizard who had styled himself Voldemort, he no longer seemed to be a threat to the wizarding or Muggle worlds, and the Auror was advised to retire, due to his advanced age (one-hundred seventy-three) and delusional tendencies.

Harry swallowed; when had the book been published? It didn't look especially old or worn. He turned to the front. It was printed by Sweetbriar Publishing when he was five years old. Out of curiosity, he turned to the index, looked for the P's. There; he'd found the entry. Potter, Harry, pages 532-534.

He thought about turning to those pages, to see what the book said about him, but he thought he heard hissing. That's strange, he thought. Have I lost the ability to understand Sandy?

"Sandy?" he said to her softly.

"Yes, Harry Potter"?

"What is it"?

"What is what"?

"What did you say to me"?

"I did not say anything to you. I was sleeping".

"Oh. Sorry, Sandy. Go back to sleep".

"Is that all? You woke me up to find out whether I was awake"?

"Not exactly, Sandy. Sorry".

Harry looked around him; he heard the hissing again. He realized that it was a human making a hissing noise, and it was coming from behind the shelves where he'd found the book he'd just been reading. He picked up the book in his arms; planned to check it out. Ron and Hermione would be very interested in what he'd just read about the other Voldemort.

He went around the shelves and found Draco Malfoy waiting there. "About time, Potter. I thought you spoke snake".

"I do, Malfoy. You're the one who doesn't".

Malfoy sneered. "Fat lot of good it's done you." Harry bit his tongue to keep from telling him about Sandy's Sight. "Listen Potter. We have to talk".

"About my recruitment letter"?

"Yeah".

"All right, then. What are my instructions"?

Malfoy grimaced. "That's just it. There are no instructions. You received the standard letter"...

"There's a standard Death Eater recruitment letter"?

"Get over it. But you aren't going to be given a time and place to come to and give your answer".

"Why"?

"My dad thinks of you as--a special case. Doesn't want you to have any time to prepare. When it happens, you won't know ahead of time".

Harry shook his head. "Listen, I don't care about myself. I just don't want anyone else hurt. Can you at least tell me whether you think it will be before next Saturday?"

"No, I can't. Why?"

"Because we need to get your dad put away before then. That's when Percy Weasley is supposed to report. He's been recruited".

"What?" Malfoy looked terrified. "How do you know?"

"I can't tell you that. You look like you didn't know".

He shook his head, dazed. "I didn't...Do you know what he plans to do"?

"No," Harry lied. "But I do know that your dad has already had two families killed because he didn't get the recruits he wanted. You read about Marcus Flint, I suppose? It was in this morning's Daily Prophet".

"It didn't say anything about my dad or the Dark Lord"...

"Of course it didn't, you prat! The Ministry's still in denial about all this. Flint didn't want to be a Death Eater, and his dad killed him".

Malfoy sank down. "Man...Flint"...

Harry looked down at him. "Can we get your dad before next Saturday? Before the entire Weasley family is put at risk"?

He looked up at Harry. "I don't know. I'll see what I can do..." But he looked worried.

"Let me know when it'll be"...

"No." Malfoy stood again.

"No"?

"My schedule, Potter, not yours. Element of surprise. If you look the least bit like you've been expecting this, my dad will kill me first and then you and whoever else happens to be standing around".

Harry looked at him shrewdly. "I'm still not sure why I should trust you"...

"Good. Keep thinking that. Treat me as anything other than your worst enemy, and my dad's sure to pick up on it".

"Are you going to ask him about Percy"?

Malfoy shook his head. "Can't afford to. He hasn't been telling me about his other recruits. You're the only one I'm in on".

"That might change".

"Why"?

"I saw Roger Davies get a recruitment letter this morning".

Malfoy snorted. "Well, that's probably overdue, isn't it? He's probably more evil than my dad, in some ways"...

"So you didn't know? And you don't know where and when he's supposed to give his answer"?

Malfoy shook his head. "No idea. This has gone on long enough. I should go before people start coming in here again. Dinner's almost over".

"Right," Harry said, turning and walking away from him with no other leave-taking. He went to the desk and waited for Madam Pince to process the book he was borrowing, then left the library, returning to the Gryffindor common room to v

for Ron and Hermione. He wished he had something he could tell Snape and Sirius, but all he could say was that sometime in the next week, he would be ambushed. It wasn't a pleasant thought, and he felt another wave of Moody-esque paranoia sweep over him. He opened the book to the middle and reread the entry on the other Lord Voldemort. Somehow, the fact that Tom Riddle wasn't terribly original wasn't especially comforting...

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Hermione was in fact very interested in the book Harry had borrowed from the library. "Why doesn't Binns teach us this? All we ever seem to cover is goblin rebellions in England"...

Harry listened to her talk, wanting to be alone with her, to talk to her, figure out what they were going to do about Ron, before he or she or Ron or all of them were ambushed and killed by Lucius Malfoy, and went to their graves without telling Ron the truth. Had she somehow decided that the night they'd spent together was a mistake, was she trying to forget it? Harry wondered whether he could do the same, just go on as if nothing had happened.

The days dragged on, it seemed to Harry. Tuesday night, he wrapped Ron's birthday present to give him the next day. There wasn't much time left before Saturday. He tried to picture Percy in the circle of Death Eaters, having the Cruciatus Curse put on him, getting the Dark Mark. No. It mustn't happen. Percy was annoying, but he didn't deserve that. Harry realized that Percy might just feel he had nothing left to live for with Penelope gone. Snape had joined after losing his mum. Was Percy really going to be a spy, or was he going to be a Death Eater in earnest? Harry was so confused. He had no certainty in his life any more, nothing solid to hold onto.

Then, just before he went up to bed, Hermione tucked a piece of paper into his hand. He crumpled it in his fist, watching her go up the stairs to her dorm. When he was upstairs in his own bed, behind his bedcurtains, he finally looked at it by wandlight.

Common room. One o'clock. Invisibility Cloak.

Harry swallowed. She wanted to meet with him. It had been so long...but she didn't want to stop being with him. That was something. He felt a knot in his stomach undo itself, then found memories of their night together swirling through his head, and he tried to stop that too, before it overwhelmed him. It will be all right, he thought. But he wondered where they could go to be alone. If she wanted him to bring the cloak, it must be someplace outside of Gryffindor Tower.

He checked his watch. One hour. It seemed like a very, very long hour. When it was almost one o'clock, he stepped out of bed carefully and removed his Invisibility Cloak from his trunk. He crept out of the dorm, then down the stairs, finding her waiting. She smiled beautifully at him.

"I couldn't wait another minute either".

And then she was there again, in his arms, and their mouths were connected as though drawn by some supernatural force. He trembled as he held her face up to his, feeling nervous all over again, as though they hadn't already done this. She gently broke the kiss and pulled him over to the portrait hole. When they had gone through, they donned the cloak, and she led him downstairs and through corridors to a familiar place; the girls' prefect bathroom.

"Drovers," she said to the shepherdess. The painting swung open and they entered. Candles flickered to life on the walls and ceiling, revealing a bathing space identical to the boys' prefect bathroom. Harry removed the cloak from them both and smiled at her.

"What a great idea"...

She smiled back. "I thought you'd think so." She went to the taps around the pool-sized tub and turned on a few. Some warm water gushed out, already impregnated with various shades of aromatic bubbles. As the tub filled, Hermione began to take off her dressing gown and night shirt. Harry froze; she was so beautiful, and he could see her so much better now with the candles, instead of just the moon, like before.

She stepped delicately into the water, sighing as she did so, then looking up at Harry. "Come on then. I rather hoped you'd join me".

Harry suddenly felt like the most awkward person on the planet as he tripped over himself to get undressed. I must have inherited my mother's grace, he thought. Taking off Sandy, his glasses and lastly the basilisk amulet, he also slid down

into the warm water, at the opposite end of the tub from Hermione, then swam over to her. She smiled at him as he put his arms around her; here was a brand new sensation, holding her underwater, with warm bubbles brushing up against them...

He leaned down to kiss her and she responded immediately. When he drew back, she looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"You know, you look completely different without your glasses, Harry"?

Harry frowned. "I can't tell if you mean that that's good or bad".

She smiled and kissed the tip of his nose. "Both are good. You just look like two different people with and without them".

He moved his hands down a little, making her moan. "Then are you cheating on your boyfriend when you're with Harry with glasses or Harry-without-glasses"?

"I don't know," she gasped, starting to kiss his neck and breathe more shallowly. "I'll let you know when I get my brain back..." He laughed and kissed her again. She pulled away from him and went to the edge of the tub, pulling herself up on the side to get out. Harry gasped; he thought the sight of her dripping wet was too fabulous for words...

She retrieved her wand from her dressing gown and put a spell he could not hear on the marble tile floor near the tub. He pulled himself out of the tub also and walked over to her.

"Hermione, what"--

But she suddenly pushed him and he fell, arms flailing, onto the tile floor where she'd just cast the spell. He winced, waiting for the pain from the hard tile coming in contact with his body, wondering simultaneously why she'd done that, but he landed instead on a soft, bouncy surface like a mattress. He pressed his fist against the tile floor next to where he was lying; it gave a little. He looked up at Hermione, who was smiling at him.

"Cushioning spell".

She joined him on the floor and he pulled her on top of him, kissing her deeply.

"My girlfriend is the cleverest witch on the planet," he said, smiling at her.

"And my boyfriend is the sexiest wizard on the planet," she said, kissing his neck, then moving her mouth further down his neck while he threw back his head and remembered George in the bed at the cottage in Hogsmeade...

* * * * *

They had dozed off. Hermione's leg was thrown over his hip and he had been pillowing his head on his arm. He opened his eyes slowly, feeling a little disoriented. When he could place his location, he looked down at Hermione, peacefully sleeping. He reached out his hand and dipped it into the water in the tub; it had gone cold. He shivered. Then he had a mischievous thought. He dipped his hand in the cold water again, then flicked it at Hermione, the cold drops falling on her face.

She opened her eyes, crying out, sitting up, making Harry smile because he still couldn't get over how beautiful she was and that he got to see all of her now.

"Harry--" she complained sleepily. He laughed.

"Sorry. Couldn't resist".

She looked at him appreciatively. "You're looking pretty irresistible yourself right about now..." she said softly, leaning in to kiss him. He responded at first, then pulled back.

"Hermione, can I ask you something"?

"What"?

“Why didn’t we just tell Ron when he saw the photo from Corfu?”

She scowled. “You really think that was the time? He was furious”!

“And he’ll be even more furious when he eventually finds out that we were lying to him that day. What are we going to tell him in a year that we’ve started holding hands and gee, we’d never have thought of it if he hadn’t asked if we were already seeing each other”...

“Don’t get sarcastic with me, Harry. It’s rather spoiling the mood”.

“We need to talk about this, Hermione! He’s our best friend; it’s important”.

“That just wasn’t the time, Harry”!

Suddenly, there was a great splashing noise, and Harry realized that something had gushed out of the one of the tub taps and fallen into the cold bathwater. The silvery image surfaced, then rose up above the water, looking at them with great interest.

“Well!” Myrtle said in an offended tone. “I thought I heard your voice echoing down the pipes, Harry, but I never thought you’d be here, and with her”...

Harry looked at Moaning Myrtle in shock, then Hermione fully woke up and screamed. Both Harry and Myrtle covered their ears as the sound bounced around the hard marble in the bathroom.

“Hermione!” he said, annoyed. “You’ll wake up half the school”!

She dashed over to where she’d thrown her dressing gown and pulled it on. Myrtle looked at Harry as appreciatively as Hermione had. “You look different. You were more of a--boy last year”.

Harry felt himself flush, remembering her spying on him in the boys’ prefect bathroom when he was trying to work out a clue for the second Tournament task. He took his dressing gown from the floor where he’d thrown it and put it on with her back to her. Hermione was pointing her wand at Myrtle, looking angry enough to kill, if Myrtle weren’t already dead.

He turned around and spoke to Myrtle. “You shouldn’t be spying on people in bathrooms. Go back to your toilet”.

“You were the ones having such a loud row. I could hear it clear down in the kitchen sinks”.

“We were not having a row!” Harry said, realizing after a second that this was a lie. He and Hermione never fought; she and Ron did, but not the two of them. Had it been a row?

“It certainly sounded like a row to me...” Myrtle sighed. “Do you have any idea how boring it is to be dead?” She wafted closer to Hermione, ignoring the wand pointed at her. “You were making quite a racket, you know, even before the row that moaning and”--

“Anima tua, anima mea!” Hermione cried, finally losing it. Harry watched in shock as Myrtle froze in mid-air. He looked at Hermione.

“What are you going to do”?

She looked thoughtful. “Maybe--let’s see, who don’t we like”?

“What do you mean”?

“Well, there’s Malfoy, and his goons, and Pansy Parkinson”...

“What about Roger Davies”?

She smiled. “Perfect”.

“Hermione; what are you going to do”?

"A little prank. Harmless." She looked grimly at the frowzy ghost. "Myrtle!" she said imperiously. "You did not see anything here. You will go to the Ravenclaw seventh-year boys' dorm and wake Roger Davies up with a big, wet, sloppy kiss!" She started to laugh, but managed to hold it in. Harry's sides ached from not breaking out into laughter. She pointed her wand at Myrtle again.

"Anima tua!"

Myrtle woke up, didn't spare the two of them a glance, and went flying back up one of the taps around the perimeter of the tub. In a blink, she was gone. Hermione drained the tub, then took off her dressing gown again, making Harry shudder from the sight of her, but it was only so that she could put her nightshirt and underwear back on. He knew he should do the same; they should return to their separate beds in Gryffindor Tower. It was getting late.

When they were dressed, they went to the door and put the Invisibility Cloak on again, opening the painting cautiously, in case Filch was nearby. They reached the portrait hole again without incident, but before they reentered the common room, Harry pulled her to him in a long, slow kiss. When he pulled his mouth away from hers, Hermione looked like she just might drag him back to the bathroom...

"Thank you," he said softly.

"Thank you? That's all you can say"?

"I mean--thank you for confirming that I didn't dream that night we spent together. I was starting to wonder"...

"Oh, right. Well--what with Neville and all"--

"I know".

"I mean, I wanted you so much all that time, and I felt so guilty for feeling that way when Neville"--

"I know, I know," he said, getting softer and softer, leaning down to kiss her again. It was a brief, delicate kiss. He swallowed. "We should go in," he said, still whispering. She nodded, looking reluctant. He gave the password and the portrait swung open. She slipped out from under the cloak and went up the stairs without a backward look, and he returned to his dorm, walking on his toes, trying to resist the urge to sneeze (his nose was tickling) until he was back behind his bedcurtains. On the other side of the room he could hear Ron snoring.

Then Harry remembered that today was Ron's sixteenth birthday. He thought of the present he had for him, wrapped and hiding in his trunk. He'd felt very smug for deciding to give this to Ron; he knew it was something that would just bowl him over. But now he wished he could give him another gift instead--the gift of truth. When would they be able to tell him? He wondered. He laid back against his pillows, falling asleep again, wishing they could just tell Ron everything...

* * * * *

Harry tried not to grin too much when he and Ron met Hermione for running the next morning. He had wished Ron a happy birthday when he woke him up, and asked him if he wanted the day off from running. Ron said he didn't, so it started off like any other day. Classes were full of O.W.L. review, as was the usual lately, but after Moody's class at the end of the day, they would get to go to a party down at Hagrid's. Everyone knew that Ron knew (he hated surprises) and they were all set to walk out the front door of the castle and go down to Hagrid's when Ron noticed that Ginny wasn't with them.

"Oh," Angelina said, "She had Potions last period. Must still be down there".

"Tell you what," Ron said to them all. "Harry and I will go and get her, and you all can get there first, and when I arrive I pretend to be surprised." He smiled merrily; it was his birthday, and he seemed happier than Harry had seen him in a while. Parvati reached up and kissed him quickly, then went off with the others, looking over her shoulder at him and smiling. Hermione walked near her, an inscrutable look on her face.

Harry and Ron turned and went down the steps to the dungeons; Ron was practically skipping. Harry had given Hermione his present for Ron to take down to Hagrid's; he knew that once Ron saw its shape, he'd have a pretty good idea what it was.

But when they were in the dungeon corridor, they heard a horrible sound. A girl, it had to be a girl. She was trying to cry out, but something was preventing her. Ron had a dreadful look on his face, and quickly outpaced Harry with his long legs, racing toward the Potions classroom.

Harry froze with shock upon entering the room; Malfoy and Ginny were there. Ginny's wrists were lashed to the wall above her head with magical ropes, no visible attachments, while Malfoy had ripped her robes and her clothes; she still wore her bra and underpants and skirt, which had been pushed up around her waist. Her thighs seemed very thin and pale and freckled; Malfoy was sucking on her neck, his hands wandering over her while she struggled ineffectually, a gag in her mouth preventing her from speaking or crying out more than they had heard.

Malfoy turned when he heard them enter; he had his wand out already, Harry realized. Ron pulled his out too and he immediately tried to disarm Malfoy, but he dodged it nimbly, while Ginny pulled at her bonds and struggled to speak against the gag. Ron threw his wand to the floor and lunged at Malfoy, who was not expecting this and fell backwards, wand flying out of his hand, as Ron began to rain blows down upon his face with his fists. Harry ran to Ginny, breaking spell that held her wrists to the wall. He helped her get the gag out, then picked up her robes from the floor, wrapping them gently around her, covering her up again. She leaned on him, crying freely.

"Why did I ever trust him?" she sobbed into his shoulder. "What did I ever see in him..." he rubbed her back and they sat on the floor, leaning against a wall, while Malfoy tried to fight back against Ron now, getting in a few blows of his own. They were rolling around on the dungeon floor, banging into the tables, blood flowing from various wounds on each of their faces. Malfoy's nose was positively gushing red.

Harry didn't care at this point if they killed each other; Ginny was what was important. Damn you, Malfoy. You couldn't wait for her to want to? He held her and rocked her; this would scar her for a long time, he knew. Girls didn't just get over this sort of thing. He ached inside that she should ever experience something like this. That Ginny, of all people, should have to remember this...

She clung to him, her head on his chest, his robes wrapped around her, as well as his arms, protecting her. Then he realized that he was actually one of the people she needed to be protected from. This was partly his fault. He had trusted Malfoy too. He had let her down, he should never have let this go on, he should have told her brothers...

Malfoy and Ron were getting tired, landing rather half-hearted punches now. Harry wasn't even sure where their wands were. Then he realized he heard footsteps in the corridor; a second later, Snape entered. The moment that he spotted Malfoy and Ron, he strode over to them, separating them and holding one of them with each hand. It wasn't difficult for him to do; they were both exhausted from their fight, gasping for breath and covered in blood and bruises.

Snape looked at Harry holding the sobbing Ginny. He felt he should explain what had happened.

"Malfoy was--attacking Ginny--" was all he could choke out, however, before he felt Ginny shivering uncontrollably in his arms, crying anew. Snape nodded.

"I can see what has happened. Take her to Madam Pomfrey. I will deal with these two".

Harry helped Ginny to stand and they left the room. They heard Snape haul Ron and Malfoy out of the classroom and into the corridor, walking in the opposite direction from the stairs. Suddenly, Ginny straightened up and called, "Professor Snape!" in a quavering voice.

He turned in surprise. "Yes"?

"My brother was--just trying to--to"--

Snape nodded. "I understand".

He turned, his hands still firmly clenching Ron's and Malfoy's upper arms, and marched them down the corridor. Harry turned to Ginny, buttoning his robes around her more securely; suddenly she collapsed against him. He propped her up under her arms.

"Ginny?" he whispered to her gently. "Do you want me to carry you?" She nodded slowly, and he scooped her up, while she put her arm around his shoulder and her head on his chest. He cradled her light frame against him, sorry when the

reached the infirmary and he had no excuse to go on holding her. Madam Pomfrey tucked her into a bed and drew a curtain around her, eyeing Harry pointedly. He was being asked to leave.

With a heavy heart, he went down to Hagrid's hut, to what should have been a merry sixteenth birthday party for Ron. Instead...

When Fred and George heard, they were livid. "Malfoy!" Fred said turning redder than his hair. "He's dead!"

"What about Ron?" Hermione wanted to know. Parvati looked anxious about this too.

"I don't know. We should all go back up to the castle." Hagrid looked sadly at the festive table in his garden, the birthday cake and the pile of presents for Ron.

"Poor little Ginny..." he sniffled, pulling out a large handkerchief, then growling fiercely. "I'd like a go at Malfoy meself..." Harry shivered; Malfoy wouldn't stand a chance against Hagrid. I'd like to see that, Harry thought.

When they reached the entrance hall, McGonagall was coming up from the dungeons. All of them starting talking at her once, wanting to know what was going to happen. Harry remembered that Dumbledore was still in London, at the trial, was Moody. McGonagall was deputy headmistress, and acting headmistress in Dumbledore's absence.

"Settle down, everyone, settle down!"

They all gradually quieted. She cleared her throat; her eyes looked red. Harry thought it was possible she had been crying. Ginny was an excellent student, and students like her were dear to McGonagall's heart. Harry remembered her sniffing over Hermione when she'd been petrified by the basilisk.

"Draco Malfoy and Ron Weasley will both be suspended for two weeks. They are in separate cells in the dungeons right now, waiting for their parents to come get them. After his two week suspension, Mr. Weasley will return to school. After suspension, Mr. Malfoy will undergo a disciplinary review before the board of governors to determine whether he will continue the rest of his education at Hogwarts".

Malfoy was going to be expelled! Harry thought happily. The disciplinary review sounded like a mere formality before kicking him out. Then his happiness fled. How were they going to get his dad if he was suspended? Percy was supposed to report on Saturday! Stupid Malfoy, why couldn't he keep his hands off Ginny? That's if he ever intended to get his da at all, which Harry was starting to doubt very much now...

Parvati was crying on Lavender's shoulder; Lavender shushed her and led her up the marble stairs. Fred and George looked very much like they wanted to hit something--or someone. McGonagall decided to give them something constructive to do.

"Fred--can you wait here for your parents and bring them up to my office when they arrive? They've probably just Apparated into the village. It shouldn't take them long to walk up here".

"Yes ma'am." Fred went to stand sentry near the door.

"George--help Alicia keep order upstairs in Gryffindor Tower. I don't want to hear of any wild reactions to this. We all need to keep our wits about us." George nodded, and he and Alicia led the rest of the Gryffindors up the stairs. McGonagall started to follow, but she noticed that Harry and Hermione were still standing in the hall, as though shell-shocked.

"Harry? Hermione? Are you coming"?

Hermione looked up at her with glistening eyes. "Professor? Today is Ron's sixteenth birthday. He and Harry were just supposed to be getting Ginny to bring her to a party down in Hagrid's garden. Could we--could we just go down to talk to him? Through the cell door"?

McGonagall looked at the two of them kindly. "Of course you may go talk to him. He'll need his friends right now".

She turned and continued going up the steps. Harry and Hermione went down to the dungeons. When they passed the open door to the potions classroom, Hermione looked in. She gasped when she saw Ginny's ripped blouse that had been

left behind. The tables were pushed out of alignment, and there was blood on the floor from either Malfoy or Ron or perhaps both of them. Then something caught Harry's eye; he crossed the room, realizing as he drew nearer what it was.

He stooped down and picked up Ron's wand. He looked around for Malfoy's. He couldn't find it.

"Harry? What are you doing with Ron's wand?"

"He left it here. But I saw Malfoy drop his wand too; only it's not here now".

Hermione looked around for another wand; it wasn't to be found. She looked up at Harry. "We should go talk to him, let him know his parents are coming".

He nodded to her and they left the room. Harry tucked Ron's wand into his robes. They walked down the corridor in the direction Harry had seen Snape take Ron and Malfoy. They turned several corners, then saw a series of heavy wooden doors with barred windows in the upper portion, heavy ironwork on the exteriors of the doors. Harry looked in the first one, having to stand on his toes to see in. The cell was empty. He tried the next one; also empty. Hermione was too short to see in the barred windows at all. After they'd been peeking into cells for fifteen minutes, she huffed impatiently.

"Ron!" she finally called. "It's Harry and Hermione! Where are you"?

There was no answer. But Harry noticed that the light further down the corridor looked odd, as though two of the cell doors were open and torchlight from inside the cells was shining into the passageway. He raced in the direction of the strange light, Hermione keeping pace with him. The two open, empty cells were identical, except that in one of them there was a piece of parchment in the middle of the floor. Harry picked it up.

"For the eyes of Harry Potter," the first line read. He looked up at Hermione.

"Why are you messing around with a blank piece of parchment?" she said impatiently, looking around the cell. He swallowed.

"It's not blank. It's just been charmed so only I can read it".

She was at his side instantly. "What's it say"?

He read the rest of it aloud. "Bring Granger and come to the forest. Do not tell anyone where you are going. Do not come alone, either one of you. Weasley will die if you do not follow these instructions".

She looked at him anxiously. "That's it? That's all it says"?

He nodded. Then he looked at her, knowing she would object--

"Listen, Hermione, I know you hated it last time"...

"I have to ride on you again, don't I?" she said shakily.

He nodded. "It will be the fastest way to find him, to look from the air".

She looked resigned. "Let's go then," she said, almost too softly for him to hear.

They walked up the stairs to the entrance hall holding hands, no longer caring who might see them. When they reached the front doors, Fred was no longer there; Mr. and Mrs. Weasley must be meeting with Professor McGonagall already. They went outside, ducking into the topiaries at the side of the door.

"Ready?" Harry asked her. She nodded; he could see, however, that she was shaking from head to foot. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the transfiguration, trying not to be distracted by worrying about her, or Ron, or Ginny. He focused wholly on himself, on becoming the golden griffin...His paws landed softly on the ground. He spread his wings and looked up at her. He felt her swing her leg over his back and lean over him, her fingers laced tightly into his mane, her knees and thighs gripping him painfully.

The sun was low, turning the western sky orange and apricot. He took a few running steps and then leapt into the air, building height as he moved the strong gossamer wings, flying straight toward the Forbidden Forest.

* * * * *

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Choice

Harry moved his wings slowly, forward and back, feeling a warm breeze on his face. Hermione clung to his back, her face buried in his mane; he could feel her ribcage moving against him with every labored breath she took. She must be terrified, he thought. He wished he could talk to her, but in his Animagus form he didn't have a human voice box.

He looked down; the trees were below them now. Harry scanned the forest, looking for clearings. He often had to make several passes over an opening in the trees to determine whether there was anything to see; the clearings were small, was well over a hundred feet in the air, and he flew over them quickly. He couldn't hover, like a hummingbird. They saw the giants' camp at one point, and he hoped they didn't see him. He wondered whether Malfoy had run into the giants.

Then a strange feeling thrilled through him. He felt it from the tips of his nose and ears to the end of his tail, to his very toes. An animal instinct, making his hide twitch; he felt like he was sensing Ron's presence. We're close, he thought.

Hermione spotted them first. She dared to take one hand off his mane and point. "There! I saw a fire--and Malfoy's hair! It's impossible to miss!"

Harry would have felt a lot better if she'd seen Ron's hair--that was pretty hard to miss, too. Then she frantically clutched at his mane again, making him wince. He was banking, heading for a clearing that was about one-hundred yards from where she'd seen the fire. Hopefully Malfoy hadn't seen them in the sky. He probably wouldn't think to look up, Harry thought. Unless he expected them to come on broomstick...

Harry tried not to think of what would happen if Malfoy saw him in his griffin form. He descended in tight spirals, as she pulled painfully on his mane even more. They were on the ground at last. There was a greenish cast to the late-afternoon light in the forest, as if they were underwater. Harry changed back to his human form, groaning with the pain, both in his bones and his scalp.

"Ouch, Hermione! You can stop pulling my hair now".

"Sorry," she mumbled, rolling off his back, the absence of her warm weight making him feel a little cold. It was less embarrassing this time for her to be flying with him; they'd been far more intimate physically since that first time in the a

Harry willed himself to stand and disregard the pain in his joints. He helped her to stand and pointed through the trees to the fire; it was a large one, visible even at a distance. I hope they aren't going to burn the forest down, he thought. The he jumped when he heard Sandy hissing under his robes.

"Harry Potter," Sandy said softly. "What has happened"?

"Oh no!" Harry said, hitting his head, feeling like a complete prat. "I forgot! I was wearing Sandy when I changed!" He pulled her out of his sleeve. "Sandy! Are you all right? I'm so sorry"--

"For what are you sorry"?

"For changing into a golden griffin and not putting you somewhere safe"--

"You can change into a golden griffin"?

"It's my Animagus form. That's why I wasn't wearing you to dinner for a while, because every night after dinner"...

"Interesting. I was part of a golden griffin".

"What"?

"When you changed, I changed with you. I do not remember anything that occurred during that time. Where are we now

"In the Forbidden Forest. So you're okay"?

"Evidently. I am not saying that I would choose to be a part of a golden griffin every day, as I do not like them. You did kill any snakes I hope"?

"No. I just did it so I could fly over the forest".

Hermione tapped him on the shoulder. "As interesting as it is to stand here listening to you hissing, we have to find Ron."

"Right. Just a second." He looked at Sandy again. "Sandy, can you see anything? Anything at all"?

"I cannot receive the Sight at will, Harry Potter. It is a gift".

"Well if you have any gifts to give me while we're here in the forest, please let me know right away. I know I sometimes you not to tell me things, to stay quiet, but right now I need all the help I can get".

"I will not keep quiet," she promised him. Harry let her slither back under his sleeve; he felt her wind around his arm again. He nodded at Hermione and reached for her hand; she gave it to him at first, then changed her mind and took her wand out. He nodded again and took out his own--no, that didn't look right. He had grabbed Ron's, which he put back in his pocket. He found his own wand and took it out. They approached the clearing as quietly as they could.

Finally, they reached the perimeter of the irregular break in the trees. They could feel the heat now from the enormous orange-blue fire in the center. Malfoy was nowhere to be seen, but Harry was sure this was the same clearing they'd seen from the air. Where is he? Harry wondered. The clearing seemed deserted.

Suddenly, Hermione cried, "Ron!" She ran toward him. Thick vines bound him to a tree to the left of the thick tree trunk where they'd been crouching, which had blocked their view of him. Ron didn't respond when she threw her arms around him. Harry looked around the clearing again, peering closely at the trees around him. He could see no one else. Hermione pulled away from Ron. Harry walked up to him and put his hands on either side of his head. His skin was still warm and his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Stunned," Harry said simply. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. She leaned on the tree next to Ron's, catching her breath. Suddenly, what looked like very strong vines around the base of the tree reached out and pulled her to the trunk. She screamed, but more vines wound themselves around her, trapping her arms at her sides. Even though it only took Harry a moment to reach her, he couldn't pry the thick vines from her, as strong as steel cables.

Then he felt something on his foot. He looked down and saw a vine wrap itself around his ankle and pull him to a tree beside Hermione's. Before he could do anything, more vines whipped around his body, binding him to the tree, as had happened to her. He looked helplessly at her and the still-senseless Ron. He had dropped his wand; it lay on the ground not a foot in front of him. Hermione had also dropped her wand.

Harry looked toward the crackling flames, which did not seem to rely on any sort of fuel to burn. Then he thought he saw a face floating above the flames; no, it wasn't floating. It was a person approaching from the other side of the clearing. A face he'd last seen on the day of the ceilidh, staring back at him from the edge of the village moments before he Apparated.

Lucius Malfoy.

The look in his eyes chilled Harry to the bone. He smiled, the most insincere smile Harry had ever seen in his life. Harry was startled by how much he seemed to be just an older version of his son; he hadn't thought the Lucius Malfoy in the Pensieve looked exactly like Draco Malfoy. But now he felt as if he could see a quarter-century into the future, see an older Draco Malfoy. Which will never happen, Harry thought, if I just kill him, which I might very well...

He saw Ginny in his mind's eye again, shivering and wide-eyed, her huddled form against his chest like a small child as he carried her to the hospital wing. He clenched his jaw. Malfoy would pay for what he'd done to Ginny--both Malfoys, he remembered, since Lucius Malfoy had been the one to give Ginny Tom Riddle's diary. He felt hate for all things Malfoy roiling through him, as he watched the grim-faced wizard who'd recruited Snape to be a Death Eater walk around the magical fire toward him.

Draco Malfoy followed his father. Another figure was behind him; he was slight, bowed just a little, wearing a hood which threw his features into shadow. He walked toward Harry, Ron and Hermione around the opposite side of the fire from the two Malfoys, and when he raised his hands to push his hood back, that's when Harry saw it; Hermione had noticed too and she gasped.

The silver hand.

Wormtail's ghoulish little face peered at Harry, Ron and Hermione, and something that might have been a smile spread over his visage. He and Lucius and Draco Malfoy approached them. Harry and Ron were on each end, Hermione in the middle. Harry stared with revulsion at Wormtail. Suddenly, his parents' erstwhile Secret-Keeper raised his wand and pointed it at Ron.

"Enervate"!

Ron shook his head and struggled to open his eyes. He looked down, surprised to see himself bound to a tree. He looked surprised in general, staring first at Wormtail, then the Malfoys, then Harry and Hermione.

"W-what--?" he stammered.

"I'll talk," Harry informed the two of them, taking charge. "Where is he, Wormtail"?

His eyes bore into Harry's. "Where is who?" came his oddly high-pitched voice.

"Voldemort".

"My Master. And soon--your Master as well".

"Where is he?" Harry was shaking.

"He is not coming today. Tomorrow, we will take you to him".

"Why"?

"Several reasons. You know that while he has his body back, he is not as strong as he was when the curse that rebounded from you left him less than a spirit. He is busy...busy building up his strength again. He does not wish to exhaust himself unduly. He is relying upon his servants to be strong for him until he is back to--his old self".

"No, I mean why am I being recruited? Voldemort's been trying to kill me for years. Why does he want me to be on his side now"?

Wormtail smiled. "On his side? You say that, Harry, as though being 'on his side' is the same as being his comrade, an equal. You will not be 'on his side,' you will be his servant. There is a difference".

"You still haven't said why".

He nodded at Draco Malfoy. "Young Malfoy tells us you know about the Prophecy. You know why the Dark Lord tried to kill you as a baby, and since then. 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.' Surely you have heard that. You know that your parents decided they would rather die than see you serve my Master. It was I who convinced him to give James and Lily that choice. They did not need to die. All they had to do was let him put a spell on you as a baby, an invisible kind of Dark Mark, if you will, and you would have been his faithful servant. You would have had so many advantages! Young Malfoy here--he had some of those advantages, briefly, before the Dark Lord tried to kill you, and almost died himself. I asked him not to kill James and Lily, I did Harry. I would not lie about that. But they would not agree to raise you to be his servant, and without that promise, my Master's spell would have been useless, just as useless as you were orphaned. Once he killed both of your short-sighted parents..."

"Hey!" Harry responded indignantly.

"He decided to kill you, to make a clean sweep of it. Unfortunately, he did not anticipate Lily's sacrifice protecting you. As so you lived. Yet you did receive some protection from my Master, in a way, something of the protection you would have enjoyed had your parents simply let him claim you as his in the first place. You have enjoyed some of the abilities my

Master has, have you not? I understand you are a Parselmouth, like my Master. Do you ever offer any thanks to him for this ability? You should. Or, when you see him, you can thank him in person”.

“Thank him? For trying to kill me? And suppose--just suppose I agree to do this, to keep some people safe...” he looked sideways at Ron and Hermione.

“No, Harry!” she cried.

“Harry, don’t!” Ron implored.

“This is my choice!” Harry growled back, his heart going a mile a minute.

“You know what we told you, Harry...” Hermione reminded him.

“We meant it,” Ron said; Harry did indeed remember. They said they would die before letting him become a Death Eater.

“But that wouldn’t be the end, even if the worst happened, would it?” he said to them. “There are always other people that could be hurt. How many people are supposed to suffer before it stops? Remember the Westminster tube station? He did that just to get my attention. Remember POTTER on the wall”?

Lucius Malfoy smiled. “Well, getting your attention was one reason for what the Dark Lord did in that station”...

“What was the other”?

The elder Malfoy smiled coyly. “You don’t know the significance of that station”?

“Just that it’s near Parliament”.

He continued to smile. “Well. You are an ignorant little whelp, aren’t you? But then, those Muggles wouldn’t have been able to teach you anything, would they? Although it seems that the other two don’t know either. Interesting. I don’t know what this school is coming to. And you Weasley, son of a Ministry employee”...

“What are you talking about?” Harry wanted to know.

“Not now. There will be time”...

Harry glared at him. What was significant about that particular station? Other than the connection to Muggle government? “And the Three Broomsticks. Were you behind that”?

“Technically, although of course, I was down the road at the ceilidh, where dozens of people could vouch for me”...

“Do you think that your becoming a Death Eater will put a stop to all that?” Hermione demanded of Harry. “What do you think you would be required to do as a Death Eater”?

Lucius Malfoy stepped toward them, cold steel-colored eyes lighting on each of them in turn. “Yes, young Potter. What do you think I should ask you to do? Hmm...Torturing your friends comes to mind”...

“No!” Harry cried. “Let them go. I’m who you want. Leave them out of it. All right. I accept. Make me a Death Eater, I don’t care. But let them go.” He felt tears behind his eyelids. Now Draco Malfoy came swimming toward him, looking blurry.

“Aw, isn’t that sweet?” he said in a sing-song intonation. “Except that it’s not true that you’re the only one wanted here. I’ve been telling my dad that Granger and Weasley would make fine candidates as well. She has the brains, and he has the temper. I can testify to that,” he said with a lopsided grin, pressing his hand momentarily against a bruise on his cheekbone. His open wounds had been magically healed between the time Snape hauled him out of the Potions classroom and this moment, but it was easy to tell he’d been fighting recently.

“I can’t believe I actually was starting to think you were an all-right bloke...Helping me when the pub blew up, sitting with Neville...” Ron’s wounds were caked in dried blood, a bruise on his cheekbone below his left eye; he might have had other bruises, but the facial hair he’d grown to hide the scar on his cheek now also hid those marks.

Draco Malfoy smiled. "Thank you, thank you," he said, bowing. "I should go on the stage, I should. Take the West End storm".

Hermione muttered darkly, "If you ever appear in the West End, people will no longer be engaged in hyperbole when they say the theatre is dead".

He stepped forward, stood very close to her. "Now you're just trying to hurt my feelings," he whispered, his face very close to hers. She turned her head and closed her eyes.

"What feelings?" Ron snarled. "Look at what you did to my sister"!

Draco Malfoy laughed, stepping back from Hermione and looking at his father and Wormtail, who smiled smugly. "What did you do to your sister! You haven't figure it out yet, you great ponce"?

Ron looked murderously at him. "Figured what out?" he said between his teeth.

"That I didn't do a damn thing to your sister. That whole scene was an act. She's almost as good as I am. If I were going to shag your sister--especially against her will--do you think I'd use the Potions dungeon? I'm not an exhibitionist, Weasley. Not that there haven't been people who tried to change my mind about that." He smiled, enjoying himself. "We weren't sure who our audience would be, but we were pretty safe in betting that one or more of the Weasley brothers, once they got wind of it, would be trying to bash my skull in. Luckily, I took a lot of painkilling potion beforehand. You were getting very annoying, you know. Actually landed one or two punches".

Ron was looking like he was sulking a bit. "A lot more than that, I thought".

"Okay, three or four. I'd suggest that you all put your hands together and clap for the fabulous acting talents of Miss Virginia Weasley, but she's not here--she's continuing her performance in the infirmary, I assume--and you three aren't exactly in a position to clap".

"What makes you think I believe you"?

"Would you like me to detail every move of my seduction of your sister? Or better still--her seduction of me? She's got a very dirty mind, you know. All the smartest girls do. But then, you know that, don't you Potter?" Although he spoke to Harry, he looked at Hermione again. Harry saw her close her eyes, shivering, so she wouldn't have to meet that knowing gaze. "That part of our relationship is actually relatively new. I was almost proper about the whole thing, waiting until after she turned fifteen. I just hope the Dark Lord doesn't think that makes me soft, that it disqualifies me from being a Death Eater." He smiled at his father, who chuckled appreciatively. Wormtail looked uncomfortable. "Potter saw us behind Hagrid's cabin on her birthday. You didn't know I'd figured that out, did you Potter? You have to watch what you say in the future. You can be careless. Ginny wasn't ready that day. Close, but not quite".

Ron glared at Harry. "You knew about them"?

Draco Malfoy slowly, laconically walked over to stand before Ron. "Not only that, Weasley," he drawled. "He knew about it quite a while ago." He turned to look at Harry and Hermione. "When was it, October? You know, that night the two of you were going at it in your common room and I came by to take Ginny for a little midnight walk around the castle"...

"October!" Ron's voice had gone up an octave. "Common room?" His face was turning as red as his hair.

"It wasn't like that!" Hermione burst out desperately. "We had just used Hedwig to deliver a letter to Dudley. Ginny came downstairs and Harry figured out that she was going to meet Malfoy"--

"Hermione!" Harry said suddenly. "Shut up!" She looked at him with a hurt expression, hearing the hardness in his voice. He was tired of the lies.

But Ron looked at Malfoy through narrowed eyes, nodding his head. "Oh, I see what you're doing again, Malfoy. I told you before, Harry and Hermione are friends. You can stop the"--

"Friends?" Malfoy laughed. "If most friends regularly shag each other senseless".

"Stop it!" Ron shouted. "Stop saying that"!

"Can't stand the truth, can you Weasley?" He moved from Ron to Hermione, standing very close to her. She turned her head, closing her eyes, her cheeks flushed, a tear running down one cheek.

Although he was looking closely at her, he was addressing Harry. "What's she like, Potter? Eh? What kind of sounds does she make? I'm betting on a screamer"...

"Malfoy--" Ron was saying again, getting darker red with every second. Suddenly Hermione turned her head and spat at Malfoy. He stepped back, wiping his cheek with his hand, livid. He reached for his wand, but Wormtail stepped forward putting his hand on his arm.

"There is a way to determine this," he said with a soft lisp, and then suddenly, he was Scabbers again, but Scabbers was a strange little silver paw. He climbed up Hermione's robes, then theropy vines binding her. He poked his nose here and there, while Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and looked green. He climbed higher and higher, closer to her face. She lifted her chin when he sniffed her neck; she was shivering and shaking, more tears sliding out of her eyes.

Without warning, the rat ran down her body and went to Harry, repeating the performance. Harry felt goosepimples all over as he felt the rat's progress; he felt sour stomach bile in the back of his throat as the rodent came closer and closer to his face. He squeezed his eyes shut as Hermione had done, trying to blank his mind until it was over.

Finally, the rat jumped back down to the ground, and in a blink, Wormtail had reappeared in his human form. He smiled lasciviously at Draco and Lucius Malfoy.

"They've been together in the last twenty-four hours. Probably more like fifteen hours. His smell is all over her, hers is all over him...there's some soap, too. They've tried to wash each other's scents away, but it's too soon, it's still too strong. And it's not just that their scents are on each other; there's another scent too. Unmistakable. Certain--bodily fluids"--

A slow smile spread across Draco Malfoy's face. "I am the luckiest bugger there is. I just want all of you to know that." He looked at Ron, who was glaring at Harry and Hermione, still speechless. Hermione looked at her feet; Harry glared at Draco Malfoy. "I certainly suspected, especially after that photo turned up...but now we know, don't we? Beyond a shadow of a doubt. I don't hear anyone denying it now." He turned to his father, waving his arm at the three bound to the trees as though he were a salesman showing off his wares. "Have I done it or haven't I, father? Now, I know I said I would bring you Harry Potter and his two best friends, but this is even better. Harry Potter, his best friend and--his girlfriend".

His father stepped forward and stood very close to Hermione, looking down at her in a way Harry did not like. "So," he said in a soft, silky voice. "It worked." He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. When she flinched away from his touch, he smacked her, the red imprint of his hand showing clearly on her pale cheek. Harry had hoped for a moment that she might spit at him too, but she didn't look like she would dare.

"Leave her alone!" Ron growled at him, straining again at the vines. Lucius Malfoy ignored him, continuing to bore his eyes into Hermione, his hand on her cheek again. She would not meet his gaze. His son laughed at Ron.

"Still defending her after the way she lied to you, Weasley? After the way she went after Potter? The way she forced you to settle for Patil? Not that Patil doesn't look very nice and--flexible. But when she's not your first choice"...

"Leave Parvati out of this!" Ron snarled.

"You said it worked," Harry said suddenly to Lucius Malfoy. His voice shook. "What worked"?

The older man didn't turn away from Hermione. "I planned ahead. I thought, would a teenage boy do everything in his power to protect his friends? Considering that the boy in question was Harry Potter, the answer was--probably. Then I asked myself, What about a girlfriend? And the answer I gave myself changed to definitely. My next problem was--how to make sure Harry Potter would have a girlfriend. I came up with several prospects".

Sirius had said the very same thing, Harry remembered. A teenage boy--how better to get at him than going through a teenage girl? He turned to look at Hermione; she turned her head and met his gaze, an anguished look in her eyes. A spell, he thought, his mind reeling. It was all a spell!

His throat was tight as he choked out the question: "Who"?

"We began first with a couple of girls in your own house, girls you would also see during Quidditch practice. It was easy enough to find Miss Bell, since she was staying with her great-aunt in Hogsmeade during the summer, and it was also fairly simple with the Head Girl, since her parents are Muggles. Draco didn't know about this. That's one reason I was somewhat surprised to see her with my son at the ceilidh. I behaved as if I did not know about her parents. It would have been suspect for me to know too much about her. I would have thought that she would have been your choice if you were going on looks alone," he said snidely to Harry, lifting up a lock of Hermione's hair as if judging her and finding her wanting. "Didn't she pursue you at all, Potter"?

"Yes," Harry whispered, remembering his moment of weakness, when Alicia kissed him and he kissed back.

"And Bell"?

Harry thought for a moment. "Not as much," he said quietly. "I think--she fancied another boy." He remembered Lee Jordan being rather alarmed by Katie having mononucleosis. "Was that all"?

Draco Malfoy laughed derisively. "Believe it or not, my dad did not bewitch every girl in school. You'd think he had. There's no accounting for taste. You could have saved yourself some trouble, father. Practically every idiotic girl in the castle was throwing herself at Potter. Why, I have no idea"...

His father ignored his son and Harry both. "And then, of course, the one we thought would work best--the Ravenclaw Seeker. And it seemed to be successful for a while--although just to be certain, I strengthened the Imperius Curse on her when I came for that Quidditch Match--but then my son," now he turned and sneered at Draco, "Managed to make a colossal blunder".

Harry furrowed his brow. "What"?

Draco grimaced. "The Charms classroom. I didn't check the book where I found that spell closely enough. Didn't see the part about the forty days of enchanted sleep".

"But--but--" Harry sputtered, "You knew that Cho Chang and I had broken up".

"Exactly. Which meant that you didn't suspect me. What I was trying to do there, in case you couldn't tell, was get you suspended or worse, expelled. Once you had left the school and were en route to your Muggle family, you would be vulnerable. Of course, Dumbledore never seriously suspected you, or he believed whatever story you told in your defense".

"But you said--school owls"...

"Oh, right. The school owls. Made it up. I also made you suspect Davies. Which made me think of recommending him to my father for recruitment. He will probably make an excellent Death Eater. You are too gullible by far, Potter. Just more so than my amazing acting prowess," he smirked, walking lazily over to Harry. "If you had eyes in your head, if you were at all observant, you'd have known that I never got any school owls".

"So," Harry said shakily, turning to Malfoy's father, trying to sort out everything that had occurred. "You put the three of them under Imperius. And it didn't really work that well. What did you do to Hermione"?

Malfoy's dad frowned. "She was harder to get at, in Bulgaria. But an opportunity finally arose, in the market. Luckily, we already knew that Krum was hopelessly puppet-like under Imperius. His assistance was invaluable. You, however," he said bringing his face close to Hermione's again, "You fought the curse from the moment it was put on you. So we had to use more drastic measures".

Hermione raised her eyes to his at last; she could finally find out what had happened to her when she was kidnapped. "What?" she whispered.

"A potion. Rather like a liquid form of Imperius. But longer lasting, harder to resist. Obviously, since it seems to have gotten you and Potter together"...

"How long does it last?" she asked, her lip trembling.

"Six months. Which seems to have given the two of you ample time to become...intimate".

Hermione didn't look scared any more. She looked more like she was working out an Arithmancy problem. "But--that means it wore off in early February!" she said, with a note of triumph in her voice.

Draco Malfoy raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "So? You and Potter were already"--

"But we weren't!" she said, sounding almost happy, a smile starting to pull at the corners of her mouth. She looked at Harry. "Don't you remember? When I told you I wasn't feeling--insane any more? The potion had worn off by then. I was resisting it all that time!"

Lucius Malfoy frowned at her. "What do you mean"?

Hermione was practically babbling. "I mean, we--we kissed, but not--" she started to say something else, but caught Ron's eye and looked down, suddenly silent and flushed. The flames from the fire made her look even redder.

Draco Malfoy walked over to Harry, an incredulous expression on his face. "You mean you two were all alone in Gryffindor Tower during the Christmas holidays and didn't do it? You expect us to believe that"?

"It's true," Harry said, his jaw clenched.

"So we're to believe that your first time was last night"?

Harry drew his lips into a line. He too caught Ron's eye, but then Ron looked away. "Not exactly," he said softly. "Easter holidays. Middle of the week. Just before I found Neville".

Ron had dropped his jaw, then closed it again. Harry saw him swallow. He tried to will himself to look back at Ron, to not chicken out and drop his gaze. He tried to communicate as much apology as he could through his eyes, but Ron's eyes were blazing, the fire reflected in them heightening the effect.

Malfoy came and stood next to his dad, also leering at Hermione now. "So. You've been going at it like bunnies since then, have you"?

Hermione looked back at him defiantly. "No, you pervert! Last night was only--only the second time--" she trailed off.

Malfoy threw up his hands and went to stand closer to Ron. "Only the second time, she says. But what timing! On the eve of your best friend's birthday, the best friend who you were still lying to about shagging Potter. How completely tactless of you, Granger. Don't dentists teach their children manners"?

His father laughed along with him. Harry thought of New Year's eve, on Ron's bed. That was pretty tactless too. And she was still under the influence of the potion then. He had stopped them from finishing what they'd started. He was stopping himself even before Sandy told him about Sirius coming. He remembered Hermione saying in the Charms classroom, "I want this too much. She was fighting, all that time, fighting what she wanted and what the potion made her want, which were so close together that it was confusing. She knew she didn't feel quite right, but she didn't know why."

"Harry," she said softly, turning her head to him. "You know I'm not under a spell, or the influence of potion, right? You know that?" Her eyes pleaded with him. He nodded, but he couldn't help thinking, "But for so long, you were. What do you make of that?"

Ron seemed determined to ignore them. "What about my sister?" he demanded angrily. "What did you do to make my sister go with you? What have you done to her"?

Malfoy strode over to Ron and gave him a lopsided smile. "Merely the Draco Malfoy charm. When I really want to turn a girl on, it can be quite irresistible. Although, truth to tell, she was the one turning on the charm at first. Very subtle, but I could tell. She was all put out about Potter being with Chang. Then I thought, what if I could get her to join us"...

His father finally moved away from Hermione now, going to stand beside his son, watching Ron's face. "Arthur Weasley's daughter," he drawled, smiling. "Wouldn't that be quite a coup! And now, it seems, Weasley will have to see two of his sons and his only daughter becoming Death Eaters. That pencil pusher at the ministry should be easy enough. Maybe a whole lot, if we can convince them. Those twin brothers of yours certainly could get some kicks from playing with Muggles, and seem to be quite creative. Then there's the charm-breaker, good skill for a servant of the Dark Lord. Dittos."

for the dragon man. Maybe we won't need to kill your dad after all. Once he learns his entire family has turned against him, perhaps he'll just oblige us with a nice, neat little heart attack".

"Percy? Percy is going to be a Death Eater?" Ron said, eyes practically bulging out of his head.

"He hasn't given his answer yet, but if he values the lives of his loved ones, I think he will".

Wormtail stepped forward now, silent after so long. "So, are they all candidates? Planning to make up for bungling Clearwater and Flint, Malfoy?" he addressed the older man. Lucius Malfoy made a face. He turned to Wormtail.

"Er, thank you for not telling the Dark Lord about the other Weasley boy and this one and Granger. In future, I think I will present my recruits to him as a fait accompli"...

Wormtail smiled evilly. "Yes. You didn't look like you enjoyed your--punishment for botching those jobs. You're welcome. He turned to Harry now. "Of course, the other reason for my wanting to help you, Harry, is the fact that you saved my life that night in the Shrieking Shack. I tried to keep my Master from using your blood to regain his body, but those entreaties were to no avail. Luckily for you, you escaped that night, so I can still repay you for what you did for me. I can take you under my wing, teach you the glories of serving the Dark Lord"...

Harry struggled against the vines again. "Then do it. Take me. Let them go".

Lucius Malfoy shook his head, amused. "But you three make such a wonderful team. We can't be breaking that up, can we? Although Weasley looks like he'd just as soon kill the two of you right now as look at you".

Harry turned to his head to look at Ron, whose gaze was shifting back and forth between him and Hermione, the most terrible expression Harry had ever seen there.

"I know!" Draco Malfoy said suddenly, almost like an excited small child. He started to laugh. "It's almost too perfect!" He stepped close to Ron and spoke softly near his ear; Ron flinched and tried to pull away, but the vines made it impossible. As Malfoy spoke, Ron's eyes widened. He turned and stared at the pale-haired boy. "So?" Malfoy said in a normal voice. "Do you agree to do it?" Ron looked dazed as he nodded--a very small nod, but it was there. Malfoy turned to his dad. "Father--let's untie Weasley. The Dark Mark will have to wait until he is presented, of course. But for his first act as a Death Eater, to prove his loyalty...do you think the Dark Lord would be terribly disappointed if Harry Potter were killed? his best friend? Or would he rather that best friend kill Harry Potter's girlfriend?"

Lucius Malfoy furrowed his brow, but looked interested. "What did you have in mind, Draco"?

He looked at Ron, smiling. "Let's give Weasley a choice. Right now, he certainly seems angry enough to do Cruciatus justice. Let him choose. He will put the curse on either Potter or Granger. Then, whoever he doesn't curse with Cruciatus would get the killing curse. That way, of course, the one who's going to die gets to see the other in agony, and they also get to consider their own impending death during the other's suffering." He grinned at Ron. "If he does this--there'll be no turning back for him. Think of Arthur Weasley's face when he finds out...Plus," he added, as though he'd just thought of something. "No matter whether you torture or kill Granger," he said to Ron, "You can still have your way with her, if you like. Although I call second. After all, what's a little necrophilia between friends?" At that, Harry saw Hermione turn green again, as when Wormtail had been climbing on her. She made a gagging sound in her throat, and suddenly, she was wretching, bringing up what was left of her lunch. It splattered on her shoes and splashed onto the leaves scattered on the ground before her.

Malfoy turned to her, grimacing. "Oh, that's attractive, Granger. Trying to put us off? You'll have to try harder. So I just won't shag your mouth, as appealing as that sounds"...

"As appealing as getting your prick bitten off?" she whispered malevolently, trying to swallow.

"Point well taken," he said cheerfully. "If she's still alive, avoid the Mudblood's mouth. There is of course, an ample array of other orifices"...

Hermione was still shaking from the wretching; Harry felt his stomach churning within him too, and he swallowed to avoid doing the same thing she did. He felt almost blinded by anger, hearing Malfoy speak this way about her, so cruel and yet so off-handed. Why can't I just do spontaneous magic at a moment like this? he wondered. But what he really wanted to do was very little to do with magic; he understood now why Ron had thrown down his wand in the Potions classroom and started throwing punches; Harry wanted nothing more than to wrap his hands around Malfoy's neck and squeeze.

Lucius Malfoy laughed and smiled at his son and put his hand on his shoulder. "I like it. All right! Untie him, Wormtail!"

Pettigrew looked nervous about this. Harry remembered him reacting the same way when Malfoy said Karkaroff would need to be untied, before he put the Hara Kiri on him. The uncertainty never vanished from his face, but he drew his wand from his robes and flicked it carelessly in Ron's direction, saying "Finite Incantatem," and the vines released Ron. He stepped away from the tree just a little, flexing his arms and legs, shaking out his robes, drawing deep breaths; Harry realized for the first time that the tightness of the bindings were keeping him from being able to really fill his lungs satisfactorily. Wormtail kept his wand carefully trained on Ron.

"Get out your wand," Malfoy said to him. Ron patted down his robes. "I haven't got it. Must be back in the Potions classroom." His voice shook. He wouldn't meet Harry's or Hermione's eyes.

"Don't, Ron! Don't let them make you!" Hermione said. Ron scowled at her.

"Still think I care anything at all about you?" he spat, a look of utter hatred on his face. "You're so proud of the fact that you slept with Harry of your own accord. Like that's something to be proud of! And the way you lied about the photograph".

"Well," she said weakly, "There was a grain of truth to it. There really were two photographs stuck together, that's what made me think of it. Except that they were copies of the same one, the one I sent Harry. It just didn't--didn't seem like the right time to tell you"...

He stepped toward her. "When would have been the right time? When?" his voice rose in volume, making her draw back, biting her lip, eyes glistening.

She put her chin up, suddenly defiant. "Maybe we should have told you right after you were done shagging Parvati! Why didn't you only did because you were hacked off about what those Ravenclaws said about you"...

There was a loud smack! and Harry looked in shock at the two of them. Ron had struck her, harder than Lucius Malfoy had, the look of the red mark on her cheek. Her mouth was open in shock.

"Parvati is my girlfriend, and everyone knows it! We weren't sneaking around. And you were keeping from me that my sister was with Malfoy!"

Malfoy made a face. "You say that like it's a bad thing"...

Hermione bit her lip, no longer defiant. "I'm so sorry, Ron..." she choked, even as her face still bore the mark of his hand.

He looked at her grimly, speaking softly. "Yes. You will be".

Harry swallowed. "This isn't you, Ron. You're not a murderer, you're not someone who can torture"...

He came to stand before Harry now. "I'm not, am I? And you are? I'd make a hell of a better Death Eater than you. I have ambition--" he turned to Hermione momentarily "--whether you think so or not--" he turned back to Harry. "And I would have killed Wormtail that night in the Shrieking Shack, or let Lupin and Sirius Black do it, anyway. You haven't got the guts to do this, Harry. I have. I'm tired of being in your shadow. I'm tired of being poor. What good has it ever done my family to embrace poverty? We won't be poor anymore. Or powerless. That's all going to change".

Malfoy stooped and picked up Harry's wand where it had fallen on the ground when the vines had pulled him to the tree. "Is this your wand, Potter?" Harry wouldn't answer, but Ron recognized it.

"Yeah, that's his." Harry kept silent, looking back and forth between the two of them. He was loath to tell them that he had put Ron's wand in his pocket. Then he started to panic; would Ron really do this? He had to get more time, give Ron a chance to reconsider. "I was wondering, Malfoy--how did you and Ron get out of the cells where Snape took you?"

Malfoy shrugged nonchalantly. "My dad was already in the castle, waiting down in the dungeons. He let us out. Simple. And you aren't the only one who knows secret passages out of that place..." He smiled and handed Harry's wand to Ron. Wormtail was still pointing his wand at Ron.

"Now, Weasley. It's up to you. One of them lives, one of them dies. The one who lives, you put the Cruciatus Curse on them. That comes first. Think about it; choose carefully. No matter what you decide, the Dark Lord will be pleased, I think. It's not many Death Eaters get to enter his service so auspiciously. You'll be quite a celebrity among dark wizards. You've always craved celebrity, haven't you? I saw your face all last year, every time Potter was getting his picture taken, or an article about him appeared in the Daily Prophet. Well, it will be your turn to be in the limelight. This is your chance, Weasley. Don't forget--Wormtail and my dad and I have our wands trained on you. So just keep that in mind. Now, make your choice".

Ron stood between Harry and Hermione, only about six feet away, holding Harry's own wand. The two Malfoys stood about the same distance from Ron, each pointing their wand at him, and Wormtail did the same. Ron turned and pointed his wand at Harry, his arm shaking. Then he turned and pointed it at Hermione. Harry saw her pleading with her eyes. Harry wanted to say something but couldn't. What could he say? Should he ask to be the one to die? That would still mean Hermione getting the Cruciatus Curse. The thought made him want to cry, that she should ever experience anything so painful. He didn't want to plead to get the Cruciatus in her stead, because that would mean she would be the one to die. He decided against pleading with Ron not to do this at all; the three of them were pointing their wands at him. They could kill him in a trice, and then the two of them would still be at their mercy--or lack thereof.

Harry swallowed. He couldn't take a deep breath, it seemed. He looked at Ron's face; it was so different now, with the beard and mustache, and the wounds from his fight with Malfoy. And he was so tall. So different from the boy he'd first met on the Hogwarts Express five years ago. Here was a man, not a boy. He held their lives--and his own--in his hand.

Suddenly, Lucius Malfoy, pointing his wand at Ron, cried, "Crucio"!

The curse hit Ron from behind, and he dropped Harry's wand, falling to his knees. As the pain continued, he fell to the ground, his arms out, his legs twitching, his scream echoing through the dark trees beyond the firelit clearing. Harry watched him in horror. This was completely different from watching Malfoy be tortured in his dream, or even experiencing it himself at the hand of Voldemort. This was his best friend, a half-dozen feet away from him, writhing and screaming in agony, while Malfoy's dad continued to send the pain through his body, through his mind.

After what seemed an eternity, Lucius Malfoy raised his wand. Harry turned his head, saw that tears were streaming down Hermione's face. And then, the echoes dying away, he realized that Hermione had also been screaming. Harry watched Ron try to get his breath back, lying on the forest floor, looking up at the night sky. Harry looked up at the sky too; he hadn't noticed when it had become dark. The impersonal stars winked at them, too impossibly far away to really affect human lives, he felt, no matter what Trelawney said. He looked back down at Ron, who was panting, but getting to his feet, with Draco Malfoy's help, holding Harry's wand again.

"Almost forgot that," Lucius Malfoy said casually by way of explanation, as though he were talking about forgetting to leave his house with his coat or gloves. "Now you know, Weasley. Now you've felt it. Now you know that you have to do it. It seeps down into your very bones, doesn't it, the fire, the pain? It's fresh in your mind now. Think of it; think of it and make your decision".

Suddenly, Harry heard it; heard the hissing. Hermione turned her head. She heard it too, but he couldn't tell her what Sandy had said. He looked at the others; the Malfoys and Wormtail were too preoccupied to notice, and Ron was too. Harry swallowed, knowing now what Ron's choice would be. Should I tell her? he wondered. Or would it be better for her not to know...

Ron was leaning heavily on Draco Malfoy still. Sweat beaded on his forehead; he was still reeling from the curse. Harry ached for him, even as he knew now what was coming. Ron, Ron, he thought. If I could spare you from this I would, if I could turn back time and tell you what horrible things would happen to you by you becoming my friend...

Ron was standing on his own again, feet spread wider apart for better support. His face was in shadow, the fire flickering in the middle of the clearing, limning him, a tall menacing figure who seemed to have nothing to do with Harry's best friend. The other three were arrayed behind him once more, their wands pointed at him. Ron looked at Harry, then Hermione. He raised the wand. His hand was no longer shaking, as before. Harry drew in his breath; Sandy was right about Ron's choice. Harry watched the end of the wand, his own wand. It seemed he could look nowhere else. Ron also seemed to be staring at the end of the wand. He opened his mouth, and louder and more terrible than his cries while he himself was being cursed, he uttered the word Harry had never thought to hear from his best friend, the sound echoing through the forest, through the night.

"CRUCIO!"

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Transfiguration

Harry had been watching Ron's mouth, waiting for that second when it started to open, ever so slightly. Sandy had told him what to expect. He'd done this in the Dueling Club, trying to be a step ahead of his opponent. As soon as he saw the slight movement, he began the now-familiar divorce process, separating his mind and body. He seemed to be rising, floating up and away, away from corporeal cares and concerns.

"CRUCIO"!

The cry echoed through the forest, but to Harry, it was growing fainter and fainter, as his ears seemed to be filled with cotton, his nose and mouth filled with cotton, his fingers and every inch of skin, his muscles and every bit of him down to his bones strangely insensate. He found that he was in fact floating above his own body, looking down on Ron and Hermione and the Malfoys and Pettigrew. There was a thread of amber light that connected the wand in Ron's hand to Harry's body. He watched that dynamic thread with fascination, at the way it slowly crackled and jumped. Ron's mouth was still open, he was finishing pronouncing the curse. Everything looked like it was moving oddly sluggishly to Harry, in this floaty universe. He saw that Hermione was looking at him--or, rather, at his body--with her mouth forming an O of horror. Perhaps she was screaming again; he had no way of knowing. Whether her horrified expression was because it was Ron, their friend Ron whom they loved, putting the Cruciatus Curse on him, or whether it was because that meant she was the one he'd chosen to kill, Harry did not know.

Then, also moving with what seemed to be excruciating slowness, Draco Malfoy turned and pointed his wand at his father. As he turned, his hair flew up and stayed momentarily suspended in the air longer than it should have, as though he were moving underwater. Another crackling ray of light was emitted gradually from Malfoy's wand; after what seemed like an interminable wait, it reached his father. Harry saw his mouth moving lethargically.

STU-PI-FY....

Lucius Malfoy dropped his wand, which seemed to float down to the ground like a feather, and then he began to fall with an impossible slowness. Harry saw Pettigrew turn his head with a laconic air that made him seem rather bored. He pointed his wand at Draco Malfoy, and Harry saw that now he was the one moving his mouth to form the dreaded curse.

CRU.... the mouth began. Ron lifted the wand, breaking the connection between it and Harry.

-Cl.... Pettigrew's mouth formed the next sound. Malfoy was still watching his father fall. Ron then pointed his wand at Harry again.

-O.... the mouth finally formed the last sound required to finish the spell. As the amber thread of light arced inch by inch through the air, Harry saw Ron moving his lips again.

Fi--ni--te...

The curse struck Malfoy from behind, as his father had done with Ron. He threw his head back slowly, sinking to the ground as if he were a marionette being carefully lowered to the earth, except that Harry could see the agony on his face, his features evolving from normal to tortured bit by bit, as though Harry were seeing a film, frame by frame, of a man being eviscerated.

In--can--

Draco Malfoy's body hit the ground finally, his mouth open in a silent scream--at least to Harry, who was still altered, still divorced from his body, existing out of time, apart from the world in which these languorous creatures lived.

--ta--tem....

Ron finished and pointed Harry's wand, sending an azure thread of light arcing through the air to where he was still bound. The vines slowly leapt away from him and, seeing this, he willed himself to slide back down into his body. He was jolted by suddenly having his hearing back; the first thing he heard was Hermione's scream, already in progress, and

Draco Malfoy's agonized yelling, forming a macabre duet. Both seemed likely to go on for some time; in fact, it almost immediately began to seem like background noise to him.

Ron was standing very close to him, looking down into his face. "You back?" his best friend asked simply, leaning in so Harry could hear. Harry nodded, blinking, disoriented. Everything seemed to be moving at lightening speed now. In a swift, all-encompassing glance, he saw Lucius Malfoy lying on a carpet of leaves, stunned, and Draco Malfoy writhing in agony on the ground, while Pettigrew kept his wand trained on him.

Then Harry willed it, and it was so; it was his fastest transfiguration yet. It was so fast he had no chance to think of the pain. His paws struck the ground, but only for a split second before he was running to the spot near the fire where Pettigrew stood. He turned, a look of abject terror blossoming on his features as Harry leapt into the air, preparing to knock the man to the ground, breaking the curse that would have reduced Draco Malfoy's brain to pulp if it continued for much longer.

But when Harry landed, all four of his feet were on the ground, not the wizard's body; standing trembling under his stomach was a dung-colored rat with a silver paw, looking up at the apparent lion standing over him for only a moment before giving a strangled-sounding squeak and running toward the trees, all four paws moving too fast to be seen.

After a moment's hesitation, Harry gathered his wits and followed the rat. He had practiced flying, taking several steps along the ground before leaping into the air, but he had never before simply run with four legs. He couldn't have flown in the forest; his wingspan was too great, and if he flew above the trees, he wouldn't be able to see the small rodent. Harry let his animal instincts take him over, his paws moving surely and rhythmically under him, a rolling sensation like flowing water. He felt his hide rippling with his footfalls, felt his mane flying out behind him. The trees were mere blurs. Running on four legs was wonderful he quickly decided, but the thought passed as he strained to keep up with the rat, blending perfectly with the forest floor, except for the silver paw which flashed as he ran, giving Harry a sure way to stay on course.

Harry did not know how far or in what direction they'd been running. The rat could corner faster than him, being much smaller, and he did this often, making up for the fact that his tiny paws would have been quickly outpaced by Harry's stride if they'd only gone in a straight line for long enough. Each time the rat changed direction, Harry did too; it took him long to adjust, though, and he was starting to tire. Harry kept his eyes to the ground about twenty feet in front of him, watching for the flashing silver paw. It took him a while to realize that he was seeing in the dark, that he could see in the dark. He wondered whether he would run into any of the fiercer residents of the forest, but then threw out that idea as unworthy concern; he would be able to vanquish any creature he came across in his griffin form, he was sure.

As he continued to run, he reveled in the feeling of invincibility running through his veins. I can do this, he thought. I can get Pettigrew at last, and clear Sirius' name. The rat changed course again, and ran into a clearing. Harry's eyes adjusted just a split second too late to the brightness in the clearing, from the enormous fire in the middle. He hadn't noticed it; he had been wholly focused on following the rat, who was now running under something brown that looked oddly like the arch of an enormous foot. He was going into a space that was a mere one foot off the ground; Harry would not fit in such a space. He started trying to go around the obstacle, to find where Pettigrew might have to come out on the other side, but suddenly, a great hand swooped out of nowhere, picking Harry up around the middle while he squirmed and writhed in its grip.

"Ere now," said a booming voice above him. "What 'ave we 'ere? A lion? What the 'ell"?

But Harry didn't have any time to waste; Pettigrew was getting away, might already be impossible to find in the legion of trees. Harry opened his mouth in a protesting roar, then brought his sharp teeth down on the giant's hand, between thumb and forefinger, which is soft, sensitive skin even on a giant. The giant roared in pain and flung him off. Harry flew across the clearing, striking a large tree hard, his head and side aching acutely as he slid to the ground and promptly changed back to a human, teenage boy with black hair and green eyes. He looked up at the amazed behemoth for a moment before the darkness overcame him.

* * * * *

He was aware first of the voices. It would be impossible not to notice them; even a person who had lost his hearing or had never had it would feel the rumbling vibrations coming up through the ground, through his bones. The sound was hurting his head; he was starting to wish he was deaf, or maybe he was wishing he were dead, dead rather than a failure, rather than having let Peter Pettigrew get away again...

He slowly opened his eyes, seeing a crowd of stars in a sapphire sky. He tilted his head to his left and saw an enormous fire with a makeshift spit constructed of a long branch resting on two Y-shaped saplings half again as tall as he was. A large animal was roasting on the spit, fat dripping into the flames, but Harry couldn't make out what it was without the head and hide. His first thought was to be disgusted, but his second was that the roasting meat smelled heavenly, and felt his stomach move within him in primal, feral need.

He turned his head to his right and saw a familiar face. When she saw that he was awake, her face was wreathed in smiles and she put a tentative finger on his cheek. It was the size of his leg. "There yeh are, Harry. I was startin' ter worry"...

"Fridwulfa!" called another one of the giants. He strode into the firelight and squatted down next to Harry. "What the 'ell yeh think yer doin'? Yeh should have left'im somewhere far away from the camp! Humans aren't supposed ter know we 'ere!" The voice was like an explosion, or a mountain being hurled at another mountain. Harry held his head in pain at the noise of it.

"Sssssh!" Hagrid's mother cautioned him. He realized now that she had been speaking (for her) in a whisper, so as not to deafen him. Harry tried to get up, but the best he could do was to prop himself on his elbows so he could look around the camp properly. There was a sharp pain in his ribs on his right side when he did this. He assumed that was from striking the tree when he was thrown; probably more than one broken rib. He gritted his teeth and looked around the clearing.

This was a much larger space than the place where he'd been tied up with Ron and Hermione. He'd been unable to judge its size from the air. The fire alone was the half the size of Hagrid's cottage. He wondered whether it was a magical fire requiring no fuel, or whether, after they'd let it burn long enough, there would actually be any forest left for them to hide

The giant who had come over to Hagrid's mother seemed bigger than she was, maybe half a head taller. He was ruddy with long, unruly dark brown hair, one continuous eyebrow above his bulbous, warty nose, and glittering dark eyes. The rest of his face was hidden behind a tangle of beard and mustache that could have hidden a large community of vermin and perhaps it did. Harry had to make a great effort not to wrinkle his nose at the giant's smell. He tried to tell himself there couldn't very well be many places where someone so large could bathe, but on the other hand, Hagrid's mum wasn't reeking like that...

"Well," she said to him in an indignant whisper, "ef you'd keep yer voice down, it would be a good start! Pro'bly heard y clear over in Hogsmeade! He's one o' Rubeus' friends, and he needs help." She drew herself up to her full height, glaring at him, and Harry sincerely hoped they would both watch where they put their feet, so they wouldn't crush him. He didn't feel able to stand yet. He was aching all over, but he didn't think it was from being a golden griffin so much as being hurled against a tree by a giant--the same giant standing before him now.

"All right, all right," Fridwulfa's companion grumbled more quietly than before; now he was merely the volume of a thunderstorm. He had a large, dirty piece of cloth wrapped around his hand, bright blood showing through it. He waved the hand at Harry.

"Can yeh tell me what the 'ell 'appened to the damn lion what bit me 'and? I looked where I thought 'e should be, and there you were, 'alf dead, and not the good 'alf." He squinted at Harry for a second and then said, as an afterthought. "Name's Orst".

Harry nodded at him. "Harry," he said weakly.

"What"?

"I said, 'Harry!'" Harry shouted, then started coughing from the effort. Fridwulfa moved to pat him on the back, but he waved her away; it was bad enough having Hagrid do that, let alone his mum. It felt like his ribs were pushing directly into his right lung. So she pushed toward him what looked to Harry like a tub of water-- Harry supposed it was supposed to be a drinking cup of some sort for the giants--and, wincing, he pulled himself to a standing position so he could lean over it and scoop his hands into the water. He brought his hands to his mouth, handful after handful. He hadn't realized how parched he was.

While he drank, Fridwulfa was lecturing Orst again, in her giant-whisper. "Yeh got ter be still ter hear humans, ye great blockhead! There's no call ter make'em shout. I din' have no trouble hearin'im, I din'."

Orst sat down by the fire, making the earth shake as he folded his legs economically underneath him. When he was settled, Harry felt like he could take a breath again. He looked up at Fridwulfa, still leaning on the edge of the cup of w

“How long have I been here?” he wanted to know.

Fridwulfa looked up at the stars. “Night’s about ‘alf-spent, I’d say. You were in a bad way”.

He pointed up at Orst’s hand with the bloody cloth. “You want me to fix that?” He was feeling somewhat responsible. Orst looked at him suspiciously.

“You a doctor or som’ting”?

“No. A wizard. I go to the school”.

Orst looked like he was considering this, and finally he unwrapped his hand and put it down on the ground near Harry. Harry took Ron’s wand out of his robes and pointed it at the bite marks he’d left on the giant’s hand. Madam Pomfrey had made sure that everyone who sat with Neville was proficient in medical binding charms, to prevent him bleeding too much if he hurt himself. After putting the charm on the giant’s hand, he told Orst, “It won’t bleed any more. But you’ll still have to keep it clean while it heals”.

“Thanks,” he grumbled at Harry. Harry thought that had something to do with the ‘keep it clean,’ advice. He looked like cleanliness were not exactly on speaking terms. Harry reached up to run his hand through his hair, his usual nervous habit, but when he did, he felt above his right ear a bump that made him wince.

“I might have concussion, I suppose,” he said to Fridwulfa. “And I think I have some broken ribs. I should go to the hospital wing”...

“Now, don’ you worry. I can bind up yer ribs. Ye’ll be back at the school in the mornin’. I’ll take ye to Rubeus, and he’ll take care o’ ye. Righ’ now ye need rest.” She produced a strip of ecru cloth, and after struggling with the tiny buttons on Harry’s robes, he took them off himself and pulled his shirt over his head. There was a purpling bruise on his lower right chest. Hagrid’s mother wrapped the cloth several times around his ribcage and pulled it tight; Harry gasped at first, so she loosened it slightly. When it was tight but he could still draw breath (albeit painfully), he replaced his shirt and put his robes back on as well. Despite the proximity of the huge fire, Harry felt a chill.

He looked up at Fridwulfa’s face, so like Hagrid’s. It was a comforting face, oddly motherly. Harry couldn’t put his finger on it. He thought of how comfortable it was to be around Ron’s mother, when she was bustling around the kitchen or sitting by the fireside reading the Daily Prophet aloud to her husband, or even lecturing the twins or sighing over Bill’s hair. Other people’s mothers, he thought. I’m always latching onto them...

The aroma of the roasting meat crept into his nostrils again and he breathed it in with a sigh. She picked up on it immediately. “Hungry?” she asked softly. He looked at the spit and nodded. “That there won’ be done fer a while. This’ll do all righ’, though.” She picked a bit of meat off of a carcass that was sitting on a sheet-sized napkin next to her, holding it out to Harry. He sat down again and reached up to take it from her. The morsel was the size of a small roast chicken to him, but it smelled savory and warm, and he held it firmly in both hands, ignoring how hot it was. He was too hungry to care.

Then he remembered, and lowered the meat, swallowing painfully. He tried to make sense of everything that had happened. Malfoy had said that Ginny was acting, that he wasn’t really assaulting her, and he’d made Ron choose one of them to torture, and one to kill. But Sandy had told him that he was the one Ron was going to torture, and he’d been ready, he’d left his body behind and watched the odd, slow-motion scene play out before him, of Malfoy turning and stunning his dad as soon as Ron had cursed him, and then Wormtail coming around and cursing Draco Malfoy, while Fred had stopped cursing him and released him from his bonds. He remembered chasing Wormtail through the woods, watching him run underneath Orst’s foot, then being picked up by Orst, and then after biting him, being flung against a tree...

He brought the meat up to his mouth again; after blowing on it, he took another bite. It was gamy, vaguely liver-flavored. Maybe it was something’s liver. He stopped thinking about that, chewing thoughtfully. Malfoy did it, he realized. He had gotten his dad. He had succeeded. While he, Harry, sat bruised and possibly concussed in the giants’ camp, knowing that Wormtail was on his way back to Voldemort to tell him Harry Potter was an Animagus...

Harry Potter is an Animagus.

He'd never thought those words before. Not like that. It was odd. He still didn't think, I am an Animagus. And yet, when he saw Wormtail torturing Malfoy, his first instinct was to change to his Animagus form and chase him, predator and prey, through the primeval forest. And now Voldemort would know. He looked up at Orst, wanting to curse him, but instead he felt his eyes fill with tears; he couldn't have known. He just knew he saw a lion, of all things, come out of nowhere. He probably hadn't even seen the rat with the silver paw; a rat would be beneath a giant's notice, not even food. Orst probably cleaned things bigger than rats out of his teeth. If he ever cleaned anything out of his teeth. Harry winced and looked away from the giant.

He took another bite of meat, looking around the camp as he chewed. Three other giants had come to sit on the other side of the fire. One was whittling a large tree trunk into a tapered shape for some unknown purpose; another was turning the spit patiently, silently. They were both men. Another giantess was sitting with her cheek on her hands, staring at the fire listlessly. They don't seem especially happy here, Harry thought. He wondered where the others were, but looking down at the meat in his hands and at the carcass roasting on the spit, he figured they were probably out hunting. This must eat quite a load, he thought.

He only ate about half of what Fridwulfa had given him, and then he leaned over the cup of water and scooped some more into his mouth. He took a final handful of water, and after he took off his glasses, he splashed it over his face, then used his robes to dry off and replaced his glasses. He looked up at Hagrid's mother.

"Where shall I sleep?"

"C'mere me lad," she said in a comfortingly rumbling voice. She led him to an animal fur she'd laid out on the ground; it was grey with white streaks at the edges, and silky soft. When he'd lain down, she placed another hide with the same color on top of him, fur side down, so that he was sandwiched in softness. He pillowed his head on his arm, trying not to think about Wormtail getting away, or Ron knowing about him and Hermione. He closed his eyes, thinking of mothers, remembering his own mother in the Pensieve, tucking him into his cot and singing him a Welsh lullaby. The warmth of the fire and the furs lulled him into a deep sleep, where his mother was waiting for him...

* * * * *

Harry awoke to raucous birdsong. He opened his eyes and looked up, seeing a white, cloud-covered sky above the canopy of trees. He pushed the top fur aside, then sat up, pulling his knees up to his chin, wrapping his arms around his legs. His ribs didn't hurt as much this morning. The fire still burned; now something else was roasting on a spit. It looked like a series of hares skewered like shish kebab, making gamy smells waft through the camp. They must constantly have something cooking, he thought. The only giant he could see was Fridwulfa, a huge mound about ten feet from him, flat on her back and breathing deeply. Perhaps the other giants slept under the trees, deeper in the forest.

He gazed around the clearing, at how everything looked so different in the daylight. He realized that the only other time he'd slept outdoors was when he'd been with the golden griffin. The Dursleys had never taken him and Dudley camping; they'd never even taken Dudley camping, leaving Harry with Mrs. Figg. Aunt Petunia believed firmly that humans became human when they invented central heating and indoor plumbing and refrigerators and microwaves and coffeemakers and hairdryers, and if there was someplace in the world where those things didn't exist, it was a backwater and a hellhole and she wanted nothing to do with it. She thought Luddites were hopelessly backwards and right up there with the flat-earth lunatics and the psychotics who thought the American government had faked the moon walks. Voluntarily sleeping outdoors, on the ground, cooking over a fire food that had just been killed (meat came from the butcher) and bathing in a stream was simply beyond the pale.

Bathing in a stream...suddenly, Harry felt like that would be wonderful, but he didn't even know where there might be a stream nearby. Perhaps he should wait until he returned to the castle and take a shower. And he'd have to see Madam Pomfrey, to get his ribs healed first. He checked his watch; it was only six o'clock. He rose slowly and went to Hagrid's mother, wondering what was the best way to wake a giant.

He stood next to her ear, trying to decide what to say, when Orst came into the clearing, a brace of deer hanging from his hand. He flung the game down and pulled out a knife, presumably to begin skinning the carcasses.

"Orst!" Harry called, hoping for some help. The giant turned, looking around behind him, as though he suspected the truth had learned to talk. "Over here, Orst!" he called more loudly. The giant looked in the right direction now and nodded at him.

“Ah! Harry. Sleep well”?

Harry nodded. “Not too bad. But I really need to get back to my school. Can you wake Fridwulfa for me”?

He nodded and strode across the clearing, the ground shaking beneath Harry’s feet. He shook Hagrid’s mother, muttering, “Get up, ye lazy”...

She started to stir, mumbling incoherently. Harry backed up as she put her hands out to support herself, pushing herself up. When she had rubbed her eyes and managed to open them, she saw Harry and smiled.

“Well! Good mornin’ then. Sleep well”?

He nodded. “The furs were very soft. I should probably get back to the castle, though. I hoped you could help me”.

“O’ course, dear lad. Be happy to.” She rose to her full height and bent over, asking demurely, “Could I pick ye up”?

He nodded, and he sat on her finger, again straddling it like a broomstick. He looked at the giants’ camp; it seemed forlorn, a sad place to live. And they were here most of the winter, he remembered. On the other hand, perhaps it was improvement over the mountains of Ukraine and Georgia. He watched the camp disappear through the trees; Fridwulfa kept her right hand with Harry on it against her stomach, and pushed the trees aside with her left hand. It seemed that they traveled through the forest for a very long time when Harry could finally see the Hagrid’s hut through the trees.

She set him down carefully. “There ye go, Harry. I can’ go no closer. Got to stay in the forest. Tell Rubeus I’ll see ‘im later”.

He smiled up at her. “I will. Thank you for everything”.

“Any time,” she said firmly. She started to turn away, then stopped and faced him again. “Harry? Can I ask ye a question?”

“What is it”?

“Well, when Orst asked ye about the lion, ye never answered. And not too long ago, I was tellin’ Rubeus that I’d seen a golden griffin flyin’ around above the trees, and that looks like a lion with wings. And then righ’ after that lion turns up and bites Orst, ye’re lyin’ there, dead to the world with a nasty bump, as though it was you ‘e threw against the tree, not a lion”.

Harry looked up at her guiltily. He knew her secret. It would only be fair if she knew his. Plus, she was dropping great hints that she already suspected or knew anyway. He smiled sheepishly. “That was me. Both times. The griffin you saw flyin’ and the lion that bit Orst. I’m a golden griffin Animagus, but when I don’t have my wings spread they blend in with my camouflage and I look like a lion. But no one’s supposed to know. You can’t tell the other giants, even Orst”.

She nodded and smiled. “I won’t. Don’ worry, me lad. Per’aps I’ll see ye soon.” With another fond look and a smile, she turned and pushed the trees out of the way again, disappearing back into the forest. Harry turned toward Hagrid’s cabin and soon had reached the edge of the trees. He went to Hagrid’s back door, knocking lightly. He checked his watch; it was seven now. It had taken almost an hour for Fridwulfa to get him here, and that was with the huge paces she could take. The giants’ camp must be very, very deep in the forest, he thought. He had no way of judging this when he was in the air; flying gave him a completely different perspective on distances.

He heard Hagrid moving around in his house, then heard the front door opening. Hagrid had gone to the wrong door. He knocked again on the back door. More shuffling. He opened the right door this time, a shocked expression appearing on his face.

“Harry! What’re yeh doing here? Are yeh all right”?

Harry nodded, staggering into the room, then sitting down heavily in a chair. “Need to go to the hospital wing. Is everyone else all right”?

Hagrid harumphed. “I don’ know ever’thin’ that’s goin’ on, but it’s mighty queer. Dumbledore can tell yeh more than I can. He an’ Moody got back late las’ night”.

Harry nodded. "I'll see him soon, I'm sure. Can you--can you help me get to the hospital wing"?

Hagrid practically carried him to Madam Pomfrey, who clucked her tongue over the bump above his right ear, wanting to know how he'd gotten it.

"Um, I'd rather not say. I need to see the headmaster. And I think I broke some ribs".

Now she harumphed. "He's finally back from London, and not before time"...

Harry furrowed his brow. She was being odd. Then he remembered that just the previous afternoon, he had carried Ginny into the infirmary, apparently in shock from being assaulted by Malfoy. Was Ginny really in on it all? "It" was clearly not the recruitment of Harry, not after what he'd seen in the forest. "It" was getting Lucius Malfoy put away. Harry laid back on the bed, wondering what the full story was.

Then he noticed that there were curtains pulled around three other beds in the infirmary. After Madam Pomfrey had put a healing salve on his ribs and a clean bandage (he also had refused to tell her where he'd gotten the soiled-looking rough cloth that had been binding his ribs), she left the room. He went to the first bed, pulling the curtain open slightly. Ron was there, resting on his back, snoring away in a white hospital smock, his feet hanging over the end of the bed. He looked peaceful and healthy and safe and Harry closed the curtain again, thankful that he seemed to be all right after Malfoy's dad put the Cruciatus Curse on him. He went to the next bed and opened that curtain a small amount. Hermione was curled up on her side; her eyes opened as soon as he parted the curtains, and a smile spread across her face. He sat on the edge of her bed, looking down at her, wondering what they would do next, how to go on after the revelations of the night before. She was under the influence of that potion for six months.

She pulled herself to a sitting position, yawning and stretching, her hospital smock moving in various interesting directions as she did this, making Harry catch his breath. She saw his eyes and smiled at him, putting her arms around him, her head on his bare shoulder. He tentatively put his arms around her, kissed the top of her head. They would have to take one step at a time, he decided.

Then he heard the curtain to the bed next to Hermione's being opened, and there was the face of Draco Malfoy above another hospital smock, looking at them embracing, a strange sort of hunger behind his eyes. He shook himself, as if forcing himself to think about something else, and said by way of greeting, "So, Potter. Decided to join us in hospital. A lion done running around the forest as a lion, I see. Damn! Trust you to do something like become an illegal Animagus. You get away with everything".

"I'm not illegal. And I'm not a lion".

"What? You're sure as hell not registered. And I think I know a lion when I see one".

"I have permission from the Ministry to wait until after I graduate to register. McGonagall trained me, starting last fall. A lion can't fly".

"Fly? What do you mean, fly"?

"I'm a golden griffin Animagus".

He opened his mouth and closed it again, shaking his head. "Unbelievable..." he muttered.

"And," Harry continued, "You're not to tell anyone about it. I was only trying to get Wormtail".

Hermione pulled back from him and looked at his face. "Did you"?

He shook his head sadly. "No. He went into the gi--" He looked at Malfoy. "Tell you later".

Malfoy looked at Harry, then Hermione. "What? Oh, come on, you can trust me." They looked at him skeptically. "You couldn't. Didn't I get my dad? Didn't I say I would"?

Harry swallowed. "You didn't say how you were going to do it. Is--is Ginny all right?" He was almost afraid to ask, holding Hermione in his arms. She nodded.

"Yes. Turns out it was an act. And after she determined that the four of us had gone to the forest, she asked Madam Pomfrey to get Snape to come here to the infirmary, and she explained to him what the plan was, and apologized for her part in it, since--well, when that happens for real, girls that are really in trouble that way need for people to take them seriously. But she said it was her idea; she knew that Ron would go crazy, and it would feed into the plan. Snape and McGonagall flew to the forest on broomsticks, and they took enough extras for us to ride back. Snape brought Malfoy's dad back. We had to fly way up above the trees...I think I liked the--other--flying better".

"So Ginny's not here"?

"She's back up in Gryffindor Tower. The Weasleys have stayed over. Oh, and we've all been given the day off from classes, if we like. I'm going though; please say you are too? I'm so glad you're back. I was terribly worried"...

She pulled his face down to hers and Harry clutched her to him, ignoring a twinge in his ribs, drinking her in. After a few moments, he opened his eyes and saw that Draco Malfoy was watching them with a smirk on his face.

"Um, do you mind, Malfoy"?

"Yeah, I mind. I mind that you think you can watch me and Ginny snogging, but I can't watch you two"...

"Malfoy, you said some--some bloody awful things last night. In fact, even if you were only acting like a total sodding bastard, you were doing a far-too-good job. I'm not really feeling like being charitable toward you just now".

"I said those things to Granger. It was part of my performance. And I apologized last night, after we got back, didn't I, Granger? Except for one thing--sorry I made you spew, Granger".

"Well," Hermione said sweetly, "You can't do much about your face".

"Ha ha," was Malfoy's rejoinder.

"So," Harry said, trying to forget the things Malfoy had said, since it seemed Hermione had gotten past it. "It really worked? Your dad's going to Azkaban"?

"He's still stunned, down in the dungeons. Ministry officials are coming later to get him. He'll be charged with multiple counts of trying to recruit people to be dark wizards, conspiracy to commit murder for ordering the hits on recruits' families, and putting the Cruciatus Curse on Weasley".

A sound behind him made Harry jump. It was Ron, coming around the bed. He stood there awkwardly, his hand on the mattress, looking at Harry and Hermione. His hospital smock was rather short, showing his pale, freckly, knobby knees. Harry pulled back from Hermione, sitting on the edge of the bed. He wanted to stand up and give his best friend a great hug, to show how glad he was that Ron was all right, but he looked in Ron's eyes and saw the hurt and betrayal there, and knew that it wasn't time yet. He was also suddenly self-conscious about having nothing on from the waist up, just his basilisk amulet, the bandages around his ribs, and, on his left arm, Sandy.

"Do you know how hard it is to sleep with you lot sitting over here yammering"?

Malfoy laughed. "I didn't think anything could wake you. Ginny says you sleep straight through all the noise that ghouls make at your house".

Ron scowled. "I'm not sure I believe you about her"...

"I swear I have never done anything more than kiss her," Malfoy said, looking sideways at Harry. Well, Harry thought, remembering Malfoy's wandering hands on Ginny's birthday; it wasn't for lack of trying. "Do you want to see if a unicorn will go up to her? Do you?"

"All right, all right. Fine. You were just trying to get me wound up yesterday, I get that. What if I'd decided to kill you? Where would you be then"?

"Well, then I'd probably be at the ministry explaining why I'd killed you in self-defense," he drawled, clearly not lacking in self-confidence after the previous day's events. Ron swayed slightly, and Malfoy got up and pulled him over to sit on his bed. "Stupid git! Sit down! Having the Cruciatus Curse put on you is no laughing matter. You don't see me poncing around

the room, and I've gone through it before." Harry tried not to smile; Malfoy's similarity to Snape was uncanny. Harry remembered Snape telling him to sit when he had come to his office after throwing off the pain of the Hara Kiri. That's what chairs are for, Potter.

The four of them sat in silence now, looking tentatively back and forth at each other. It reminded Harry strangely of the previous evening in the forest, Malfoy and Ron on one side, he and Hermione on the other. Suddenly Malfoy broke the silence. He looked at Harry, then Ron, shaking his head.

"I just cannot believe that the two of you have sex lives and I don't".

Ron smiled at him and suggested, "You could get a new girlfriend"...

Malfoy gave him a challenging look. "I could. I could, for instance, take your girlfriend...or Potter's"...

At that Hermione burst out laughing and fell back on the bed; she started to pound the mattress, helpless in the grip of laughter. Her hospital smock had ridden up a little when she did this. Malfoy tilted his head to one side.

"When you do that, Granger, I can see your knickers"...

"Shut up!" Harry and Ron said simultaneously, while Hermione abruptly stopped laughing and sat up, pulling her Hogwarts robes off the chair beside her bed and draping them over her lap. So much for Malfoy only acting like a sodding bastard, Harry thought. While she was clearing her throat and starting to return to a peach colour from her previous deep red, something else occurred to Harry.

"Ron--what exactly did Malfoy say to you, before you were untied? How did he convince you to go along with his plan, like that?"

Ron grimaced and looked at Malfoy for a moment, then back at Harry and Hermione. "He told me that he'd never--slept with Ginny, he was only trying to get his dad put away--I don't even remember it all now"--

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "I can tell you exactly what I said. I had to practice it enough ahead of time, and that was after writing something like ten drafts of it. I needed to make sure I communicated all of the necessary details as quickly as possible. My exact words were, 'Put the Cruciatus Curse on Potter. He can take it, he won't feel any pain. When you do will stun my dad and Wormtail. Take the curse off Potter and untie him and Granger. I never touched your sister; she's helping me put my dad in Azkaban'".

Hermione snorted. "That took ten drafts"?

"Hey, I got my point across".

She looked at Ron. "So those things you said--" she said softly.

Ron looked uncomfortable. "Just trying to make it look good. Didn't want Malfoy's dad to suspect anything." But Harry remembered the way he'd spoken to her, the edge to his voice. There was a grain of truth to it. Those things didn't just come out of Ron's head at that moment; they'd been festering.

"But," Hermione said, looking perplexed. "You didn't stun Wormtail".

Malfoy grimaced. "Don't remind me. He was too damn fast for me. But what I want to know, Potter, is why can you do that pain-blocking stuff, and I can't? And it looked like Weasley couldn't, either".

Harry didn't answer the question. He still hadn't gotten an answer about that himself, from Snape, and he also hadn't dared to ask Dumbledore. But it didn't matter, because Ron was speaking instead. "I could do it a little in Moody's class," Ron told him. "But that was just the Passus Curse. And thanks for telling me your dad was going to do that. I really appreciate it".

"No need to get sarcastic, Weasley. I wasn't any better off than you. And I was hoping that you'd start the curse on Potter before that. You took so damn long"...

"Listen, just because you don't think twice about putting your dad in Azkaban, doesn't mean I don't think twice about putting a curse like that on my best friend, no matter how likely it is that he can take it!"

Malfoy looked at Ron in silent fury, and Harry wasn't completely certain that they weren't going to start rolling around on the floor again throwing punches. "That was the hardest thing I've ever had to do," he said softly to Ron. "If you think I did that without any thought..." He shook his head. "I don't have to justify myself to you. If you want to know why I planned this, why I wanted to do it for years, just ask your sister. Now get off my damn bed".

"Malfoy..." Hermione started. She clearly was over being ogled by him. "You know what the real reason is. Why you did this now, why you finally did what you'd only been thinking about for years"...

Malfoy looked at her; Harry was startled by the exposed expression on his face, how totally without artifice he was suddenly. He finally looked away from her, staring at his hands. "Ginny," he said simply. Ron looked at him for a second then away.

"Did someone say my name?" Ginny came around Hermione's bed, smiling at Malfoy and Ron. "Look at the two of you! Sitting next to each other! Not fighting!" She sat down between them, and took their hands in hers. She looked back and forth between the two of them. "Well? Are you actually trying to get along"?

Ron and Malfoy glanced at each other behind her head. She turned and looked at Ron, while Malfoy stuck his tongue out at Ron and made a rude face. Ginny turned to look at Malfoy and he instantly converted his features into a beatific smile while Ron returned Malfoy's rudeness with the middle finger of his left hand, out of Ginny's range of vision.

Harry tried to stifle a laugh, and suddenly Ginny jerked her head up, dropping Malfoy's and Ron's hands. "Harry!" she cried in surprise, standing. "You're back!" She pulled on his hand, and then he was standing and embracing her, his arms across her back, his face in her hair, so glad not to be comforting her after being attacked, to learn that she was never in danger, that she wouldn't be traumatized. He felt her fingers pressed against the bare skin of his back, above the bandages, and ignored the pain in his ribs as unimportant. Then he lifted his head and saw Malfoy and Ron looking at him; Malfoy's face looked stormy and Ron's slightly disgruntled and intrigued all at once. Harry released her and stepped back, sitting back down next to Hermione. He glanced at her for a moment; she was frowning, but she reached for his hand and laced her fingers through his, the frown fading from her face as she leaned her head on his shoulder again.

Ginny was just smiling happily still, and sat down between Ron and Malfoy again. Harry remembered the murderous thoughts he'd had while tied to the tree in the clearing, before Malfoy's plan had become clear. He remembered Malfoy talking about his seducing her, and her seducing him. He had believed it; now he wondered how he could have done that. He looked at her, recalling that Professor Sprout had said that she was a good girl, she wouldn't be needing any potion made from spleenwort. She looked as fresh-faced as ever, and he now also remembered her telling Malfoy that she wasn't on some schedule, "Like a bloody train". She saw him looking at her and smiled back, a simple, friendly smile. Everything something was missing; he realized that she used to smile at him more tentatively, with a wistful hopefulness behind her eyes. Now that she had Malfoy, he realized, that was gone. Instead, when she smiled at Draco Malfoy, there was a serene happiness that made her glow as if lit from within; he returned her smile with a clear hunger in his gaze, a wistfulness of its own kind, but also a clear affection. For the first time, seeing that, Harry decided that he probably meant it when he said that he would never hurt Ginny. He was also clearly not interested in changing girlfriends.

"So," she said to Harry, still smiling sunnily. "Draco told me--you turned into a lion and went after Wormtail! Did you catch him"?

So Harry had to explain again that he was a golden griffin Animagus and that he hadn't caught Wormtail, although once again, he didn't mention the giants. The four of them were suddenly full of questions about the difficulty of Animagus training, and didn't hear the door to the infirmary opening and closing, nor the footsteps approaching them.

"Ahem!" came a familiar voice. It sounded remarkably like Aberforth, but Harry wasn't at all surprised to look up and find that it was the headmaster. They stopped talking suddenly, in the middles of sentences. Dumbledore looked at them strangely seriously.

"Harry! I didn't know you had returned. We were all very worried. You spent the night in the forest"?

"Yes, sir. I--I'll tell you about that later, if you don't mind".

"Yes, yes. I'm sure that will be interesting. But at the moment, you might want to get your robes"...

Harry leapt to his feet, crossing the infirmary quickly. Dumbledore waiting for him to button his robes and sit next to Hermione again.

"I have some news for our two suspended students," he said sternly. Malfoy and Ron jerked their heads up, looking alarmed. "Thought I'd forgotten about that, did you?" Then a slow smile spread across his face. "The news is that you aren't suspended. Last night you were all very informative about your various parts in the scheme to apprehend Lucius Malfoy. But you did all break a number of school rules along the way, and I'm afraid points will have to be deducted from your houses as a result"...

Their faces fell; Harry in particular thought how unfair it was that four of them were from Gryffindor. Their house would suffer the most. He thought of first year, when he and Hermione had been responsible for losing Gryffindor quite a lot of points when they were caught leaving the Astronomy tower after helping smuggle Norbert to safety. He wondered what kind of reception they would get in Gryffindor Tower when the news of their losing points for the house spread.

"First: Draco Malfoy. Seventy-five points from Slytherin for charming the doorway to the Charms classroom. Pranks are one thing; Professor Snape felt that leaving us without a Charms instructor for forty days, and leaving Ravenclaw without a head-of-house and a Seeker for their Quidditch team all because you did not do proper research may even be grounds for making you wait until next year to take your Charms O.W.L.s. However, Professor Flitwick talked Professor Snape out of that and insists he wants to let you sit for your tests this year, so consider yourself lucky. Another seventy-five points from Slytherin for staging that appalling little drama in the Potions dungeon. I never want to hear of such a charade again."

His eyes bore into Malfoy who swallowed and looked properly admonished, nodding and saying softly, "Yes, sir".

Now he turned to Ginny. "Virginia Weasley: Fifty points from Gryffindor for your part in the Potions dungeon play. I believe Professor McGonagall already gave you quite an earful about that last night, so I will say no more at this time. Suffice to say I am very disappointed in you." Ginny drew her lips into a line and nodded. Harry wondered what McGonagall had said; she could really go off when something touched a nerve with her, as this obviously had. She'd been quite upset when she thought Malfoy had attacked Ginny. He didn't imagine she would appreciate discovering how her emotions had been manipulated.

"Ronald Weasley." He looked up at the headmaster with that strangely mature expression Harry was still getting used to. Madam Pomfrey had healed all of his wounds, but he had some bruises on his cheekbones and jaw that wouldn't fade immediately. "Fifty points from Gryffindor for that fight in the Potions Dungeon. I understand you truly thought your sister in danger, but there were better ways to handle it. Suspension is the usual course of action in cases like this, but considering the other events of yesterday and the reason for you being provoked into the fight, I think I will leave the penalty at fifty points".

Ron nodded grimly at him. "Thank you, sir".

"Hermione Granger and Harry Potter!" Harry jerked his head up in surprise. Had he heard about their relationship? Were they going to be removed from the ranks of the prefects? "Twenty-five points each from Gryffindor for flying off to the Forbidden Forest--does no one remember the name of that place?--without telling anyone why or asking for help. What were you thinking?" But he didn't pause for an answer. He suddenly stopped looking grim and smiled as though he had just deducted one-hundred and fifty points from each of their houses. Harry grimaced; when they got back to Gryffindor Tower, their names were going to be mud. And Malfoy would have to contend with the Slytherins alone. He didn't envy him--for many reasons.

Harry looked at Dumbledore now, confused by how cheerful he looked. He clapped his hands together and looked round at them all. "There. We've got the unpleasantness out of the way. Now for the good." He looked at Malfoy again. "Draco Malfoy. For concocting a truly Slytherin-like plan to put a Death Eater away who also happens to be your own father, three-hundred points for your house." Malfoy got a very cocky grin on his face and looked at Harry very smugly. Harry looked away.

"Virginia Weasley, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger: Fifty points each for Gryffindor for helping to bag Lucius Malfoy. And Harry Potter: One-hundred fifty points for Gryffindor for the excellent job overcoming, er, painful curses, the fine job you've done in your work to become an Animagus--which no one here will discuss with anyone, or I start throwing memory charms around--and," he paused and looked at Ginny again, "For helping Ginny when you thought she was in great need, rather than fighting".

He smiled at them all. "And finally, I decided that you all needed to have another bit of recognition to strengthen you in times to come, so I just came up with this last night, and I hope you like it. I'm very fond of it myself, but--well, here it is."

He held up a small gold-colored brooch with the letters OP in the middle, flanked by wings with red enamel over the gold metal, and what seemed to be flames coming up from the letters, also with enamel, but rather than being a single color the flames actually looked like flames, moving and changing every second, white and yellow and red and orange and sometimes even a little purplish-blue. They all stared dumbly at the headmaster, unsure what to make of this. He sighed and held it out to Ron, then took others out of his pockets and distributed them round to the rest of them.

"It's the Order of the Phoenix. Now, I know it's not the Order of Merlin, but I really couldn't nominate the five of you for that--you broke too many rules along the way." His eyes twinkled at them. "So I made up my own Order of the Phoenix to recognize the work of people who have dedicated themselves to bringing dark wizards to justice. I know that to young people, an award like this is a piddling thing. It's not hundreds of galleons or a chance to meet your favorite Quidditch player, I'll grant you that. But it's my way of saying thank you, that I think we're fighting on the same side and that I trust you to do the right thing. Oh, and I'm also having some house elves work on some lovely parchments that can be framed and hung on the wall. Paid house elves", he said pointedly, looking at Hermione.

He smiled round at them all, even Malfoy, Harry noticed, who actually seemed to have some colour in his face after Dumbledore's speech.

"You are the first members of the Order of the Phoenix. I am very proud of you all. I know that this has been difficult for you, but there is one more difficult thing that you must do soon." He looked at each of them in turn. "There will be a trial at the Ministry of Magic. You will probably be called to be witnesses. I will accompany you to the Ministry myself for the trial. I will try to get the procedure streamlined down to one day, to avoid you missing a great deal of school, since four of you have the O.W.L.s coming up. You may not all have to testify, but I'm certain that you will, Draco. That will be difficult, testifying against your own father in court." He looked sympathetically toward Malfoy, who already looked uncomfortable. Perhaps, thought Harry, he hadn't thought about this part. Testifying against your father. He tried to imagine it, and couldn't.

"And you will also likely testify, Ron, since you were on the receiving end of the Cruciatus Curse that is going to be the basis for his life-sentence." Ron swallowed, looking down at his OP. Dumbledore slapped his hands together. "Well! I must be going; the ministry is sending someone to collect Mr. Malfoy from the dungeons. Go enjoy your breakfast!" he said cheerily, as though he hadn't just been discussing Malfoy's dad going on trial and unforgivable curses. After the door to the infirmary closed, Harry noticed that Ron had a dreadful panicked look on his face.

"Are you okay, Ron?"

He shook his head, looking worse by the second. "Harry; I put the Cruciatus Curse on you. And Dumbledore knows about it too; we told him last night. If they ask him or any of us about that--I'll be spending the rest of my life in Azkaban." His voice had dwindled to a whisper at the end. He swallowed and looked terrified and alone, suddenly separate from the rest of them, who had plenty to worry about, but going to Azkaban wasn't one of those worries.

Suddenly Malfoy pushed at Ron with his left hand, wrapping it around Ginny's shoulder afterward. "Hey, Weasley. Are you sure you put the Cruciatus on Potter? I mean, I personally don't think you could. You probably couldn't give a hemophiliac a nosebleed. Did you feel any pain, Potter? When Weasley tried to curse you?"

Harry furrowed his brow, wondering what Malfoy was on about; then he caught on and smiled. "Pain? No pain at all. Not a bit. You say you put the Cruciatus Curse on me?" He smiled at Ron, who then started smiling too. "I mean," he went on, "I think I'd know if someone put the Cruciatus Curse on me. I've felt it before. I can testify to that in court." Then he had another thought. He drew Ron's wand out of his robes, where it had been all night. "And isn't this your wand, Ron? If the ministry is curious about whether it's been used for the Cruciatus Curse, there's a simple test they can do"...

"My wand!" He took it from Harry. By now, Ron was absolutely grinning at Harry and almost looking like he was going to start laughing. Then he did laugh, throwing his head back and then sighing with relief afterward. Harry felt a happiness leap up in him at seeing Ron smile back like that. There would be a time of healing, he knew, but he somehow felt that they could in fact go on now.

Ginny put her arm through Malfoy's and her head on his shoulder. "She's almost got you tamed, hasn't she, Malfoy?" Hermione said, looking at them.

Malfoy looked down at Ginny and said softly, "Mais, si tu m'apprivoises, nous aurons besoin l'un de l'autre." She looked like she might very well melt.

Ron reached behind Ginny and whapped Malfoy on the back of his head. "Hey! Stop speaking French to my sister!"

"But if you tame me, we shall need each other," Hermione translated in a quiet voice. "It's from *The Little Prince*".

"Wasn't he a Parselmouth?" Malfoy asked her, not tearing his gaze away from Ginny's.

"Who"?

"The Little Prince".

"Oh, that's right! He was talking to that snake in the desert. But he looked more like you, Malfoy, than Harry." She smiled at Harry. Then a hissing was heard from the vicinity of Harry's left arm. "What did she say"?

"Who is this Little Prince?" he told her. He hissed back at Sandy. "I told her never mind".

Hermione laughed. "Maybe I'll get used to that eventually...But I don't know whether I gave the best translation of that I you said, Malfoy. 'Apprivoiser' can also mean 'to domesticate.' Are you going to domesticate him, Ginny?" she laughed. Ginny turned her head and smiled, breaking the bond between her eyes and Malfoy's.

"Won't someone have to domesticate me first?" She looked at Malfoy again, losing her smile when she saw how serious his face looked. He leaned close to her again and spoke softly.

"Tu seras pour moi unique au monde. Je serai pour toi unique au monde".

"You shall be for me unique in all the world. I shall be for you unique in all the world," Hermione whispered, looking at Harry. He swallowed, wishing no one else were around just now.

Ron hit Malfoy on the back of the head again. "I said stop that! And you," he said to Hermione. "Stop translating for him".

They all broke up into laughter, even Ron. Ginny kissed Malfoy on the cheek and left the infirmary, and Hermione kissed Harry on the cheek before closing her curtains and preparing to dress for breakfast. Harry rose and followed Ron to his hospital bed, stopping him with his hand on his arm. Ron looked at him expectantly, but what he was expecting, Harry didn't know.

"Ron," he said softly. "Are we all right"?

Ron looked at him for what seemed a long time. "No. And yes. Not yet. But--eventually. I think we will be." He tried to smile at Harry, and Harry smiled feebly back. It wasn't everything he'd hoped for, but it was enough for now.

* * * * *

After breakfast, Ron and Ginny and the twins bade their parents goodbye. Mrs. Weasley did not hug Harry though, or talk to him or Hermione. He felt strange, watching her leave the Great Hall with her husband. Did she hate him now? he wondered. Had Ron told her about him and Hermione? He didn't know what to think. Her being upset with him was very nearly as bad as Ron. He looked at Hermione, sitting next to him. She had noticed Mrs. Weasley's behavior as well. She didn't look happy about it either. He remembered when Ron's mother had snubbed Hermione after the *Witch Weekly* article about her toying with Harry's and Krum's feelings. He dreaded finding out what she thought of Hermione now, if Ron had told her about their physical relationship.

On the other hand, he thought, she could be upset with them about Malfoy. They had both known. And he had vouched for Malfoy before the Weasleys, all of them, and they had looked at him suspiciously, as though perhaps he should go and be in Slytherin house now with the other snakes-in-the-grass. Regaining Ron's trust would be difficult, he knew. But he didn't just have to work on Ron; all of the Weasleys now regarded him differently, and he felt awful about that. He'd always felt so at home with them, almost like they had adopted him, and now, remembering the way Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had looked at him, as though he'd mortally wounded them by not revealing Ginny's relationship with Malfoy, it almost more than he could bear.

Harry pulled Ron and Ginny aside before they left the hall to go to classes, asking them whether they'd told anyone about him and Hermione. They looked at each other, brows furrowed, then at Harry.

"You mean you're still not going to tell people"?

"Well--we're going to come clean about being a couple. But--does everyone need to know about all of the details"?

Ron smirked. "You mean like--McGonagall"?

Harry widened his eyes and hit his head. "McGonagall! I hadn't even thought of her! She doesn't know, does she"?

Ron and Ginny looked at each other. Harry's heart sank. Then Ron laughed. "You should see your face, Harry! No McGonagall only knows you're a couple. Not that you've been"--

Coupling, thought Harry.

--"You know," Ron finished lamely, his ears turning red. Harry nodded.

They went to class. Harry was a bit disoriented and started going out the front door to Hagrid's, but Hermione dragged him to the stairs to the Potions dungeon. For a moment he'd forgotten what day it was. Harry hesitated before entering the last time he'd been here, he'd seen Ginny and Draco Malfoy, and Ron...

Somehow, he got through the class. They weren't covering anything new; Snape was snidely going over material they would need to know for the O.W.L.s, hinting broadly that none of them would get O.W.L.s in Potions because they were hopelessly incompetent and stupid. Oddly, the only person he didn't seem to look at when hurling insults around was Neville, who was working next to Malfoy again. Snape actually took points from his own house because of Crabbe and Goyle repeatedly poking Malfoy when they thought Snape's back was turned. The other Slytherins weren't any kinder to him. Harry hoped Malfoy would hex them when he got the chance. He wondered how he was going to be able to continue living in Slytherin.

Harry was jolted when, at the end of class, Snape called out to him, "Potter! I need a word with you; Dueling Club business." Harry sent Hermione along ahead of him. Ron and Parvati and the others had already left. Harry shouldered his bag and followed Snape into his office; the next class wouldn't be arriving for a few minutes. Snape closed the door and nodded at the chair near the fireplace. Harry sat down and looked at him expectantly. When Sirius' head appeared in the fireplace, Harry jumped.

"Harry! I didn't mean to startle you. Severus contacted me last night and told me everything he knew. I won't ask for a complete recap now--that can wait. I just wanted to see you, make sure you're all right".

Harry nodded at him. "As well as can be expected...At least I'm not in too much trouble for staying in the forest all night...You know about--who's in the forest, right"?

"Yes, Severus told me".

"Well, I was in the giants' camp. Hagrid's mum took care of me. And this morning, Madam Pomfrey decided that this nodule--" he touched the tender spot above his ear "--will go away, and I don't have concussion. And I had some broken ribs, but she took care of that. They're already feeling much better. So I guess everything's okay. Except"--

"What"?

Harry hesitated. When he finally spoke, he couldn't keep the tears out of his voice. "I'm sorry, Sirius. I tried to catch him, I really tried. I kept thinking, if I can just catch Wormtail, you can be cleared"...

Sirius smiled ruefully. "Harry, I don't want you losing sleep over that. You did what you could, and Lucius Malfoy will be going to Azkaban, if the trial goes as expected. You'll have to go, won't you?" Harry nodded. "Well, it will be a quite an experience, I daresay. I wish I could go with you, but for obvious reasons"...

"I wish you could too." Harry swallowed. He thought he would lose it if he had to go on talking to his godfather much longer. "Listen, Sirius, I'd better go. I'll talk to you again soon".

Sirius smiled warmly. "Goodbye Harry. I'm very proud of you. Don't forget that".

His face disappeared. Harry turned to Snape. "Thank you for that. It's nice to be able to talk to him more often..." he trailed off, looking at the strange expression on Snape's face. He actually seemed to be somewhat proud of Harry himself, and for once not hiding it. Harry felt his chest hitch; without knowing it, maybe Snape's approval was something he'd been craving more than he knew. Perhaps because he knew it would never, could never be lightly bestowed. Snape looked away now, as though he just realized that he was not hiding his thoughts well enough.

"Potter. I meant what I said about having Dueling Club business to discuss with you. We will be doing an end-of-term demonstration for the school after exams, while the students are waiting for their grades. We will begin preparing for that demonstration during club meetings on Sundays. Understood?"

Harry nodded. He didn't need Snape to say the things Dumbledore and Sirius had said. Some small gestures were enough. He smiled at the Potions master and shouldered his bag again.

"Understood." He turned and left, his heart lighter than it had felt for some time. Somehow, he had the feeling that everything was going to be all right.

* * * * *

After he was done eating lunch, Harry looked up to see Dumbledore standing next to him.

"Harry," he said briefly. "A word".

Harry nodded and rose, following the headmaster up out of the hall, up the stairs, up and up, finally arriving in the study at the top of the moving spiral stairs, after Dumbledore gave the gargoyle the password. ("Custard rolls")

Harry sat in a chair facing the desk and Dumbledore, rather than sitting behind his desk, sat in another chair next to him. He peered at Harry, as though trying to tell whether there was a difference in him compared to the last time he'd seen him. Harry started to squirm from being so scrutinized.

"Would you like to give me the story of what happened last night, from your perspective?" Harry looked at him levelly. How much had the others told him? Did he know about him and Hermione? But then he thought about how many years Dumbledore had been headmaster, and how many years before that he'd taught at the school. Surely he couldn't be ignorant of Madam Pomfrey's liberal distribution of Prophylaxis Potion? Harry decided that he was tired of editing himself. He felt Dumbledore was the one person he needed to tell everything to. And so he did.

When he was done his recitation, the headmaster leaned back, examining Harry again. Harry didn't have a clue what he was thinking.

"So," Dumbledore said suddenly. "You want to know why you can block pain".

Harry frowned. He did, but he hadn't asked. Perhaps now he would find out...

"It's because you know you can".

Harry frowned even more deeply now. "What"?

"Harry, do you remember when you conjured the Patronus that held off hundreds of dementors when you were only thirteen"?

"Yes"...

"And you did it because you realized you'd already done it"?

Harry nodded. "But what does that have to do with this"?

He smiled. "Do you know that Professor Moody has never accomplished the pain blocking"?

Harry's jaw dropped. "What"?

“Nor have I. You, more so than most wizards, Harry, are highly suggestible. When you believe that you can’t do something, you usually can’t. Your attitude defeats you. But when you are led to believe you can do something, oddly enough, you usually can. You can leap on a broomstick when you’ve never done it before, and fly like Charlie Weasley. You can conjure a Patronus most adult wizards couldn’t produce. You can overcome Imperius almost on the first try. You can block curses like Hara Kiri and Cruciatius. I told Professor Moody to introduce the idea of blocking pain into the curriculum. I wanted to see whether any of you were so suggestible that you could do it, just because you were told first that it was possible. And I wasn’t a bit surprised to learn that you’d mastered it”.

“So Moody was lying to us when he said we would master it by the end of the term? He couldn’t do it himself? It isn’t something Aurors usually learn”?

He shook his head. “No, Harry. If it were, Neville Longbottom’s parents wouldn’t be in St. Mungo’s”.

Harry furrowed his brow. “About Neville; is that why he did so well dueling when he was on the Eutharsos Potion”?

“Do you know what that potion does”?

“It makes you feel safe whether you are or not”.

“Exactly. It’s another case of mind over matter. That’s all that much magic is, Harry. Those of us who are witches and wizards do have magic in us, but the training you receive here teaches you to focus and put your mind to a spell, to believe that it will work the way you want it to. You are very good at putting mind over matter, Harry, and I see you getting better at it year by year. Hermione has better study habits, it’s undeniable. And Evan Davies has far better grades—as do several other fifth-year Ravenclaws and a couple of Hufflepuffs. As for the other Gryffindor students in your year, besides Hermione...compared to them, you admittedly look rather good. Although Ron Weasley has undergone quite an improvement this year. But grades are not everything; your inner focus is more pronounced than in any wizard I have seen come through here for a long time. As such, your greatest deficiency is also your mind—when you let it convince you that you are incapable of something. Your greatest strength is also your greatest weakness. Do you understand what I’m saying, Harry”?

Harry nodded, thinking about his duel with Voldemort, forcing the bead of light into his wand, forcing it to regurgitate the previous spells it had cast.

“And Voldemort”?

“Voldemort? When he was a student here, he was very, very much like you. Better grades, though. And he put on more of a show of following the rules.” He looked at Harry over his spectacles. “Sometimes you don’t even bother about that, Harry”.

Harry felt his face grow warm. “I remember when I met the young Tom Riddle. He said we were a lot alike, too. When we were in the forest...when I offered to become a Death Eater if they would let Ron and Hermione go, I thought about that. About whether I was going to become just like him”.

Now Dumbledore smiled. “That is something you do not have to worry about, Harry. No proper Death Eater ever did it to protect people they cared about. If you go into that with the intention of doing good, don’t you think it rather defeats the whole purpose”?

Harry hadn’t thought about that before. “But why do they threaten the recruits with hurting people they care about”?

“That’s just until they’re in. Then they have to hurt—really hurt—someone. You would never have been able to do that, Harry.” Harry remembered Draco Malfoy cursing Karkaroff. He remembered Ron cursing him. Ron was hoping Harry could do pain blockage, but still...

“You are too self-sacrificing to make a proper Death Eater, Harry. As much as Pettigrew seems to have convinced Voldemort to recruit you to repay his debt to you, I think Voldemort has agreed to that plan for a different reason”...

“What”?

Dumbledore sighed. "It took him years to achieve the level of power he had attained when the killing curse rebounded on him, giving you that scar. I believe that in the last year, he has come to realize that it will take years and years again for him to climb back to that level of power. Unless he finds a shortcut. Unless he finds a very powerful wizard who will become his servant, and let him absorb his power...You have in you a great deal of the power he lost when he cursed you, more than he has right now, I daresay. He has realized that he needs you alive, to draw on that power".

Harry looked at his hands. "I still don't want anything to happen to Ron or Hermione. They can still be used against me rather than give him all my magical power than see them hurt--or see anyone else hurt".

Dumbledore smiled. "But it's precisely because of that that you can't possibly give up your power to him, even if you wanted to. I'm guessing that he doesn't understand that yet. It's alien to him. That's why your mother's sacrifice protected you, Harry. And that's why I trust you".

Harry looked at Dumbledore, trying to understand consciously everything he'd said, but he gave up on that and decided that perhaps the best thing was to comprehend it unconsciously. He tried to quiet the voices inside him, throwing out one idea after another. He felt a peace come over him, and suddenly, understanding lit up his brain in a startling epiphany. He looked levelly at Dumbledore, very calm.

"I understand".

Dumbledore smiled and nodded at him. "Because you know that you can." Harry smiled back, leaving the study more at peace than he'd felt in a very long time. For once he didn't feel like he was leaving Dumbledore's office with more questions than he'd entered. But he still had quite a lot to think about.

Your greatest strength is also your greatest weakness....

* * * * *

The next morning Harry felt like going running again. He hadn't gone the day before. As he opened the wardrobe door, getting out his running shoes and shorts, Ron opened his bedcurtains and peered at him sleepily. "Going running"?

"Yeah," Harry said shortly, undecided whether it would make him happy for Ron to come along. Ron rose and retrieved his own running gear. Finally, Harry put his shirt on while Ron was tying his laces. "Let's go," he said tersely.

When they reached the common room, it was deserted. Harry checked his watch; it was ten minutes after seven. They waited another five minutes, but Harry decided they should leave. "If she were coming, she'd be down here by now." He took Sandy off his arm and left her by the fireside.

When they reached the Quidditch pitch, they did the warm-up exercises in silence, then rose and started running on the sandy path. Afterward, they were doing the warm-down exercises when Ron suddenly looked up at Harry and asked, "When did it start"?

Harry was jolted. "What?" he said, realizing even as he said this what it was that Ron meant.

"You and Hermione".

They'd been going through the motions of normal school life since returning from the forest, as though nothing had happened, although there were times when Harry saw Ron looking at Hermione strangely. He put his chin on his knees and considered his answer.

"Well, there was this time we almost kissed at my house, just before we left to come to the Burrow. No, wait, there was a time she was sunbathing in the garden. Actually, maybe it was when she kissed me on the cheek before the summer holiday, at the station." He frowned; then he went back to his thoughts when they'd consummated their relationship. "No," he corrected himself again. "In a way--it started when I noticed at the Yule Ball how pretty Krum's date was. I was, of course, still insanely obsessed with Cho Chang, but even I could see that. Then I realized it was her. And you were such a prat to her; I wanted to kick you," he said, but smiled. Ron nodded.

"That's true. A total prat".

"And when Krum wanted to talk to me about her, what really struck me was that he actually thought of me as a rival. He said she talked about me all the time. I told him it was because we're friends, and he let it go at that. Of course then everything around us starting going crazy, Barty Crouch and all that, but later in the summer, I still remembered him saying that she talked about me all the time".

Ron shrugged. "Well, you're Harry Potter"...

"Yeah, yeah, I survived the killing curse. Of course, when she sent the photo"...

"Right. The photo".

..."Then I gathered that she might be interested in me. That was before Bulgaria".

Ron couldn't deny this. "True," he said simply.

Harry looked at his face. "Ron, you're still my best friend, right"?

"Right," Ron said, hesitating only a moment before answering.

"I don't want to hide anything from you. I want to tell you everything".

Ron widened his eyes, looking both hopeful and apprehensive. "Everything" ?

"Well, okay, not everything..." He realized how that must have sounded. "But there are some things you don't know, and there's no bloody reason to keep them from you now".

"Like what"?

"After the dream I had on Christmas night, I screamed bloody murder. Hermione heard and--she slept in my bed with me the rest of the night. And the next night. And the rest of the holidays. We just slept. I still miss that at times. It was so comforting just having her there, hearing her breathing in her sleep, feeling her warmth next to me..." Harry trailed off, feeling a flush rising up from his neck. Ron narrowed his eyes.

"I've never done that. Slept in the same bed with someone else..." Harry couldn't tell whether Ron sounded envious or was just a statement of fact.

Harry sighed. "Of course, there came a time when I had trouble not thinking about--certain things. So I moved to another bed." He decided that Ron didn't need to know it was his bed. "Which did no good, because she followed me, wanting to know what was wrong, and then she told me it was after midnight--this was New Year's Eve--and she wished me Happy New Year and kissed me and--" He looked down. He couldn't go on.

"Well?" Ron said, looking wide-eyed. Harry realized he'd rather left him hanging.

"Well," Harry hesitated, "I, er, stopped what we were doing, and then Sandy told me a dark wizard was coming. I went rather insane. I put Hermione in the corner under the Invisibility Cloak and I hid under Dean Thomas' bed, aiming my wand at the door. Of course, it was Sirius".

Ron's jaw dropped, then he burst out laughing, flinging himself backwards and rolling around on the pitch. Harry felt laughter bubbling up inside him, too, and soon he too was laughing loudly. After a while, Ron sat up, wiping his eyes.

"Oh, Harry," he said weakly. "Thanks. I needed that".

Harry shrugged. "Glad I could amuse you by being such a sodding idiot".

Ron shook his head, standing. He helped Harry to stand too, then put his arm across his shoulder. "It's not that. Okay, that a little bit. I think I thought..." he trailed off. "I thought it was all rainbows and champagne and sappy stuff like that. ... it was probably sneaking around to snog in dark uncomfortable places, and making up ridiculous excuses, and insane-sounding alibis...None of it sounds remotely romantic or something to be jealous of. I should have known you'd bollix up your first real girlfriend experience. Cho doesn't count, of course"...

“Of course...” Harry mumbled, feeling more than a little insulted, but if thinking of his and Hermione’s relationship as one horrendous, disastrous encounter after another cheered him up, he wasn’t feeling inclined to correct him. Then he was struck by something Ron had said that was just a bit upsetting. “What do you mean, ‘first’ girlfriend”?

Ron stopped walking for a second, then resumed his course, moving ahead of Harry so he couldn’t see his face. “Oh. Nothing. Nothing at all. Let’s go”...

* * * * *

Harry told Ron about the way Snape had actually been quite decent to him when away from other people, the way he let him use his office fireplace to communicate with Sirius, and the fact that he was on a first-name basis with Sirius. Harry and Hermione told Ron together about the things they’d seen in Snape’s Pensieve; his mouth was open in shock much of the time. His first reaction to the thought of Snape kissing Lily was the same as Harry’s .

“Eeeew” .

His second reaction to their recitation of the Pensieve events was to look at the two of them strangely, and say softly, “Um, you do realize that you two have been finishing each other’s sentences”?

Harry looked in surprise at Hermione, who then smiled, lacing her fingers through his and leaning her head on his shoulder. Harry looked at Ron, who gazed with an inscrutable expression at them both, then looked away.

After a few days, the rest of the people in the Gryffindor common room started acting normally around Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginny. At first, everyone seemed to be walking on eggshells around the four of them, but now games of chess were being played, and Exploding Snap. The twins were telling jokes and people were laughing at them. There no longer seemed to be a pall cast on the place. Most Gryffindors simply greeted the news that Harry and Hermione were a couple with equanimity, as though they’d thought that all along (many of them had), so it didn’t cause any significant ripples in the daily life of the house. The extent of their relationship was not common knowledge; only Ginny and Ron knew that. Ginny’s and Draco’s relationship, however, was still under wraps, for the most part. The twins knew, of course, and weren’t particularly happy about it, but so far they hadn’t tried to decapitate Malfoy. They had tried to offer him some Ton-Tongue Toffees, but Ginny had forewarned him, so he declined, looking, Harry thought, like he was wondering what he’d gotten himself into.

The focus of concern in Gryffindor Tower returned to Neville. There were many people who still treated Neville very carefully since his recovery, which was clearly wearing on him. Neville sometimes would retreat to the dorm to sit on his bed reading, catching up with his schoolwork, but then Dean or Seamus would go up to sit with him. He had started to look a bit annoyed about this. At one point Harry was on his bed reading for the O.W.L.s while Neville was doing the same on his. Neville looked up at Harry.

“You don’t have to stay and baby-sit me, Harry. I’m not going to start secretly taking Eutharsos Potion again”.

Harry looked up in surprise. “I’m not baby-sitting you, Neville. I was here first, reading for Binns’ class. It’s just that it put me to sleep, so I figured I might as well be on my bed, so I’ll be comfortable when it happens”.

Neville smiled in apology. “Sorry, Harry. I just feel like--everyone’s waiting for me to snap. But you know, they say if you’re reading something that might make you fall asleep, you should actually read it in the most uncomfortable place you can”.

“You’re assuming I don’t want to fall asleep, Neville,” he laughed, and Neville laughed too, then look a little surprised.

“That’s funny, Harry. I--I don’t remember laughing since--since I got back. It’s like people are trying not to say funny things around me”.

“Even Fred and George”?

“Even them”.

“Well, come on downstairs, Neville. If they’re not busy with their N.E.W.T. preparation, maybe they can give us both a good laugh”.

They left their books on their beds and went down the stairs to the common room. Before they had reached the bottom however, they met Ron coming up the stairs, looking breathless.

“Oh,” he said anxiously, “Harry and Neville! Are Dean and Seamus upstairs in our room?”

“No,” Neville answered. “We were the only ones there”.

“Well, um--do you need to go back there real soon? I'd like some--privacy”---

Harry looked down and saw Parvati appear at the foot of the stairs. She didn't look at Harry or Neville. Harry understood and was a little bit wistful; he and Hermione were trying to be so careful about people knowing about their physical relationship, they hadn't been alone together since returning from the forest.

Neville nodded at Ron, smiling. “Not a problem”.

“I'm putting a locking charm on the door, just so you know”.

“Fine, fine,” Harry said, trying not to sound too irritated as Parvati, averting her eyes, passed him on the stairs.

“It's not for you two; last time Dean and Seamus thought they would 'interrupt,’” Ron said. “Let them know they should even bother”.

Neville said he would, laughing, and Harry was glad to hear him laugh again. He was right; he hadn't laughed enough since returning from the hospital wing.

Thinking of Ron and Parvati up in their room made Harry wonder where Hermione was. Probably in the library, he thought, with O.W.L.s being so close. Maybe if they went up to Fluffy's room...

But he didn't bother to go look for her. He and Neville started playing Exploding Snap with the twins, and before long, they were all laughing hysterically and nursing small burns, mostly singed eyebrows. Then Harry excused himself to go to the lavatory. The twins hinted broadly that he was going to try to spy on Ron and Parvati, and Harry laughed, pretending to go along with this. He went up the stairs, not hearing any sounds from the dorm before he entered the lavatory. When he was washing his hands, he heard the door to the dormitory open and slam shut again, then open again.

“Parvati!” he heard Ron's voice plead. Harry dried his hands on a towel; he stepped closer to the door and put his ear to it. He heard her footsteps return from the stairs, then the unmistakable sound of a slap.

“You bastard!” he heard Parvati's strangled voice, as though she were trying not to cry. Harry swallowed. He was trapped. Although perhaps if he opened the door and appeared on the landing with them, it could defuse the explosive situation somehow felt was brewing.

“Parvati--” Ron pleaded again. “Come on! It happens to everyone”...

Now Harry was appalled; he did not want to know about this, not in a million years. How awful, he thought, imagining himself in Ron's shoes. Now he knew for sure that he shouldn't step foot out of the lavatory. Ron would die if he knew Harry had heard.

“It was a slip of the tongue...” Ron continued to try to placate her. What? Harry thought. Obviously it wasn't what he thought. Ron had said something to upset her. What could it be?

“A slip of the tongue? A slip of the tongue? Don't tell me you haven't been pretending I'm her every time. I'm not a bleeding substitute! I--I sometimes suspected, but when you actually call me by her name in the--in the middle of it--it becomes glaringly obvious! I am never speaking to you again, Ron Weasley!”

Harry covered his mouth in horror. It was even worse than he'd originally thought. He heard Parvati run down the stairs, her footsteps a rapid tattoo on the stone, receding now. Harry heard Ron take a step, then held his breath. What if Ron came in here? Harry thought fleetingly of running into a stall and standing on a toilet seat lid, hoping Ron wouldn't find him. But then he heard the door to the dorm slam again, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He opened the door and stepped onto the landing just as Ron opened the door to their dorm again. He froze when he saw Harry. Harry felt himself

flush, remembering what he'd just heard. Ron's face was furious when he'd opened the door, then mortified when he saw Harry.

"Harry," he said nervously. "How--how long were you in there?"

"Why?" Harry decided the best course of action was to feign stupidity and deafness.

"You didn't hear our--our argument, did you? Me and Parvati?"

Harry swallowed. "You and Parvati had an argument?" he said, his voice higher than he wanted it to be. "I'm--I'm sorry you hear that".

Ron looked at him as though he were unconvinced, but also as though he'd rather kiss Snape than admit what they'd been arguing about. "Yeah, well, you know. Women".

Harry smiled feebly. "Women," he echoed softly.

Or, he thought, a particular woman.

Hermione .

* * * * *

Chapter Thirty: Trials

The train swayed gently as it moved through the verdant countryside. It was a beautiful late-May day, with a cloudless periwinkle-blue sky, and not a plant anywhere in sight that wasn't green or blooming. It seemed a shame, Harry thought, to waste a day like this by going into grimy London. He would have liked to lounge about on the grass by the lake during lunch, perhaps getting some sun, lazily watching the ripples on the water made by the giant squid. That was his idea of how to spend a gorgeous spring day.

Harry leaned back in his seat, watching the scenery rush by. Hermione was sleeping with her head on his thigh, and he played idly with her curls. Her hair was getting longer and threatening to be rather on the bushy side again. After he'd gotten his hair cut by Parvati, she'd also been getting Parvati to cut her hair when necessary, but she recently stopped. Parvati wouldn't tell Hermione why. The short-curls-style seemed to be the only way to combat the bushiness without impregnating her hair with gooey gel, as she had for the Yule Ball.

Harry combed her lengthening curls through his fingers. He'd never minded her bushy hair, truthfully. He like that she mostly didn't care much about how she looked at all and still managed to look wonderful all the same. The only real vanity he'd detected was when she'd let Madam Pomfrey go on shrinking her teeth after the spell Malfoy had been aiming at Harry hit her instead and started making her resemble a walrus on steroids. On the other hand, he knew it was also quite inconvenient and painful to have orthodontia, so perhaps it wasn't really vanity that had led her to do it.

She shifted slightly and mumbled something in her sleep. Harry smiled down at her. He'd forgotten how nice it was to watch her sleep. He also was glad that they could be as physically comfortable with each other as they wanted (within reason) now that others knew about them. He could sit like this, her head on his leg, while one of his hands played with her hair and the other rubbed her back gently. They could sit in the common room, Hermione in an armchair, reciting potions ingredients from memory or the different uses of St. John's wort for Herbology, while Harry checked to see if she'd gotten everything right, leaning against the front of her chair, giving her a foot rub.

He wasn't clear about whether anyone knew about the extent of their physical relationship (although there had only been the two times). Once he thought he saw George and Angelina giving them a knowing look. He knew about them, Harry thought. They probably recognized the signs, he reckoned.

The train was going through a tunnel. Harry looked up and met Ron's eye. He was sitting in the seat opposite Harry and Hermione, nearest the window. Draco Malfoy was nearest the door to the compartment and Ginny was between them. Ron had tried to get between her and Malfoy when they'd boarded, but he wasn't fast enough. Ginny was asleep too; she leaned against Malfoy's chest, her head on his shoulder, his arm around her. They'd all gotten up quite early, two o'clock in order to board the two-thirty local to King's Cross Station. The express only ran on September first, the last day of summer term, and to get students to and from home for the Christmas and Easter holidays. Anyone in the wizarding world

who needed to get to London (or points in between) in the morning, but who couldn't Apparate, or who was traveling with someone who couldn't, such as small children, needed to get the early train. It made a number of stops, so that the trip to London took seven hours instead of six, as on the express. For some people, the ride was even longer, if they boarded before Hogwarts, way up by the northern coast. Harry found out there was even a wizarding ferry one could take from the end of the train line to the Orkneys.

Harry was feeling tired at first, leaning back and closing his eyes while Hermione stretched out on the seat, but by dawn he'd rested enough, he felt. He anxiously watched the large variety of witches and wizards who boarded and disembarked from the train. He'd had the opportunity to see more of the wizarding world at the ceilidh, and the year before, at the Quidditch World Cup, and now he was seeing still more. Families traveling together, witches and wizards going to visit relatives. And soon they would arrive in London and go to the Ministry of Magic itself. Harry had no idea what the Ministry would look like.

"Ron," he said quietly, so as not to disturb Ginny or Hermione. Ron didn't answer him, although he seemed to be looking right at Harry. "Ron?" he said again. When he abruptly moved his eyes up to Harry's, he realized that Ron had been watching Hermione sleep.

"Oh, Harry. What"?

"Has your dad ever taken you to work"?

He shook his head. "Nah. Normally he Apparates, so I couldn't have gone with him that way. And dad said the fireplaces at the Ministry aren't on the floo network for security reasons, so that isn't an option. Although they are used for communication--just not transportation".

"Well, it's in London, right"?

"Right".

"So couldn't you just go by floo powder to Diagon Alley, they go from there to the Ministry"?

Ron looked thoughtful. "Well, for that matter, it isn't like we live on the other side of the country from London....I think he just didn't want to take any of us"...

"Yeah, well, who would want a pack of Weasleys running around the Ministry?" Malfoy sneered. "Apart from Ginny, of course".

"Keep it up, Malfoy. That's the way to get accepted by my family. Just keep up the insults. Real smart".

Harry thought about why Mr. Weasley might not want his children wandering around the Ministry, but he couldn't think of anything. Every time a question about the wizarding world was answered for him, it seemed he had several more to take its place.

"You ever been there?" Harry asked Malfoy, who looked surprised at being addressed by Harry. He shook his head dumbly.

"No, Potter. My father--well, let's just say he may have had Ministry business at times, but he certainly never wanted me there for it. He knows a lot of high-ranking people, but"...

Harry frowned. He remembered Malfoy bragging that his dad knew all of the big movers and shakers at the Ministry. Would they try to get him off? Or perhaps they were running scared now, hoping they weren't associated with him in any way so they wouldn't also be under suspicion. If his own son was any indication, Lucius Malfoy didn't exactly inspire selfless acts of loyalty. "You reckon he was seeing people who work for the Ministry who're Death Eaters"?

Malfoy shrugged. "Who knows? Could be he was just threatening or blackmailing someone to get them to do something he wanted. I overheard some things at home when I was younger, but it was usually luck. He never actually let me in on something big he was up to until after he took me to get--you know".

The Dark Mark. Harry nodded. Ron looked at him. "Has--has Ginny seen it?" he asked quietly. Malfoy shook his head.

"Have I seen what?" Ginny mumbled sleepily, starting to sit up and stretch.

"Um, nothing," Harry said quickly. Malfoy drew his lips into a line, looking like he didn't want Harry's help.

"Are we there yet?" Ginny asked, yawning.

Ron looked out of the window. "No idea. How long's it been, Harry"?

Harry checked his watch. "It's nine. Dumbledore said seven hours on the train, so it'll be another half hour".

Dumbledore and Moody were riding in another compartment. The headmaster had given the former Auror permission to cancel his classes for the day. Harry wondered for how many years Moody had wanted to get the goods on Lucius Malfoy. He would most certainly not want to miss the trial where Malfoy's own son would be testifying against him.

They sat quietly for the rest of the trip, Hermione still sleeping on Harry's lap. Ginny had taken Ron's hand in her right and Malfoy's in her left and grasped them firmly, clearly trying to send some of her strength into them. This day would be the hardest for the two of them. Harry wasn't sure what he would be asked, but surely it couldn't be as bad for him.

As they pulled into King's Cross Station, Harry gently woke Hermione. She sat up groggily, as Ginny had. She smiled at Harry and kissed him on the cheek. He tried to smile back but all he could manage was a sort of grim worried look. Dumbledore appeared at the door to their compartment wordlessly, Moody behind him. They followed the professors unquestioningly, none of them having the least idea what to expect, except for Harry, who had at least seen the trials in the past. Dumbledore's Pensieve.

They went through the barrier to come out in the Muggle part of the station in pairs, except for Moody, who went last. Moody and Dumbledore had not bothered with Muggle clothes, but wore traveling cloaks that didn't look too outlandish and disguised their robes well. Harry, Ron and Malfoy were all wearing black trousers with neat button-down shirts, Harry's in black, Ron's in maroon and Malfoy's in white linen. The girls wore the simple dresses they'd used for the ceiling. Hermione's bottle green, Ginny's black. They all carried bags with their black Hogwarts robes, so they'd be properly attired for wizard court.

They proceeded to the King's Cross/St. Pancras tube station; Harry was surprised that they didn't attract more attention. He kept waiting for people to start staring and pointing, as though they could recognize witches and wizards even in Muggle clothes, but the Muggles they saw passed without noticing them, their gazes directed ahead at goals Harry and the others could not see or imagine. Dumbledore gave each of them some Muggle money for the fare. Ron and Malfoy stared at theirs. Ginny didn't bat an eye, but Harry recalled that she was taking Muggle Studies. They waited quietly on the platform, morning commuters still bustling around them. When the train came labeled BRIXTON, they boarded.

The stations passed, and Harry gazed listlessly out the window. Euston. Warren Street. Oxford Circus. Green Park...

Hermione grabbed his arm, pulling him toward the open door. "Come on, Harry. Didn't you hear Dumbledore say we're switching trains here? We have to go from the Victoria Line to the Jubilee Line." He stumbled after her, just missing being mashed by the closing doors. They walked to the Jubilee Line, and when the train finally came, they had to stand.

There was what looked like several dozen American students, around thirteen to sixteen years in age, crammed onto the train car, one of their teachers lecturing to them loudly and non-stop about the history of the tube. She was about thirty and had that air of a slightly desperate single woman who was wondering how she'd gotten trapped in the life she was in. Her light brown hair was escaping from a sloppy French twist barely held in place by a large plastic clip, she paused every sentence or so to put eyedrops in her eyes (it mostly ran down her face, making her look as if she'd been crying) and her clothes seemed chosen to help her blend in with her students, who were all affecting a grunge look with lots of muddy-coloured plaid shirts hanging on either anorexic or overweight frames. Only her didactic tone identified her as a teacher and one who was alien to their culture, for that matter. Harry had quickly pegged her accent as some kind of Southern American strain, having seen a number of American films, whereas the students' voices he heard sounded flat and nasal and sometimes a little sing-song.

"I think they're from Minnesota or Wisconsin," Hermione whispered to Harry. He nodded.

"Not the teacher, though," he whispered back. "She's Southern".

Hermione agreed, but didn't have an idea about a specific Southern state any more than he did. Harry noticed Ron, Ginny, and Malfoy glancing with interest at the American students. Not only were they Muggles, they came from a different country. The three of them looked like they thought anything might happen, riding the tube with such aliens.

"Now everybody stay together as we disembark from the train," she drawled to her students. Her small voice carried surprisingly well, but Harry noticed that most of the students completely ignored her, carrying on animated conversation with each other about musical groups and who-liked-who, like normal teenagers. Normal, Harry thought. What was normal?

"We," she went on, "Will be getting off," many giggles from the students, and Malfoy, "At Westminster, home of Parliament. Parliament consists of two houses. What are the two houses? Anybody? Anybody? Anybody?" Harry's head had leapt into his throat. Westminster. He hadn't realized that switching trains put them on the same line as Westminster.

The students continued to ignore their teacher. "The House of--" she prompted them, drawing out the "of" until it almost sounded like she was singing it. "Commons," she finally said, also drawing that out, as though she would be willing to give someone partial credit for the answer even after she had started to pronounce the word. "And the House of--anybody? Anybody?" She looked round at the oblivious, chattering, walking hormone bombs. "The House of Lords," she said loudly, trying to drown out twenty different conversations and failing. "Now, the notion of a majority whip and minority whip in our government comes from the British Parliament. Can anybody tell me which party is in the majority and which in the minority right now?" She looked round at them again. They obviously didn't care a bit about British government. Harry remembered his days in school before going to Hogwarts. In his opinion, British children didn't care, either. "Anybody? Anybody? Does anybody know who the Prime Minister is? Anybody? Anybody?"

She was getting to be so pathetic Harry felt it was painful to watch now. Then the train began to slow down, and with a jerk, it stopped and the teacher had to shift gears and become a sort of shrill border collie, herding the students out of the train, making sure no one was left behind.

As the dozens of bodies shuffled toward the door in Doc Maartens and holey canvas basketball shoes, Dumbledore nodded at the five of them and said simply, "Come on." Harry swallowed. They were getting off at Westminster too.

Harry and the others passed through the doors onto the platform. The American teacher and her students were moving toward the stairs, having passed through the turnstiles. She was yelling directions and periodically quizzing them about British government. As the noise from their large party receded (They could hear repetitions of "Anybody? Anybody?" growing softer and softer) Harry looked around. There was the sign saying WESTMINSTER, just like in his dream. The floor was what looked like new tile on the ceiling and walls, and there--

"Oh, Harry," Hermione breathed. He nodded, walking toward it. He started to put his hand out to touch it, then pulled back. He swallowed painfully, remembering the people who had died there. Others were daily remembering them too; the spot had turned into a small shrine. There were flowers, some rather old now; photographs of people who had been killed, many of them children. The thing that broke his heart was the stuffed rabbit someone had left. Hermione picked it up, looking at it, tears in her eyes, before she replaced it.

Harry leaned closer to the wall and saw that there was what looked like paint applied over the tiles, and it appeared that the green legend POTTER was applied on top of the paint. "The paint is new," growled Moody. "But then, so's the tile. They've tried everything. New tile, new paint, everything but taking the wall down completely, and every time, that reappears, like--well, like magic".

So, Harry thought, it wasn't that the Muggles hadn't tried to eradicate it. Voldemort had seen to it that the green POTTER would continue to reassert itself no matter what.

"Well," he whispered, "Why don't they just take the wall down, then?"

"We don't want them to," Dumbledore said softly. "Every time it's suggested, we subtly get everyone involved to forget about it".

Harry frowned at him. "Why?" Dumbledore seemed to ignore him. "Now," he said, looking around the platform. There weren't many people who had come to take the next train yet. "Ron and Ginny, you go first. Just walk toward the wall at a normal pace. Don't slow down, and don't tense up. We'll shield you. Go on".

So they did. Harry watched them walk toward the POTTER on the wall, just as if they were approaching a doorway. Then they disappeared. Draco Malfoy went next. Then Harry and Hermione. He stared at it. POTTER. He walked purposefully toward it, the horrifying, sickly green of the magical substance growing closer and closer. Then--he could no longer see. He looked around at the odd corridor where Ron and Ginny and Malfoy already stood. In a moment, Dumbledore and Moody had come through and were standing with them.

Overhead and on both sides was terra cotta-coloured brick. Large red-orange tiles covered the floor. It was like being in a large sewer pipe with a flat bottom. After arriving in the corridor, Dumbledore and Moody turned to the left and they followed. They walked what seemed a long way from the entry point, which Harry thought, did not look particularly distinctive on this side. So, he thought, this is really why Voldemort attacked the Westminster station. He wasn't attacking the Muggle government; this is where the Ministry of Magic is located--and he marked the entrance with POTTER.

"Thirty-seven," Dumbledore said suddenly, and Harry realized that the reason it seemed he'd been walking looking at his feet was because that was precisely what he was doing. He'd been counting his paces. Dumbledore now raised his wand and Harry noticed that there was a slight indentation in one brick, which was the one Dumbledore tapped now with his wand. Suddenly, an archway appeared, and they followed Dumbledore and Moody through it. Dumbledore turned to Harry. "It's been a while since I've come this way, so I'm relieved that I remember how. It's about ten-twenty. We should be in place by ten-forty-five. The trial begins at eleven. Best to put your robes on now".

They opened their bags and extracted their Hogwarts robes, pulling them on, buttoning, adjusting. Harry, Hermione and Malfoy wore their silver prefects' badges. Moody and Dumbledore removed their traveling cloaks. Dumbledore gestured to them and led them down a corridor identical to the first one. After a few minutes, it suddenly opened out into a large circular space, maybe twenty feet in diameter, with numerous doorways around the perimeter. It took Harry a moment to realize that the people on the other sides of the doorways didn't look right. They looked, he thought, as though they were images on a television screen. He watched a witch in deep green robes directing a pile of papers through the air with her wand. She moved from left to right, framed in a doorway labeled IUMO on the lintel. When she disappeared to the right of the doorjamb, it seemed that she should have reappeared in the doorway that was a mere six inches or so to its right. However, an imposing sandy-haired wizard in deep sapphire robes who sported rather prominent horns on his head moved toward the witch, such that Harry thought he would collide with her. His doorway's lintel was labeled CEC. He too disappeared, and did not reappear in the IUMO doorway although it appeared that he should.

"That," Moody rumbled, nodding at the doorway where the witch had been, "Was Mafalda Hopkirk. Improper Use of Magic Office. The horned freak was Gilbert Wimple. Committee on Experimental Charms".

Harry found himself spinning around, gazing at doorways labeled DMGS, DIMC, DRCMC, DMT. Dumbledore and Moody went on explaining the various abbreviations were Department of Magical Games and Sports (Harry thought he saw Luna Bagman pass by the open doorway briefly), Department of International Magical Cooperation, Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures (He saw both Cedric Diggory's dad and the eerie Macnair, who had almost executed Buckbeak, pass by this doorway) and Dumbledore brightly called out, "Cheers, Basil!" to the harried-looking wizard working for the Department of Magical Transportation whom Harry remembered from the Quidditch World Cup. He still looked harried, bustling by the doorway carrying a box of what looked like rubbish. Harry assumed it was actually full of Portkeys.

They also saw the doorways for the Goblin Liaison Office, the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad and the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, where Mr. Weasley and Percy worked. Harry puzzled over the strange appearance of the doorways. The people walking past them appeared suddenly, then disappeared just as suddenly, exactly the same as people on a television or cinema screen appearing and then disappearing from one side to the other.

Dumbledore saw his perplexed look. "Oh, they're not really here, Harry".

Now Harry was really confused. "What"?

Dumbledore smiled. "These are portals. Walking through these doorways, you are automatically taken to the actual location of the office on the other side. The portals are all really here, but the offices are spread out over the entire London Underground system".

"The Underground"?

"Old tube stations," Moody growled. "The Muggle War Office used them as military offices during World War II. Most of the ones they were in had already fallen into disuse. Made good air-raid shelters, too. We were mighty tight over here in the

original Ministry offices. After the war, we made a deal with the Muggle Prime Minister to take over the old Underground Offices. They can't be accessed by Muggles anymore; you can only get to them if you can Apparate or know how to get into here from Westminster Station. Except for that damn Aldwych Station"...

Dumbledore sighed. "Yes. Aldwych. That used to be where we had all the registries. Animagi, werewolves, vampires, and that sort of thing. But there have been so many film crews down in the station proper lately, we've had to move the registries out of there. The film producers like the station for period dramas especially. It's very nicely preserved, looks the same as it did in 1910 or so. The registries are sharing space now with the Goblin Liaison Office, and neither Cuthbert Mockridge nor the goblins are particularly thrilled about that. But we risked all sorts of problems with werewolves and vampires bothering film crews while trying to enter through Aldwych Station--we had to allow that originally, since most of them are not witches or wizards, and so cannot Apparate, and we didn't necessarily want them to know about Westminster and these other portals".

"So," Hermione said, nodding at the portals, "Can they see us"?

"Oh, yes," Dumbledore told her. "But I expect they've learned to tune out what they see through the portal. It is very convenient, though, to be able to walk through here to get from, say, the Department of Magical Transportation to the Improper Use of Magic Office, especially if you're with a person being charged. Apparating is impractical at such a time. These offices tend to have a good bit of overlap; the DMT fines anyone who Apparates without a license, and usually the lack of license goes along with offenses such as Apparating in front of Muggles, a charge issued from the IUMO. As such, they often have to call in the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad as well, so as to make the Muggles forget a witch or wizard suddenly appearing on their kitchen table, or what have you".

Harry remembered getting a letter from the Improper Use of Magic Office the summer before he began second year. When the witch passed by the doorway again, he instinctively ducked behind Ron, so she wouldn't see him. With his forehead scar, she would know who he was right away if she decided not to ignore the people standing in the middle of the portals. Ron looked over his shoulder and laughed down at him.

"What are you doing, Harry?" He peered out from behind Ron, to check that she'd gone. He smiled feebly up at Ron, then felt himself redden. Ginny, Malfoy and Hermione were also looking at him strangely.

Two of the portals were not like the others. One did not show an office with people bustling about; it was just a black rectangle, with no sign. The other didn't look like a portal at all. It was another rounded corridor, brick all around, like the passage from which they'd emerged. Moody saw Harry looking at the dark doorway. "Unspeakables. Department of Mysteries. They can get out, but no one else can go in. Except I've never actually seen anyone come out of there"...

Dumbledore led them down the pipe-like brick corridor, which slanted subtly downward, and after it turned a few times, Harry could no longer see the round room behind them with the office portals. There were more than a few that Dumbledore hadn't explained, but he didn't question the headmaster as they continued on their way. After a few minutes the corridor came to an end. They were confronted with a large bronze door with "MoM" in raised, ornately intertwined pewter letters. Dumbledore said something Harry didn't catch, and the door swung toward them. They entered and found themselves in another corridor, rectilinear now rather than rounded, looking remarkably like the corridors in the dungeons at Hogwarts. They all continued to follow Dumbledore.

Upon turning a corner, they entered into what could only be called a mob. Witches and wizards Harry had never seen before suddenly surrounded the seven of them, but most of them seemed to be trying to talk to him and Malfoy. He caught snatches of questions about the trial, about Lucius Malfoy, about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named (Which some of them could say amazingly fast). Many of them had accents that did not sound at all British. Harry had never considered that there was a foreign wizarding press, but obviously these were some representatives. He'd also never considered foreign wizarding schools or wizarding communities outside of Britain until the Triwizard Tournament and the Quidditch World Cup.

With a sweep of his hand, Dumbledore caused the mass of reporters to fall back. They were able to pass unmolested now, and Harry catalogued in his mind how quickly and easily Dumbledore was able to do the same sort of thing Voldemort did--magic without his wand--when he wanted to. Dumbledore looked stern and unapproachable as he walked next to Harry down the corridor. The reporters must have angered him a great deal, Harry thought, for him to do that. He usually seemed to avoid making such displays.

They turned another corner and came to another large bronze door. A troll stood next to it. He wasn't a mountain troll; Harry wasn't sure what kind of troll he was, but he was about Hagrid's height, with a troll's long arms and vacant

expression. He looked very, very strong. He must have been a well-trained troll, Harry thought, for when Dumbledore nodded at him, he opened the bronze door--it looked quite heavy--and they entered.

Harry gasped. They were in the room he'd seen in the Pensieve. They were standing at the top. The tiered rows of benches dropped off before them. It reminded Harry of a square funnel, leading to the flat, open space in the center, where he saw the familiar chair with the chains where Lucius Malfoy would sit to be tried. He swallowed, looking at that chair. He did not want to see Lucius Malfoy again. He did not want to see those cruel eyes that did not reveal any emotion at all. He did not want to hear the voice that casually said, "Almost forgot that," after putting the Cruciatus Curse on his best friend. Suddenly Harry felt an almost overwhelming impulse to run, to turn and flee from this tribunal, to flee from the wizarding world in general. He remembered the American students on the train. That's what Dumbledore should have done, he thought. He should have left me on some doorstep in America with a note saying my name was John Smith. I could have grown up far away from here and lived as a Muggle and Voldemort would have no idea where to find me and would have no clue what it is like to feel responsible for other people suffering and dying...

POTTER.

An ordinary life. Why did that seem so much to ask? He looked at Malfoy, who was visibly shaking as he looked at the chair. He hadn't had a choice about his life any more than Harry had. He appeared to be taking a deep breath. He looked at Moody, of all people, who actually smiled kindly at him and nodded in what was meant to be a reassuring fashion. Harry could not help but smile a little. For all that he could see so much with that eye of his, Moody noticing Malfoy's Dark Mark through his robes didn't tell the whole story. Clearly Moody was admitting he'd been wrong about Draco Malfoy.

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "Where is this? Really? In relation to Muggle London"?

Dumbledore pointed down at the chair in the center of the room. "Directly above that chair, about two-hundred feet or so is the chair where the Muggle Prime Minister sits when Parliament is in session." Harry's mouth hung open in shock. Dumbledore smiled. "Actually, it may be over a few feet. But my point is, Harry, this chamber was here before this city was a little Roman settlement called Londinium. This has been here for a very long time. Come".

They stepped down the rows until they were only two levels above the flat center of the room. Dumbledore indicated that they should sit, and they did, all in a row, with the headmaster to their left and Moody to their right. Harry sat next to Dumbledore, with Hermione to his right. Next to her, Ron glanced to his right, where Ginny sat holding Malfoy's hand tightly. Then Moody leaned in and spoke to Malfoy.

"One thing I should tell you before all this starts, Malfoy," he said raspily. "My house. It's been many a year since I was at school--I finished in 1915--but I thought I should tell you what house I was in. I've caught a slew of dark wizards, and I think the reason I have is that I can think like them. Doesn't mean I act like them. But I understand how their minds work so I'm able to be one step ahead of them. Understand what I'm saying?" Malfoy nodded.

"You were in Slytherin".

Moody nodded. "Aye. And we're the most cunning, the sneakiest, the hardest to catch lot of bastards there is. That's what became an Auror. I always liked a challenge in school, and given that most dark wizards have come from Slytherin, I knew I'd never be bored. Most of them think of me as a traitor, of course." Malfoy drew his lips into a line; he was already dealing with this. "But you're strong. You can beat them. If you can come up with a plan to catch your dad, you can do damn near anything, I reckon."

Malfoy nodded again, looking scared still, but now also oddly comforted. Harry remembered Marcus Flint who'd been killed by his own father for refusing to be a Death Eater; he remembered the girl with the impenetrable Scottish accent who'd had the nerve to ask him to the ceilidh. Lastly, he thought of Snape. He'd once thought of everyone who'd been in Slytherin as being completely irredeemable, and was enormously relieved that he'd been put in Gryffindor after the Sorting Hat had briefly considered him for Slytherin. Now he found himself changing his mind, willing to be open about considering the merits of being ambitious and clever. Truthfully, he was less inclined to like Ravenclaws these days, especially considering Roger Davies and Niamh Quirke and her gossipy friends. And Barty Crouch, Jr. had also been a Ravenclaw. He saw a certain arrogance there, somehow; they projected a feeling of innate superiority that grated on him. Except for Cho--she was all right. Maybe eventually, they'd even be friends. He still felt just a bit smug about putting her together with Viktor Krum.

Moody leaned forward now and said to Dumbledore, "Who's the Inquisitor"?

“Bean’s handling it”.

Moody nodded and sat back again. Harry frowned. “Who?” he said to Dumbledore.

“Eustace Bean,” was all the explanation Dumbledore gave.

The door behind them opened again and other witches and wizards began filling the room. Harry watched the other spectators file in. He saw Remus Lupin enter and sit in the top row on the left. He nodded at Harry and gave him a small smile, then hid his face behind a Daily Prophet. He would not want to be recognized, Harry knew. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up into the kind blue eyes of Arthur Weasley. Harry stood to face him, swallowing. Percy stood next to him, and behind them were Molly Weasley and Bill and Charlie.

“Hello, Harry. Good luck,” Mr. Weasley said to him. Harry couldn’t speak. Just those few words were so moving to him. He kept his left hand on Harry’s shoulder, then extended his right hand and Harry took it silently, with a gratitude in his eyes that he knew Mr. Weasley understood. Harry felt that he was perhaps absolved of his part in the Ginny/Draco cover-up. Percy shook his hand and then Mr. Weasley and Percy moved on to Ron and Ginny, after greeting Hermione. Bill and Charlie each also wrung Harry’s hand, smiling encouragingly, before they too moved down to the others. Then he looked up into Mrs. Weasley’s dark brown eyes, glittering with tears. She nodded at him, then enfolded him in a forgiving embrace, making his eyes water, finishing with a kiss on the cheek. She moved to Hermione then, doing the same, and Harry could see how much this meant to her.

Harry looked over at Draco Malfoy and saw Mr. Weasley shaking his hand grimly, without a smile. This was quite something from someone who previously would probably have preferred to put hot needles in his eyes rather than contemplate a Malfoy touching his only daughter. Harry watched Percy, Bill and Charlie, also not smiling, quickly take Malfoy’s hand. Finally, Mrs. Weasley released Ginny from a tight hug, kissing her on the cheek, and turned to Malfoy. She looked uncertainly at him, then suddenly, she gave him a quick peck on the cheek, turning swiftly to join her husband and sons.

Malfoy touched his cheek briefly, then pulled his hand away with a guilty look on his face as he caught his mother’s eye. She was sitting several rows lower than Remus Lupin, and was staring daggers at him. Harry saw Malfoy swallow, then he put his hands in his lap and looked down at them. Harry shuddered as Narcissa Malfoy then caught his eye. He remembered how the veela had gone from being seductively beautiful women to frightening harpies, killing machines. He looked away from Mrs. Malfoy. Oddly, at that moment, he was reminded of how frightening his own mother had been during some of the episodes he and Hermione had seen in Snape’s Pensieve. Why should I think of that now? he wondered.

He turned to look at Hermione. She was very pale. He knew she worried about the same thing he did; would the testimony of others reveal their physical relationship? Would they themselves have to reveal the secret? And would their testimony suffice to put Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban?

The door in the corner opened then, and twelve witches and wizards filed in and took their places on the right-hand side of the room, several tiers below where the Weasleys were sitting. Finally, the buzzing and chatting in the room died down and everyone seemed to be holding their breaths as the corner door opened again and Lucius Malfoy was led in by two dementors. He looked exhausted yet still defiant. He didn’t look at his son. Harry shuddered from being so close to the dementors, but tried to focus, tried not to let them get to him. Lucius Malfoy was taken to the chair with the chains, which turned gold and snaked up the sides of the chair, encasing his arms and binding him there. The dementors left again, causing Harry to breathe a sigh of relief.

Silence reigned in the room. Harry saw that Narcissa Malfoy did not look at her son or husband. Then Harry heard someone stepping down the levels, going toward the center of the windowless, underground chamber. He turned his head and saw a large, dark-haired, middle-aged man with a barrel chest and piercing light blue eyes under heavy brows. He wore the blackest black robes Harry had ever seen, and a matching wizard’s hat which did not wobble an inch as he descended toward the prisoner.

The prisoner.

He remembered seeing Karkaroff in that same chair, bargaining for his freedom, then on the rock at Dover, bargaining for his life. Neither setting had been particularly fair. As before in Dumbledore’s Pensieve, Harry saw that Lucius Malfoy had no advocate to speak for him. He remembered that Ludo Bagman had spoken for himself, and his popularity had given him his freedom. Obviously, the concept of a fair trial in the wizarding world was still mired in a millenia-old tradition of

assumption of the guilt of the accused. Perhaps it would not have done Sirius much good to have a trial, he thought. He was glad that it probably meant that Lucius Malfoy would be going to Azkaban, but he sincerely hoped that he was never down there in that chair, without anyone to speak on his behalf...

"Lucius Malfoy!" came the booming voice of Eustace Bean. He sounded oddly like a bartender from the East End of London--yet he was in charge here. Harry noticed Cornelius Fudge seated just behind Narcissa Malfoy. Harry remembered at the World Cup how he had spoken of Lucius Malfoy's generosity to St. Mungo's. Fudge looked nervous and unhappy all at once. Could he override Bean if he chose? Harry did not know.

"You have been brought before the Council of Magical Law to answer to multiple charges," Bean continued. "First: Illegally training your son--an underage wizard-- to Apparate. Second: Taking your son to a gathering of dark wizards for the purpose of being initiated into their number. Third: At said gathering of dark wizards, allowing your son to be placed under the Cruciatus Curse. Fourth: Also at said gathering, witnessing the murder of one Igor Karkaroff, and not divulging this to the proper authorities. Fifth through ninth: Attempting to coerce other young people to become dark wizards, namely Penelope Clearwater," Harry saw Percy cover his mouth in distress, "Marcus Flint, Percy Weasley--a Ministry employee-- and mind you--Roger Davies--current Head Boy at Hogwarts--and--Harry Potter".

A gasp went up from the spectators and Harry felt dozens of eyes upon him. Bean had paused for effect, and he seemed satisfied with the crowd's reaction. A born showman, Harry thought. He looked sideways at Dumbledore, who nodded almost imperceptibly and then turned to glare around the room. The noise dissolved.

"Charges Ten through fifteen: conspiracy to commit murder. You ordered the murders of Penelope Clearwater's parents Beryl and Reginald Clearwater, her grandfather, Wilmer Clearwater, and--her ten-year-old brother, Jeremy Clearwater. Another reaction from the crowd, which Bean ignored. "You also ordered the murders of Aurelia Flint and Letitia Carpenter." Harry assumed Aurelia Flint was Marcus Flint's mother, and the Carpenter woman must have been the houseguest at the Flints' that Sirius had mentioned.

"Charges Sixteen through nineteen," Bean continued, "You placed three young girls, students at Hogwarts, under the Imperius Curse, namely Kathryn Bell and Cho Chang--both prefects--and Alicia Spinnet--current Head Girl. You also used a dangerous potion that acts like Imperius on Hogwarts prefect Hermione Granger.

"Charges Twenty through Twenty-two," Bean said. "Kidnapping and detaining Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter against their will. And lastly, Charge Twenty-three: Placing the Cruciatus Curse on Ronald Weasley, son of Ministry employee Arthur Weasley".

Bean walked near Malfoy and peered briefly into his face before straightening up again. "Lucius Malfoy! You have heard the twenty-three charges against you. What say you to these charges?"

Harry looked at Lucius Malfoy, and was startled to see him looking back, directly at him. "I say, I know something you don't know," he said softly.

"What's that?" Bean said loudly. Now Malfoy looked at Bean.

"I know some things you don't know. Quite a few things." He looked at Harry again, and his mouth began to twist in a very wicked fashion. Harry swallowed. He was getting a very bad feeling about this.

Bean saw what Malfoy was trying to do, how he was trying to shake him up. He looked at Malfoy shrewdly and said. "I'm sure you will have the opportunity to tell us many things as we go through the charges one by one. The first four charges involve your son, so I will ask him to elucidate for us. You may respond when he is done if you feel he has been in any way inaccurate." He turned to the row where they were sitting. "Draco Malfoy! Please stand".

He swallowed and stood, and Harry remembered how composed he was most of the time when he was in the circle at Dover. That's right, just stand there like you have ice water in your veins. Don't let that old bastard who fathered you get the upper hand...

"Draco Malfoy!" Bean said again. "The first charge against your father is that of teaching you to Apparate. When did this begin"?

He lifted his chin and looked at the Inquisitor. "Right after I returned home from school last June".

“Were you aware of the fact that your father was breaking the law by doing this”?

He paused for a moment before saying levelly, “Yes”.

“Why then did you comply”?

Draco Malfoy looked down, then at Ginny next to him, who gave a small nod. He looked up at Bean again. “I complied because I had to. I always had to do whatever he said”.

Bean nodded and paced slowly in front of Lucius Malfoy’s chair. “Yes, yes, you were an obedient son”...

“No. That’s not it”.

Bean looked up at him. “It’s not? You didn’t just go along with everything your father asked of you to be a good, obedient son? Obedience for its own sake”?

He shook his head. “There would have been--consequences, should I have chosen to defy him”.

Bean looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Consequences, you say. Punishment of some kind? Loss of privileges? Going to bed with no tea?” Bean sounded glib.

“Torture”.

A low murmur rumbled through the room, and Lucius Malfoy began to glare at his son, as did Narcissa Malfoy. He was airing the dirty laundry in public.

“Torture, you say. What sort of torture”?

“He would put the Passus Curse on me”.

“The Passus Curse? Is that all? It is painful, of course, but it is brief. Is that how he tortured you, coerced you to do things you knew to be illegal”?

“It is brief if the person casting the spell wishes it to be. If it is repeated...well, I still bear the marks”.

Bean looked slightly uncomfortable now. “Er, where are these--marks”?

“My arms”.

Bean looked relieved. “Would you mind showing the jury these--marks”?

He paused for a moment, then began to move. He unbuttoned his robes to his waist, then slid them off his shoulders; he unbuttoned his shirt to the waist and then drew the fine linen fabric off his shoulders, revealing his pale chest, but more importantly, his bruised upper arms. He kept his forearms covered. The bruises were purplish-green and numerous on both arms. After the jury had had a chance to see this, he pulled his shirt on again, buttoning it properly once more, then replacing his robes and buttoning those as well. He continued to hold his head high, and Harry thought that perhaps this wasn’t going so badly after all. It certainly couldn’t look good for Lucius Malfoy to be torturing his own son to coerce him to do illegal things. Draco Malfoy was underage--surely he wouldn’t be blamed.

Bean prepared to go on. “The second charge”--

“That’s not all,” Draco Malfoy interrupted him, still standing. Bean looked startled, then malevolent. Harry made a mental note not to interrupt him while being questioned. Then he remembered that Draco Malfoy had interrupted Voldemort himself during his initiation. He certainly had nerve, Harry thought.

“That’s not all,” Bean echoed, almost without inflection.

“If I really displeased him, he put the Hara Kiri curse on me”.

“I am not familiar with that curse. What is it”?

Draco Malfoy sighed. "Something my father discovered while traveling. It comes from Japan. In that country, it is the ritual of suicide that is performed--or was, rather, since it's been illegal for some time--when a person was in disgrace. The honorable thing to do was to kill yourself, in a very specific way. You were supposed to use a special knife made just for the purpose. You used the knife to ritually disembowel yourself. When the Hara Kiri curse is placed on someone, they believe that they are performing this ritual suicide on themselves, and feel all of the pain and see all of the blood as if they really were doing it. It's an Unforgivable Curse in Japan. You can be executed for using it on a human being. They do not use dementors. But there are no laws against it here".

A loud buzz erupted as the spectators considered what kind of father would put such a curse on his own son. Bean had a gleam in his eye and one corner of his mouth curled up. "So," he said. "You had ample reason for also acceding to your father in his wish to have you initiated into a group of dark wizards. The second charge. And the third charge: being complicit in the Cruciatus Curse being placed on another person, namely you, Draco Malfoy. And witnessing the murder of Igor Karkaroff--which you also did not divulge," Bean said to Draco Malfoy, "But we have heard and seen evidence about why you did not".

He stood straight and tall, his platinum hair almost blending in with his pale skin, and spoke again. "It was not just any group of dark wizards, sir".

Bean looked up at him, frowning. "How do you mean"?

Draco turned and looked at Harry, who nodded grimly at him. He turned back to Bean. "They were Death Eaters summoned by--Voldemort".

Now the noise rumbling through the room had gotten completely out of hand, and Harry was impressed. He'd never heard Draco Malfoy say the name before, he'd only called him the Dark Lord. Bean looked darkly at him, while Fudge stood and tried to quiet the crowd, but they ignored him and the noise continued. Finally, Dumbledore stood and shot silver sparks into the air with his wand, and used the commanding voice Harry had only heard from him a few times.

"Silence! Do you want to hear the truth or not"?

The chamber grew quiet. Dumbledore remained standing, as did Fudge, who was glaring back at the headmaster. "We are here for the truth, yes!" the bowler-hatted wizard declared. "Not fairy tales about You-Know-Who returning"!

Eustace Bean nodded. "Yes, Minister, I quite agree. Master Malfoy, please remember"...

"He's telling the truth!" Harry had been unable to stop himself. He was on his feet now, trying to steady his breathing. Every eye was on him, and Bean looked astonished. Harry swallowed, then looked at Draco Malfoy, who glanced at him briefly, but did not look as though the outburst were unwelcome.

"And you would know this because--?" Bean prompted him.

"I was there almost one year ago when Voldemort got his body back. He used my blood to do it".

The pandemonium in the chamber was deafening. Bean tried crying out, "I will clear the room!" but it had no effect. Harry looked defiantly at Fudge, who was purple with rage. He had been contradicted by Harry Potter. He had no doubt as to whom the wizarding world would believe. Fudge sat again, as did Dumbledore.

When the noise had finally died away, Lucius Malfoy looked up at Eustace Bean and said evenly, "I told you there were things you don't know." He had a nasty smile on his face and looked up at Harry, who slowly sat next to Dumbledore again. Once more, the only people standing were Draco Malfoy and the Inquisitor.

"Let us return to the second charge, and let us also hope that not all of the charges take so long to explore. You say that this particular gathering of dark wizards was summoned by the Dark Lord"?

"Yes".

"When was it"?

“Christmas night, last year. My father and I Apparated to a spot on the cliffs at Dover where all of the Death Eaters were being summoned. Voldemort was there, with his snake and Wormtail”.

“Who is this ‘Wormtail’?”

He turned and looked at Harry again. “I think Potter should tell you about him. I don’t really know much about him except that he’s the Death Eater who took care of Voldemort until he got his body back”.

“Continue”.

And he told the hushed assembly of the appearance of Karkaroff, of Voldemort questioning him. There threatened to be a riot again at the mention of Voldemort having an heir, but this time Bean’s angry gaze was enough to quell the murmurs and Draco Malfoy was able to continue his recitation. He told of having the Cruciatus Curse put on him, of receiving the Dark Mark, which Bean asked him to display to the jury. Tentatively, he pushed up the sleeve of his robes, then unbuttoned his shirt cuff and pushed that out of the way as well. Harry watched the faces of the jury members; some were impassive, others merely looking as though they wished to appear so. Several were openly horrified, covering their mouths. Harry also watched the Weasleys. Mrs. Weasley held her handkerchief over her mouth and her eyes shone with tears as she turned to look at her husband, who seemed very grim. They knew now; they knew what it meant to be Lucius Malfoy’s son.

He covered his arm again and continued, explaining that he did not wish to break the law by using the Cruciatus Curse on himself on Karkaroff, so he had volunteered to use the Hara Kiri, although knowing how painful it was. He then described Snape’s arrival--and Harry was glad that he had not told him that it was Snape, so he could not reveal that now--and the attempted flight which resulted in Wormtail alerting Voldemort, and Voldemort killing Karkaroff.

Bean thanked him and bade him sit. They were only through the first four charges. He turned to the prisoner and asked him whether anything his son had said was untrue. He looked into his son’s eyes and said, “No. Every word is true”.

Bean looked shaken, as though he were wondering what Malfoy was playing at. “You do not wish to refute anything”?

Malfoy looked up at the Inquisitor now. “I do not”.

He cleared his throat. “Very well. We shall move on to the next charges. Attempting to coerce various witches and wizards to join the Death Eaters. Penelope Clearwater! Did you attempt to recruit her”?

He smiled at Bean. “You have her suicide note, do you not? Doesn’t it say”?

Bean looked uncomfortable. “No. It does not. It’s, er, actually--” He turned and caught Percy’s eye, and Harry noticed that Percy was turning as red as his hair. “It was addressed to Percy Weasley”.

Bean nodded at Percy. “Please stand. You are Percy Weasley”?

Percy’s color had returned to normal again. He held himself erect. “Yes, sir”.

“And you were given this note after Miss Clearwater’s body was discovered”?

Percy’s eyes looked wet behind his glasses. “Yes,” he answered, his voice catching.

“What did the note say”?

Percy looked around the chamber, colouring once more. “It, er, said some rather personal things”...

Bean smiled indulgently. “How old are you, Mr. Weasley”?

“Twenty”.

“As was Miss Clearwater, I understand. I think we can assume some of the--rather personal things. You may leave the chamber now. Was there anything in the note which was not--rather personal”?

Percy nodded. "She said she would never do as they wished. She said they wanted to use her to get to me, to get me to be a Death Eater, too. She said she didn't know what else to do, and she thought that by killing herself, she at least might protect her family, if not me as well. But--but--it didn't work..." Percy was crying openly now, tears flowing freely down his face, and Harry saw that he hadn't shaved that morning; he had a faint orange fuzz on his cheeks that was now damp with his tears. Harry turned to Hermione, whose eyes were also glistening. He fought the urge to put his arm around her and hold her tightly.

"If I may," Lucius Malfoy said to Bean, with a casual tone that reminded Harry of his comment after cursing Ron. "I had no idea that Miss Clearwater had killed herself, I only knew that she did not report as ordered. As such, the plans were already in place to eliminate her family".

The hubbub in the room grew again at the offhanded way he spoke of the Clearwaters. Bean managed to silence the crowd with a wave of his hand this time. "So you admit that you ordered the murders of Beryl, Reginald, Wilmer and Jeremy Clearwater"?

He smiled. "Of course. We couldn't have any other recruits think suicide was a way out, could we? They had to know that even though they were dead, we would still take retribution on their families".

Bean was looking angry now at the way Lucius Malfoy appeared to be so glib about his situation. "Who actually carried out the murders"?

"Well, I thought about just not telling you, but they were so incompetent about the pub in Hogsmeade, I don't think they were any great loss to the Dark Lord. Avery and Nott".

Bean furrowed his brow. "They were given suspended sentences and fined for the Three Broomsticks explosion and forced to pay the publican retribution".

"Yes, and after that I gave them work that wouldn't involve them being anywhere near that ex-Auror with the magical eye," he snarled, looking up at Moody, who glared back. "They proved much more competent. I didn't anticipate the trouble with the Flints, unfortunately. Titus Flint was already a Death Eater, I assumed his son would come into the fold as a matter of course. But he was so Quidditch-obsessed, he wanted no part of it. I understand there are witnesses to his dad's killing him? I certainly didn't tell Titus to do that".

"What about Aurelia Flint, and their houseguest, Letitia Carpenter"?

"Avery and Nott again. They didn't know which was which, who was the mother and who was the houseguest, so they just killed them both. Easier that way".

Bean looked at Malfoy suspiciously again. Harry wondered what was going on. Why was he giving up Avery and Nott? Why was he so easily admitting his involvement? Why wasn't he denying anything? Bean asked him about sending recruitment letters to Percy and Roger, and he freely admitted this, saying that the Dark Lord had a bit of a weakness for Head Boys. He liked their drive and ambition. Percy looked embarrassed by this--he liked to think these were good qualities, and here he was being coveted by Voldemort because of them. He also confirmed that they were no longer potential candidates; too much publicity. Then Bean mentioned recruiting Harry.

"Yes, well, that one's obvious, isn't it?" he said cheerfully.

"Obvious?" Bean said, as though it were no such thing.

"Certainly. The triumph of the Dark Lord having Harry Potter for his servant...what could be more satisfying for him?" He didn't mention what Dumbledore had, Voldemort's needing Harry alive to draw on his power. Perhaps he didn't know of this motivation.

"So," Bean said again, full-voiced. "You do not deny any of these charges either"?

Malfoy smiled again. "Not a one".

"Moving on!" he cried. "Charges Ten through fifteen: conspiracy to commit murder. You have already admitted ordering the murders of the Clearwaters and Mrs. Flint and Miss Carpenter. Are you expecting leniency for giving up the names

the murderers? Because I should remind you that you are also charged with numerous counts of using Unforgivable Curses on human beings”.

“If you like,” was all Malfoy said. Harry was genuinely puzzled. Why was he so cheerful and unconcerned about spending the rest of his life in Azkaban? He caught his son’s eye and furrowed his brow in a silent question. Sitting between Ginny and Moody, he raised his eyebrows and shrugged. He was as baffled as Harry.

They both turned their attention back to Bean.

“Charges Sixteen through nineteen,” Bean continued, “Placing those three girls under the Imperius Curse and using a potion that acts like Imperius on another girl. Once these girls were all in your power, what did you order them to do”?

“To pursue Harry Potter romantically.” Another buzz, and Harry felt himself redden. “Although my son informed me--and I think for once he wasn’t lying--that I needn’t have bothered as Potter seems to have become Mr. Popularity at Hogwarts. But you have been misled; although I ordered it, I didn’t personally put the girls under Imperius or administer the potion to Miss Granger. Avery and Nott did those things. I only reinforced the Imperius on Miss Chang at the Quidditch match at Hogwarts. So I humbly request that the charges against me of using the Imperius Curse be reduced to that one instance”.

Bean nodded at a wizard Harry hadn’t noticed before, sitting on the bottom tier, rapidly taking notes. This wizard nodded back at Bean and went on scribbling. Harry didn’t feel he would be likely to stop being beet-red anytime soon. “What,” Bean continued, “Was the purpose of ordering the girls to do this”?

“To guarantee that he would have a girlfriend. He doesn’t think anything of that Muggle family of his; we needed for him to be someone he would really care about if it became necessary to--persuade him of the wisdom of serving the Dark Lord. He had best friends, it’s true, but one of them is now--quite a bit more than a friend”...

Hermione was shaking, reaching out her hands blindly; Ron took one and Harry the other, squeezing so that she could absorb their strength. She looked at each of them in turn, grateful, while Harry was aware of the scratching quills of the reporters in the chamber. He had no idea what to expect from them; he almost found himself missing Rita’s articles for their predictably outrageous statements. Predictability was something. He wished he could see Hermione’s face as she looked at Ron; over her head, he could see Ron’s expression as he gazed at her. He looked as he had when she had thrown her arms around him after Harry and Malfoy had pulled him from under the debris at the Three Broomsticks. Then he met Harry’s eye, and Harry remembered the conversation he and Ron had had about Hermione without saying her name. Ron had not been ready to risk his friendship with her, he’d said. Was he ready now? Harry wondered. And there was the way he and Parvati had parted ways...

“Whether it worked is not pertinent to this inquiry, Mr. Malfoy,” Bean informed him, shutting down that avenue of exploration, much to Harry’s relief. “And whether you used the Imperius Curse once, twice or twenty times is also irrelevant.”

“Charges Twenty through Twenty-two,” Bean continued. “Kidnapping and detaining three people against their will. And charge twenty-three, placing the Cruciatius Curse on Ronald Weasley. Do you have any answer to these charges”?

Malfoy looked thoughtful. “Now that I think of it, you may have to add two more. I mean, once we had them there, we were also considering recruiting young Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger. I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention that”.

Harry didn’t get a good feeling from the way Malfoy was behaving. Volunteering that there were charges to be added? What sane prisoner would ever do such a thing? Plus, he’d already given up Avery and Nott for the six murders and used Imperius, and he’d revealed that Titus Flint was not just a murderer on the run, but a Death Eater who was trying to coerce his son to join also--as Lucius Malfoy had done with his son. Harry was beginning to regret having left Sandy at Hogwarts. He had thought that it wouldn’t be good for anyone to hear her hissing under his robes, and he didn’t want her being a Parselmouth to come up, but now he was wishing he had some way to glimpse into the future, so he could tell what Lucius Malfoy was up to.

“So,” Bean said, “When you say ‘we had them there,’ you mean you and your son”.

“And Wormtail”.

“Ah. There is that name again”.

He looked at Harry. "Ask Harry Potter." Bean looked at Harry again; Draco Malfoy had said as much. Then Lucius Malfoy looked around the room and his eyes lit on Lupin. Oh no, thought Harry. "You can ask him, too. The werewolf they had teaching our children at Hogwarts two years ago".

Lupin drew his lips into a line and caught Harry's eye. Sorry, Harry said silently to him. If there were people in the wizarding world who didn't know Remus Lupin was a werewolf, they would know now. Bean looked up at him, considering the matter. "I may do just that. But right now I am more interested in the final charge. Lucius Malfoy, you placed the Cruciatus Curse on Ronald Weasley. That brings the number of unforgivable curses you cast to two. Do you have anything to say? Do you deny that you put this curse on him"?

Malfoy smiled unevenly. "Why don't you ask him? Or better still--why don't you ask him whether he put the Cruciatus Curse on his best friend, Harry Potter"?

The buzz started yet again. So that was Malfoy's game, Harry thought. Get Ron strung up as well. He knew he was stuck; they had too much on him; so he was trying to take Ron down too, and maybe Harry and Lupin if it came out that they were protecting Sirius. Which would also put Dumbledore and Snape in danger. Then he remembered that the Weasleys also knew about Sirius, and Hermione knew, and the other operatives; Dumbledore's entire covert operation could come crashing down. Did Lucius Malfoy know about Sirius? he wondered. Harry tried to remember whether he was in the crowd in Hogsmeade when Madam Rosmerta noticed Sirius after his Polyjuice Potion had worn off; worse still, had he seen the fleeing black dog and connected it to Sirius? Did he know that Sirius was an unregistered Animagus? And how could Harry and Ron and the rest of them avoid revealing all that without lying to the Inquisitor?

Ron looked at Harry and Hermione uncertainly, then down at Bean. "Very well," Bean said. "Ronald Weasley! Please stand".

Ron stood slowly, and Bean looked momentarily alarmed at how tall he was. He'd trimmed his beard neatly for the tribunal, but he still looked a bit young and frightened, despite his size and the facial hair.

"You are Ronald Weasley, son of Ministry employee Arthur Weasley"?

"Yes, sir".

"Please tell us what happened during the time leading up to Lucius Malfoy putting the Cruciatus Curse on you".

Ron was shaking. "Well," he began with a waver in his voice. "I had been tied to a tree, but Draco Malfoy convinced his dad to untie me. Before that, he pretended to tell me to put the Cruciatus Curse on Harry, and I pretended to do so as a distraction, so he could stun his dad".

Lucius Malfoy stopped being impassive now. He was livid; he screwed up his face and screamed at Ron, "You didn't fake that, Weasley! You couldn't have, not after I cursed you, and you'd heard about them," he said, gesturing with his head at Harry and Hermione. "You put the Cruciatus Curse on Harry Potter"!

Ron breathed through his nostrils, his chest heaving as though he'd gone running with Harry and Hermione for the first time all over again. Harry could see how nervous he was.

"Ronald Weasley!" bellowed the Inquisitor, suddenly looking at Ron quite menacingly. The Weasleys looked terrified; they hadn't known about this. "Did you or did you not put the Cruciatus Curse on Harry Potter"?

Ron bit his lip; when he spoke, his voice shook. "I--I wanted Mr. Malfoy to think so..." Still technically a truthful response, not a yes-no one. Harry stood quickly.

"Sir," he said as respectfully as he could, considering he was speaking out of turn. "May I?" Bean surveyed him for a few moments, then nodded. "I heard him say the curse, and he pointed the wand at me, but--I felt no pain. No pain at all. I didn't feel a thing." He was also telling the truth, technically. Lucius Malfoy looked hysterical now, struggling with his body as though he wanted to run up into the seats and throttle Harry personally.

"I tell you, he did!" he said repeatedly. Bean observed him with a detached expression, almost pity, but not quite. After he had ranted for a bit, he put a stop to it.

"Enough! If any charges are to be brought against Ronald Weasley, that is for another time. Further, it seems that an investigation into this Wormtail person is also in order, but also at another time. Do you have any further response to the charges against you, Lucius Malfoy?"

Malfoy glared at Harry. "No, I do not," he said with his eyes full of hate.

"Very well. I now ask the jury," Bean proclaimed, "To raise their hands for conviction and a life sentence in Azkaban." Everyone looked expectantly at the jurors. Not a single hand was raised. Bean was starting to turn purple. "All who vote for acquittal, raise your hands." Still not a single movement from the jurors except to look down. Bean strode over to the front. "May I remind you that you are here to serve the cause of justice! What say you?"

"What about justice for us?" a young wizard on the jury asked, then reddened and looked down again.

A witch burst out, "If You-Know-Who is back, do you think he won't be able to find those of us who were on this jury? We didn't know about that when we agreed to do this!"

An older witch stood uncertainly and said, "With all due respect, Mr. Bean, would it be possible for us to--discuss the verdict and sentence in private, and to give an anonymous vote?" She looked uncertainly at her fellow jurors, since they hadn't talked about this. Some of them nodded to her, others still looked uncertain. Harry remembered that in Dumbledore's Pensieve, the verdicts were given quite promptly after the testimony, by a show of hands, no anonymity. But all of those trials were held after the fall of Voldemort.

Bean reluctantly nodded to the witch, then went to the door in the corner and knocked twice. The dementors who had escorted Malfoy into the room went to the chair. The chains released him, and they lifted him to a standing position, escorting him out again. Harry watched through narrowed eyes; somehow, he felt looking at the dementors this way might prevent them from having any effect on him. When they were gone, the members of the jury rose and filed out. The chamber seemed to be in some disarray; everyone had expected to get the verdict immediately. This was an unexpected development. The rest of the crowd starting moving about now, and Harry saw Dumbledore giving an angry glare to some reporters who started to approach them. Then Harry turned and saw Eustace Bean approaching them.

"Albus. May I speak to you privately? Perhaps Alastor can escort your students to the commissary for some tea".

Dumbledore nodded at him. "Of course. I had hoped to speak to you as well. May I bring someone else along"?

Bean nodded and Dumbledore gestured to Lupin to descend the rows of seats to join them. When he was standing next to them, Dumbledore said, "Eustace Bean, may I introduce to you Remus Lupin? Remus will be our Defense Against the Dark Arts professor in September. I'm afraid we cannot impose upon Alastor any longer".

Harry felt this was the first bit of good news he'd had all day. He grinned at Lupin. "Really? You're coming back"?

Lupin smiled at him. "It's all set. The board of governors practically begged me." Harry turned to Hermione and Ron, who also looked thrilled. Ginny wasn't paying attention; she was gazing with concern at Draco Malfoy, who stared at the chair where his father had been. Lupin made his way through to them.

"Hello again, Draco," he said to him. Why did I think they wouldn't know each other? Harry thought stupidly. He taught me of us two years ago; of course he knew Draco Malfoy.

"Hello, Professor," he said automatically. Lupin smiled.

"Not 'Professor' again yet. In September," he said. Then he looked at him soberly. "You showed great courage today, Draco".

He looked down at Lupin; Harry was startled to realize that he too was taller than Lupin now, who was only of medium height. "Thank you," he said softly. Lupin nodded to him. He didn't seem to expect any long conversations. Dumbledore and Lupin walked off with Bean, and Moody clapped a hand on Draco Malfoy's shoulder.

"Come on. Let's all see if there's anything edible at the commissary. If there is, we can all mark this day on the calendar and celebrate it in future years as a holiday." He smiled that unnatural smile of his and then they were all laughing, even Malfoy, as they went back up the tiered rows to the door where they'd entered. Harry checked his watch; it was one-thirty. The trial had taken two-and-a-half hours. Harry didn't know whether that was short or long. Probably short, since

Malfoy hadn't really argued with any of the charges except the Imperius, and he'd still admitted to putting it on Cho Chang and he himself added the charges of trying to recruit Hermione and Ron to be Death Eaters. On the other hand, it also didn't seem that it should have taken that long for everything that was said to be said. Then he remembered all of the instances when the chamber had erupted in noise, and the time that Malfoy had spent undressing to reveal first his bruises, then his Mark.

Thankfully, Ginny and Hermione hadn't been asked to testify. He'd been terrified; and now there might be an inquiry about Wormtail, and thus, about Sirius. Perhaps Dumbledore could convince Bean to drop that for now, he hoped.

When they emerged into the corridor, the reporters were there again, asking questions, taking photographs. Moody looked at them with his magical eye and they fell back, repulsed by his strange appearance. He was leading the five of them back toward the bronze door, when they came face to face suddenly with Narcissa Malfoy.

She glared at her son with eyes full of hate. Then suddenly she slapped him across the face. "That's for disgracing the family," she said icily. "That's for throwing away everything your father and I have ever done for you, for telling us how stupid we were for saving your life when you could have been killed as a baby".

He stared at her in surprise. Then he woke up and glared at her just as angrily. "Saving my life? Screwing up my life is more like it. At least Potter's parents showed they loved him; they decided they'd rather die than let him serve that scurvy you and father call a lord. They loved him enough to give their lives for him!" Harry had never heard before exactly what was that Draco Malfoy envied most about him--now he knew.

"No, I didn't die for you! I lived for you! And your father did, too! But do you appreciate it? No, you're an ungrateful little whelp who deserves everything you're going to get!" And she spat at his face suddenly, shocking them all, especially Draco. He put his hand to his cheek, disbelief in his eyes. He stared at her speechlessly.

"I should tell you," she said icily. "That regardless of the verdict and sentence, you'd better speak to that excuse for a headmaster about where you will spend your summer holiday, and your future Christmas and Easter holidays, because certainly won't be at Malfoy Manor. You are never to darken our doorstep again. You are no longer our son. You are dead to us. You will also have to make some other arrangements for paying your tuition and school supplies. You will never see another Knut from us. You have completely disgraced the Malfoy name. You are no longer a Malfoy!" As she spoke, her hair flew loose from its carefully constructed upsweep and her face grew red. Harry thought of veelas again. "And as far as the Hara Kiri curse--it's a pity this isn't Japan. Then perhaps you would do the right thing after bringing such disgrace on your family and actually commit Hara Kiri!"

He opened his mouth to speak, but he had no words. He watched her turn and march down the corridor away from him. Then he turned to Ginny, who uttered an inarticulate cry and threw her arms around him; he put his cheek on her blazing hair, eyes shining, a shocked look still on his face.

They all stood awkwardly in the corridor, unsure what to do after the dreadful display from Mrs. Malfoy, but when Moody spotted some reporters coming their way, he moved them along again to the large bronze door, and thence to the circular room with the portals. Moody directed them to a doorway which Harry had noticed before had a number of long tables with benches, similar to the house tables in the Great Hall at Hogwarts, but a bit smaller, only seating about ten people each. After going through the portal, they selected a table. Other tables were populated by Ministry employees who were just finishing their lunches and preparing to return to their offices. Harry looked around; he didn't see any place to line up with a tray to get food. There were just tables and benches in the large underground room--which could be anywhere in the city of London, he realized after a second, depending on the location of the abandoned tube station they had converted into the commissary. He looked uncertainly at Moody, who grabbed a plate from a stack on the table. Looking down at it, Moody muttered, "Corned beef and cabbage, boiled potatoes and a stout." The requested food appeared on his plate, and a pint of stout next to it. So Ron took a plate from the stack as well.

"Bubble and squeak," he said experimentally, "and pumpkin juice".

The food appeared. The other students also procured plates and placed their orders. It took Harry a while to decide what he felt like eating. Oddly enough, the first thing that came to mind was something he'd only ever had at Mrs. Figg's. For that her house smelled of cabbage (and more than a little like cats) the food she'd served him had been good, and certainly in more generous portions than the Dursleys. "Moussaka," he said clearly, hoping the house elves or whoever was taking the orders knew what this was. "And flatbread and lemonade." In a matter of moments, the food had appeared looking just as Harry had remembered it the last time he'd been at Mrs. Figg's, years before (Although, as Moody had warned, the food wasn't as good as Mrs. Figg's--it was slightly bland). Ginny was having some shrimp dish that smelled

garlicky (luckily, Snape wasn't present), and Hermione had chosen (Without a thought to the invisible servers, he noticed a serving of paella.

Only Draco Malfoy had no food in front of him and did not look as though he wanted any. He still looked in shock. Ginny tried to get him to try some of her lunch, and Ron did the same, but he shook his head dumbly, a vacant look in his eyes. He wasn't truly with them, Harry thought. This was a price he hadn't expected to pay. He was suddenly disowned, cut off, destitute and alone. For someone who had led the kind of privileged existence Draco had, this would be an utter shock to the system. Harry felt confident that Dumbledore would find some way to sort things out for him, and he probably would not care at all about the tuition, but, having had no family really, for most of his life, Harry could not begin to imagine what it would be like to have one, and then have it snatched away because he had done the right and just thing.

By the time they were done eating, it was two-thirty. They didn't get up. Dumbledore and Lupin came through the portkey and joined them at their table after putting a hand briefly on Draco Malfoy's shoulder. Harry remembered him doing the same with the young Snape, when Sirius had given him the goblet of blood. Harry again felt the same concern about making sure that Draco stayed on the right side, that he didn't slip back into what was easy and familiar.

"We've spoken to Bean about Wormtail. He knows that he is a dark wizard who is also an unregistered Animagus, taking the form of a rat. He knows that he helped Voldemort regain his body and that he put the Cruciatus Curse on Draco here. He squeezed Malfoy's shoulder again. "He knows nothing yet about-- Snuffles. And for now, it will stay that way." Harry noticed that Malfoy had a perplexed look on his face. How much could they tell him? he wondered. How trustworthy was he now, really?

"He also knows that Wormtail has a distinctive silver hand, and in his rat form, a silver paw. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement will be on the lookout for him. That is the best we can do for now"...

"Professor?" Harry said suddenly.

"Yes, Harry"?

"The silver hand--it seems to have changed him. He's different now. More confident".

Dumbledore nodded. "It is a very powerful magical object that Voldemort has bestowed upon him, and it is part of his body. And as it is silver..." he turned and looked at Lupin, and Harry understood. He in particular had to be very careful ever he encountered his old friend Pettigrew. Silver was fatal to werewolves. But apparently Dumbledore decided that they had explored this topic for long enough.

"The jury isn't back yet," Dumbledore told them all. "We all need to find a way to occupy ourselves while we wait." The Weasleys had come into the commissary not long after they had commenced eating, and Mr. Weasley stood now and approached their table.

"Well," he said, trying to sound cheerful. "I could give everyone a long-overdue tour of my office".

Ginny looked very excited about this, as did Hermione. Ron was less excited, but Ginny was pulling on his arm, reminding him for how long they'd wanted to see where their father worked. She tried to pull on Malfoy's arm too, but he shook his head, looking glum. Harry actually might have liked to see the office, but he begged off too. He didn't want Malfoy to be alone. He thought of Penelope Clearwater, thinking there was no way out but suicide. He had never thought of Draco Malfoy as someone who could be suicidal (Homicidal, yes), but now he decided there was a definite danger, and it made him nervous. For one thing, there was Ginny; Harry hated to think of how she would react if Malfoy killed himself. He thought he had nothing left to live for; Harry had to remind him that he had Ginny.

The others left for the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, and only Malfoy and Harry were left in the commissary. Suddenly, Malfoy rose and took off his robes, folding them up hastily and cramming them into his bag after taking his wand and inserting it in a special pocket along the outside of his right thigh. Harry watched him go, then picked up his own bag and followed. He emerged into the circular room, but there was no sign of Malfoy. Then Harry listened; he heard footsteps echoing down the curving corridor they'd taken to come here from the station platform. Oh no, thought Harry. He's going to the station.

He ran down the corridor, and then he started to hear the footsteps before him running, not walking away from him. He sped up and finally found Malfoy staring at the solid wall in which Dumbledore had opened an archway with his wand. Then, as he might, Malfoy couldn't seem to get it to open. He struck his wand on the bricks repeatedly, looking for the spot th

would let him out. He looked over his shoulder, seeing Harry, and decided to ignore him, continuing to bash his wand against the wall, until Harry thought he would snap it. He had already snapped.

Harry moved to stand next to him, then grabbed his wrist and gently took his wand from his hand. Malfoy stared at him as though he were a stranger, his wrist still in Harry's hand. Harry pocketed Malfoy's wand.

"You don't want to do it, you know".

"Do what"?

Harry stared at him intently, waiting to answer. "Throw yourself in front of the train," he finally said.

Malfoy looked alarmed, as though Harry had read his mind. "How did you"--

"Because that's the first thing I'd think of, if I were you. I wouldn't think of the obvious thing".

"What obvious thing? There's a better way to kill myself down here? Besides getting you hacked off enough that you might do it for me"?

"No. I mean the obvious reason why you shouldn't".

"What's that"?

"Ginny".

The moment Harry said the name, Malfoy's face crumpled, and he nodded, then leaned against the unyielding wall and slumped down to his haunches, hiding his face in his hands. If he was crying, he was doing it silently. Harry wondered how young he was when he had learned to do that, to cry so silently that his father wouldn't hear, so no one would suspect what he was doing. He remembered the years in his cupboard under the stairs...Harry also leaned against the wall, slowly sliding down to a sitting position. He stared into space, his legs stretched out in front of him, waiting.

After what seemed a very long time, Malfoy lifted his face. He sat down on the floor like Harry now, his legs stretched out in front of him, and sighed. He sounded very tired. They sat like that for a while, not talking. Finally Malfoy said, "Potter".

"Yeah Malfoy?" Silence. "Well, Malfoy"?

"You can't call me that".

"What? That's what I always call you".

"I know, but I shouldn't use that name any more. I'm no longer a Malfoy, remember"?

"What are you going to do, go by just one name, like Sting"?

"Who"?

"Nevermind. So I'm supposed to call you Draco now"?

"Yes".

"I don't think so. You still call me Potter".

"All right." He took a deep breath and forced out the word: "Harry. There. I said it".

Harry made a face. "Don't do that. This isn't going to work. As far as I'm concerned, you're still Malfoy".

He actually smiled a little. "And I suppose I'd better keep calling you Potter".

"So we actually agree on something".

"A miracle." They each had a small smile. They were quiet again for a little while, but it was a more companionable silence this time. Then Malfoy spoke again. "So, Potter. What do you do with those Muggles of yours all summer?"

"Last summer I relandscaped the garden for five pounds a day".

"Oh, right. The manual labour".

"It was good exercise. And I actually had some spending money for once".

Malfoy was silent again for a time before he spoke. "How much is five pounds a day in Galleons"?

"I don't know. Probably not very much. It's not even very much in Muggle money. That's why I knew my aunt would agree to pay me that. It's so little it's laughable--but it's better than nothing".

"How do you pay for your Hogwarts stuff, then"?

"I have an account at Gringott's. My parents left me some money." Harry felt a little uncomfortable discussing this with him, now that he had nothing. It was even worse than with Ron.

"Well, you could change some of your Galleons into Muggle money, you know. The Goblins don't mind. In fact, they love it. It's the chief way they make money, after all. First, they set the exchange rates so that they're favourable to them always, then they also charge a transaction fee on every exchange--a percentage, naturally, rather than a flat fee. Since plenty of wizards and witches need to buy things in the Muggle world, they really clean up. And their loan policies are even worse. I can personally tell you of several pureblood families who think nothing of converting large amounts of gold to Muggle money just so they can put it in Muggle banks as collateral, then take out even bigger Muggle loans using the gold. The Goblins would kill if they knew how much business they were losing to the Muggles, but their rates are ridiculous. They're driving the wizard loan business away".

Harry listened, not really interested in what Malfoy was saying, but in how he managed to find something to talk about that didn't have a direct connection to the crisis in his life right now. He could babble about Muggle versus Goblin loan policies and Harry could sit with him, pretending to listen and understand about compound interest and how much you had to invest to make to offset the Goblin exchange fees in each direction, and know that at least he was keeping Malfoy from winding up under a train.

Harry was actually started to doze off when he heard footsteps and looked up to see Dumbledore approaching. They entered the room, stood, and Malfoy took out his robes again, and Harry gave him his wand back, which he pocketed. When Dumbledore reached them, he said simply, "They're back".

They both nodded, then followed him down the corridor to the circular room where the others were waiting. Harry knew it wasn't worth it to bother asking Dumbledore how he'd found them. In a daze, Harry walked along next to Hermione; they went through the great bronze door again, past the gauntlet of reporters, into the ancient chamber where wizarding law had been tested, for better or worse, for more than a millenium before Hogwarts even existed.

They took the same seats they had before and waited. Harry saw Cornelius Fudge seat himself behind Narcissa Malfoy again. There was no way he could keep all of the foreign press from writing about Voldemort's return, even if he continued to suppress it in the Daily Prophet. What would he do now? Harry wondered. Which side was he really on?

The jury finally filed back into the room. Then the dementors returned with Lucius Malfoy, who was chained to the chair once more. At last, Eustace Bean walked down the rows of seats and stood next to the chair. Lucius Malfoy's jaw was clenched. He glared around the room. Harry met his eyes at one point; he saw him look at his son, at Bean, at the Weasleys and the jury members, who looked visibly nervous. Please, thought Harry desperately. Please let them be brave enough to do the right thing, to not fear Voldemort and the Death Eaters...

"Lucius Malfoy!" Eustace Bean pronounced loudly and deliberately. "You have heard and answered the charges against you. Do you have anything else to say in your defense"?

He stared into space, not dignifying this question with a response. Bean nodded, as though he'd expected as much. He turned to the jury and nodded. The same witch who'd requested privacy for them to reach their decision stood again, a sheaf of parchments in her hand which shook vigorously due to her nervousness. Bean looked at her intently. Then his voice rang out in the stone-walled chamber:

“Do you have a verdict”?

* * * * *

Chapter Thirty-One: Legacy

“Do you have a verdict”?

Eustace Bean’s voice rang out in the stone chamber. The witch standing and holding the sheaf of parchment swallowed and looked at Lucius Malfoy, who then turned and gazed at her with a malevolence which made her turn ashen and shiver even more, although she managed to remain upright. But through her shaking and fear, she finally was able to speak.

“We do”.

A low rumble started to move through the room, growing slightly louder, then dying out again, until there was silence once more. The witch cleared her throat and read:

“Charge one: Illegally training an underage wizard to Apparate. The defendant is found guilty and ordered to pay the Improper Use of Magic Office and the Department of Magical Transportation each a fine of one thousand Galleons.

“Charge two: Conspiring in the initiation of Draco Malfoy into the Death Eaters. The defendant is found guilty, sentenced to three years in Azkaban.

“Charge three: Conspiring in Draco Malfoy being placed under Cruciatius: The defendant is found guilty, sentenced to three years in Azkaban.

“Charge four: Conspiring to conceal the murder of Igor Karkaroff. The defendant is found guilty, sentenced to three years in Azkaban.

“Charges five through nine and charges twenty-four and twenty-five, appended at the prisoner’s request: Recruiting Penelope Clearwater, Marcus Flint, Percy Weasley, Roger Davies, Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger to be Death Eaters. The defendant is found guilty, sentenced to fourteen years in Azkaban.

“Charges ten through fifteen: conspiracy to murder Beryl Clearwater, Reginald Clearwater, Wilmer Clearwater, Jeremy Clearwater, Aurelia Flint and Letitia Carpenter. The defendant is found guilty and sentenced to eighteen years in Azkaban and required to liquidate all assets to be divided among the heirs of the deceased.

“Charge sixteen: Placing Cho Chang under Imperius. The defendant is found guilty and sentenced to life in Azkaban.

Charges seventeen and eighteen: Placing Kathryn Bell and Alicia Spinnet under Imperius. And charge nineteen: Administering a potion to Hermione Granger that acts like Imperius. The jury recommends that these three charges be suspended and reviewed at a later date pending the apprehension and trial of Matthias Avery and Gunther Nott.

“Charges twenty through twenty-two: Kidnapping and detaining Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger and Harry Potter. The defendant is found guilty and sentenced to nine years in Azkaban and ordered to pay Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger and Mr. Potter one-thousand Galleons each.

“Charge twenty-three: Placing the Cruciatius Curse on Ronald Weasley. The defendant is found guilty and sentenced to life in Azkaban”.

A low murmur started moving through the chamber as those assembled considered the consequences of Lucius Malfoy’s actions. Hermione had been doing the calculations in her head. “That’s fifty years plus two life sentences, as well as the fines and the liquidation of the assets,” she whispered to Ron and Harry. “They didn’t go easy on him.” She was smiling and looking at the witch who had read out the verdicts and sentences. Harry also looked at the jury; he wanted to memorize every face on it, imprint them on his mind forever. We must choose between what is right and what is easy. He looked at Lucius Malfoy, who was glaring at Eustace Bean, not looking happy. Ha, Harry thought. His Ministry connections failed him. Even Cornelius Fudge can’t help you now, Malfoy.

He heard a wail then, and Narcissa Malfoy ran from the chamber, a handkerchief held over her face in anguish. Lucius Malfoy did not look at her. Harry leaned forward and raised his eyebrows at Draco Malfoy, who saw and whispered, "It's the liquidation of assets thing." He was smiling. "She needn't have told me not to come back to Malfoy Manor. Looks like she won't be going back either--at least, not for long." Harry nodded. She would be destitute, no money or place to live. Harry wasn't sure Draco Malfoy should look so gleeful about this, but then his mother had just a little while ago disowned him and recommended that he kill himself...

When the murmur had died down again, Cornelius Fudge stood. "As the Minister of Magic," he said, "I suspend Mr. Malfoy's life sentences, inasmuch as he has given us the names of Matthias Avery and Gunther Nott, who will be apprehended and tried for murder. The fines will stand. I also suspend half of the other sentences".

Eustace Bean glared at Fudge and Harry looked sideways at Dumbledore, who seemed utterly unsurprised. That left Malfoy with twenty-six years in Azkaban. He would be sixty-seven upon leaving. Considering how long wizards live, Harry thought, looking at Dumbledore, that still left him more than half his life to live after that. The beauty of a life sentence being placed on a wizard, Harry thought, was that his life was very, very long. Could Fudge just do this?

There was not just a murmur in the chamber now; there threatened to be a riot. But evidently, Fudge did in fact have the right to do this. Harry supposed it was a lucky thing that he hadn't pardoned Malfoy completely. Perhaps that was some gesture to appear to be fair and impartial. Harry was convinced that, come what may, Fudge had to be ousted from his post. This was a travesty of justice. Suspending the life sentences!

He turned to see Ron's face. Oddly, he was beaming. "What's wrong with you?" Harry whispered, unsure whether he'd heard in the hubbub.

"A thousand Galleons," Ron said simply, grinning. "And I didn't have to be a Triwizard Champion," he laughed. "I just had to get myself kidnapped." Harry also laughed. Trust Ron to see it in those terms. Well, he would finally have a little more money. That was nice for him. Harry didn't care about the money. He cared about Fudge cutting Malfoy's years in prison down to a mere twenty-six. He cared about Fudge's motivations. Fudge looked at Harry now, a cold look that Harry returned. I will not look away, he thought. This cowardly little wizard will not make me take back what I said about Voldemort returning as much as he wants to deny it.

Fudge looked away first. Then the door in the corner opened again, and the dementors returned, to take Lucius Malfoy to Azkaban. He still looked oddly cheerful, and Bean in fact remarked on this.

"May I remind you that you are going to Azkaban now?" he growled at him.

Malfoy smiled cockily. "Do you think Azkaban can hold me, when it is guarded by the natural allies of the Dark Lord? I may be there for a while...but only for a while"...

He was still smiling as they dragged him out. Harry's heart thudded painfully in his chest. He turned to Dumbledore, who nodded. "That," he said to Harry, "is why I do not like the idea of their running Azkaban. I never liked it. I fear that we may soon regret it".

The courtroom decorum was fast evaporating as the jury moved to leave and reporters jostled each other, trying to reach them. Then a reporter's face was mere inches away from Harry's, asking him something about Hewmustnotbenamed. The reporter said it very fast. Dumbledore looked at her and said firmly, "No comment".

He and Moody managed to get the five of them out of the room and down the corridor. Harry looked over his shoulder; the Weasleys were following. When they all reached the circular room with the portals again, Dumbledore led them into one labeled MMAO, which Harry now realized meant Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office. Mr. Weasley's office. And Percy's, since he worked for his dad now. Mr. Weasley led them all to his untidy office, walled off from the larger workspace, with a door with frosted glass in the top labeled simply, "A. Weasley".

Mrs. Weasley hugged Ron and Ginny once they were in the office, then Harry and Hermione, and finally, hesitating only for a moment, Draco Malfoy, who actually got some colour in his face when this happened, although it faded quickly. Then his wife led her to his desk chair, where she sat wearily, her hand on her shoulder. Harry looked around; it looked very similar to like the office of the headmaster of the school he'd attended before Hogwarts. There was the large desk, the swiveling chair behind it, some hard wooden chairs before it for visitors, and rows of filing cabinets on each side of the room. Perhaps because of his love of all things Muggle, Mr. Weasley had consciously decided to mimic a typical Muggle office (Albeit one from about forty years ago).

Harry had unfortunately been sent to the headmaster's office multiple times for things that he did not understand, such as being on the roof of the school while being chased by Dudley and his gang. He had no control over these things when they happened, and had no plausible explanation, so he would sit in the large, hard chair before the headmaster's desk and look back at him, wide eyed and innocent, but seeming like an incorrigible little troublemaker to the stern man before him.

Harry did not miss those days, he realized. As dangerous as it was to be him, sometimes, he closed his eyes and knew that, deep down, he was still far happier being a wizard than being a boy who did not know he was a wizard, oppressed by his family and teachers and headmaster, and miserably missing his parents every day as he lived in a cupboard under the stairs.

He opened his eyes again and continued to look around Mr. Weasley's office. There was a window on the wall behind the desk; but then Harry realized that the window showed a view of the Burrow. "It's like another portal," Mr. Weasley explained when he saw Harry puzzling at it. "Except it's just a view. I can't actually go through and be in the garden at home. I could choose any view I like; I chose this one".

"Why didn't you ever bring us to work, Dad?" Ron asked him. His father looked odd.

"I've brought you to work, surely? Of course I have"...

"No, you haven't," Ginny agreed with Ron.

"Nor the twins," Ron added.

"Well, he brought me," Charlie said. "And Bill. I was ten and Bill was twelve. I met you," he said to Moody, nodding.

Moody looked back at him shrewdly. "That's right, we did meet. You were just a lad. And I also met your"--

"Ah!" Mrs. Weasley screamed. Everyone stared at her. She had leapt to her feet and was looking terrified. "I mean, I mean--" she faltered, then turned to the view of the Burrow. "Look at the weeds in the garden! And those gnomes just running around like they own the place!" She turned to Ron and Ginny. "I'll have plenty of work for you two and the twins when the term is over".

Harry looked at the view of the Burrow, thinking that her reaction to the garden was very strange. He didn't see any gnomes. But he also thought it was a nice view for Mr. Weasley to have in his office. Mrs. Weasley had calmed down. He looked around the office some more, at some wizard photos on the walls that showed the Weasley family, the children at different stages in their lives. He smiled at a photo of Ron and Ginny playing in the garden with George and Fred. Ginny couldn't have been more than four, Ron five and the twins seven. They smiled and waved, the wind lifting their red hair slightly. Then Harry felt another presence next to him and turned to see Draco Malfoy looking at the same picture. Ginny and Ron and Hermione had been in here earlier and seen everything; they were chatting excitedly with the older Weasley brothers and Mr. Weasley about the verdict.

"I wish," Harry said softly, "I'd grown up with them. The Weasleys. I wish Ron hadn't just become my best friend when I was eleven".

Malfoy nodded. "I've never had a real friend." He also spoke softly. The others were making quite a lot of noise, ignoring them.

"What? There's Crabbe and Goyle".

He grimaced. "They're just kids of my dad's friends. We all got thrown together all the time. Didn't have much choice. They were easy to boss around, not being too bright. I couldn't actually talk to them. I don't just--um--what I mean to say about Ginny is"--

"You talk. You're also friends. That's good".

"I feel like I can tell her almost anything".

"Almost"?

"Well, there are some things she doesn't need me to tell her"...

"Such as when your hormones are completely out of control? Yeah, she can probably figure that out when she's standing facing you with a chair in one hand and a whip in the other".

Malfoy got a lopsided smile and a faraway look on his face. "Ginny with a whip...now there's an image"...

Harry laughed softly and shook his head. "I should expect it by now, but you always surprise me, Malfoy"...

"Thank you, thank you".

Just then, Ginny herself came over to them and put her arm through Malfoy's, pillowing her head on his shoulder. She nodded at the picture of her with Ron and the twins.

"That was Ron's fifth birthday. Mum always did parties in the garden. We'd play at throwing the garden gnomes over the wall and such. It's been strange being at school for our birthdays every year since starting at Hogwarts. And the loneliest year of my life was when Ron went away to school and I was the only one left at home." Harry had never thought of that before. Just Ginny and her mother and father. It did sound lonely.

Harry sighed. "I wish my birthday happened at school. Spending my birthday with the Dursleys is one of the most depressing things in the world".

Malfoy didn't speak. Ginny kissed his cheek lightly. "Your birthday is coming soon, Draco. What do you usually do"?

He swallowed, looking at her. "I used to get to do whatever I wanted..." And then Harry realized that Ginny had been unintentionally tactless, asking him about this, when he no longer had a home or family to speak of. She covered her mouth.

"Oh, Draco, that was so stupid of me".

He shook his head. "Nah. I'll get used to it. Eventually. There are a lot of things I'll probably do automatically, before realizing that I can't, or shouldn't. It'll take a while"...

She put her head back on his shoulder and Harry looked back and forth between her and her younger self. He smiled. "You haven't actually changed very much since the age of four, have you, Gin"?

She looked a little miffed. "I hope I have"...

"I mean your face. It's impossible not to know that that's you." He nodded at the photo. She still had the same snub childish nose covered in freckles, the same large brown eyes, the same thin, pale face under the mop of flaming hair. Hermione suddenly appeared at his elbow, and also put her arm through his, as Ginny had done with Malfoy.

"What are we talking about"?

"Whether we've changed since that photo was taken," Ginny said, nodding at it. Hermione looked.

"Oh, yes, we saw that one earlier. Weren't they all so cute! But the boys have changed a lot, don't you think"?

Harry looked at her for a moment, then at the waving Ron and George and Fred. At that age, the three boys looked far more similar than they did now. All three had the bright red hair, the freckles. Ron's nose wasn't as long as it was when Harry met him; it was closer to being like Ginny's. Fred and George were laughing; they were each missing some teeth but different ones.

"Fred and George didn't lose the same teeth at the same time"?

"Oh, mum loved that. For a while she could actually tell them apart." Ginny smiled. Harry moved further along the wall, taking Hermione along with him. Ginny and Draco followed. Here was a photo of Percy without his glasses on and one of the twins, Harry didn't know which, and the two of them were playing in the sand on a beach at about the ages of eight and ten.

Harry pointed at it. "Is that Fred or George? And where's everyone else"?

Ginny looked very uncomfortable and swallowed. "Actually, that's Bill and Charlie. Probably about two years before Percy was born. Seventy-four. Over twenty years ago." Harry frowned; why was she acting odd? And he'd never thought about the large age difference between Charlie and Percy. Charlie and Bill were ten and twelve when Percy was born. That meant...Harry realized for the first time...

"Ginny--Bill and Charlie--when they were in school--did they know my mum and dad?" Ginny nodded. She didn't look like she wanted to talk. Harry thought quickly; if Bill was in his first year at Hogwarts in 1975, his mum and dad would have been in their fifth year. Prefects. A year before he saw his mum and Snape in the Potions Dungeon...although, perhaps that was at the end of their fifth year...And in their seventh year, Bill would have been in his third and Charlie in first.

He turned and looked at Bill and Charlie, wondering why they'd never said anything to him before. But then he thought about how much interaction he had with students four years younger than him. He probably had more contact with Will Flitwick than any of the others, only because he felt Will was a friend now, after the way he'd stood up for him in the Great Hall. It just seemed so strange to be standing so close to people who'd gone to school with his parents who weren't--well, grownups. Although he knew that technically, they were. Bill was thirty-two and Charlie was thirty. They just didn't seem much like other adults. But then, they'd grown up during Voldemort's first reign of terror. Perhaps they felt some of their childhoods had been taken from them, and they weren't ready to settle down yet.

Then he came upon a picture of two little red-haired girls that looked remarkably like Ginny, except that they both had blue eyes. They were sitting around a Christmas Tree with what he now knew was Bill and Charlie. They were all laughing and getting ready to open presents. Bill and Charlie seemed a little older than in the beach photo, maybe fourteen and twelve while the girls seemed about six and eight. Harry pointed.

"Who are they"?

"Cousins," Hermione told him. "Ron told me earlier. They were visiting for the holidays. That was the year the twins were born, before Ron and Ginny came along".

Harry nodded. "Well, you can tell they're Weasleys. What are their names"?

Ginny looked uncomfortable again and turned to Professor Dumbledore. "Professor--do you think it's safe yet? To get past the reporters? Don't we have to get a train back"?

Dumbledore looked down at Ginny kindly. "Quite right, Ginny. The five of you will probably need to sleep on the train. The dining car will be in place, so you can have a nice dinner before that".

Harry wondered why Ginny was uncomfortable about the picture of her cousins. They weren't much younger than Bill and Charlie, so they'd be adults now. Had they gone bad? Were they the family shame? He looked at Malfoy, who looked as uncomfortable about it as Ginny. Hmm...Harry thought. Whatever it was, it looked like Ginny had told Malfoy about it. Malfoy definitely did not look ignorant.

They said goodbye to the Weasleys and followed Dumbledore back to the wall that Malfoy hadn't been able to penetrate. After that they walked to where they'd originally come through from the station, the wall with POTTER on the other side. Lucius Malfoy thought Azkaban couldn't hold him while it was run by dementors, and Voldemort had marked the entrance to the Ministry of Magic with an indelible kind of graffiti. Harry should have felt like a lot of things were resolved, but he didn't. Wormtail was still on the loose, and until he was caught, Sirius had to still be on the run too. The Death Eaters still had it out for Snape, and probably now Draco Malfoy as well. Many problems were solved, and yet many remained....

As the train moved away, Harry watched the POTTER on the wall of the station until it disappeared from view.

* * * * *

The following week, Harry felt like his head was going to explode from simultaneously preparing for the O.W.L.s and the final Quidditch match of the year. On Saturday was the match, then he would have still another week to stuff things into his brain before taking the O.W.L.s. He despaired of surviving it all. Suddenly, taking on dark wizards seemed like the easiest thing he'd done all year. And after exams, there was still the Dueling Club demonstration...He felt like curling up with a little ball in a cave and hibernating.

After spending what felt like a solid week on his broomstick (And being very thankful for broomstick cushioning charms the day of the match dawned sunny and fair. Everyone was in good health, so Ginny would be able to sit in the stands and watch the rest of them play. Harry thought briefly of feigning illness himself so that she could play; somehow, he would be much more of a sure thing with her playing Seeker. He also wasn't sure how ruthless he could be against Chang; it was because of him that she'd been in an enchanted sleep for forty days (Really Malfoy, of course, but it was indirectly because of him). He tried to get over this thought and remind himself that the Ravenclaw captain was Roger Davies; beating Roger was something he could get behind. Roger probably wanted his last Quidditch match as captain to be one for the record books. Harry knew he'd be facing a very determined Head Boy.

The Slytherin/Ravenclaw match had been an intense one, with the combination of Liam Quirke and Evan Davies as Beaters wreaking havoc with the Slytherin Chasers (Who still scored quite a lot), such that the Ravenclaw Chaser combination of Mandy Brocklehurst, Padma Patil and Niamh Quirke had racked up three-hundred fifty points to Slytherin two-hundred and forty before Malfoy caught the Snitch, making the final Slytherin score a whopping three-hundred ninety. As a result, even though they only scored in two out of their three games, Slytherin was in the lead for the cup with seven hundred points, and Ravenclaw was second with five-hundred sixty. That meant that all Ravenclaw had to do was get the Snitch and they would have ten points more than Slytherin and win the Quidditch cup. Gryffindor needed one-hundred ninety to win the cup.

The Gryffindor team rose early and went running together, as Harry had had them do before. Hermione came along, but Ginny did not. Afterward, when they entered the Great Hall in their team robes, the other Gryffindors and the Hufflepuffs were cheering for them, while the Slytherins reserved their support for Ravenclaw. Interesting, thought Harry. They'll do anything to not support Gryffindor, won't they? Of course, Hufflepuff was already out of the running, but still...

After breakfast, the entire population of the school flowed down to the Quidditch pitch. There were already some families there that had made a special trip to see the match. The Weasleys were much in evidence, waving to the twins and Ron as well as Harry. He waved back, smiling, glad to be friendly with them again, hoping he wouldn't humiliate himself with Charlie Weasley sitting right there...

He saw Draco Malfoy sitting near Snape on the other side of the stands, and no one else within a stone's throw of them. Then that changed; the Scottish girl who'd asked him out came near and nodded at the place on the other side of Malfoy. He raised his eyebrows but nodded back at her, letting her sit. She wasn't bad looking, really. She had wiry black hair and dark eyes, she was rather pale but slightly freckled, and a bit on the thin side. Malfoy looked surprised. Harry almost started to wonder whether the Sorting Hat could have made a mistake with her and Malfoy.

Harry and Roger Davies walked to the middle of the pitch with their teams and Madam Hooch. They shook hands, Harry looking into Roger's eyes, trying to tell what he was thinking. Roger looked back malevolently, making Harry shudder involuntarily. All right, he thought. That's how it is. No quarter.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle and fifteen broomsticks rose into the air. Lee Jordan's magically magnified voice announced, "And it's the last Quidditch match of the year! This will decide whether the Quidditch Cup will go to--" he paused meaningfully "--Gryffindor--" much cheering from the crowd as he drew out the house name. "Ravenclaw," he said derisively, as though it were ludicrous, "Or those bounders in Slytherin..." he sneered with feeling.

"Jordan!" Professor McGonagall admonished him. He straightened up and continued his commentary, watching her out of the corner of his eye.

"And Gryffindor captain Harry Potter is in fine form on his Firebolt today, while much of the rest of the team is on excellent Nimbus 2001's. I see the Ravenclaw Seeker is still poking along on a Cleansweep--And Gryffindor Chaser Katie Bell passes to Johnson, Johnson swerves a Bludger hit by Ravenclaw thug Evan Davies"--

"Jordan"--

"I mean Ravenclaw Beater Evan Davies...while Chaser Alicia Spinnet takes the Quaffle and--YES! Gryffindor, ten, Ravenclaw, zero! As the Head Girl gives the Head Boy what-for!"

Roger Davies was glowering at Alicia after she flung the Quaffle through the far right goal; he was about to move there when he realized she wasn't aiming for the far left, but he was too late. Alicia gave him a smug smile and raced off with Katie while Angelina took possession of the Quaffle once more, only to lose it to Niamh Quirke.

“Oh! And Chaser Quirke of Ravenclaw intercepts a pass Chaser Johnson meant for Katie Bell! Nice bit of cheating there...”

“Jordan”...

“And--there! Stooging! The Ravenclaw Chasers are Stooging! Penalty to Gryffindor”!

Lee was right; Niamh and Mandy were both in the scoring area in front of the Gryffindor goals at the same time, so it mattered not that Ron easily prevented the Quaffle from entering the center goal. Madam Hooch blew her whistle and collected the Quaffle from Ron. Harry decided Angelina should take the penalty; she was their best feinter when taking penalty shots, most likely to fool Roger Davies. Sure enough, she succeeded in making him zip toward the wrong goal.

“Gryffindor TWENTY, Ravenclaw ZERO!” Jordan called out gleefully. “That’s where Stooging will get you!” Professor McGonagall also looked a bit smugly in Professor Flitwick’s direction, not restraining Lee this time.

Harry flew a little above the rest of the players, scanning the field for the Snitch at the same time that he was keeping an eye on the Bludgers Liam and Evan were hitting. He saw that Cho Chang was marking him, as was her usual strategy, and he gave her a feeble smile before focusing grimly on the field below once more. Fred and George were giving as good as they were getting, but it was starting to look like someone would wind up in the hospital wing.

He had no idea how close to right he was, however, until Liam Quirke did a Bludger Backbeat just as Alicia, Katie and Angelina were heading toward the Ravenclaw goals with the Quaffle again, sending the iron ball behind him, directly toward the part of the stands where the Gryffindor supporters were sitting. There was a hue and cry as spectators scrambled to get out of the way. Will Flitwick narrowly avoided being hit, splintered wood was flying after the heavy ball the seat where he’d been moments before, and Madam Hooch blew her whistle hysterically while Jordan yelled expletives which would normally have resulted in his being reprimanded by McGonagall, except that she was now using quite surprising language directed at Liam Quirke and examining young Will for any damage. Even Professor Flitwick was on his feet yelling at Liam.

“That’s my great-nephew, you sodding job!” he cried at him; which was strong language indeed for the little wizard.

“Right!” Jordan went on with the commentary once he’d gotten the bad language out of his system. “And because of Beater Quirke engaging in a dirty bit of Bumping--which I also like to call cheating--another penalty to Gryffindor! Fat lot of good it did you to stop the game!” When Madam Hooch had blown her whistle, the Gryffindor Chasers had been forced to stop their drive to the Ravenclaw goalposts.

So Angelina took the Quaffle once more, but this time Roger Davies was ready and intercepted it before it could go through the center goal. He pulled back his arm and flung it in a long pass to Niamh Quirke, who sped toward Ron, who was glaring at her as he hovered back and forth before the goals. She sent the ball flying toward the right goal and Ron handily picked it out of the air, his long arm reaching for it effortlessly. Not missing a beat, he reared back and passed it on to Katie, who, with Angelina and Alicia formed an arrowhead pattern, flying toward the Ravenclaw goalposts.

“And the Gryffindor Chasers move into the classic Hawkshead Attacking Formation, scattering the Ravenclaw players. Careful to avoid Stooging, now, now now NOW! Yes! Katie Bell scores! Gryffindor THIRTY, Ravenclaw STILL ZERO! That’s my girl!” Then Lee ducked his head as McGonagall turned to him in surprise, speechless about this last exclamation. Harry smiled as he scanned the field. He’d suspected as much, since that first match when Ginny had had to step in for Katie...

There. He saw it. The Snitch was half-way up the far left Gryffindor goalpost. He looked away, hoping Cho Chang hadn’t seen it; he moved toward the center of the field, hoping she would follow. If she caught it, Ravenclaw would win the cup; if he caught it now, they would win the match, but not the cup. At least not technically; they would share the cup with Slytherin, tied with seven-hundred points each.

They would share the cup with Slytherin.

He pushed out of his head the horrible consequences of saying to Cedric, We’ll take the cup together. Suddenly, Harry knew what he was going to do. With a glance at Cho Chang to make certain she’d believed his feint away from the Gryffindor goalposts, he made a sudden about face and sped toward the Snitch, still hovering there. He turned his head for a split second, looking toward Malfoy. Malfoy was looking straight back, his mouth open in disbelief. Harry turned toward the Snitch once more, hoping that his usually fine Chasers were not scoring again as he came nearer and nearer.

"The Gryffindor Chasers are nearing their quarry again...but what's this? Seeker and Captain Harry Potter is closing in on the Snitch! Hurry up girls, score again before he touches it! Oh, no! No NO NO! He has the Snitch! Potter has the Snitch! Gryffindor wins the match--and Gryffindor and Slytherin will share the Quidditch Cup!"

Harry flew around the field, the Snitch over his head. Most of the Gryffindors were looking shell-shocked and disappointed. Only Hermione and Ginny were standing and clapping on their side of the stands. On the other side, the Slytherins were equally surprised, but Malfoy and Snape and the Scottish girls were now standing and clapping. Snape turned and glared at the other Slytherins, and slowly, they all stood as well and clapped, lackadaisically at first, then with growing enthusiasm as they perhaps realized that this was the only way they would get anything; ten more points for Gryffindor would be a clean win, and if Ravenclaw had won the match, there was no way Slytherin would have gotten anything either.

McGonagall looked toward Snape and Malfoy, and with an expression of understanding on her face now, she smiled at Harry and also stood to clap. Her glare at the other Gryffindors brought them to their feet as well. Harry flew down to the center of the field, smiling up at Ginny and Hermione, who clearly understood why he'd done it, and when he landed he met Dumbledore's eye as well, twinkling at him. This time it wouldn't go wrong, he thought. Not unless that damn cup is also a Portkey...

But it was definitely not a Portkey. Harry stood facing Roger, each with their team behind them, and they shook hands. Roger looked resentful, but he grasped Harry's hand with his chin up, every bit Head Boy. Then Dumbledore summoned Draco Malfoy and the Slytherin team to the field, and Harry and Malfoy each grasped one side of the Quidditch Cup and held it aloft, as the students on both sides of the pitch now roared their approval. Malfoy grinned, no, smiled at Harry, the first genuine smile from Malfoy Harry had ever seen directed at him. He smiled back, then felt his smile grow even broader as they lowered their hands, giving the cup back to Dumbledore's care (So he could magically etch the year and winning house names on the base) for Hermione was pushing her way through the crowd now, her eyes locked with Harry's, and he knew before she reached him what would happen, and he didn't care.

She threw her arms around him and he drew her to him for a deep kiss. A new roar of approval went up from the crowd upon seeing this, and Hermione coloured and buried her face in his neck, smiling happily anyway. Then the crowd really got a shock when Ginny threw her arms around Malfoy and did the same. Suddenly Harry didn't know where the ground was, and it was because he had been lifted bodily above the crowd, and looking to his side, he saw that Malfoy was too. The Slytherins seemed to be beyond caring about anything else he'd done recently--they were co-winners of the cup!

As they were borne back to the castle for a joint celebration in the Great Hall--so both winning houses could celebrate together--Harry saw Viktor standing up in the seats, his arm around Cho's shoulder. They both smiled at him and each raised a silent hand, reminding Harry of how he'd bidden Hermione goodbye on September first. He raised a hand to them, smiling, as the crowd carried him off the pitch and continued up the lawn. It had actually been a good year, he thought. There'd been a few bumps along the way (If you called being recruited to be a Death Eater a "bump") and he still had the O.W.L.s to take. But some things he'd set out to do had actually worked well. Viktor and Cho. Lucius Malfoy in Azkaban. He was with Hermione, openly now. Ron was still their friend. Ginny and Draco Malfoy were happy together. And now he'd managed to do what he never thought he would want to do, and tied with Slytherin for the Quidditch Cup.

He turned and grinned at Malfoy again, also bobbing along above the crowd. Maybe, Malfoy, he thought; maybe you had a friend after all.

* * * * *

The celebration lasted much of the day, and when Harry dragged himself up the marble steps in the middle of the afternoon, his arm comfortably settled around Hermione's shoulders, he felt like he could sleep until Monday morning. He had one more thing to do this day, and he checked to see where the other Gryffindor team members were--good, Fred and Alicia were following behind, George and Angelina had already gone up, he remembered, and Katie and Lee were walking ahead of them. Ginny was behind Fred and Alicia; she and Malfoy were walking with their arms around each other's waists. Every so often Fred looked over his shoulder at them, but he didn't look hostile--just big-brotherly.

When they reached the portrait hole, it had already been opened by George and Angelina, who were holding it for them. They all scrambled in, except for Ginny and Malfoy. He was giving her a very chaste kiss on the cheek, clearly aware of her brothers' proximity. Harry called to him, "Come on in, Malfoy! There's something you'll want to know about." He looked up in surprise, but did not comment, following Ginny into the common room. Harry remembered the only other time (The

he knew of) Malfoy had been in their common room, when he'd caught him trying to meet with Ginny at midnight. It seemed a very long time ago.

Ron was sitting in a chair by the fire, quite exhausted, his small cat Argent curled contentedly on his lap, asleep. His eyes were closed as well. He had been the first to come upstairs. The team surrounded him quietly, Angelina and Katie looking like it was a struggle not to giggle. Harry sprinted up to the dorm, retrieved a package from his trunk, and sped down to the common room again. He stood in front of Ron, who was still oblivious to the small crowd around him.

"Ron," Harry said, to wake him. He slept on. "Ron!" he tried again.

Grinning, Ginny reached out and shook him. "Ron!" she also said. "Time to wake up! Fleur Delacour is here for her date with you!" she laughed, and so did everyone else. Ron's eyes flew open in surprise, even more so when he saw all of them looking at him.

"Wha"?---

"Happy Birthday, Ron," Harry said, presenting Ron with the package from his trunk. Argent scrambled up onto the top of the chair, rubbing her head affectionately against Ron's arm. "What with one thing and another, I didn't have the chance to give this to you before. This seemed like an appropriate time".

Ron looked around at them all, then down at the package. He shrugged and pulled the paper off. It was the same book Malfoy had given Harry for Christmas: Great Quidditch Captains of Hogwarts, by Roderick Plumpton, III. He frowned and looked up at Harry. "You're giving me the book back"?

"No you--it's another copy. I bought it by owl post. That's just part of it. Check page 428".

He watched Ron turn to the table listing the greatest Quidditch captains of Hogwarts teams in the last century (In the author's humble opinion); he watched him scan down the column, past Charlie's name, then he saw the expression on Ron's face and knew he'd come to where Harry had written in by hand, "Ronald Weasley, Gryffindor".

"Blimey," he breathed softly. Ron swallowed and looked up at him, then round at all of them. "Captain?" he whispered. "But Harry"--

"But nothing. We've all agreed. You're the one who was really running the practices, coming up with the strategies. When I of course scuttled, by catching the Snitch when I did..." he smiled, glancing at Malfoy. "But I'm a lousy captain. It should be you, Ron. You know I'm right. You know we're all right".

Ron's mouth was hanging open as he looked down at the book again, then back up at Harry. "I don't know what to say"

"Just say you'll do it, Weasley," Malfoy drawled. "Else I'll never get out of here"...

Everyone laughed, including Ron, and he nodded at Harry, looking quite choked up. He closed the book and put it on his lap again, picking up his cat and holding her close to him, smiling and petting her while multiple hands reached out to pat him on the back and say things along the line of, "There's a good bloke...we'll come back to see you get the cup...once we're gone, you can have practices before sunrise"...

Later, Harry knew he should be studying for the O.W.L.s but he pulled Hermione into a corner of the common room, sitting down in a chair George and Angelina usually used which faced into the corner, creating a cozy refuge. He sat down, pulling her into his lap. She acquiesced, putting her arms around his shoulders, bringing her mouth to his. He felt a wave of happiness surge through him as they kissed deeper and deeper, a contentment that seemed to be beyond anything he deserved or ever thought he'd experience. He moved his hand up her leg, under her robes; now that it was June, she was wearing shorts and a T-shirt underneath, and he rested his hand comfortably on one of her thighs, feeling the warmth emanating from her skin, feeling so right about the world.

She pulled her mouth gently away from his, but it was only to move her lips to his neck. He opened his eyes now, smiling, then he thought he saw a flash of red out of the corner of his eye.

"Ron"?

There was silence, then Ron walked to the corner where they were sitting, looking abashed. "I, um, didn't mean to disturb you..." His ears were quite pink. Harry realized that although the entire school had seen them kiss on the Quidditch pitch, Ron had never seen the two of them just sitting like this, touching and kissing privately. Harry bit his tongue, to avoid asking whether he'd been watching them.

"You're not disturbing us. What is it"?

"I just wanted to--to thank you properly. You know, the captain thing".

Harry smiled at him. "You're welcome. Really. Quite welcome. It was driving me dotty".

Ron tried to smile back, but it looked difficult. Harry hoped he understood that he deserved it, that it wasn't charity. Ron could be so touchy sometimes. Harry had wondered whether he'd be able to convince him to take the position; he remembered Ron saying that in the Mirror of Erised, he was Head Boy and captain of the Quidditch Team...

"I'm going to make you work, you know," he smiled at Harry now.

"You're the one who's going to have to work. You have two Chasers and two Beaters to replace".

"Correction: one Chaser and two Beaters. I'm not going to be Keeper anymore. Ginny's going to train for that. Not too far off from Seeker, after all. And Ginny says Zoey Russell is a pretty good Chaser as well. So we could have her, perhaps, and I'll finally be a Chaser, too, like I wanted to be." Harry remembered his performance in the first match of the year; he was a fabulous Chaser. There'd be no stopping them with Ron in this position. He remembered seeing his dad playing

"That just leaves the Beaters. What about Dean and Seamus"?

"Nah. Dean's hopeless. All he cares about is football. Seamus dragged him to the World Cup. And Seamus wants Lee's old job".

Harry laughed. "Think of the blarney he'll throw around".

"Too right! There's this fourth year I thought might be good for a Beater--I've seen him flying a bit. Ginny said his name was Anthony Perugia".

"Tony? Yeah, he's a good flyer. What about the other"?

"Well--what do you think about--Neville? Think he'd agree"?

Harry smiled. "Yeah. I really think he would".

"Hope so. Have you noticed how big he is now? Kind of snuck up on us all, didn't he"?

Harry agreed. Then Ron looked a bit embarrassed again. "Well, I'll be leaving you two alone again"...

"Oh, no, Ron!" Hermione said, standing. "Let's do something together, the three of us!" Ron and Harry looked at each other uncertainly. "Oh, you--" she sputtered. "I mean--let's go down to Hagrid's! Come on!" She headed for the portrait hole and they followed. Harry knew she didn't want to exclude Ron, but he realized now that it would be a bit of a balancing act, having time together and with Ron as well. It would work itself out, he thought optimistically. They just had to get used to a new way of doing things. Everything would be all right.

* * * * *

Harry dragged himself into the dorm and threw himself onto the bed violently, but with relief.

"Ouch!" Sandy said suddenly.

"Sorry, Sandy. I'm just glad that's over".

"What"?

"The O.W.L.s".

"Was it that bad"?

"Weren't you paying any attention"?

"I was asleep much of the time".

"Oh. Wish I could say the same. Wait--I was asleep for history of magic and astronomy"...

"Harry Potter"?

"What"?

"What are the O.W.L.s"?

"Very, very annoying tests of our magical knowledge and skills. Five years' worth, except for Care of Magical Creatures and Divination, which were three years' worth".

"Is it important"?

"Rather important. But I think I did well on most things".

Harry, Ron and Hermione had barely slept during the week after the Quidditch Cup. They didn't have to go to classes. They were to spend the time preparing for the tests, and Hermione rode herd on them and made sure that's what they were doing every waking hour (Which was far more hours than they should have been awake, in Harry's opinion). Most nights they dragged themselves upstairs at two or three in the morning, muscles moving toward the dorm on auto-pilot. One night they simply stayed where they were, Hermione sitting at one of the tables, her cheek on an Arithmancy text, snoring softly, while Harry sat next to her leaning on her shoulder (he was rather appalled to discover that he'd drooled on her robes when he awoke in the morning) and Ron spread-eagled on the hearthrug, his face on an Herbology text which was merely in close proximity to his brain, rather than part of the contents of it.

Then, the following Monday morning, it had begun: they walked in the Potions dungeon and Snape started in on them. They spent the entire day brewing potions and writing essays and taking tests about potions ingredients and counter-indications and poison antidotes. Potions took longer than any of their other tests because of the need to wait for things to bubble and brew. At the end of the first day, Harry felt great relief that that was over, but reminded himself there were still more tests to get through.

On Tuesday, they would have Transfiguration and Charms. Harry transfigured McGonagall's desk into a pig, as he'd once seen her do; he changed other inanimate objects into animate ones, and animate ones into inanimate ones. He changed things which he'd already changed, taking a shoe, at one point, through five transfigurations, from hedgehog to bowler hat to Yorkshire terrier to tea-cozy to rabbit, before he started to give out and produced a knife-box (With rather pronounced rabbit ears and a cotton tail) that barked.

Then she'd cleared out the room, and instead of going down to lunch with the others, he demonstrated for her, formally and for the record, his ability to do the Animagus transfiguration. She used a stop-watch to time him, over and over, changing into a golden griffin and back, griffin and back, griffin and back, until he collapsed on the floor from the pain and mental effort. She smiled at him and nodded. He staggered from the room, meeting Ron and Hermione in the corridor, and they'd practically carried him down to the Great Hall.

Charms went well, Harry knew, because Professor Flitwick was so terrible at doing a poker face. There was no chance that a student taking the Charms O.W.L.s had to wait until they received their results to know how they did with him. Harry went through the basics, then the intermediate-level charms, and then Flitwick asked all students to stay past the usual time who wanted credit for advanced charms.

Harry, Ron and Hermione were the only Gryffindors who stayed. The test was basically dueling with Flitwick, who'd been a champion in his youth. Ron went down very quickly; Hermione held her own for some time, before he also disarmed her. After dueling for more than half an hour, Flitwick and Harry were still at it, and Harry had abandoned his robes and was dripping sweat, while the little wizard was still cool as a cucumber and pacing around humming to himself before aiming his wand at Harry nonchalantly and muttering charms.

After more than an hour, Flitwick stood still and faced an exhausted Harry and lowered his wand. "Bow, Harry," he told him gently. "The duel is over. It is a draw".

Harry lowered his wand and bowed, and that's when he heard, "Expelliarmus!" and felt his wand slipping from his grip, himself hurtling backward, bracing himself before he struck the wall hard, and, wincing, sliding down into a sitting position. Flitwick smiled and walked over to him, handing him his wand.

"Really, Harry. You should have known better," he smiled at him. Harry looked up at the professor, his eyes unfocused.

"I do now." Flitwick helped him stand and patted him on the back. But Harry had a feeling that he hadn't exactly failed advanced Charms.

If he thought it was exhausting to study for the O.W.L.s, it was nothing compared to taking them. Wednesday, they started off with Herbology, an entire morning of wrestling with plants in the greenhouse, then taking exhaustive tests about the magical herbs and fungi they'd been learning about for five years. In the afternoon, they had History of Magic. Three hours of sitting in Binns' stuffy classroom writing about Goblin rebellions. Harry actually fell asleep, and when he awoke, Hermione was shaking him and telling him to hand in his parchment. He looked down at it. He'd written one sentence about someone he'd named Oscar the Offbeat, who Harry wasn't even sure had existed. He groaned; he would not be getting a History of Magic O.W.L. He looked at Ron, who was handing in several parchments of closely-written script. Even Ron had had quite a lot to write for History of Magic. When Hermione wasn't looking, he crumpled up the parchment and stuffed it in his pocket. He just wouldn't hand in anything at all. Better than the humiliation of handing this in, he thought. He'd blown it.

That night at midnight, they had astronomy. Harry again felt as though he were sleepwalking, and Professor Sinistra was short with him. Another flop, he thought. Ron was also the walking dead. Neither of them expected to get an Astronomy O.W.L.

The next morning they were permitted to sleep in, because of the late Astronomy test, and in the afternoon they were to report to Hagrid for Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid had a virtual zoo for them to walk through, and his test was multiple-choice. Harry thought he was probably being pretty easy on them, and wondered whether Dumbledore had approved this. It was the easiest test so far, Harry felt. Afterward, he heaved a sigh of relief. Just two to go: Divination and Defense against the Dark Arts.

On Friday morning, he and Ron and the other Gryffindors other than Hermione reported to Trelawney's tower, while Hermione went off to Professor Vector for Arithmancy testing. They went through tea leaves, palmistry, augury, star charts (Not for nothing had he done terribly in astronomy), crystal balls, Tarot cards...every form of soothsaying they'd covered since their first day with her in their third year. Trelawney glared at him time after time; he was terrible at everything. Even Ron had something to say most of the time that was spot on or close enough. I have a snake who has the Sight and I'm not going to get an O.W.L. in Divination. Something was wrong somewhere, he felt. But he also knew he shouldn't check he'd left Sandy by the fire in the common room.

After lunch, they reported to Moody. He had them work on a written test about werewolves, vampires and other dark creatures that they couldn't actually bring to class, then they handed in their papers and actually confronted some dark creatures they'd studied with Lupin. After the redcaps, Hinkypunks and Grindylows had been despatched, he opened a drawer and produced--a boggart.

The boggart took on a different form for some of them than it had when they were in third year. Not surprisingly, Hermione's looked like Professor McGonagall expelling her and telling her she'd failed every subject. Neville's was merely a flask of steaming potion. Parvati's turned into--Hermione. Harry saw it first, then turned her around and spoke to her rapidly, until Parvati had taken care of it and Seamus was stepping up. Finally, Harry faced the boggart, and, remembering the dementors who had brought Lucius Malfoy in and out of the courtroom, sure enough, it promptly turned into a dementor.

Harry grimly faced it down, focused intently on his happy thought (Now that he'd been with Hermione that was easy) and cried, "Expecto Patronum!"

The silver-grey stag emerged from his wand-tip and raced toward the boggart-dementor. Then Harry looked at it again, crying "Riddikulus!" and it disappeared with a pop!

Moody stared in disbelief at him. "Potter," he said, clearly in awe, which shook Harry somewhat. "You didn't tell me you could conjure a Patronus. And what a Patronus"...

Harry swallowed. "I'm sorry. We discovered in third year that when I'm confronted with a boggart, it turns into a dementor, so Lupin taught me how to conjure a Patronus"...

"You're sorry?" Moody said, incredulous. "You're doing something so advanced most adult wizards can't, and you're sorry?" He shook his head. "You're the damnedest thing I've ever seen, Potter"...

After they did various curses and counter-curses, he dismissed everyone except those who wanted to stay to do advanced Dark Arts. "I've already seen you conjure your Patronus, so you've already got points for that, Potter. Now, let me see that pain blocking you've become so famous for"...

And without any warning, Moody pointed his wand at him and cried, "Hara Kiri"!

Harry's eyes rolled back in his head; he felt himself floating up, up, and, looking down, he watched his body in fascination. He watched Moody moving slowly, watched Hermione anxiously put her hand to her mouth in slow motion, then her other hand on Ron's arm as Ron stared at him, his jaw dropping in tiny increments...

When Harry saw Moody lift his wand, he allowed himself to slide back down into his body. He collapsed on the floor, panting, then struggled to stand. Moody nodded.

"Good job, Potter." That was all he said. Harry swallowed and nodded back at him. That was it. It was all done. All they had to do now was wait for the results.

Harry closed his eyes, lying on the bed; he felt like he could sleep for a week. After dreading the O.W.L.s all year (With good reason, he now knew), they were actually over. He did in fact sleep straight through until the next morning. He awoke with the sun and rose to dress for running, feeling like a huge weight had been lifted from him. Ron was still asleep, sprawled across his bed diagonally (The only way he could fit on it all the way). When Harry went down to the common room, Hermione wasn't there, but he didn't bother waiting. If she had any sense, he thought, she'd sleep in. If he had any sense, perhaps I would, he thought. But he was feeling restless after sleeping for more than fourteen hours; he wanted to be active, doing something.

The Quidditch pitch was deserted, dewy and pristine-looking. Harry ran on the sandy path until he felt he'd exorcised something from his soul, some restless demon that had been possessing him, making it hurt when he took a breath. Not even though his lungs were working at maximum capacity, he felt at peace. Everything was as it should be. He did some sit-ups and pull-ups and stretches afterward, then returned to the castle with a spring in his step.

In the prefects' bathroom, he encountered Malfoy, but that no longer had the power to ruin his day. He merely sauntered in, smiling at him as he soaked in the tub, saying cheerfully, "Good morning, Malfoy! Beautiful day, isn't it"?

Malfoy had had his eyes closed and opened them now. He leaned against one of the short sides of the tub, his arms spread out on either side of him on the tub ledge. He no longer bothered to hide the Dark Mark. There was no need to bother.

"You're damn cheerful for this time of the morning, Potter. Jump in the lake, will you"?

"Actually, I thought I'd take a shower. Maybe I'll do a swim in the lake later..." he practically chirped as he headed for the showers. He saw Malfoy shake his head.

"You, Potter, are too happy to be allowed"...

"But the O.W.L.s are over!" Harry crowed as he stood under the pounding water, making the noise echo off the tile and marble lining the room. He turned and saw Malfoy putting his head around the corner.

"I have two words for you, Potter. SHUT THE BLOODY HELL UP".

"That's five words".

"It would be two if you didn't make me swear".

“That wouldn’t be any fun,” Harry laughed, letting the water gush over his head. He flung his head back then and turned the water off, grinning at Malfoy. “Aren’t you glad it’s over”?

As Harry wrapped a towel around his waist, Malfoy nodded, finally admitting this. “I can’t believe Moody...or McGonagall...or Flitwick. Or Sprout...” He plunged his hands into the pockets of the deep green bathrobe he’d donned. Harry frowned. What was wrong with him? Yes, he’d been disowned...but this seemed to have to do with something else.

“Don’t you think you did well, Malfoy”?

Malfoy jerked his head up. “I did bloody well, thank you very much. I fully expect to get more than ten O.W.L.s. In fact, bet I’ll get more than you”.

Harry thought about the advanced credit he was going to be getting in Transfiguration, Dark Arts and Charms. “Bet you won’t,” he smiled. “But if you get more than ten--that’d be really impressive. I mean, I’d think you’d be happy. What’s your problem? Why aren’t you celebrating them being over”?

Malfoy walked back toward the tub, started draining it and collecting his clothes. “And just who am I going to celebrate with? The only Slytherins who’ll have anything to do with me are Snape and that fourth-year, what’s-her-name. And I’m starting to think she fancies me, so I don’t want to hang around her too much and give her the wrong impression”...

“Or you could spend all of your spare time with her. Then she’d probably stop fancying you pretty fast.” Harry laughed and Malfoy threw a damp towel at him, catching it while it was still in the air.

“You can laugh, Potter. Even if you only got two O.W.L.s, you’d have people to commiserate with you”...

Harry sighed and bit the bullet; he should do it, he should. Malfoy was hinting about it broadly enough. “Malfoy,” he finally said, as he took a red bathrobe from the wardrobe. “Dumbledore said that he’s going to let everyone third year and up into Hogsmeade again next Saturday. We’ll be getting our O.W.L. results on Friday. No matter what the outcome--why don’t you celebrate with us? Ginny will want to be along anyway, and then you can spend some time with her. We’ll all go down to the village after breakfast”.

Malfoy looked at him and swallowed. He hadn’t acknowledged what Harry had done in sharing the Quidditch Cup with a Slytherin, but Harry knew it meant a lot to him. He was starting to understand how Ginny had had such a struggle at the beginning of their relationship to get Malfoy not to sabotage himself.

“If you like,” Malfoy said noncommittally. Harry nodded.

“That’s it, then,” he said firmly. After Malfoy left, Harry collected Sandy and asked her, “Why do some people find it so hard to let other people be nice to them?” He wasn’t just thinking of Malfoy; Ron was this way too. They had far more in common than either of them would ever have admitted.

“I do not understand people very well, Harry Potter,” she answered, “But perhaps they feel that they do not deserve it”?

“It was a rhetorical question, Sandy. That means I wasn’t really expecting an answer. But I think you understand people better than you think you do.” He wrapped her around his arm and left.

* * * * *

The following week they didn’t have to go to class again, unless they wanted to. Harry, Hermione, Ron and Malfoy weren’t supposed to see Snape when they would have had Potions anyway, but they practiced for the Dueling Club exhibition instead of brewing potions. Harry was going to be demonstrating some moves against three attackers, and Snape was nodding grimly as he aimed his curses and deflected the curses Ron, Hermione and Malfoy were aiming at him. This wasn’t real dueling, actually; it was tightly choreographed, designed to put on a good show. The outcome was predetermined. Part of the exhibition would consist of real dueling, with the outcome unknown, but much of it would be carefully rehearsed and planned. After the duel he’d lost to Neville (Which had been a better show, Harry thought, than the things they were thus far planning for the exhibition), he wanted to be seen winning a duel before the entire school. Ron was paired with him in one of the non-rehearsed duels, and Roger Davies for another. They’d pulled names out of a wizard’s hat to determine the pairings. Malfoy was matched with Niamh Quirke and Fred Weasley, and Hermione was taking on Alicia again, as was George Weasley.

The following afternoon they went down to Hagrid's to see the seventh-year Gryffindors go up against the sun bulls. After Angelina prepared George to harness the bulls and plow the ground, sowing the earth with dragon's teeth, they both fought against the Chthonians that sprang from the soil, but they hadn't done especially well in the Dueling Club, and Moody put a stop to it so that they could go to the hospital wing. (It was a combination test for Care of Magical Creatures, Potions, Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts.) Moody caused the Chthonians to disappear, and waving his wand, Flitwick restored the plowed ground to its pristine state for Fred and his partner, Yarrow Swartz, a girl with a good reputation for brewing potions.

After drinking the potion Yarrow made him and charming himself with a protective shield, Fred harnessed the bulls and proceeded to do the plowing, as George had. This time, when the Chthonians sprang from the earth sown with dragon's teeth, Fred and Yarrow beat them back, until the ground was littered with their white bones. Which was all the Chthonians were: fighting skeletons. Harry had at first been alarmed when they'd sprung from the earth to fight George and Angelina, but the second time, he knew what to expect, and was gratified to see someone conquer them. He was very, very glad that his N.E.W.T.s were two years away...

Lee Jordan and Alicia Spinnet did better than George and Angelina, but not as well as Fred and Yarrow. Harry had his hand in his mouth when it seemed that one of the bulls was going to gore Lee...but Alicia hexed it before it could break skin. Harry pondered the fact that the twins performed so differently on the test. They seemed to be growing apart, a bit, or at least exhibiting different skills and talents. Fred was a far better dueler, for instance, while George was the one with a girlfriend (Fred and Susan Bones had opted to be "just friends" after the ceilidh).

As Friday approached, Harry grew tenser and tenser. Dueling practice did little to alleviate this; what he really wanted to do was to sneak off with Hermione to Fluffy's old lair, but he was starting to suspect that she was being superstitious about their physical relationship. After the first time, he'd found Neville, and after the second time, they'd wound up in the forest tied to trees, not knowing whether they'd survive another five minutes. He wondered whether she assumed it would be bad luck to be together again before they learned of their test results. It seemed uncharacteristic of her, and yet...she was definitely avoiding being alone with him. She went out of her way to make sure that Ron was with them at all times. She didn't refrain from touching him or even kissing him, but she also didn't suggest that they be alone or try to instigate as she had in the past. Harry was getting very, very frustrated.

Finally, at breakfast on Friday morning, even more owls than usually fluttered in the windows, most of them school owls. Every fifth-year student received a large creamy envelope with the Hogwarts seal. Seamus and Dean were pulling their envelopes down from the owls before they'd had time to alight on their shoulders, and Ron sat holding his, sweat breaking out on his brow as he hesitated to open it.

Harry finally had an envelope drop into his hands. Harry Potter, Gryffindor, it said simply in large, looping script. Harry was starting to open it when, beside him, Hermione started screaming, then practically choked him when she threw her arm around his neck. Harry gasped and gently took her arm away from his windpipe, then smiled at her.

"I'm guessing you're pretty happy with your results"?

She nodded, speechless, and handed him the letter. She'd received two O.W.L.s for Potions, both basic and intermediate, she also received both basic and intermediate O.W.L.s for Transfiguration, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Arithmancy and History of Magic. She received one each for Herbology, Astronomy and Care of Magical Creatures, and three for basic, intermediate and advanced Charms.

"Hermione," he breathed. "You've gotten"--

"I know"!

"Sixteen O.W.L.s"--

"I know"!

He stared at her letter again. She had set a school record. No one, not even Percy Weasley, had ever gotten sixteen O.W.L.s. He was half afraid to open his letter now. He thought of his nonexistent History of Magic test. There was a lump in his throat that would not go away. Hermione's scream had been the first, but now fifth-years all over the Great Hall were chattering loudly about their test results, running from table to table to talk to friends in other houses. Pandemonium ensued.

Then suddenly, he was being attacked by Ron. “Aaaah!” he cried, having finally opened his letter. “Eleven! I got eleven! Only one off from Percy and Bill!” Harry stared in disbelief at Ron’s letter, thrust under his nose. Snape had actually given him an O.W.L. for basic Potions; he also had both basic and intermediate Transfiguration, Charms and Defense against the Dark Arts, and one O.W.L. each for Care of Magical Creatures, Divination, History of Magic and Herbology. The one he’d missed was Astronomy, which was hardly a surprise in that they’d slept through virtually every class. Harry smiled uncertainly at him.

“That’s great, Ron.” He tried to look happy, he really did, then went back to staring at the envelope with his name written on it. Ron frowned at him.

“Haven’t you opened yours yet?”

Harry thrust it at him. “I can’t. You do it. Give it to me gently”.

Harry clenched his jaw and grimaced while he watched Ron open the envelope and take out the letter. “Well,” he began. “You didn’t get History of Magic”.

“That’s probably because I slept through the test and didn’t turn anything in”.

“And you didn’t get Astronomy. Ditto for Divination”.

“Trelawney’s hacked off at me for not revealing my ‘Inner Eye’ again. How bad is the rest of it?”

“Well, I hate to tell you this Harry, but you only got--thirteen”.

Harry’s jaw dropped. “What? Thirteen? How did I get thirteen?”

Ron laughed and handed him the letter. “Well, it probably helped that you got basic, intermediate and advanced for three subjects, Transfiguration, Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts. That’s nine right there. And then Hagrid gave you one, and Sprout, and Snape gave you two, for basic and intermediate Potions. Getting to be quite the Snape-pet, aren’t you? Who’d have thought, five years ago?”

Harry hit his arm with the back of his hand. “I’m not. I worked hard”.

Hermione took his letter and examined it. “Well, see? It paid off.” She was smiling at him and his letter, looking proud of him, but she was also still glowing from being very, very pleased with herself. Harry had never seen her quite so happy.

“How’d you do, Nev?” Ron said now to Neville, who was also smiling while looking at his letter.

“Nine,” he said happily. “I missed Transfiguration and Charms. But I got one from everyone else, even Sinistra and Snape and two from Professor Moody and Professor Sprout.” He looked down at his letter again. “Gran will not believe this”...

Suddenly Harry’s letter was plucked from his hands and he heard a familiar voice drawling, “All right, Potter, let’s see how you’ve done”...

Harry waited for Malfoy to finish reading, trying to suppress the smile curling at the edges of his mouth and looking at Hermione merrily. Harry wished he had a camera when Malfoy finished.

“How’d you do, Malfoy?” he asked, trying not to sound too smug. Malfoy grimaced, not speaking, thrusting his letter at Harry for inspection. He’d gotten basic and intermediate from Snape, McGonagall, Moody and Vector, and basic from Flitwick (Who no doubt was taking points off for the burglar-alarm fiasco), Binns, Sprout and Sinistra. The only teacher who hadn’t given him a single O.W.L. was Hagrid, and considering Malfoy’s attitude in that class, as well as his performance, it was a miracle Hagrid hadn’t found a way to give him a negative number of O.W.L.s.

“Pity, Malfoy,” Harry said casually. “You only got twelve. Thought you said you’d get more than me”...

Malfoy continued to look at Harry’s letter in disbelief. “And I should have. What’s this ‘advanced Transfiguration, advanced Charms, advanced Defense against the Dark Arts’?”

"You know about the Transfiguration..." Harry said under his breath. Malfoy nodded then.

"Oh, right. But these others...it sure pays to be the teachers' pet"...

"It also pays to be able to duel with Flitwick for more than an hour and to conjure a Patronus and block the pain of the Hara Kiri curse," Hermione informed him archly, with a smile at Harry. Malfoy still grimaced, then nimbly plucked Hermione's letter from her hand. His astonishment was even greater than when he'd seen Harry's letter, but now he found a way to turn the information to his advantage.

"So, Potter. Couldn't outperform your girlfriend"?

Harry smiled and put his arm around her shoulder. "If we're talking about performance, Malfoy"...

"I'm out of here..." he muttered, throwing the letter back at Hermione, who caught it in the air, laughing.

They were looking forward to going to Hogsmeade again the next day, though, even with Malfoy, and spent much of Friday lounging by the lake and chattering about the tests. Now that they were done, dissecting them in great detail seemed to be Hermione's favorite pastime. Harry had to quiet her more than once with a kiss. The third time this happened, they were relaxing by the lake with Ron and Ginny and Malfoy and the twins and Angelina, who were done taking their N.E.W.T.s. Hermione held his head firmly, and Harry had the distinct impression that she'd been trying to get him to shut her up this time...

"Get a room!" Malfoy yelled irritably, throwing some leaves at them, as he sat next to Ginny, looking more than a little grumpy. He wouldn't dare lay a lip on Ginny with her brothers around. Harry came up for air, smiling, then looked at Hermione searchingly.

"Sounds good to me. What do you think?" he said to her mischievously. She stood and immediately started walking toward the castle. He took that as a yes. As he turned to go, he caught Ron's eye for a moment, and almost considered not following her. But then he turned to watch her walk toward the castle; none of them were wearing robes on this hot almost-summer day. She wore a pair of white shorts and a rather tight sleeveless blue blouse. His mouth went dry, watching her, and he forgot about Ron, running to catch her up. George and Angelina sent them off with wolf-whistles.

As they were about to enter the castle, walking hand-in-hand and grinning at each other, Hedwig came and landed on his shoulder, a parchment tied to her leg with Dudley's handwriting on it. He thanked her, explaining that he didn't have any owl treats, and she flew off to the owlery. He pocketed Dudley's letter; he could read it later. They dashed up to Fluffy's room, locking the door with multiple charms, putting a cushioning charm on the floor and attacking each other with abandon, the desires of the previous five weeks finally unleashed.

Afterward, she pillowed her head on his chest, watching his face in the flickering light of the candles they'd conjured, scattered around the room like a sea of fairy lights. "Harry?" she whispered.

He opened his eyes and found her looking at him. He smiled at how beautiful she was. "Yes"?

"Dumbledore gave me some good news about my parents".

"What is it"?

"They can come out of hiding. We're going to be back in our old house this summer. He's put the kind of protection charms on it that are on your house--you know, the Dursleys' house. But we can't go traveling like we normally do. We can leave the house, mind you, even go down to London for the day or--" she smiled at him "--I could come to visit you in Surrey. But we can't leave England".

"I'm sorry, Hermione"...

"No, Harry! I wasn't trying to make you feel guilty or anything. I'll just be so glad to see my mum and dad again. Do you know it's been almost a year? When you're an only child, you're very close to your parents..." Then she stopped. "Oh, I'm sorry, Harry. Sometimes I have a terrible case of foot-in-mouth disease"...

He smiled and kissed her on the forehead. "Hermione. You can't not mention your parents or being close to them or missing them just because I'm an orphan. Frankly, I forget that there's any other way to live, now. I've never really know

my parents. Seeing my mum and dad in the Pensieve...it was interesting, but they don't seem any more real to me now than before I saw them. It was like seeing actors on a stage. You love your parents and you're close to them and miss them. Don't be afraid to say those things to me, Hermione".

She smiled and snuggled up to him again. "You make me feel very lucky, do you know that Harry"?

He stroked her hair. "Feel like feeling even luckier--again"?

She lifted her head to smile at him, then moved to close the gap between their mouths as his hands caressed her back then started moving further down...

* * * * *

They left after breakfast the next day to go to Hogsmeade. It was the first time since the ceilidh. When they reached the village, they were surprised by being greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Bill and Charlie and Percy outside the newly rebuilt Three Broomsticks. Ron and Ginny and the twins were hugged and kissed by their mother (even the twins didn't seem to mind for a change) and O.W.L. results were discussed and praised, and N.E.W.T. results were speculated upon (they wouldn't know for five more days).

Harry didn't mind the Weasleys meeting them in Hogsmeade, but Ron seemed a bit discomfited by them suddenly turning up, as did Draco Malfoy. It seemed he couldn't be alone with Ginny ever, anymore; there were always other Weasleys somewhere in the vicinity. Mrs. Weasley was practically bouncing with excitement-- Harry had never seen her like this-- but Bill managed to explain what was going on a bit more coherently.

"We're here to celebrate too. Do you remember the jury saying that the Malfoy assets had to be liquidated and divided between the heirs of the six people he'd ordered killed? Of course, that's after paying the fines they levied on him as well. That meant two-thirds of what was left was to go to the heirs to the Clearwaters. Penelope and her little brother Jeremy didn't have wills, of course. And they were the chief beneficiaries named in their parents' will. But in the event that Penelope and Jeremy didn't survive their parents, last year, the Clearwaters added a codicil to their will naming an alternate heir".

Ron frowned. "Why are you telling us this"?

Bill nodded at Percy. "Percy's the heir. Apparently Penelope's parents were very keen on them getting married and assumed they would in a few years. They never thought anything would happen to them or their children, of course, but they put Percy's name in since they assumed he would soon be family anyway. So two-thirds of the proceeds from the liquidation will go to Percy. He's going to be bloody rich".

And yet, Harry couldn't help but think that Percy didn't look like he felt like celebrating. All the gold in the world couldn't bring back the girl he might have married. Harry caught his eye. He tried to smile, but it looked extremely half-hearted. Harry looked at Malfoy then, who looked utterly miserable. Harry gestured to Malfoy with his head, his eyes wide, as he looked back at Percy.

"Well, Bill," Percy said shakily. "I don't in particular want to be rich." Ron choked on his butterbeer, staring in disbelief at his brother. "I may put some of it away for the future...but I think a better use for it would be to set up a scholarship fund for Hogwarts students who might have trouble paying their school fees and buying supplies because their families have been killed or injured by Death Eaters...or similar reasons"...

Malfoy stared at Percy, whom Harry knew he'd never liked, especially when Percy was Head Boy. Percy looked back at him benignly, and Malfoy looked away. He was going to be even harder to help than Ron, Harry thought.

"Also," Bill continued, "Your thousand Galleons has been deposited in your vault at Gringotts, Harry, and you two," he said, nodding at Ron and Hermione, "Now have Gringotts accounts, opened with your respective thousand Galleons. Don't spend it all at once!" he said with a grin. "And," he continued, "In honor of Percy becoming rich as Croesus, everything today is his treat"...

George and Fred enthusiastically endorsed this idea, while Harry noticed Ron leaning back and drinking his butterbeer, look on his face that implied he was already envisioning what to do with his thousand Galleons...

They enjoyed themselves in the village all day, going to various shops, back to the pub for lunch, then having a leisurely walk back to the castle in the late afternoon, the sun still higher in the sky than it seemed it had any right to be. The day before had been midsummer, and Harry remembered that it was his parents' anniversary. He wondered whether he could convince Snape to put anything in the Pensieve from his parents' wedding--he'd been there, after all. Harry had seen himself in the wedding photos. But then he thought about how his thoughts about them and Sirius and Remus had changed after seeing them in the Pensieve, and he decided against it. He could go look at the wedding pictures in the album Hagrid had given him, and imagine them dancing on the wooden floor laid down on the lawn outside the country inn called the Willows...he didn't need to jump into the Pensieve. He had a very vivid imagination; after all, he'd imagined being with Hermione countless times before it had actually happened...

He smiled at her as they walked back to the castle, remembering the previous afternoon. Lucius Malfoy was in prison; Percy had a windfall (Even though he'd rather have had Penelope), Ron had a bank account for the first time, and Draco Malfoy didn't have to worry about money thanks to the scholarship Percy wanted to set up. They'd done well on their O.W.L.s. He didn't even mind going back to the Dursleys, he thought. Maybe he could contact Dick when he returned home and ask for a real job with him, for real pay, for the summer. He'd enjoy that, and he could continue to wear Sanderson and chat with her when he liked. Despite the fact that Voldemort was still out there somewhere, as well as Wormtail, Harry had never felt quite so optimistic that everything would turn out all right.

As they neared the castle, though, Harry could see from a distance that Dumbledore was standing on the front steps with a large black dog. Harry got a very bad feeling upon seeing that, and he took his arm from around Hermione and started sprinting toward the headmaster, his well-trained legs now moving smoothly under him. It was tempting to just transfigure into his griffin form and fly to them, but he restrained himself. When he reached them, he stopped abruptly, breathing hard.

"What is it?" he gasped, bracing himself for the worst. But it was something he could never have expected.

"Harry," Dumbledore said gently. "I have some bad news for you. Please come to my office".

Harry nodded dumbly, patting Sirius on the head. He trotted next to Harry, pressing comfortingly against his side. Harry looked over his shoulder at the others, still some distance away. Hermione looked like she wanted to run, too, but Ron put his hand on her arm and shook his head. He looked toward Harry. He looked like he too suspected what it was. Harry soon found out that they were both wrong.

He didn't remember how he reached Dumbledore's office. When he was sitting in a chair before his desk, Sirius changed to his human form again. Then Harry saw a beetle land on the floor, and suddenly standing before him was someone he hadn't seen in a year: Rita Skeeter. Dumbledore nodded at her and he sat.

"Harry--Rita here has been helping us keep tabs on your aunt and uncle and your cousin, between running some other errands now and again." Harry remembered the samples that had had to be collected to test for Krum's paternity. "Unfortunately, I neglected to tell her something important--and she was checking in on your aunt and uncle"--

"If I'd only known that he was also an unregistered Animagus..." she was saying in a slightly whiny tone to Dumbledore. "I'd have known to say something"...

Harry looked at Sirius. "She didn't know you were an unregistered Animagus? What does that have to do with anything?"

He frowned at Harry. "Not me, Harry. Wormtail. He turned up at Smeltings. One of teachers started keeping him as a pet or some such thing, and then he was able to get at Dudley"...

Harry's heart was in his throat. "What happened?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry levelly. "He jumped off the roof of his dormitory. This morning. It looked like a suicide. We think he was under Imperius. Wormtail may be the one who put the curse on him. He's dead, Harry".

Tears prickled against his eyelids. "What? But--but we'd just become friends! He--he was all right, it turned out...we were writing to each other regularly"...

"And he never mentioned this rat with the silver paw?" Dumbledore wanted to know. Harry shook his head.

"He mentioned rats, yeah. But he said they were white rats, they were using them in their biology class. Behavior projects with cheese in them and all that. He never..." But then Harry remembered the letter he'd received from Dudley the day before, the letter he hadn't read.

Without another word to any of them, he ran from the office, down the spiral stairs, up to Gryffindor Tower. He ransacked the wardrobe, his trunk, trying to find every scrap of clothing he owned. What had happened to the letter? He found the pants he'd worn the previous day, when he and Hermione had gone up to Fluffy's room. The pockets were empty and there was a food stain on them from dinner the night before. The elves hadn't washed them yet. Harry went tearing out the common room again and up to Fluffy's room. After yanking the door open, he lit his wand and stared around the dining chamber, then looked down and saw it, the rolled parchment with his own footprint on it, having trod on it before leaving, never noticing....

He picked it up, tears already flowing down his face as he unrolled it.

Dear Harry,

Thank god school's almost over! We can run together again, can't we, during the summer hols, right? I've lost a total of 120 pounds since September! You're not going to recognize me. Julia's going to come visit during the summer, and you can meet her. I never thought I'd have a girlfriend, and now I owe it all to you. Never thought I'd be saying that! Maybe you can convince mum and dad to treat you half-decent, or to actually do something for your birthday. I already have your gift. Hope you like it!

Even if I could make mum stop being so nasty to you, I suppose I could never convince her to let me have a pet rat though. Sounds unlikely, doesn't it? Remember how I said I thought my rat had gotten my roommate's rat preggers? That rat had some really cute little white rat babies. Not bloody likely for her to let me, I know. Mr. Frankel, our biology teacher, made a pet of this rat he found with a silver paw. Calls it a prognosis or something--

Prosthesis, Harry thought, remembering Hermione using the term in reference to Moody's leg. He wiped his eyes and continued reading.

--but I'm not sure what that means. Said he's never seen an animal that was apparently wild with anything like this. He didn't even keep it in a cage, but carried it around in the pocket of his lab coat. Frankel said it probably wasn't wild after all, probably someone's pet for a good long while. He still couldn't figure out how the silver paw was attached, though.

Maybe I can convince mum and dad to take us to Brighton for my birthday, even if they neglect yours. I'll insist that you come! They won't be able to get me to shut up until they say you can! Hope your tests went ok. See you soon.

--Dudley

Then Harry was crying freely as he leaned against the door and thought, If only I'd read it yesterday! If he had, he could have alerted Dumbledore and Sirius to the danger Dudley could be in, Sirius could have Apparated to Dudley's school, found Wormtail, kept him from putting Imperius on Dudley...

If he hadn't been in such a hurry to be with Hermione--if he'd only read it in time--

He curled up on the cold, stone floor, feeling like a murderer, crying until he could cry no more.

* * * * *

Harry skipped dinner. He staggered down to the common room later, a hollow ache in his chest. He kept throwing passwords at the Fat Lady, who kept refusing him entrance because none of them were the right one. He finally resorted to knocking, and Neville opened it for him, looking surprised. Harry didn't speak, walking toward the stairs to the dorm, really seeing anything or anybody. He was vaguely aware of people looking at him strangely, but he didn't care. He was responsible, he thought. He could have stopped it. He couldn't have stopped the Westminster explosion, he knew that now. He couldn't have prevented the Clearwaters being killed, or Marcus Flint and his mother, or their houseguest. But he could have stopped this. He had as good as killed Dudley with his own two hands, Dudley who had become like a brother to him...

And then he stopped, remembering Trelawney's Tarot reading for the first time in months.

Another brother...And for him, at the hand of the traitor....

The Spectre of Death.

Had Trelawney actually made another accurate prediction? Harry was starting to wonder about her, about whether she just wanted them to think she was a sham most of the time. He remembered Snape telling his mum that a seeress had come up with the Prophecy...could it have been Trelawney? He swallowed. At the hand of the traitor... Wormtail's silver hand...

"HARRY!" Ron yelled, Harry realized, for the fourth or fifth time. He'd been trudging up the stone steps listlessly, lost in his own thoughts. He turned to Ron, feeling like the world was moving in slow motion again, like when he'd left his body when Ron had put the Cruciatus Curse on him.

"What"?

"This came for you. A strange owl brought it." He handed Harry a small package, labeled, H. Potter. He opened it and took out a cassette tape. He frowned at it. Written on the small label on the tape were the words For the Boy Who Lived.

Suddenly he was galvanized into action. He ran up to the dorm, he tore into his trunk, finding the tape player Dudley had given him. He checked the battery compartment; it still had the right sort, in the right position. He took the tape out that had been in the player and put in the tape he'd just received. He put on the earphones and hit play, but the same hissing rushing noise met his ears that he'd heard before, when he'd tried to use it in the dormitory. He punched the STOP button angrily, then went down the stairs of the dorm again, his robes swirling behind him. As he strode through the common room, he was aware of multiple voices calling out to him; Hermione's, Ron's, Neville's...

He ignored them all, striding through the corridors up to the Astronomy Tower. He knew what he had to do. He looked down at the ground, so far below, wondering whether Dudley had felt any fear beneath the curse that compelled him to leap to his death. Had he stood on the roof, looking down, shaking with fear, and moving toward his doom anyway? Had he been able to form coherent thoughts of regret and apprehension as he fell toward the earth?

Harry swallowed and looked up at the sky instead. He put the tape player and headphones in his robe pockets, knowing that they would be there again when he changed back to human form again. Then he closed his eyes and felt the change move through him in an instant, as quick as thought, and he opened his eyes to find the world just as sunny and summery-bright, albeit with colors a little more muted because of his Animagus form. He spread his wings and leapt on the wind, moving toward the village, toward a place hopefully far enough from Hogwarts that he could listen to the tape. As he flew over the village, he looked down, not surprised to see people looking up and pointing, exclaiming in surprise. He probably should have used his broom, he realized, but he wanted the feeling of flying, really flying under his own power, and he pushed on, flying a little beyond the village, landing next to a copse of alders, running into the shelter of trees a little way before changing back, turning and looking toward the village, hoping no one would try to find where the anomalous golden griffin had set down.

He sat against a tree, taking the tape player out of his pocket and putting on the earphones. It was awkward to wear them at the same time as his glasses. He pressed play and watched the gears spinning, then heard the familiar hissing...the sound, finally, a familiar voice. A voice he hadn't heard since Ron's birthday.

"Hello, Harry. I'm glad you've found a way to listen to this. I know how these things work because my mother was a Muggle. Did you know that? You probably didn't. My Master doesn't hold it against me, though. He is also a half-blood, and at least I'm no Mudblood. But I digress. I thought there were a few things you should know, now that you have heard of the death of your cousin.

"Yes, I killed him. You knew that, of course. You figured it out, at any rate. You're not a stupid boy. Lily's and James' boy would not be stupid. But are you smart enough to outsmart me? People have been underestimating me all my life, Harry. It gets tiresome, frankly. I have the ear of the Dark Lord. I have more power than the Minister of Magic, although he has the power to do things like suspend sentences and cut years in prison in half...especially when he's being blackmailed. But I digress again...

"I have been living at your cousin's school. It has been a very convenient place to avoid capture by the Ministry of Magic. You surprised me that night, Harry, when you changed into a lion and chased me through the forest. So, you've followed in your father's footsteps and become an illegal Animagus! I haven't told my Master yet...I think it is something I will say for just the right moment. Don't worry; he will be pleased. For such a young wizard to achieve such a feat in such a short

amount of time will merely show him again how powerful you are, and how powerful he can be when you are joined to as his servant.

“One piece of information was not given to you on the night we were in the forest. Mr. Malfoy indicated that he had had underlings put the Imperius Curse on those girls in the hopes that one of them might become your girlfriend...What we not tell you was that a Congeniality Charm was also placed upon your cousin, such that he became a much more agreeable person. I understand you two became good friends, writing letters back and forth, running together when you were still at home. What a shame he’s dead now...”

“You must understand that this WILL happen. You will become the servant of the Dark Lord and there is nothing you can do to stop it. Do not fight it any longer, Harry. I am sure you do not want anyone else close to you to die. A pity he was never really your friend...you just thought so”...

It seemed that there might be more, but Harry didn’t care. He ripped off the headphones, threw them on the ground with the player and aimed an angry blast at them both with his wand, blowing them to bits. He didn’t want it anymore. It was tainted. Tainted, like his friendship with Dudley...

A pity he was never really your friend...you just thought so...

He swallowed, staring at the bits of metal and plastic littering the ground. He’d been manipulated, completely manipulated. He felt as though he couldn’t trust anything or anyone. What was real? Was his relationship with Hermione real? With Ron? Even with Malfoy? Had he really gotten thirteen O.W.L.s, or had he just imagined it? Was he really a prefect, captain of the Dueling Club? Nothing seemed to be real, he had no feeling of stability in his life any more...

He walked back through the village on foot, then reached the castle well after dark. Since the day before had been the longest day of the year, that was saying something, as the sun was up exceptionally late in the evening now. He tried to bring himself to climb the marble stairs, but instead found that he was walking through the Great Hall, to the secret passage to Snape’s office. Once in the dank passage at the foot of the stairs, he put his shoulder to the wall, finally feeling it give and pivot. Snape looked up from where he sat at his desk, a pile of graded parchments pushed to one side. He looked utterly unsurprised. Somehow, Harry knew that Snape knew about Dudley.

Harry pushed the wall back into place and stood, staring at the bottle of Ogden’s Old Fire Whiskey that was on the desk. There was a glass with a small amount of the amber liquid sitting next to the bottle; Snape had been partaking after finishing his work for the evening. He took one look at Harry and opened a desk drawer, producing another identical glass. He picked up the bottle and poured until the glass was half-full. He was commiserating, in his way. Snape pushed it toward Harry. Harry nodded and picked up the glass, then sat in the wing chair by the empty fireplace. He stared at the glass for a minute before taking a sip. It burned his throat; he welcomed the pain. He deserved it. He took another sip, feeling more burning, then a numbness that started to creep into his brain. He wasn’t sure how long it took him to finish but when it was gone, he felt thoroughly drunk. He wasn’t used to this; he had a very low tolerance. He wouldn’t even be sixteen for over a month, and Snape probably shouldn’t have given it to him, but it was too late now. Perhaps the Potions master had a patented hangover formula he could give him in the morning...

Harry closed his eyes, leaning back in the wing chair, feeling sleep creep over him, and blissful forgetfulness, although that would be strictly temporary. He was vaguely aware of Snape rising and leaving the room, first taking his glass from his limp hand and placing it on his desk with a solid-sounding thunk. He heard his professor leave the room, closing the door quietly, as he sank back into the chair, letting himself sink down into a dreamless slumber...

* * * * *

Chapter Thirty-Two: With Drooping Wings

Harry heard a noise and he opened his eyes. He immediately closed them again; his neck hurt like hell from sleeping in the wing chair in Snape’s office all night. His mouth tasted terrible from the whiskey, but his head felt oddly clear. He tried opening his eyes again and looked around the office; there was a dim light coming from somewhere, and looking up, Harry noticed for the first time the narrow clerestory windows at the top of the high wall behind Snape’s desk, partially obscured by the objects sitting before the windows on the tops of the bookcases lining the wall. Bell jars, mason jars with pickled dragons’ eyes and other creatures’ body parts as well. The eerie colour of the light was in part a result of the morning light being filtered through the contents of these containers. How cheery, thought Harry. It’s no wonder Snape was always in such a sunny mood...

He grimaced. Snape. Snape was just the person to suit his disposition, now. He felt he would probably want to blast out his way anyone even slightly more cheerful than Snape usually was. Harry understood now Malfoy's irritation with him morning in the prefects' bathroom. Misery certainly does love company, he thought.

The door to the office suddenly opened, and Snape stood framed in the opening, regarding Harry with an inscrutable expression. He nodded a mute greeting to him and then gestured for Harry to follow him into the classroom. He rose and plodded after him, legs like lead. Snape stood at one of the ancient granite sinks in the corner of the room. He turned on the single tap for cold water and handed Harry a goblet. Harry looked down into it; the goblet was dark brown, and Harry could not tell what color the contents might be. He looked up at Snape, who nodded, and he took a deep breath and drank the contents of the goblet, remembering with a touch of irony the way he'd been appalled at Lupin for drinking the steaming potion Snape had brought him...

Harry felt dreadful; he immediately spat the contents of his mouth into the sink, where they swirled down the drain, helped along by the running water. Then he put his hand under the tap, cupping his hand to collect some water, which he brought quickly to his mouth, again and again, as when he'd been with the giants.

He brought the sleeve of his robes up to his mouth, looking at Snape. "What was that" ?

Snape gave him what passed for a smile. "Homemade mouthwash. Your mouth should taste better now." To his surprise Harry found that he was right; there was a residual taste of ginger and mint.

"I thought it might be something for hangover"...

"Why? Do you feel like you have a hangover"?

Harry's brow furrowed. "No. Which is odd, because I felt like the whiskey really put me under, and I'm not used to drinking"...

"You no doubt fell asleep from pure stress. I have been watering my Ogden's for some time now, to cut down on my intake. It is really not good for me, but...At any rate, what you had was actually about eighty per cent water. Even someone with no tolerance should not find that unwieldy".

Harry nodded. "It probably was stress...But thanks for letting me stay down here".

Snape nodded. "I told the headmaster and Professor McGonagall where you were, and not to worry. Where were you before that"?

Harry explained to him about having to get far enough from Hogwarts to use the tape player, the message from Wormtail. "I remember now; Hermione said that the wizards who abducted her in Bulgaria talked about doing something to a Muggle boy when he was still in his school last June...They were planning to kill him for a whole year"!

Snape looked utterly unsurprised. "I am afraid that there is very little you could tell me about Death Eaters that would shock me, Potter. Your godfather went to see your aunt and uncle; they were at your cousin's school, summoned there because of the--tragedy. He should return soon".

Harry nodded, still numb somehow. He almost wished he had really gotten drunk. No, he thought, what I really wish was that I'd read Dudley's letter in time...if only...if only...

"You should go upstairs. It is too early for breakfast. Let your housemates know you are all right. Professor McGonagall told them not to worry about you, but I am sure they shall be glad to see you." Harry's throat felt very tight. Snape had never seemed so--nice. He almost wished he'd stop, that he'd yell at him or take house points away...

"And Potter," he said then, a little stiffly. "You are a prefect. You know the rules." Harry furrowed his brow, clueless about what he was going to say. "No leaving the grounds without permission. And I am quite certain that you should not have anyone see a golden griffin flying over the village. I think it would be fair to say...twenty-five points from Gryffindor. I do. Professor McGonagall would disagree with me." Well, Harry thought, I got my wish. Although, for possibly the first time he thought the points taken away were justified...

"Now," Snape said even more sternly. "Sleep in my office all night or drink any more alcohol and it will be fifty points from Gryffindor".

Harry restrained himself from smiling. "Yes, sir".

Harry checked his watch as he slogged up the stairs. It was early, but not early enough to run. This was about the time he usually showered after running. Showering; that sounded like what he needed. He made his way to the prefects' bathroom and almost didn't see Hermione standing there waiting for him.

"Harry! Oh, Harry, I've been so worried, and Ron's been worried, and Neville, and Ginny, and even Draco Malfoy..." She moved to enclose him in an embrace, and he recoiled and made a face as though he found her to be utterly repulsive. She cried, "Harry! What"--

"Don't touch me!" he choked, trying to avoid coming in contact with her; he backed up against the opposite wall of the wide corridor, putting as much distance as possible between them. "Never," he said, and she looked stricken at his expression, "Ever touch me again"!

He ran from her, going toward Gryffindor Tower. He heard her crying behind him, calling his name with tears in her voice, but he ignored her and kept moving forward, onward and upward. When he reached the portrait of the Fat Lady, he gave her the password and entered, then crossed the common room and strode up the stairs to his dorm. He stood by his bed, shedding his clothes and putting his dressing gown on. Ron and the others still slept. He went to use the regular shower to avoid going back to the prefects' bathroom. No one would be in there at this hour. After he had put his glasses in his dressing gown pocket and hung it on a hook, he stepped under the spray, leaning against the wall and just letting it hit him like a fire hose...his tears came pouring forth again, then, blending with the water from the showerhead, mixing in the drain as the water swirled around his feet. After a time, he stopped crying and put his hand up to clasp the basilisk amulet. He stared at the tiles on the opposite wall, holding the basilisk, and eventually, a feeling of calm pervaded him, and he reached out to turn off the water, feeling like his head was clear at last. He knew what he must do.

He dried off and put his dressing gown on again. When he returned to the dorm, Ron was sitting on the edge of his bed and Hermione was sitting there with him, crying on his chest. Harry looked at the other beds; the three other boys had gone down to breakfast. Ron's arms were around Hermione; her own arms were crossed over her chest as she huddled against him like a child, tears wetting the T-shirt he wore with his pajama pants. He looked unspeakably sad as he gazed down at her, then up at Harry.

But Harry's calmness went flying out the window; he felt a wave of hostility roll through himself again at seeing her. "What's she doing here?" he said as hatefully as he could. It wasn't easy, but this was what had to be done...

Ron leaned down and whispered something to her and she nodded, then he kissed the top of her head. She stood and left without looking at Harry.

Harry didn't look at Ron; he went to the wardrobe to get some clothes. "Well, I'll bet you're happy"...

Ron screwed up his face in confusion. "What?"

"Not about Dudley. About me and Hermione. What you've been waiting for, isn't it?" Harry couldn't keep the bitterness of his voice. Maybe that's what I should do, he thought. Alienate everybody. If I don't have any friends, maybe Voldemort can't hold anything over my head...

Suddenly, Ron ran at him and threw him against the wall, his hands on his upper arms. Harry gasped with the shock of the impact, wincing at the pain emanating from where his head had struck the wall. He felt a sudden grudging respect for Malfoy for not crying out when Ron had done the same thing to him. Ron spoke with his face very close to Harry's.

"You don't know anything, Harry! What do you think we were doing up here? I'll tell you what: she was crying because she said you don't ever want her to touch you again! That's what. What the hell is wrong with you? How can you blame her for this? This is not her fault, Harry. You think you could have saved him from Wormtail, but if they really wanted it to happen...how could a Muggle be safe? Unless your aunt and uncle were to let Dumbledore bring him here? As if that would ever have happened. Don't you take this out on her! You need her right now, you can't afford to push her away. She wants to be there for you. Don't you think she feels terrible? She needs you to tell her it's all right, that she did nothing wrong, as much as you need to hear it, too. Don't be a sodding bastard to her, Harry. She didn't kill Dudley. No more did you".

Harry stared at Ron, amazed. He swallowed; he'd been very tense, but now he collapsed against the wall, and when Ron released him, he sank down onto his haunches. He nodded at Ron.

"You're right, of course. Damn you...I hate it when you're right"...

He looked up to see Ron smiling. "I'm still getting used to it, frankly. It's a weird feeling".

Harry tried to smile feebly back. "You can see a lot when you want to, Ron, you know that? After those essays you wrote for Moody...maybe you should go to Muggle university, become an Oxford don, teach literature"...

Ron looked ill. "Nah. I can't wait to finish school. Muggles are gluttons for punishment, all those years cooped up in libraries...I want to get a job as soon as I walk out of the castle for the last time"...

Harry sat silently for a minute. Ron sat on his bed again. The silence wasn't uncomfortable; in fact, it was a pleasant, companionable silence. Oddly, it reminded Harry of sitting quietly with Snape in his office. Suddenly, Ron was moved to speak.

"Harry, at least--at least you and Dudley became friends before--you know"--

Harry shook his head. "But we didn't..." and he explained to Ron about the Congeniality Charm. Ron tried to offer explanations: maybe Wormtail was lying, just trying to upset Harry, maybe...But Harry told him about Hermione's recollections about being abducted, and he stopped talking, unable to reconcile these things.

"They made me care about him, Ron, just to take him away. How could anyone...how can a human being be so cruel"...

Ron sighed. "I'm not sure Death Eaters are human beings anymore, Harry. But this just goes to show, you really can't hold yourself responsible for Dudley. They were planning this for a year. A year, Harry. If you didn't do what You-Know-Who wanted, he was going to do this, any way that he could. If you caught Wormtail, someone else would have been sent to do it".

"But at least if I'd caught Wormtail, there'd be a chance of Sirius getting cleared"...

"Is that part of it? Wormtail got away again? You've got to stop obsessing over him, Harry. Sirius probably doesn't think about it as much as you do. I have to try really hard sometimes to forget that rat slept in the same bed with me. How do you think it makes me feel that he's doing the things he is now? And I never figured out that he was a wizard, not a stupid sickly rat? He lived with us for twelve years. He knows more about my family than I'm really comfortable with a dark wizard knowing. And Percy...he used to be Percy's, remember. He and I were talking about Wormtail a little last summer about some things we noticed about him that didn't make sense until we knew he was an Animagus. Percy feels guilty never noticing, too. The thing is, Harry, some people are determined to do certain things, and as much as we'd all like to be onto them and stop them before they can hurt people...well, I have to work really hard sometimes not to blame myself for what happened to you after the Triwizard Tournament."

Harry swallowed. "I never blamed you for anything Wormtail did, Ron. You had no idea".

"Exactly. And don't blame yourself, or Hermione, for Dudley".

Ron put his hand out to Harry and he took it, pulling himself up. He didn't release Harry's hand right away. They gazed at each other, and Harry knew he was incredibly lucky to have Ron for his friend. He didn't want to alienate him--not that it seemed he could, even by saying quite despicable things to him. They each dressed and went down to the common room. Hermione was waiting for them there. She stood up from her armchair by the fire as Harry walked toward her, her bottom lip shaking. He strode purposefully toward her, then he was holding her in his arms, whispering into her hair, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," over and over, while she clung to him and said, "Yes, yes, it's all right"...

He finally kissed her on the forehead and separated from her, looking at Ron. "You should thank Ron for talking some sense into me," he told her, although he looked at his best friend. She smiled and stepped over to give Ron a hug, which Harry could see he took gratefully, closing his eyes, holding her tightly for several seconds before letting her go with a reluctant look. Ron was perhaps not being completely honest about how he felt about Hermione, Harry thought, but he was too good a person to want to get her by default...Ron steered her back toward Harry, smiling grimly at him.

"I can go, if you like. If there's other things you two want to say to each other"...

Harry looked at her; he felt they'd said everything, all that was necessary for now. She had accepted his apology and forgiven him. "No. We should go down for breakfast".

Ron frowned. "You're sure"?

Now Harry was perplexed. What more did Ron expect them to say? "Yeah, I'm sure. What's with you? Let's go." And Hermione opened the portrait for them all to scramble through, but Harry saw that Ron still looked bothered by something as they walked down the stairs to the Great Hall together, Harry holding one of Hermione's hands, and Ron the other.

* * * * *

After breakfast, Dumbledore asked Harry, Hermione, Ron and Ginny to come to his office. When they arrived in the room with the portraits of the slumbering former headmasters and headmistresses, Harry was elated to see Sirius. His godfather gave him a crushing hug, then stepped back to look at him. He'd last seen him in person on the day of the ceilidh, but that seemed a long time ago now.

"You've grown up a lot this year, haven't you Harry?" he said quite seriously. Harry glanced toward Hermione and felt a warmth move up his face. Sirius laughed.

"I don't mean that...well, that's part of it, I suppose. Having a girlfriend." Harry glanced toward Dumbledore now, uncomfortable. He was still very glad that it was Aberforth and not his brother who had seen him and Hermione kissing outside the infirmary after Cho and Flitwick had woken up. Harry knew what Sirius meant; he had seen it himself, when he looked in his own eyes in the mirror. He still knew who he was when he closed his eyes, he could feel that entity that was Harry, his familiar, basically insecure but friendly self; but gazing out of his eyes now was a slightly haunted-looking Harry, a more serious Harry. He was also aware of losing most of the baby fat in his face, his cheekbones more pronounced and sharper now (which he thought made the shape of his face more like his mother's than his father's). He didn't look like the same person he'd been a year earlier, and he didn't feel like it either.

"Sirius has talked to your aunt and uncle about the funeral. It will be at St. Bede's in the Meadow Church, just outside Little Whinging, on Wednesday. The interment will be in the village cemetery just down the road".

"I offered my condolences to them," Sirius said to Harry. "They're very distraught"...

Harry's voice caught. "Do they know how he really died?" Harry didn't feel like mentioning the Congeniality Charm at that time.

"No. They think it was a suicide. They're blaming themselves...It's so sad, really. I never thought I could feel sorry for them, but all they could do practically the whole time I was there was to come up with yet another slight, something they said or done that might have driven him to it"...

Harry swallowed. So, he could tell them it was his fault, and they could hate him even more, or he could go on letting them think he'd killed himself and they'd done something to drive him to it. Neither was a particularly attractive choice.

"They wanted to know, Harry--are you planning to come to the funeral? They said they needed pallbearers...Actually, what they said was that if you come, you could make yourself useful for once and bring a couple of pallbearers, since they only have three...and you'd be one too, if you wanted".

Harry looked at Ron, who nodded. Then he looked at Sirius. "What about"--

He shook his head. "Sorry, Harry. I can't show my face. Too risky".

"Draco!" Ginny said suddenly. Harry turned to her.

"What"?

"Draco will do it. If I ask him, I'm sure he will. If it's all right for him to go, that is," she said uncertainly, looking at Dumbledore.

He smiled at her. "If Harry would like him to, then yes, Draco may go. In fact, you may all go; Harry will need his friends around him. Sirius has said that Remus Lupin has agreed to accompany you. I'll have a horseless carriage take you to Hogsmeade on Tuesday, and then you can go from Honeyduke's to Diagon Alley by floo. That will give you a day to shop for appropriate Muggle funeral clothes; you can stay over at the Leaky Cauldron before going to the funeral on Wednesday".

Harry frowned. "Floo? Then--why couldn't we have gone that way to the Ministry of Magic"?

Dumbledore looked unconcerned about this oddity. "We could have. If I didn't think we all needed the buffer of the time the train...sometimes, Harry, wizards and muggles alike are so concerned with getting places quickly that they forget about the pleasures of something like a long, leisurely train ride. It's not jarring and sudden; you have time to adjust from one place to another. That's why we use it to bring you students to school. Well, that and it would be a bit messy for so many young witches and wizards and their belongings to be flowing out of the fireplaces in Hogsmeade all day long on September first." He smiled, his eyes twinkling at them all.

"On Wednesday, I'll have Ministry cars take you from the Leaky Cauldron to the church for the service. Are you familiar with it, Harry"?

"St. Bede's? A little; we went there for Christmas and Easter when I was young. The rector was nice, if it's the same one...It's a bit old fashioned. They still use the 1928 Book of Common Prayer..." What he didn't say was that Dudley had sung in the boys' choir, even doing soprano solos when he was young, before his voice changed. Aunt Petunia had been so proud...it didn't bear thinking about.

"Ah, yes. Well. Sirius has to leave, and you have to ask Draco if he will accompany you to London and the funeral." He nodded to them, and that was all; it was their cue to go. They left the office (Sirius came with them in his dog form) and walked down to the entrance hall, all four of them patting the large black dog affectionately before he went bounding down the path to Hogsmeade. Suddenly, Draco Malfoy came in the hall, carrying his broomstick over his shoulder. He looked like he'd gone for a morning fly around the pitch after breakfast. Ginny greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. He smiled at her and tried to give her a better-aimed kiss, but caught a look in Ron's eye and seemed to think better of it.

"Draco! I need to ask you--" she began.

"Hullo," he interrupted her, looking out the door and frowning. "Wasn't that the same dog we saw in Hogsmeade? On the day of the ceilidh"?

The four of them suddenly stood still, tongue-tied, staring back and forth at each other. Malfoy looked at each of them in turn. "What's the matter? Is that the password for making the four of you get the world's stupidest expressions on your faces? Oops--sorry Ginny, I meant three"...

She smiled and laughed, recovering. "No, no--it might have been the same dog. I think it's just a stray the house elves have been feeding. You know how it is once you've fed them once; they keep coming back for more..." He nodded, accepting this. Ginny took a breath then, and said quickly, "Draco, Harry's cousin's funeral is on Wednesday, so can you come along and be a pallbearer"?

He looked shocked. "What"?

Harry explained that three pallbearers were needed, and that they'd be going down to London first to shop for appropriate clothes, then going to Surrey the next day.

He shook his head, although he really did look reluctant. "Sorry, Potter. No".

"Oh, come on, Malfoy, do the right thing for once," Ron started to say, before Malfoy cut him off.

"Easy for you to say, Weasley. You have money now. I don't have any way to actually pay for new clothes, thank you very much".

Harry shrugged. "I wasn't going to let anyone pay for their own anyway, Malfoy. It's all on me. The rooms at the Cauldron are too." He turned to Ron, to shut him up, as his mouth had started to open. "And I'm not taking no on that, from anyone. I'm not going to make you come to a funeral and not cover the clothes and rooms you wouldn't have had to pay for if you hadn't come".

Ron closed his mouth again. Malfoy looked at him, then Harry, then at Ginny's pleading face, which really seemed to be the clincher. "Well, as I seem to be confronted with the opportunity to spend the night at an inn where Ginny will be sleeping..." he started to say mischievously putting his arm around her shoulder and moving in for another kiss. Ron quickly disabused him of the notion he'd clearly started to entertain.

"Oh, no you don't, Malfoy. You and I are sharing a room, and I'm keeping an eye on you. Or I could just put a binding spell on you, so you can't leave the room overnight. Don't get any ideas".

Harry tried not to laugh; he couldn't have imagined Ron wanting to spend the night in the same room with Malfoy before this, but with Ginny in another room in the same inn, Ron wasn't going to be taking any chances.

Malfoy sighed, but he also still had the mischievous smile. "It is just too easy to get you wound up, you know that Weasley? All right; I'll do it. Isn't often one gets to go on an unsupervised field trip"...

"Well, actually, Remus Lupin's supervising us," Harry told him.

Malfoy looked thoughtful, then shrugged. "Oh, well, Lupin wasn't so bad. As teachers go, he certainly wasn't as bad as Lockhart. Or Quirrell. But--when's the next full moon"?

"The last one was a week ago, Malfoy. I thought you got an O.W.L. in astronomy?" Hermione said a little snidely. He made a face at her; he still wasn't quite over not getting more O.W.L.s than her or Harry, although he'd taken a couple opportunities to point out to Ron that he'd gotten one more than him.

Tuesday seemed to come quickly. After breakfast, they five of them took small suitcases down to the entrance hall; Hermione had shown them a clever spell for transfiguring their rucksacks into the suitcases. "One can always have the right piece of luggage, if one only has a wand"...

"Don't gloat, Granger," Malfoy warned her, although he seemed pretty pleased with himself when the spell converted his canvas bag into a nice simple black leather suitcase to which he added his initials: DIM. Ron and Harry started to laugh when they saw that.

"Perfect initials, Malfoy. What's the I stand for?" Ron chuckled.

"The I stands for I don't want to tell you"...

"Do you know?" Ron tried to ask Ginny on the sly. She shook her head dumbly, but Harry wasn't sure if she was being truthful or not.

They were quiet on the way to the village, then at Honeyduke's, they met Lupin, and one by one, they walked into the fireplace and announced that they wanted to go to the Leaky Cauldron. Harry hadn't used floo in a while; he'd forgotten about the dizzying array of gratings that would be whirling past him, glimpses of rooms throughout the wizarding world, until, just as he was starting to feel like he would lose his lunch, he tumbled out into the front room of the pub, tripping over his suitcase, and looking up into the kindly face of Tom the publican.

"Hello, Harry," he said calmly. Harry stood, brushing soot off the knees of his jeans. Hermione and Ginny were already standing at the foot of the stairs with their bags. Ron and Malfoy followed after, and then Lupin. Tom gave them their room keys and they all went up.

"How come you get a room to yourself, Potter?" Malfoy wanted to know as they went upstairs. Hermione and Ginny were sharing, like Malfoy and Ron. Lupin was also in a single room.

"Because I'm paying. Any other stupid questions"?

"Boys..." Lupin started to say.

"Sorry," Harry said to him. "Don't want to make you into a referee".

Lupin smiled at him. "Actually, it's like old times. We didn't even need Snape to be around to be picking on each other. I'd say something to Sirius, he'd say something to James"...

Malfoy stopped and stared at him. "Sirius? Sirius Black"?

They all froze. Lupin looked awful; Harry could tell he was mortified at having forgotten to watch what he said about Sirius.

"Yeah," Harry said, trying to get rid of the quaver in his voice. "You knew he was in my dad's crowd, surely? Everyone knew that".

Malfoy nodded, but Harry thought he was perhaps remembering the way Sirius had suddenly appeared at the Three Broomsticks on the day of the ceilidh. Had he noticed that he was wearing the same clothes as Ian Lucas? Had he wondered about the black dog? Harry wondered whether he'd ever trust Malfoy enough to tell him the truth about Sirius. Life would certainly be easier if he could. Of course, it would help if he could get Sirius cleared...

They went to their rooms and left their bags; they'd all worn Muggle clothes to floo to the Cauldron, so all they had to do was meet in the bar again before going to Diagon Alley. While Harry went to Gringotts to exchange Galleons for pounds, Lupin and the others went to Florean Fortescue's for ice cream. He gritted his teeth during the ride down to his vault, then waited, trying not to tap his foot, while the Goblin at the window upstairs determined how much of a surcharge he would pay for the currency conversion. When he finally emerged from the bank, he had a large wad of twenty-pound notes and enough in Galleons to pay Tom for the expenses at the inn. They went back to the Cauldron, but just as they were getting ready to open the street-side door, Harry realized that Lupin was going to go out into Muggle London in robes. They waited while he took his robes back to his room, returning in rather shabby brown pants and a brown shirt.

"My guard uniform," he mumbled with some embarrassment. Harry didn't know what to say. He still thought it a crime that Lupin had to support himself the way he did. They emerged into a bright, summery London day, looking, Harry thought, exactly like the six of them had spent the previous year in a dungeon. Which, considering how much time the five of them had put in working on potions, wasn't that far off. Harry hesitated, unsure of what to do next. Malfoy immediately picked up on this.

"What's the matter, Potter? Never been in the big city before"?

"I've been to London before, Malfoy. I'm just not sure, um, where we should go"...

Hermione took charge. "Right," she said, promptly hailing a taxi. A large black car rolled to a stop in front of them almost immediately. After they piled in, Hermione said firmly to the driver, "MacTavish's, please".

"Yes, miss," said the elderly driver, moving out into the traffic as though there were no other possible destination for a person in London. After about fifteen minutes, they pulled up in front of a large store with doormen dressed in highland regalia, even more elaborate than that Malfoy had worn to the ceilidh.

"Um, Hermione," Ron said nervously, "We're not supposed to wear kilts for this funeral, are we? Because I have a basic philosophical problem with going about in a skirt"...

She nudged him with her elbow. "Stop panicking, Ron. They're just for show, because the name of the place is Scottish. They sell your basic Muggle clothes, and they tailor men's suits very quickly. My dad gets all of his suits here. And they have lovely silk ties"...

Harry paid the driver and they went into the store. Harry didn't feel particularly comfortable here, but he didn't want to reveal in front of Malfoy that he'd never been in a Muggle establishment like this, with posh fixtures, and immaculate young men and women who looked like they'd stepped out of glossy magazine adverts trying to squirt them with cologne or inquire every three seconds whether they needed any assistance at all, any at all...He noticed that Lupin didn't look more comfortable in this setting than he did.

Hermione went immediately to a bank of lifts and pressed the button to go up. When the doors opened, she and Harry and Lupin stepped on; Ron, Ginny and Malfoy just stood looking into the little room with mirrors and tartan wallpaper lining it. Their expressions were not just uncertain, but downright terrified. Even Malfoy wasn't ashamed to show how he felt about this. Hermione sighed with exasperation.

"Come on, you three! It's just a lift. Something that Muggles invented over a hundred years ago. Get on! Else we'll have to walk up five storeys".

Ginny put her foot into the lift experimentally, then crept in with her other foot, each step careful and tentative. Now Hermione was closing her eyes in exasperation; Harry could feel the heat of frustration emanating from her, like when she knew an answer in class and she was trying to restrain herself from screaming it out. Suddenly, the doors to the lift started closing, and would have hit Ron if Harry hadn't quickly found the button for opening them again. Ron screamed and leaped backward; he'd been about to board the lift, but when the doors had threatened to make a Ron snack out of him...

"Hurry up, you two!" Hermione hissed at them. "That happens when the doors have been open a long time. If you'd just get on"...

So Ron and Malfoy did a kind of kamikaze approach to the lift and leapt into it, each uttering a small cry, knocking into the rest of them and making the car shift slightly in the shaft, which was making Harry nervous now, and he'd never felt that way about lifts before. With a little more eye-rolling, Hermione punched the button for the fifth floor and the doors rolled smoothly shut. When the lift started moving upward, Malfoy suddenly grabbed Harry's arm; Harry gave him an amused look and he removed his hand quickly. Harry noticed that he had beads of sweat on his forehead as he looked above the door at the numbers lighting up, one by one, as they passed the lower floors.

When the lift shuddered to a stop and the doors slid open, Ron and Malfoy shouldered their way past the others, racing to get out. Ginny was actually laughing at the two of them as she strolled out with Hermione, suddenly an old veteran.

"I liked it!" she declared. "We should have those at school. I'm so tired of slogging up and down so many stairs...You'd think it wouldn't be too hard to create a spell to"--

"Sssshh!" Hermione said suddenly, putting her hand over Ginny's mouth. "Don't mention spells or anything like that!" she hissed. Ginny glared at Hermione, who removed her hand from her mouth. "Sorry about that, but you can't say things like that here"...

Lupin nodded. "One thing I'm here for is to keep you all out of any trouble of that sort. Revealing or even discussing your abilities--would be a serious breach".

Ginny nodded at him, reluctantly admitting the truth of this. Harry realized that she and Ron and Malfoy had probably had very, very little exposure to the Muggle world; they just weren't used to concealing something that was so second-nature to them. Harry and Hermione hadn't even discovered they were magical until they received their Hogwarts letters (Although, of course, there were the anomalous magical incidents from their childhoods). This was completely new for others.

The rest of the shopping trip went fairly easily. The girls went off to look at appropriate funeral clothes for themselves while Lupin and the boys were fitted for suits and selected shirts and ties. Ron and Lupin also needed black oxfords. Malfoy was eyeing some expensive silk neckties, but Harry informed him they'd all be wearing plain black ties with their black suits.

When Malfoy was standing before a triple mirror in the suit he was getting, he squinted and stared at the mirror in an odd way, Harry thought. Finally, he stepped up to it and started rapping it with his knuckles. "Well?" he said to his reflection. "What's wrong with you"?

Harry walked over to him, standing very close. "Stop it, Malfoy! What's wrong with you"?

Malfoy still peered with a perplexed look into the mirror. "Stupid thing isn't working...hasn't said a word about whether the suits look all right"...

"Malfoy," he said more softly still. "Muggle mirrors don't talk" .

"They don't?" He still stared at the mirror, his eyes narrowed.

"No." Finally taking this for an answer, Malfoy walked away from the mirror, as though it had slighted him by not commenting. He probably has mirrors at home that feed his ego all the time, Harry thought.

The girls' clothes were ready to go, but the suits were still being hemmed and altered by the middle of the afternoon. (Malfoy wanted to know why he couldn't just use his wand for this back at the Leaky Cauldron; Harry nixed this idea). They went up to the top floor (Ron and Malfoy weathering the lift better this time) to have a bite in the tea room there w

they waited. They chose one of the tables on a roof terrace looking out over the neighborhood. On the streets below, the newly green trees fluttered in a warm breeze, and they could see children playing in a park with a tall iron fence around it. Nannies sat primly on benches, prams parked beside them, reading or chatting with each other. Office workers ate sandwiches on other benches and enjoyed the summer sunshine.

Harry listened to the others chatter around him with only half an ear; they were enjoying their outing, the unfamiliar setting, and he was glad he could do this for them. He, however, couldn't help being constantly aware of the reason why they were here. The next morning, they would rise and don their newly-purchased, somber clothes, and go to the church for Dudley's funeral...

Lupin caught his eye and nodded; he understood. It had been strange for Harry to see Lupin wearing a nicely-tailored suit, he'd only ever seen him in rather shabby robes, and now rather shabby Muggle clothes. He had seemed very different, somehow. More authoritative, although Harry had never disrespected him when he was his teacher in third year. He couldn't quite put his finger on it.

After their tea, they went back downstairs to retrieve the altered suits. Ginny and Hermione picked up their outfits in another department, where they'd been keeping their packages for them. Harry felt he'd had enough of the Muggle world for a while; he'd be immersed in it tomorrow, and then for the rest of the summer...

But he couldn't imagine the summer. Trying to live in the same house with Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon while they mourned Dudley, and he knew it was all his fault. He dreaded seeing them at the funeral. Perhaps it would help that he'd been asked to provide pallbearers and he'd done just that. Harry didn't think they'd expect him to speak. He sincerely hoped not. He had no idea how he'd survive such a thing...

After they put their purchases in their rooms, they occupied themselves in the bar of the Leaky Cauldron before dinner. Ron challenged Malfoy to wizard chess, while Ginny and Remus watched them. Harry sat next to Hermione, his hand draped across her shoulder. She grew tired and put her head on his shoulder, then yawned hugely.

"Oh, Hermione, don't do that, you'll make me--" he began, before a yawn overcame him as well. She laughed, then kissed him on the cheek.

"I think I'll go take a nap in my room before dinner." She stood to go upstairs, but he still held her hand, looking at her hopefully.

"Would you like some company"?

She glanced over at Lupin, their chaperone, saying to Harry, "I really do want to sleep"...

"So do I. As you've said before, it's nice sleeping in the same bed"...

She nodded. "All right--" she answered, and they walked up the stairs; Harry looked over his shoulder; Lupin met his eyes but he nodded at Harry. Harry's chest hitched with emotion, treasuring the trust he felt from his father's old friend. He walked with Hermione up to the room she shared with Ginny, following her to the bed. She lay down on her side in her clothes, and he put his glasses on the table and curled up behind her as they'd done many times. Very quickly, she was breathing slowly and regularly, her cheek on her hand in a way that always reminded him of a small child sleeping. He drew her to him, his arm around her waist, closing his eyes and letting his cares slip away...

* * * * *

Harry felt someone watching him. He wasn't sure why or how he knew; he just did. His eyes flew open and he saw Ron sitting on Ginny's bed looking at the two of them. Except that he wasn't looking at Harry's face, so he didn't seem to be aware of the fact that his eyes were open. Harry remembered him watching Hermione sleep on the train.

"Ron," he said softly, not moving any other part of him.

"Ah!" Ron jumped, as startled as though a statue had spoken. Probably more startled, Harry thought, since the suits of armor and artwork and mirrors at Hogwarts addressed them all the time. Harry smiled as he remembered Malfoy trying to get the Muggle mirror to talk. "Harry--don't do that"!

"Sorry Ron; I wasn't trying to make you jump out of your skin"...

He rolled over onto his back, stretching, and then Hermione murmured something in her sleep and also rolled over, throwing her arm and one leg over Harry. Harry dared to glance back at Ron, looking at Hermione again; his heart was unmistakably on his face. Harry closed his eyes. Just the other day, Ron had been yelling at him for trying to push Hermione away. Harry wondered now how much that had cost him.

“Don’t fall asleep again, Harry. It’s time for dinner. Lupin got us a private dining room downstairs. Everyone else is waiting”.

He woke Hermione and the three of them went down to dinner. Harry talked with the others, caught up with Lupin, told him quite a bit about the O.W.L.s, which gave the older man the chance to reminisce about his own fifth-year tests, then was back to the bar for more wizard chess, Exploding Snap and wizard darts. The wizard darts were very frustrating to Harry, who’d never played before. The board looked at first like a regular dartboard in any pub; but the moment the dart (which spoke) was released, the board started changing and moving, so that it looked totally different by the time the small projectile reached it and embedded itself in the cork. Lupin was beating Harry mercilessly, but Ron gave Lupin a bribe for his money while Harry played Ginny at chess and Hermione and Malfoy laughed over their Snap burns.

Ginny was going to win; his pieces were beating a hasty retreat before her onslaught. In no time, it seemed, she was saying, “Checkmate,” as Harry’s remaining knight and bishop were criticizing him, saying, “We told you to move that pawn to protect the rook, which was protecting the king, but did you listen? No, you know what you’re doing, you said”...

Ginny smiled shyly at him as they cleared up the pieces. When they’d finished putting it away, Malfoy had started playing darts with Lupin and Ron while Hermione watched, highly amused, and Harry fetched some butterbeers from the bar for him and Ginny. They sat sipping them slowly, watching the darts match. Suddenly Ginny spoke softly to him.

“Harry. I know he probably hasn’t said anything to you, but--the Quidditch Cup. That meant a great deal to Draco. This has been so hard on him. You have no idea, the way he’s been treated in Slytherin since the trial, and of course, his mother...It was such a wonderful thing to do. He has a hard time saying these things, but he really appreciated it”.

Harry smiled at her. “It just came to me suddenly. The Snitch appearing when it did...I would have had to pretend I didn’t see it and try to draw Cho away too, so Ravenclaw wouldn’t win, and then hope that the next time it appeared, I’d get to it first. The moment I thought, Hey, if I catch it now, we’ll tie Slytherin for the cup, I also thought, And that would be a bad thing why? So before I could spend much more time thinking about it, I just went for it”...

“Well, it was still a wonderful thing to do. You and Draco may wind up friends yet”.

Harry looked at him, playing darts, laughing and joking with the others, sipping a butterbeer between his turns. Harry had never seen him like this, just socializing happily. “Yeah, well a greater wonder seems to be happening over there. Draco and Malfoy and Ron Weasley getting along. A truly miraculous event”.

Ginny sighed. “Now I just have five other brothers and my mum and dad to convince...” But then she smiled at Harry, and his chest felt strange; suddenly having her smile at him like that seemed so important and wonderful. He shook himself, looking over at Hermione, who was giving that throaty laugh he adored, which made her even more attractive than she already was...

Harry and Ginny gave in and joined the darts match. At last, they all went up the stairs rather later than they should have, laughing and rehashing the hilarious results of their trying to play this game for the first time (Except for Lupin). Harry kissed Hermione lightly on the lips and watched her close the door to her and Ginny’s room, then said goodnight to Ron, Malfoy and Lupin before retiring to his own room. He undressed and lay on the bed in his drawers, wondering how to conjure up a ceiling fan to dissipate the muggy heat from the room. He didn’t even have a chance to take his glasses off, however, before his exhaustion and the oppressive heat caused him to fall asleep.

* * * * *

Harry awoke with a start. He was confused by the fact that the world was in focus, as it never was when he first awoke until he realized that he’d fallen asleep with his glasses on. He wasn’t sorry to wake up; he’d been having horrible nightmares, and he’d been trying to wake up for what felt like a long time. He drew his dressing gown around himself, tying the belt and taking his wand out of the pocket as he approached the door to his room. He took the locking charm off the door that he’d added as an extra precaution, then slowly turned the knob and pulled the door open a fraction of an inch, peering into the corridor to try to determine where the noise had come from.

An eye stared back at him.

But he knew whose eye it was. He opened the door wide enough for her to enter, and Hermione crept into his room. He closed the door again and she turned to him. "Did I wake you up, Harry?" she whispered. "I just thought--it was nice to take that nap earlier. If you wanted, I could just, you know, sleep here tonight"...

Harry stood with his back to the door, while she stepped toward him. He shook his head, remembering the dreams, not wanting to remember, trying to get the damn things out of his head...

"No, Harry? Oh. Well, all right, then. If you want to be alone, you should be alone"...

He swallowed and looked at her. "No. That wasn't what I meant. I mean--stay. But I don't just want to sleep".

She looked up at him, understanding now, sliding her arms up around his neck. He tipped her head back and bent over her, running his tongue along her bottom lip, shaking as she opened her lips and he felt her tongue meet his, as her fingers twined in his hair and he moved his hands to the belt of her dressing gown.

Somehow, he felt desperate, as though they didn't have much time, as though it were terribly important not to dawdle. He took care of removing the clothing from both of them, his hands moving quickly, surprising her, he could tell. While she glided languidly to the bed, he moved swiftly to his table, to put his glasses and amulet there. It seemed like he waited years for her to reach the bed. Once she was there, he continued to feel the strange urgency as he explored her, tried to make her feel that there wasn't a square inch of her skin untouched by his mouth and hands. Time and again, he heard gasps of surprise from her; but she seemed to think they were good surprises, and when she drew him to her, into her, and he finally felt that surge of electricity igniting all of his nerve endings, and heard her say his name over and over in a cried whisper, he saw the dreams again on the inside of his eyelids, and knew that even this hadn't been a solution. He had never felt like this with her before, like he was beating back death. The dreams would not be denied; they demanded his notice ...

He stood on the flat roof of a nondescript brick building, Dudley beside him, smiling and talking, but the words made no sense to Harry. He was watching Dudley's mouth move, and he heard words, but the two didn't merge into a meaningful whole.

Harry looked around him; there was a fog obscuring the landscape around the building. Harry could not see any other buildings, or the ground at the bottom of the building they were on. He looked down the side of the building; the brick wall disappeared into the fog, but Harry didn't get the impression that this meant they were very high up. The building didn't seem to be more than four storeys.

He looked at Dudley again, who was still talking at him unconcernedly. Harry wanted to say to him, 'Why are we on the roof? Let's go downstairs; I don't like it up here'...

But when Harry looked around, there was no door, nothing to indicate how they'd gotten to the roof. Harry saw a mob of white rats running along the ledge around the building a storey below the roof. There were hundreds, white fur and pink eyes and tails blurring, so that it was hard to tell where one of the animals began and another one left off. Then he saw the silver and brown amidst the pink and white. He lay on his stomach to reach down and catch it (He shouldn't have been able to reach it, but somehow he could), plucking it from the mass of moving white rodents, and then there it was; it was writhing in his hand, a silver paw sprouting incongruously from its small furry brown arm, the naked pink tail waving as though it could pick up things with it, like the prehensile tail of a monkey. He looked up at Dudley; it was as though Dudley could not see what he was doing, he went on talking, still out of sync, looking like a badly dubbed Japanese movie.

Harry tried to throw the rat off the roof in his fury, but as it left his grasp it was moving incredibly slowly, and Harry watched it change. In mid-air it metamorphosized into a large snake, its four limbs disappearing, its body lengthening and turning green, the pupils of its eyes becoming vertical, like a cat's. Then the snake, floating in the air next to the building (While Dudley continued his strange speech) continued to grow. Now it had limbs again, scaly green ones, now its head was changing shape, now it had sprouted wings and was using the wings to fly back and forth above Harry's and Dudley's heads. Harry watched the dragon with trepidation. Now the dragon was the one moving its mouth, but, unlike Dudley's words, what the dragon was saying was intelligible to Harry.

'You can trust me,' it drawled.

Harry stared at it, thinking, No. I can't.

'You can trust me,' it said to Dudley now. Still moving his lips ceaselessly, Dudley nodded and stepped up on the lip running around the roof of the building. Harry tried to stop him, but even though he was only five feet away, his movements seemed to be slower than slow; watching himself move was like watching the movements he'd seen when he had blocked the pain of the Cruciatus Curse in the forest. He could feel his feet moving, his legs pumping, he could see his hands reaching out for Dudley, but he could also see Dudley nodding calmly at the dragon and jumping from the ledge. Harry flailed and windmilled, trying to reach him. But by the time he arrived at the spot from which Dudley had jumped, his cousin was descending toward the fog. Harry, helpless, stared down at the fog shrouding the building, and then Dudley went through and could be seen no more...

The dream was the same every time. He looked down at her. For now, time seemed to be moving along in the usual manner again. She was gazing up at him, her hands wrapped around his upper arms, her legs still binding him to her, a light sheen of sweat on her upper lip, her forehead, her neck and chest. She looked concerned, and he tried to reassure her, but he wasn't sure who was going to reassure him. He leaned down and kissed her neck, moving his mouth down, making her arch her back and smile at him. Distract her, arouse her again, do anything but fall asleep again...If I sleep I might dream...

Mustn't dream.

No more dreaming.

None.

But he fell into an exhausted heap next to her, staring up at the streetlights bouncing off the ceiling. She snuggled into crook of his arm, having no idea of the horror he'd just seen, and he felt her breath upon his neck, her skin pressed against his, as he committed himself to never, ever sleeping again, and promptly broke his promise to himself in ten minutes, his eyes feeling welded shut and refusing to open...

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He woke in the night, furious with himself that he'd let himself break his new vow of no-sleep already. He looked down at her. She lay beside him, her body shining and promising, and he lowered his lips to hers, coaxing her into consciousness, hoping she would help him stay awake again. He moved his mouth down to her neck, then her chest; he stroked his hands down her body until she could deny his movements no more, and her eyes flew open suddenly before being squeezed shut again, while she breathed, "Oh, Harry"...

There were worse ways to stay awake, he thought, as she came to life in his arms. When she whispered that she was feeling sticky and sweaty, he suggested they take a shower together; he hoped it would be harder to fall asleep, harder to have the dreams again. She smiled and pulled his mouth down to hers, to show she approved of the idea.

In the small shower in the bathroom adjoining his room, they soaped and explored each other some more, but Harry was feeling desperate again, feeling like it was dreadfully important that this work, that this make the dreams go away. The water beat against him, washing only his skin clean, leaving his soul still with a film that could not be removed.

He carried her back to the bed, her legs around his waist, trying to achieve forgetfulness and oblivion again...

When he was lying beside her once more, staring at the ceiling, struggling to keep his eyes open, listening to her even breathing, he finally gave in and closed his eyes, but when the images appeared on the insides of his eyelids they were different this time ...

He was standing with Hermione in the garden at Godric's Hollow. He looked down at himself and Hermione; they were naked, but for some reason they were not trying to cover themselves. His mother was at the door of the cottage, holding a black-haired, green-eyed baby, pleading with Voldemort, falling on her knees, begging. Harry hadn't thought she could see him, but then she turned to him and said, 'I'm sorry Harry. I wanted to be there for you. I really did. We never meant for you to grow up without us'...

He looked back at her through his tears. 'Then,' he said, 'Do something about it!'

Suddenly, Snape was there behind her, coaching her, speaking softly to her. 'You don't have to mean it,' he said to her. 'Just say it. Do what you must. Save yourself, and Harry'...

She appeared not to have heard him, but she looked up at the menacing figure before her in the dark, hooded cloak, opening her mouth in a scream. 'Yes! Yes!' she cried through her tears. 'I will give him to you! I will raise him to be your servant! Please don't hurt him'...

Suddenly, the dark figure was gone, his mother and Snape was gone, the baby was gone. Harry turned to Hermione, standing beside him, as lacking in clothes as he was.

But the girl wasn't Hermione.

'Ginny...' he breathed as he took her body in his arms, and she put her arms around him and brought his mouth to hers, then drew him down to the ground and pulled him on top of her.

'It will be all right...the scar is gone now...' she murmured between her kisses, her mouth on his chest, his arms, his neck, his face, and finally his forehead, where he could feel that the skin was now smooth and uninterrupted, and she wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him to her...

But he blinked, and when next he looked, she too was gone, and he was lying prone on a skeleton. The bones collapsed beneath him, his face was next to the skull, and he rose up, screaming. He turned back to the cottage, but it was gone; he saw instead ruins, the ruins of the castle at Hogwarts. He had no doubt that's what it was. It looked as though it had been abandoned for a thousand years...He opened his mouth in a horrified cry:

'Mum! Mum! MUM!'

He opened his eyes. He'd been asleep for a while, having the same dream over and over, but only now did he cry out. The bright light of morning invaded the room. He felt his heart racing in his chest. Hermione was asleep beside him, having no idea what mental torture he was going through. She had pulled a sheet up over both of them at some point in the night; they were still both unclothed. Suddenly, Harry heard a voice crying, "Alohomora!" and the bang of the door hitting the wall as the spell flung it open violently. Harry realized he'd neglected to put the locking charm back on the door so that it would be impervious to Alohomora. They must have heard him screaming, or Ginny had seen Hermione's empty bed and started worrying.

He saw the appalled faces of Ron, Draco and Ginny staring at them. Harry didn't know what to say; he was lying in bed with Hermione, neither of them wearing anything, and he'd been screaming. What had he been screaming? He couldn't remember. He looked at Ginny and tried to remember. She was there, but she hadn't been wearing anything either...

He tried to wipe this thought from his brain, swallowing and looking back at their shocked faces. He couldn't speak. Evidently, neither could they.

Beside him, Hermione stretched and started to sit up. Harry saw Ron's and Malfoy's eyes go wide, he turned and saw that she was no longer adequately covered by the sheet. He pushed her down again, pulling the sheet further up. She opened her eyes now, looking up at him sleepily.

"Hey, Harry, what's the big idea...?" Then she saw the others standing at the foot of the bed and promptly screamed.

Malfoy smirked.

"Good morning to you, too, Granger. Thanks for the news flash"...

Hermione pulled the sheet up over her head, unwilling to look at any of them after that. Harry was pleased to see that Ginny was livid; she pointed at the door. "Out!" she commanded, and he immediately took in the frightening look on her face and obeyed without question. Now she was seeing his true colours, he thought. Harry looked at Ron, who was still wide-eyed.

"Ron? Could you--excuse us"?

He nodded dumbly, and Harry wasn't sure whether he'd actually blinked in the last five minutes. Perhaps he was afraid he'd miss another little show, thought Harry. Ron turned to go, still looking at the outline of Hermione under the sheet,

taking far too much time for Harry's taste. Harry turned to try to talk to Hermione, when he realized that Ginny remained. Harry looked back at her; the sheet was around his waist, and he suddenly felt far more exposed than any of the times he'd gone about on the school grounds without a shirt. Ginny didn't seem to be quite conscious of the way she was gazing at him.

"Ginny?" He startled her. She widened her eyes and practically ran for the door, closing it loudly behind her. Now that the door was closed again, he looked down at Hermione. She had rolled over to lie on her stomach, and he could see that her face was quite red. "Oh my god," she was saying into the pillow. "Malfoy is never going to let me forget that, is he? I'm not going to be hearing about rack of lamb from him for the next two years"...

Which was just what Harry needed to jerk him out of his stupor. He laughed suddenly, and leaned down to kiss her on the shoulder. She frowned at him. "Oh, it's funny, is it, that I just flashed Malfoy and Ginny and--" she swallowed "--Ron," she finished softly.

Well, Harry thought, Ron didn't exactly look like he minded... But he didn't dare say it. She dressed and left the room, and he went into the bathroom and took another shower, trying to forget his nightmares. Today will be enough of a nightmare, he thought. He leaned against the wall while the water ran into the drain. He'd thought he could distract himself with her last night, but it hadn't worked. His brain had simply not cooperated. He hoped the others would not tell Lupin. He wondered whether Lupin knew anyway. Maybe he didn't care.

He put on his new suit and went down to the bar. Tom pointed down the corridor to the private dining room where they had dinner the night before. The others were there already, eating a quiet breakfast. Hermione had pulled her lengthened curls into a tight, uncompromising-looking French twist, her face looking very thin and exposed without the tangle of curls surrounding it as usual. She looked down at her plate, not daring to meet anyone's gaze, even Harry's. Harry saw Ginny looking at her in a distinctly unfriendly way. Oh great, thought Harry. We're off to a really great start today...

Malfoy, to his credit, was gazing longingly at Ginny, as though Hermione didn't exist. He sure had a hole to climb out of, Harry thought. But Ron...Ron couldn't take his eyes from Hermione. Which was odd, because she could not have chosen a sterner ensemble for the funeral. Her charcoal-grey suit was high-necked and the skirt fell to mid-calf. The colour was good for her, Harry thought; her normally lightly-tanned skin looked sallow, and she had dark circles under her eyes (From him waking her up in the night, he knew).

Ginny had pulled only some of her hair back, gathered with a barrette at her crown; most of it still cascaded onto her shoulders. Her pale skin looked translucent; Harry noticed a very pale blue vein near her hairline, found it hard to not look at it. She had a simple dress of the same charcoal-grey colour as Hermione, but it was a far better choice for her. Suddenly he realized that she was looking back at him, frowning, and he looked down at his plate again. Good grief, he thought. It was going to be nearly impossible to have a conversation with any of them ever again...

When Lupin spoke, it was like a thunderclap. "The Ministry car will be here soon. We should get ready." His new suit hung perfectly on his slight frame, making Harry think of an accountant, sitting quietly in an office, adding columns of figures, except that he was hairier than most people probably wanted their accountants to be...

The Ministry car accommodated the six of them with ease, being far bigger inside than outside. The driver knew where to go, and the car slipped in between cars and trucks, moving in spaces that wouldn't have fit a bicycle, or, sometimes, a very thin stray cat. Harry stopped looking out the window; it was making him feel dizzy and ill. He looked at Hermione; she tried to smile at him, but the corners of her mouth didn't quite turn up enough for it to be a smile. He found himself turning to Malfoy then, and to his surprise, he found a look of sympathy there that was unexpected and without baggage.

When they arrived, the only person at the church was the vicar. Apparently the parish had fallen on hard times and could no longer afford a rector. To Harry's surprise, it was a quite young man who looked like he couldn't have been much older than Percy. How odd for this person to be in a position of authority. Mostly, he reminded Harry of Stan Shunpike, the conductor on the Knight Bus. He even had some acne, as though he were not quite done adolescence. He had sandy hair and hazel eyes, and thinking of this, Harry suddenly wished he'd brought Sandy with him instead of leaving her in Neville's care. He could have used someone else to talk to. He couldn't very well tell Hermione about his dreams, nor Ginny, Ron, Malfoy, Lupin...

They waited in an uncertain, irregular cluster by the lane, waiting for the hearse and the Dursleys. The vicar was named Mr. Babcock, and he tried to make small talk with Harry.

"So," he said, clearly uncomfortable. "Dudley was your cousin".

“Yes”.

A long pause. He’s terrible at this, Harry thought. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you at services”.

“I’ve been at boarding school the last five years”.

“Ah.” Pause. Foot tapping. Staring at the sky. “You like your school”?

“Yes”.

“Mmm....Do you do sports”?

“I’m the captain of the Dueling Club”.

“Ah. Fencing. Yes. I quite liked ‘The Three Musketeers.’ I’ve seen many a Shakespeare production ruined by poor fencing. Yes”...

Harry knew he’d think this was what he meant; he couldn’t correct him, of course. It gave the nervous young man something to babble about. He eventually exhausted his store of fencing references, however, and trailed off into silence once more.

They were finally saved when the hearse starting making its way down the lane from the village, followed by two long, dark cars. After the hearse stopped, Harry, Ron and Malfoy moved to the rear of the vehicle, waiting for their instructions. The first car behind the hearse stopped, but it was the car behind it which opened its doors, and Dudley’s old friends emerged, the boys who, with Dudley, had chased Harry in the schoolyard when he was young. They looked odd; Harry realized he hadn’t seen them in five years. He knew they recognized him and registered the surprise in their faces at the changes in his appearance. They nodded at each other. They were on the same team today.

A far too cheerful young woman in a black skirted suit stepped out of the passenger side of the hearse and walked to the back to brief the pallbearers. They would carry the coffin into the church now using the handles, but after, they would hold it onto their shoulders and walk down the lane to the cemetery, about an eighth of a mile. Did they all feel up to it? she wanted to know. The six of them all looked warily at each other, wizards and muggles (Although the muggles didn’t know they were confronted by wizards) and nodded, nobody wanting to show trepidation at the task ahead.

Ron leaned in to say to Harry, “She’s the undertaker?” in a low voice. Harry shrugged.

“I suppose so. But I don’t know that you should call her that. It might be mortician. Or funeral director. Or post-life planner. I don’t know what they go by these days”.

Ron smirked. “Hang in there, Harry. After all, you didn’t have such a bad night, now did you”?

Harry looked away from him. Ron thought the night had been all about pleasure; he had no idea of the horrific images he’d been trying to exorcise from his mind...

The six of them grasped the handles of the coffin, carrying it carefully down the flagstone path and in a side door to the sanctuary, then placed it on a table draped in black fabric which sat in front of the communion rail. An elderly woman Harry thought he recognized carried a spray of flowers into the sanctuary from the flower-arranging room between the parish house and the rectory--which he supposed might be called the vicarage now. She laid the spray across the closed coffin. The pallbearers sat then and waited for the rest of the congregation to arrive. Ron was to his right, Draco Malfoy to Ron’s right. Hermione came into the church and sat on Harry’s left, and Ginny sat to her left. Harry looked up at the dark rafters, the grey stone, the stained glass, remembering this place, remembering how much he had looked forward to Christmas and Easter every year because it was the closest he came to feeling like a normal person. When he was a child and they came here at the holidays, all of the children participated in the Easter Egg hunt, all of them received a gift at Christmas, even if it was just a small package of sweets. There was no discrimination, no thought of excluding him. Dudley always claimed Harry’s Christmas package of sweets as well as his own, but Harry usually was able to nick a piece of candy from it before giving it up.

The memory of running down the middle aisle of the church, ducking into a pew box, trying to stop the swinging door from moving (They were quite high, more than thirty inches) so Dudley wouldn’t know where he was....He would move the

kneelers out of the way, the numerous cushions decorated on top by needlepoint covers executed by the army of little ladies that used to populate the church; with these out of the way, he could hide his small, bony frame under the pew and wait for Dudley to give up. He was never clear on how he did it, but somehow, Dudley always managed to find him. And he wrestle the candy away.

His throat grew tight as he remembered this. Yes, he thought. Remember those things, all the times growing up that I felt like I was just running, running, running from him all the time, bullied constantly...don't think about last summer, about the letters we'd exchanged, about being friends...remember the bad times...

He thought that it was a little odd that at these times, Dudley chasing Harry for the Christmas and Easter sweets, Harry never seemed to do any accidental magic. Perhaps it just didn't mean enough to him, and he knew Dudley wasn't trying to hurt him, he just really wanted the sweets...There were even times when he remembered rather enjoying the cat-and-mouse game, seeing what kind of ridiculous positions he could get Dudley into, luring him into places he never would have dreamed of going...He even managed to fit himself in between some of the large, square wooden organ pipes. That was when Dudley found him, Dudley got stuck between the pipes while Harry slipped out easily, then went to the organ console, pressing his foot down on one of the far left pedals, making a noise like a hundred foghorns emanate from the huge thirty-two-foot pipe Dudley was pressed against. Dudley did a duet with the pipe, his scream summoning the entire vestry, who had been meeting in the front of the sanctuary. Harry had gotten in a great deal of trouble for that, everyone from the rector to the organist to his aunt and uncle were extremely irate, and Dudley's Easter suit had been ruined.

He couldn't stop the tears then, even in the midst of what should be bad memories, memories that should make him think of Good riddance, I'm better off, we're all better off, the world is better off. But instead, he found himself thinking rather fondly of the amusement he'd been afforded the first time he saw Dudley in his Smeltings uniform, the sight of Dudley with the pig's tail, the inflated tongue after he'd pounced on the twins' toffee.

Dudley as he'd been before the Congeniality Charm deserved many things, Harry thought, but death just for being my cousin wasn't one of them. A handkerchief was suddenly thrust at him; he looked at Hermione, who had taken it out of her pocket and was giving it to him now. He nodded, taking off his glasses and wiping his eyes. She indicated that he should keep it, so he stuffed it in his pocket, giving her hand a small squeeze. Somehow he would get through this.

The organist arrived and started playing something slow and mournful; the church started to fill up, and when Harry heard a familiar voice, he turned and saw his aunt and uncle, looking very pale and strained, and as though they hadn't slept since hearing of Dudley's supposed suicide. Harry wanted to get up and tell them that it wasn't their fault, that they had driven him to kill himself, but he couldn't. His legs wouldn't move. After he heard Aunt Petunia raging at his mum, in the Pensieve, knowing that she hated his mother because she wouldn't use magic to save their mother...He just couldn't do it. He turned to the front again without meeting her eye, afraid that she would see his guilt, his culpability.

A number of Smeltings students had come; the church became a sea of teenagers, many of them sobbing girls. He struggled to maintain his composure again in the face of their tears. It was worse than the urge to yawn around other yawners. He wondered whether Dudley's popularity had come because of the Congeniality Charm or before that. He hadn't expected this, the number of people who would be in the little stone church, the number of lives that had been touched by this. Harry wondered for the first time who had found him, whether any of the other students had looked up and seen his body falling past their windows, the things that must have gone through their minds...

The service started, hushing the morbid thoughts rolling through Harry's head. The organ's drone ceased and the vicar stood, holding his prayer book, his Adam's apple bobbing as he spoke the familiar words.

"I am the resurrection and the life"...

Harry remembered the book he'd read in the library, about the first Lord Voldemort who'd tried to resurrect his son, and failed. He remembered Dumbledore saying that there wasn't a spell to bring someone back to life.

"We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out"....

He tried to follow along in the prayer book, then realized that the vicar was using *The Order for the Burial of the Dead, At the Burial of a Child*. He wondered whether his aunt and uncle had noticed the mistake.

..."Let me know mine end, and the number of my days; that I may be certified how long I have to live"....

How long I have to live...that shouldn't have been in there, Harry thought. Dudley was only fifteen, not quite sixteen. He was still a child. Then he thought, am I still a child? He remembered the strange feeling of being included with the adults in the conference in Madam Pomfrey's office, considering what was best for Neville...

...let me know mine end...

The vicar finished that psalm, then an olive-skinned boy stood and went to the front and read another, then a blond girl read the Twenty-Third psalm... They had tears in their voices as they read, and Harry's throat felt almost blocked, so he was he trying not to cry.

...“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me....Thou shalt prepare a table before me in the presence of them that trouble me.”...

The valley of the shadow of death.

I will fear no evil.

He clenched his jaw, thinking of the times he'd come close to death. Had Dudley been afraid? Would he? Of course, he couldn't be controlled by Imperius, he knew how to fight it. Had it really made Dudley commit suicide? Or had it simply removed his inhibitions, like Hermione?

The crying blonde girl sat down. The organist was playing again, and the vicar announced the number of the hymn. The congregation stood, a very noisy affair, and sang their shaky off-pitch way through Now the laborer's task is o'er. Harry's throat wouldn't produce a note; he noted the name of the tune: Requiescat. Harry mentally added, In pacem.

Rest in peace.

Hermione had to tug at his jacket to get him to sit down again; he'd let his mind wander. He was vaguely aware then of the vicar reading a long passage from I Corinthians. He jerked his head up; the vicar had gotten his attention.

“All flesh is not the same flesh: but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fishes, and another of birds. There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body”...

Sown in corruption, raised in incorruption...perhaps that was why Marvolo hadn't been able to raise his son from the dead...he was sown in corruption and raised in corruption...

...“Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law”.

The law. What law? Harry thought. The law that allows Fudge to practically pardon Lucius Malfoy? The wizarding laws that will probably never punish anyone for Dudley's murder?

...“Remember thy servant Dudley Dursley, O Lord, according to the favour which thou bearest unto thy people, and grant that, increasing in knowledge and love of thee, he may go from strength to strength, in the life of perfect service”...

Harry stared up at the carved wooden screen hiding the organ console, willing Dudley to emerge from behind it, laughing and with a chocolate-smearred face. This had to be a nightmare, he kept telling himself, this couldn't have happened...

...“The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace, both now and evermore. Amen”.

The organ started playing again. Harry's eyes had been closed at the amen, now they flew open, hearing the music. He looked at Hermione. She nodded.

“Suo Gan,” he whispered. She squeezed his hand. A young boy, around ten years of age, had stood in the choir loft, alone. His pink face was freshly scrubbed, his light-brown hair curled innocently over his head, his blue eyes were pure

cornflowers. He lifted his flute-like voice above the organ's accompaniment, the sound bouncing off the rafters and stone and plaster, the old lullaby's Welsh words rolling around Harry's brain with a comforting familiarity...

Huna blentyn yn fy mynwes
Clyd a chynnes ydyw hon
Breichiau mam sy'n dyn am danat,
Cariad mam sy dan fy mron
Ni cha dim amharu'th gyntun
Ni wna undyn a thi gam
Huna'n dawel, anwyl blentyn
Huna'n fwyn ar fron dy fam.

Huna'n dawel, heno, huna,
Huna'n fwyn, y tlws ei lun
Pam yr wyt yn awr yn gwenu,
Gwenu'n dirion yn dy hun?
Ai angylion fry sy'n gwenu
Arnat ti yn gwenu'n llon
Tithau'n gwenu'n ol dan huno
Huno'n dawel ar fy mron?

The young woman from the funeral home signaled to the pallbearers, and the six of them stood, marching neatly toward the casket. They hoisted it onto their shoulders; Harry was on the right, at the front. Malfoy was behind him, Ron behind Malfoy. Dudley's friends were on the other side. Harry walked out of the church slowly, the heavy box cutting into his shoulder, the faces of the congregation imprinting themselves on his mind as the boy continued to sing the lullaby...

Paid ag ofni, dim ond deilen
Gura, gura ar y ddor
Paid ag ofni, ton fach unig
Sua, sua ar lan y mor
Huna blentyn, nid oes yma
Ddim i roddi iti fraw
Gwena'n dawel yn fy mynwes
Ar yr engyl gwynion draw.

The aisle of the small church seemed to be miles long. Harry felt the texture of the rounded stones through the thin sole of his shoes; he tried to make as little noise as possible, so he could clearly hear the English words which the boy sang now ...

Sleep, my baby, on my bosom,
Warm and cozy, it will prove,
Round thee mother's arms are folding,
In her heart a mother's love.
There shall no one come to harm thee,
Naught shall ever break thy rest;
Sleep, my darling babe, in quiet,
Sleep on mother's gentle breast.

Sleep serenely, baby, slumber,
Lovely baby, gently sleep;
Tell me wherefore art thou smiling,
Smiling sweetly in thy sleep?
Do the angels smile in heaven
When thy happy smile they see?
Dost thou on them smile while slumb'ring
On my bosom peacefully.

Harry could hear the organ continuing as they walked down the path to the lane, the six of them with their burden on their shoulders, the congregation following behind, led by the vicar and his aunt and uncle, he knew, although he could not turn to look. He had the perfect excuse for not looking at them. He was glad of that.

The lane was filled with the funeral procession. Harry wanted the walk to the grave to go on forever; he never wanted to reach that ominous pit, that final destination for this burden...

At the grave, they lowered the casket from their shoulders onto the boards that were lain across the open grave. The vicar took up a position next to it, while Harry and the other pallbearers backed off from the grave. Harry stood next to Hermione; she reached out and took his hand in hers. He saw that she'd been crying, her eyes red-rimmed.

"Man, that is born of a woman," Mr. Babcock read, "hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay....In the midst of life we are in death; of whom may we seek for succour"?

Who indeed? thought Harry, thinking of the previous night, with Hermione. He had expected too much of her, he realized now. He shouldn't have expected her to be able to take away all of the guilt and self-recrimination he now suffered. There was no secret potion to remove it, no spell, no wave of a wand would do the trick...

Heavy pieces of webbing were passed under the coffin by somber, black-suited men from the funeral home. While they held the webbing, the young woman gestured for Ron and Harry and Malfoy to remove the supporting pieces of wood, and Dudley was lowered into the ground while the vicar finished speaking. Then she led him to his aunt and uncle; he tried not to look at their strained faces; Vernon stooped to the mound of earth that had been thrown up by the gravediggers, he took a fistful of soil and threw it half-heartedly onto the coffin. Aunt Petunia did the same, tears flowing down her face, then Harry stooped mechanically to scoop up some earth, shower the coffin with the dark soil. He watched it leave his hand, but some of it still stuck to his palm...

...“Unto Almighty God we commend the soul of our brother Dudley, departed”...

Our brother, thought Harry.

...“And we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust”...

The vicar muttered something which induced the congregation to answer again, but Harry missed it, his mind wandering. Then he heard the words of the Kyrie being intoned, first by the vicar, then the people...Finally, he joined in on the Lord's Prayer, the familiar words not passing his lips for five years, some of the words giving him a great deal of trouble...

“And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil”...

Lead us not into temptation.

Deliver us from evil.

Evil. What did most of the people here know about evil? Harry wondered. He had seen evil. He had dueled with evil...

...“We give thee hearty thanks for the good examples of all those thy servants, who, having finished their course in faith, do now rest from their labours”...

Harry was annoyed. That's what I need to do, he thought. Be annoyed. Be upset with the prayers this man who probably didn't even know Dudley is standing there mindlessly reciting. From what labours was Dudley resting? He hadn't been able to live long enough to have labours...Harry listened to him for a few more minutes, using this new tactic to survive. Keep from breaking down utterly, from falling to his knees and confessing before his aunt and uncle and a host of muggles that Dudley had died because he was under the Imperius Curse, that it was because he was someone who had come to mean something to him and a dark wizard had used him...

“Amen”.

The final word at last. The vicar quietly walked away from the grave, leading the Dursleys and Harry, and Hermione and the others followed after, then the rest of the congregation slowly trickled away from the grave, while the gravediggers materialized seemingly from nowhere, and began to move the mound of earth into the long, rectangular hole. Harry couldn't hear the earth hitting the wood, thump! thump! He couldn't resist turning back to look. He stood still, letting the others file past him, until he alone stood at the gate to the graveyard, watching the gravediggers work, doing their job, oblivious.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a large black dog up on a hill, standing near a small stone. He walked toward it, glad to see that black dog than he thought was possible.

When he reached the dog, it didn't change into a man, but Harry recognized him all the same. He patted him on the head, then sat down on the grass, ignoring the stains he would get on his new suit. Then he saw the grave marker.

JAMES GODRIC POTTER

1960-1981

LILY EVANS POTTER

1960-1981

Beloved parents and friends

RIP

Harry's voice caught. He turned, and suddenly, Sirius was sitting beside him, his hands clasped around his knees like Harry.

"They're here?" he asked. "There were here the whole time I was growing up, and I never knew"?

Sirius nodded. "Your aunt took care of it. There wasn't actually a service. Remus told me about it last year. I'd never seen it either. Well, you know why. Remus doesn't know who paid for the stone. Somehow, I don't think it was your aunt. Look at the carving; that wasn't done with a chisel. Too clean. That was done with a wand, with magic".

Harry remembered Snape in the garden of the cottage at Godric's Hollow, his mother's body in his arms. It could have been Dumbledore, Harry supposed, but then again, it would be like Snape to do it. Even more like him not to tell anyone.

"I mean," he stammered, "I used to come running in here, into the graveyard, on the way home from school every day, when Dudley and his friends were chasing me. They were superstitious about coming in, so I knew I'd be safe. Somehow, I always felt safe here"...

Sirius put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "So maybe you did sense they were here after all, Harry. I'm sorry that this is the best I can do as far as being here for you today. I'm sorry for so much. I wish we could have done something to prevent this"...

Harry thought of the unread letter again and shook his head. "Don't, Sirius. It's not your fault".

His godfather looked at him levelly. "It's not your fault either, Harry. Please remember that".

Harry looked up at him and nodded, not able to lie verbally to him. It would be an uphill battle, but he knew that he had to try, if only for his mental health. Wormtail wanted to paralyze him, he knew, anyway he knew how. He'd participated in putting Lucius Malfoy away, and still they thought they had the upper hand...

"I have to tell you something else, Harry." Harry looked at him expectantly. "Avery and Nott were found--dead. The Dark Mark was over them. It seems that Malfoy had no trouble giving them up for two reasons. They hadn't actually committed the murders he said they did, and they'd already been killed themselves for botching the Three Broomsticks, plus getting caught so easily".

I did that, Harry thought. Moody and I caught them. And now they're dead. Even if they were Death Eaters, they didn't really hurt anyone that we know of...

"People are clamoring for Fudge to reinstate Malfoy's suspended sentences, but he hasn't done it," Sirius went on. "Someone who killed the Clearwaters, and Mrs. Flint and her friend, is still out there. Plus"--

"There's more"?

Sirius heaved a great sigh. "I'm afraid those jurors were right to be afraid. But they weren't afraid enough. They did the right thing, but two of them have already paid for it. One's dead. One's in St. Mungo's, the burn ward. You don't want to know. And two others have received threats. It doesn't look good, Harry. No one will want to be on a jury at a Death Eater trial at this rate. And the Daily Prophet is covering other Death Eater activities now. If anything, their audacity is worse than when Fudge was trying to hush it all up. They seem to have become publicity-mad. Now, I'm the last person to want to say that Fudge knows what he's doing, but maybe--maybe he had the right idea after all. The wizarding world knows the danger now, but the Death Eaters also are able to throw their weight around now. Some appalling things have been happening...I won't bother you with it now, Harry, but--things are sure to get worse before they get better. Remus and Mundungus Fletcher and I will be very busy this summer, I think, and Severus as well".

Harry looked at him, appalled. "Summer! How can I face Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia all summer"...

Sirius shook his head. "I'm afraid you'll have to, Harry. It's the only safe place for you. Now more than ever. In fact, you should go back to the house now. For the wake. They'll be wondering where you are. I can walk with you, if you like".

Harry nodded, and Sirius became a dog again. They walked down to the gate to the graveyard, then along the lane, going back to Privet Drive. Harry liked walking along with Sirius in his dog form; there was no pressure for conversation, just the two of them keeping each other company, a simple togetherness. But Harry didn't think; when he went through the front door of the house and into the front hall, Sirius was still with him. He could hear the other mourners milling around in the living room and dining room. Hermione came to him, giving him a brief, gentle hug and handing him a cup of some kind of fruit punch. Lupin, Ron and Ginny looked at him morosely, but Draco Malfoy...

"It's that dog again!" he said with surprise. Harry looked down at Sirius.

"Um--" he stalled trying to think quickly. The four of them looked back and forth at each other nervously. Malfoy looked from one face to another, clearing waiting for someone to enlighten him. His face was getting angrier and angrier as he saw that no one was going to do this.

"Oh, fine!" he finally sneered bitterly. "I save your sorry arses," he pointed at Ron, Harry and Hermione, "Get my own dad put in prison, I'm here at your cousin's funeral as a pallbearer, but you still don't think you can trust me. Fine! And people think Slytherins hold grudges..." He started to turn away toward the door (Although where he thought he might go in Little Whinging was unclear). Ginny reached for his hand, pulling him back.

"It's not that..." Harry started to say, when Sirius-the-dog bounded up the stairs. "Hey!" he exclaimed, sprinting up the stairs after him. He heard the others following him.

The large black dog had entered his room and leapt on his bed, lying down comfortably as though he lived there, looking at Harry pointedly. Tell him, the look in his dark expressive eyes seemed to say. Harry sat down on the bed next to him, sighing wearily and idly petting the dog. Ron and Hermione stood uncertainly near his desk, and Ginny and Malfoy stood in the doorway, Malfoy having been dragged upstairs with her.

"Everybody in," Harry said. "Close the door." After they did this, Harry nodded at his desk chair. "Have a seat, Malfoy. I have a kind of a long story"...

So he finally told him, with help from the others. The Fidelius Charm, Peter the traitor, the truth about the street of Muggles who were killed, Peter being Wormtail, Sirius and his dad and Peter all learning to become Animagi to accompany Remus Lupin when he was in his wolf form, what happened in the Shrieking Shack at the end of their third year, even how he and Hermione had helped Sirius escape from Flitwick's office...

Malfoy looked round at them all, as they each leapt in at different points, filling in bits of the story (Hermione was very proud of Crookshanks, and her narration made this clear). When they were done, Harry would have liked to capture the expression of utter amazement on Malfoy's face with a muggle camera, so it would have been a still picture, no movement, a moment of frozen shock.

Suddenly, Sirius changed, and Malfoy stood up, knocking Harry's desk chair over. He was even paler than usual, virtually no difference between his skin and the white shirt he wore with his black suit. Sirius also stood and stepped toward Malfoy, his hand extended. Harry stood and smiled with perhaps too much pleasure at seeing Malfoy's reaction.

"Draco Malfoy," he said, "Meet Sirius Black".

Sirius smiled his most charming smile and shook Malfoy's hand. "Nice to finally officially meet you, Draco".

Malfoy nodded dumbly; it appeared that even after hearing the whole saga, and knowing that the dog on the bed was Sirius Black, illegal animagus and erstwhile denizen of Azkaban, he still didn't quite believe it. He started to sit down again, but Sirius kept hold of his hand until Ginny could scramble to right the chair he'd knocked over, then he let him s

"So you mean," he choked, finally regaining the power of speech, "That Wormtail is actually your stupid pet rat," he said pointing at Ron, "And that he was the one who killed that street of Muggles and betrayed Potter's parents"...

"Were you paying any attention at all, Malfoy?" Ron wanted to know, rolling his eyes.

"Yes, Weasley, but when you hear something which seems to be so obviously a fairy tale, and it turns out"...

"That it isn't?" Ginny smiled.

Malfoy swallowed and looked at Sirius again. "Yeah," he said softly.

Harry laughed, then thought, Thank you, Malfoy. I didn't think I'd laugh today. Or ever again, for that matter... "I wish," he said, "You could see your face, Malfoy".

Draco Malfoy grimaced. "I'm not here for your entertainment, Potter. I'm only here because Ginny asked me to...But it certainly has been informative".

Suddenly, there was a knock at Harry's bedroom door which made everyone jump, and Sirius abruptly changed back into a dog. They breathed a sigh of relief when they heard the voice that followed the knock.

"Harry? Are you in there?" Ginny was closest to the door, so she opened it to admit Remus Lupin. He closed the door behind himself and was clearly surprised to see the five teenagers clustered in the small room. Then he was startled to see the large black dog on the bed. Sirius changed into his human form and Lupin cried out, "What the hell are you doing! He's here!" indicating Draco Malfoy.

"He knows now, Remus," Sirius told him. Lupin gave a sigh of relief and looked at Malfoy.

"I suppose that's for the best... Actually I've got something to tell you too," he said to Malfoy, "But I hadn't had the chance before. It's about where you'll be this summer".

Malfoy jerked his head up. Harry had forgotten about Malfoy's problem. Well, he certainly couldn't stay with Sirius or Lupin or even Snape, if they were going to be busy working against the Death Eaters. Maybe Dumbledore would just let him stay at the school.

"The headmaster contacted your old nanny, and she's happy to have you stay with her for the summer".

"My nanny? I haven't seen her since I was four years old".

"Nevertheless, Dumbledore said she's heard about what you did and would be proud for you to stay with her. That suits you?" Malfoy nodded, obviously surprised. Lupin turned to Harry. "Now, you, Harry...You'll be picked up at the train by your uncle and stay here for a few days, but then...they want to get away. Portugal or something. They don't want to hang about here all summer thinking about Dudley. You understand?"

Harry nodded. "And I take it I'm not going to Portugal"?

Lupin shook his head. "Of course not, Harry. Do you know what a security nightmare that would be for those of us trying to keep you safe"?

"So. I'm to stay here by myself"?

"No. Your aunt and uncle have already made arrangements for you to stay with your old babysitter, Mrs. Figg. They also say that someone named Dick has come round asking whether you want a summer job when you get back"...

Harry was torn between groaning about Mrs. Figg and being quite pleased about Dick. Well, if he was out working much of the day, he'd only have to deal with old Mrs. Figg in the evenings...that wouldn't be too bad. "That's all right, I suppose," he said. "I was hoping I could work for Dick. I was going to call him when I got back".

Lupin clapped his hands together. "Right! So that's you two sorted out. See? Not so hard. We should all go back downstairs. In about an hour, a Ministry car is coming to take us back to the Leaky Cauldron so we can collect our things and return to Hogsmeade by floo. There's a pretty blonde girl down there who was looking for you, Harry. Said her name was Julia"...

Harry swallowed. Dudley's girlfriend. He never knew how he got through the rest of the wake, watching his aunt and uncle as the guests commiserated with them, listening while Julia told him how just the day before he died, she and Dudley had been making plans to see each other for the summer...

He was quite glad when the Ministry car arrived. He wanted nothing more than to be back at Hogwarts, even though it would only be for a few more days. There wasn't much of the term left now; just the Dueling Club Exhibition and the leaving feast. And then the long train ride back to London...

Before they left the doorway of Four Privet Drive, Malfoy stopped Harry and said quietly to him, "Thanks for finally telling me, Potter. About--what is the other name you were using? Snuffles? And--for the Quidditch Cup," he threw in quickly, then turned away from Harry and walked toward the car. Harry stood in the doorway, speechless. Well, wonder of wonders, he thought. Two thank yous from Draco Malfoy.

It had been a year of miracles indeed.

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Next :

Epilogue: Convergence

The end is near! After the epilogue, I will be taking a week off before posting the first chapter of Year Six: Harry Potter and the Time of Good Intentions (or: The Last Temptation of Harry Potter).

I know I haven't done thank-yous for a bit, but I will take care of that at the very end. I just want to say a general thanks here for the support of the folks on the HP_Psych list...You guys keep me to my deadlines, because at this point I'd feel dreadfully guilty making over three-hundred people wait around for me... :) And now for the usual housekeeping stuff ..

Epilogue: Full Circle

On the last day of term, Harry, Hermione and Ron walked back to the castle after their morning run. Following breakfast there would be the Dueling Club Exhibition, then the leaving feast, and the long train ride back to King's Cross. Harry could hardly believe that his fifth year was almost over, that he was almost sixteen. He thought of some of the other things that had occurred during the previous year--not least among them, Hermione--and shook his head in wonder as he walked.

They left her at the girls' prefects' bathroom, and Ron was going to leave Harry at the boys' bathroom and go up to Gryffindor tower, but Harry said, "Oh, come on, Ron; just use this one. It's early; no one's to know".

Ron looked up and down the corridor uncertainly, then after Harry gave the password, he followed him in. To say that Ron was floored by the opulence of the room would have been a gross understatement. Harry thought of the utilitarian white tile and simple candle-sconces lining the Gryffindor Tower bathrooms. He immediately wondered whether this was a mistake, another instance of his tactlessly rubbing Ron's nose in what he didn't have--in this case, regular access to a marble-lined Roman bath.

Then he thought it was a mistake for a different reason, as Ron's wondering gaze reached the tub, and the person lounging there, eyes closed. The Dark Mark was clearly visible on his left forearm and his upper arms were still decorated with purple-green bruises.

"Oi! Malfoy!" Draco Malfoy opened his eyes and screamed, "Weasley! Potter, what the hell is he doing in here? He's not a prefect"!

“Oh, stuff it Malfoy. Who cares what shower he uses? Mind your own business”.

“This is my business. It’s bad enough my personal sanctuary is invaded by you on a regular basis, but when it’s also invaded by Weasley, I draw the line”...

Ron wasn’t shaken up by this; he merely smirked at Malfoy. “What’s the matter? Afraid I’ll tell my sister about any physical inadequacies you might have”?

Malfoy looked uncomfortable and shifted some bubbles in the water with his hands. “Great. Somehow, by being involved with your sister, I seem to have given you the idea I’m interested in you. Can’t even take a simple bath without being leered at by Weasley. Or are you in here to see Potter? What about it Potter? Is there something the two of you should be telling Granger”?

Harry walked to the showers, humming. “Only if you want us to tell her about your ‘physical inadequacies,’ too”.

“I do not ...” Malfoy started to say, before realizing that he’d been tricked. Once he heard the showers turned on for both Harry and Ron, they heard him get out of the tub and pad over to the wardrobe where the bathrobes were kept. A little later they looked up to see him peering round the corner at them in Slytherin green.

“If you two like, I could tell all the girls in the school about your ‘physical inad--” Then he got a really good look at them and was speechless. When he finally found words again, all he could utter was a soft, “Oh, shit”.

Ron and Harry both threw back their heads and laughed. When they had finished their showers, they wrapped towels around themselves. Malfoy went to the door, trying to get in a last dig,

“I am so going to whip your arses in the exhibition,” he sneered at them before leaving. He slammed the door and they couldn’t help laughing again. Well, Harry thought as he retrieved a deep red Gryffindor bathrobe and handed one to Ron as well; Malfoy hasn’t lost his edge. It was comforting, somehow, like Snape taking house points away.

While they were walking back to Gryffindor Tower, Ron suddenly stopped. “Hey, Harry, what do you suppose Malfoy meant? I mean, he’s not supposed to be going up against us. You’re paired with me and Roger Davies, and he’s paired with Niamh and Fred. He and Hermione and I are supposed to be going up against you alone, but that’s one of the scripted bits”.

Harry shrugged. “I think he just meant he was going to do better than us in the individual duels. He’s beaten Niamh. But Fred’s good; he’ll have to work pretty hard to beat him. He and Yarrow were really impressive with the sun bulls and the Chthonians”.

Ron shuddered. “Those things were...” Ron couldn’t go on speaking and shuddered. “I am so glad we don’t have to worry about that for two more years”.

Harry nodded in agreement. The Chthonians made him remember the skeleton in his dream...and seeing Hogwarts in ruins. These images haunted him during his waking hours now, in addition to his sleeping ones, and he really didn’t need Ron reminding him of the dueling skeletons.

They dressed for breakfast in their best robes. The exhibition would immediately follow. It was originally going to be on Wednesday, but Snape rescheduled it because of Dudley’s funeral. Harry’s stomach was starting to act up in anticipation he could barely get down a bite of toast or a sip of juice. He watched Ron eat a bowl of porridge, two slices of toast slathered with butter and marmalade, five sausages and some kippers.

“Hungry much?” he asked Ron, feeling ill as he watched.

“Mmm?” Ron mumbled back at him, his mouth full. It seemed to be an effort for him to notice that anything in the universe existed outside of the food in front of him. “Wan’ be bebaired,” he said through a mouthful of porridge. Harry nodded, grimacing and leaning back in his seat, so he wouldn’t be sprayed with food. You’d think it was a thirty-mile hike, he thought, not a dueling exhibition.

After breakfast, the entire population of the school advanced on the Quidditch pitch. The spectators would have to stand round the edges of the pitch to watch the duelers in the center, since the stands were quite high up and designed for

viewing people flying about in the air. The various duelers could stand at the edges and also watch, or wait in the Quidditch changing rooms, if they wished to continue to practice before they were slated to appear.

Harry went into the changing rooms and sat down on a bench, trying to steady his breathing. Why was he so nervous? He'd do fine. He was the captain. Flitwick had given him an advanced Charms O.W.L. for his dueling. Nothing to worry about.

He thought he was going to throw up.

Hermione sat next to him and put her arm about his shoulders. "Harry?" she said uncertainly, peering in his face. He seemed not to hear her at first, then he lifted his eyes to hers and gave a feeble smile.

"Fine. I mean, fine I'm. I mean, I'm fine".

She smiled. "Okay, whatever you say. It's a good thing we're going out there to duel and not recite Shakespeare soliloquies".

He grimaced at her. "That wouldn't be a problem. Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw, and resolve itself in a dew, or that the Almighty had not fixed His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" ...

She frowned. "Did you have to choose something about suicide"?

Harry's eyes opened wide. "Oh. It just came out. I didn't think...but Dudley didn't really commit suicide, remember".

"I know. It's just..." She stopped and drew her lips into a line. "Nothing. We'll be up soon. Ready"?

He nodded. Roger and Evan Davies were standing nearby, and Draco Malfoy and Ginny stood together near the door, their arms around each other in a gentle embrace. Ron sat down near Harry and Hermione, clearly keeping an eye on sister and Malfoy.

"We're next," Ron told Harry, not moving his eyes away from them as Ginny brushed her lips lightly against Malfoy's cheek. Harry turned now to look at them.

..."Love you," he saw rather than heard Ginny say to him, she was speaking so quietly. Malfoy swallowed and brushed hair out of her face.

"I love you so much," Harry heard him say very softly, then he kissed her quickly and lightly on the lips. He looked startled to turn and meet Harry's eyes. Then he frowned.

"Ready, Potter?" Harry swallowed and turned to Hermione, who was looking at him strangely. He turned back to Malfoy and nodded. This was the scripted exhibition, Harry against the three of them. Ron looked suspiciously at Malfoy.

"You're sure you remember what you're supposed to do, Malfoy?" he asked him.

Draco Malfoy gave a very un reassuring lopsided smile. "I know exactly what I'm going to do".

Harry thought, I don't like that answer, as the four of them exited the changing rooms. Ginny followed them out and took up a position on the edge of the pitch with the other spectators.

Snape stood in the center of the pitch. The spectators' applause for the previous duelers died down and Snape pointed his wand at his throat to announce the next combination.

"Sonus. Next," his magically magnified voice sounded around the pitch, "Harry Potter will face Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy in a three-on-one attack".

Snape pointed his wand at his throat again. "Quietus," he said, then moved to the perimeter of the pitch with the other

Harry stood a little off from the center, where Snape had been, facing the goal posts nearest him. Ron, Hermione and Malfoy were arrayed behind him. When practicing this, it had reminded him unnervingly of when Ron had been about to

curse him in the forest, and Lucius Malfoy, his son and Wormtail had been behind Ron. He tried to put that out of his mind now. He knew just what was going to happen. It was all rehearsed.

Sandy hissed at him.

Uh oh, Harry thought. He didn't usually duel with Sandy on his arm, but he had forgotten to leave her by the fireplace in the common room before going down to breakfast; the fire wasn't usually lit now, since it was late June. Harry worried about what to do. He'd have to think fast; with any luck, those in the crowd who weren't in the Dueling Club and hadn't seen them rehearsing wouldn't know that anything was wrong.

Harry braced himself; he didn't want to start too soon. Malfoy, Ron and Hermione were supposed to hit him very quickly from behind with successive Passus Curses that--in theory--were supposed to give him pain in three parts of his body.

"Gastro suo--" he heard Hermione begin, and he began the process, the separation of mind and body...

"Tracheo suo--" Ron said a split second after her.

"Capo suo--" Draco Malfoy said almost as soon as Ron had spoken.

"Passus est. Passus est. Passus est." All three had finished their curses, but Harry didn't feel a thing, floating above his body, turning to look at them, their wands connected to his body by crackling waves of light. Then he saw it, he saw the moment when Malfoy turned and broke the connection between his wand and Harry, when he turned and pointed his wand at Ron, who turned his head slowly in surprise as Harry watched Malfoy's lips move in an unheard curse, as the beam of light arced the short distance to Ron's body. Ron's wand broke the connection with Harry as Malfoy's curse struck him.

Hermione broke her connection with Harry now, turning to Malfoy, and Harry slid down into his body again, but before Hermione could get her curse out of her mouth, Malfoy had broken the connection between his wand and Ron, and pointed it at her instead, and the second that Harry was fully integrated again, he heard him cry, "Impedimenta!"

Now Hermione appeared to him to be moving even more slowly than when he had been in his separated state; so slow that any movement was indiscernible. Harry had decided what to do. Originally, he was supposed to demonstrate a shielding charm that he could put upon himself, to allow him to continue to cast spells, but preventing people and most spells from penetrating from the outside and affecting him.

Instead, did something he remembered from the book Sirius had given him for his birthday. Harry pointed his wand to his side, crying, "Serpensortia!" whereupon a snake began to emerge from the tip of his wand, growing more enormous by the second, until the spectators backed up from the pitch, nervous.

"Stop!" he hissed to it, and the huge serpent turned its head to look at him curiously. "You will obey me," he told it.

"Yessss," it answered him.

"Position yourself in a circle around those people," he hissed, pointing at Ron, Malfoy and Hermione, "and take your tail in your mouth".

The snake slithered to do his bidding. When Malfoy had put the Impediment Curse on Hermione, Ron had had to catch his breath for a moment. He clutched his throat (Malfoy had done Tracheo suo for the Passus Curse he'd put on Ron), then turned his wand on Malfoy, saying, "Stupefy!" as the snake surrounded them and put its tail in its mouth. Malfoy promptly fell down on the pitch, and that's when Ron noticed that he was surrounded by an enormous snake's body.

He looked with alarm at Harry; he knew that Harry was forced to improvise as much as he was, thanks to Malfoy throwing the script out, but suddenly he seemed to be much less sure of Harry than he was of Malfoy. Harry pointed at the Snake and cried, "AEGIS!"

A blue light sprang up from the snake's body, a glowing column that extended far over Ron's head, fading as it reached the clouds. The shield charm was now a prison charm, meaning that Harry could send spells into the blue column, but Ron could not send any out, or get out himself, although if he could find a rock and throw it (or some other inanimate object), that would go through. Ron hurled himself against the shield now, and his body stopped abruptly, as though he had struck a glass wall. Malfoy was on the ground beside him while Hermione stood nearby, also in the column, still

moving with imperceptible slowness. Harry smiled at Ron, then pointed his wand toward the prisoners inside the snake circle.

“Accio!” he cried, and all three of their wands flew through the shield and propelled themselves into Harry’s outstretched hand. He turned to the spectators nearest him and smiled, holding his own wand in his outstretched right hand, the three other wands in his left.

He took a sweeping bow as the tumultuous applause started to move around the pitch. When he rose, he caught Snape’s eye. He wasn’t clapping, but he gave Harry a very small nod. Harry nodded back. He turned and pointed his wand, saying, “Finite Incantatem!”

The blue column of light and the snake disappeared. He walked to Hermione and took the Impediment Curse off her, then pointed his wand at Malfoy and said, “Enervate!”

Malfoy lifted his head, blinking and looking about with confusion. He saw Harry standing over him with a crooked smile and sighed. Harry helped him to stand, then gave each of them their wands back. They took a bow together, all four of them, as the applause increased, and as they bowed, Malfoy muttered out of the side of his mouth, “Made it more interesting, didn’t I Potter?”

“That’s all you were trying to do?” Harry asked softly, unconvinced.

“Of course.” Malfoy’s smug grin was thoroughly unbelievable. Harry wondered again about trusting Malfoy. He can’t even do a simple dueling exhibition without ruining hours and hours of planning and practice, Harry thought. And now Malfoy knew about Sirius. Well, Sirius had sanctioned that. There wasn’t much Harry could have done to stop it...

When the applause died down, they all left the center of the pitch except for Malfoy, who was about to engage in a real duel with Niamh Quirke. Harry, Ron and Hermione stood near Ginny, who had her hands clasped together in front of her stomach. Her knuckles were white.

Harry watched the duel without really seeing it. Luckily, Sandy had told him what Malfoy was going to do, before he turned to attack Ron. Harry knew that having Sandy with him, predicting things, was perhaps not the most sporting thing to do, but he was glad now that he had not removed her from his arm before breakfast. Malfoy hadn’t exactly been sporting, either.

After several feints and some exchange of curses, Malfoy landed the disarming charm on Niamh, and she went flying backward into the crowd, her wand zooming into Malfoy’s hand. As the people who had Niamh land on them helped her to stand, applause went round the pitch. Niamh and Malfoy returned to stand with the other spectators, Niamh near her brother and sister, Malfoy with Ginny, standing next to Ron and Hermione.

It was time for Harry and Ron to duel. Hermione turned to Harry and kissed him on the cheek. “Good luck.” She stopped Ron from going and stood on her toes to kiss his cheek also. “Good luck,” she said again, more softly. Ron glanced at her then Harry. He nodded at Harry. There was a strange look in Ron’s eyes.

They both advanced to the center of the pitch. After bowing, Ron promptly pointed his wand at him and cried, “Apiarium!” Immediately, Harry had the sensation of there being bees all over his body, crawling on every square inch, exposed and unexposed. He jumped; this was new. Ron had never done this before; indeed, Harry had never heard of the spell before.

Then the stinging began.

Harry cried out once. Then he clamped his jaw shut. He could do the pain blocking, but he decided to work through the pain instead, so he would be able to cast spells on Ron as well. The unseen bees were starting to sting him in very sensitive places...

He pointed his wand at Ron, wincing as he cried, “Otoexodus!” He watched Ron’s bafflement as his hearing left him. Ron stared round at the cheering crowd, who, Harry knew, would now look to Ron like a television with the sound turned off. People moved their mouths, and yelled and shouted, but Ron could hear none of it. He wouldn’t be able to hear his own voice, or the spells that Harry was casting. Harry had made him temporarily deaf.

Ron and Harry circled each other now. There was a light in Ron’s eye that made Harry nervous. It reminded him of the way he had looked in the forest, when he’d been speaking so hatefully to him and Hermione. This, Harry thought, was

just about dueling. This was about much more, and Ron had permission to do whatever he wanted, within reason. He was torn between letting Ron get it out of his system and protecting his own reputation as captain of the Dueling Club. Harry wished Sandy would say something, but he knew her Sight could not be forced, he couldn't even ask her. If she had something to tell him, she would.

Harry twitched more than a little from the sensation of still being covered by stinging bees. Sweat was running down into his eyes, and he blinked. His glasses were fogging a little; Ron appeared to be advancing on him through a cloud of mist. He dodged Ron's curse, then Ron dodged one of his own. A few more exchanges like this occurred, and Harry remembered that Ron had been watching when he'd been dueling Flitwick. Taking notes, Ron? he thought, as he dodged another hex and sent an ankle-stabbing Passus Curse in Ron's direction.

Ron went down on one knee, his face contorted in pain, his head bowed. Harry smiled. He would be all right. Ron was in a good deal of pain, and now he could just--

"Expelliarmus!"

Ron had pointed his wand at Harry suddenly, lifting his head. Harry had thought Ron was caught up in his pain, but knew he'd been a fool as now he felt himself flying backwards, his wand leaving his hand, drawn to Ron like a magnet. Harry landed on the pitch, breaking his fall by throwing his hands behind him. He remembered Flitwick telling him the duel was a draw, then disarming him. He stood uncertainly after a moment, brushing grass off his robes (And still flinching from the bees). He walked back to Ron, who took the Beehive Hex off him, and Harry restored his hearing. They shook hands and turned to acknowledge the applause, but Harry couldn't help notice where Ron's eyes had gone.

Hermione looked at them both, smiling and laughing. Harry looked back at her, trying to smile. It wasn't just that Ron had been more aggressive in the duel than Harry had ever seen him; he seemed to have as much to prove as the day they heard the Ravenclaws gossiping and he'd charged upstairs to Parvati....And now he could say he'd beaten Harry Potter, captain of the Dueling Club. Of course, some people would think that this was a choreographed duel, or that Harry had thrown it so his best friend could win. In a way, he had won because he was Harry's friend, because Harry had paused to let him get his breath, where he might not have done that with someone else. Harry looked sideways at Ron, smiling at Hermione. He felt his stomach clench and remembered the way Ron had looked in the forest again. He was suddenly more worried about Ron than about Malfoy, and he didn't like feeling that way.

They moved to the perimeter to stand with Hermione and watch the others duel. In a little while Harry would go up against Roger Davies. Lovely, he thought. A Head Boy with something to prove. He had drawn some great dueling partners...

Hermione stood between them, short enough that Harry could look right over her head at Ron. Ron turned and met Harry's eyes. He suddenly looked very hostile. Then Ron looked down at Hermione, and his gaze softened; his eyes smiled.

Harry turned to watch the duels, knowing that his hardest fight lay ahead of him, and knowing that it would not be with Roger Davies, but with his best friend.

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On the way back to the castle, Colin and Dennis Creevey were animatedly dissecting Harry's performance against Roger Davies (Harry had won) and the three attackers as well.

"And when the snake just oozed out of your wand"...

"And when you hissed at it"...

Harry grimaced and looked sideways at Will Flitwick, walking nearby. Colin and Dennis were one and two years behind him, still starstruck about The Great Harry Potter, while Harry felt that Will Flitwick, a full four years behind him, treated him like a normal person.

"Uncle Filius said you did really well on your Charms O.W.L.s, and that you'd duelled with him".

Harry frowned. "Who? Oh, Professor Flitwick. Yeah, he was pretty tough".

"I guess you wanted to give Ron a chance to win one, huh"?

He hesitated for a moment. "Something like that, yeah".

The leaving feast was waiting for them when they returned from the Quidditch pitch. Everyone was ravenous from standing about watching the dueling or participating. They filed into the Great Hall and went to their house tables, anxiously awaiting the news of who had won the House Cup. No one house had won the year before; the decorations of the walls had been black, in honor of Cedric. At least, Harry thought, none of the students had died this year. None of the students at this school, anyway. He thought of Dudley.

The food was already laid out on the tables, and everyone started heaping their plates with their favorite dishes. Ron started in on a large turkey drumstick as though he hadn't had a perfectly enormous breakfast before the dueling. Harry smiled at Hermione, and they both shook their heads over Ron. He seemed perfectly normal again, and Harry tried to push out of his mind the entity he now thought of as Dueling Ron.

Before moving off to the Slytherin table, Draco Malfoy dramatically kissed Ginny's hand, while she looked at him with a glazed expression. Ron snapped his fingers in front of her face.

"What? Oh, Ron--" she said, flustered. Then she noticed his plate. "Oh my! Are you afraid mum and dad won't have any food when we get home? Because you could probably ask the house elves to pack you a picnic hamper for the train..." Ron looked at her, chewing. "Ver' fuh-ee".

Ginny laughed and sat next to him. After he chewed and swallowed, he looked at her very seriously. "Gin--I just want to know. Malfoy. He--treats you all right"?

She put her hand over his and patted it. "Yes, Ron. He treats me like a princess." She smiled at him, then kissed his cheek. He actually recoiled slightly.

"What was that for"?

"Ron, you're sixteen. Grow up! You were being sweet. Note the past tense. Sorry to alarm you"...

He went back to eating, but Harry noticed him looking surreptitiously at him and Hermione. Harry remembered the intensity of dueling with him. It had meant far more to Ron than to him. He was getting something out of his system by coming after him that way.

Finally, after the pudding, Dumbledore stood and everyone looked at him expectantly; they would finally find out who had won the House Cup. He gazed round the hall at them, his blue eyes twinkling behind his half-moon spectacles and a gentle smile on his face.

He held a parchment before his face and peered at it. "Well! I am pleased to announce that this year, the House Cup goes to"...

"Excuse me, Headmaster," Snape said suddenly, appearing at his elbow. "I have a deduction in house points to report. A student in Gryffindor left the school grounds without permission. I neglected to tell you before, but I have it right here." He handed a small piece of parchment to Dumbledore.

Ron, Ginny and Hermione glared at Harry, who felt like disappearing under the pile of turkey bones on Ron's plate. Dumbledore opened the folded slip of parchment and read, "Fifteen points from Gryffindor. Well, let's see how that leaves us"...

Harry frowned, looking straight at Snape. He met Harry's gaze, expressionless. He'd taken twenty-five points away, not fifteen points. What was he up to?

"Actually, that leaves us exactly where we already were! Gryffindor was twenty-five points ahead of Slytherin, and now they are ten points ahead. Gryffindor wins the House Cup! And now for the appropriate decor"...

He clapped his hands and the red-gold Gryffindor hangings showing a rampant lion rolled down the walls of the hall, warming the grey stone. He could have tied us for the House Cup, Harry thought. Like I did with the Quidditch Cup. But he didn't. He could have taken away a few more points and won it for Slytherin, but he didn't...

Harry's throat felt tight. He looked at Snape. Snape looked back at Harry, expressionless. The Slytherins weren't looking very happy, but the Gryffindor table was in an uproar, as palms slapped each other in the air and some couples kissed a bit too enthusiastically for Professor McGonagall, who broke Lee and Katie apart with some well-aimed sparks).

Harry grinned at Hermione, Ron and Ginny, who looked floored. Dumbledore quietly waited for peace to return. "Congratulations, Gryffindors. Tying for the Quidditch Cup with Slytherin made it very close, but it's my understanding that Professor Moody--" and he turned to the old Auror sitting near him "--received some especially fine essays from the fifth year class which warranted house points a number of times. You should be proud of yourselves." Now Ron coloured deeply, and Neville did too. They were the only ones to get points from Moody for their essays, and Ron received points more often than Neville. Dumbledore didn't mention the three-hundred points they'd earned for their house because of the Lucius Malfoy affair. That had been a draw with Slytherin as well, as Draco Malfoy had received the same number of points afterward.

"And now, for some sadder news. At the end of last year, we mourned the death of Cedric Diggory. Fortunately no such tragedy has occurred this year to any Hogwarts student. However, that does not mean that we here at Hogwarts have been untouched by the return of Voldemort, who was responsible for Cedric's death. A number of young people have recently been recruited to be Death Eaters, as you may know. Many of you here knew Penelope Clearwater and Marcus Flint, who completed their education here in recent years. Marcus was a fine Quidditch player. He also had the strength of character to say 'no' when his own father wished him to become a Death Eater. He and his mother are now dead. Penelope was a prefect in Ravenclaw here at Hogwarts and worked at Witch Weekly; she will be missed by many. Her family was also killed, including her brother Jeremy, who would have been in first year here at Hogwarts in September.

"Cedric was one of the first casualties in this war, for we are at war, I am sorry to say, and the Clearwaters and Flints will not be the last people we mourn, I fear. Some of you--especially those finishing your seventh year--may be approached to serve Voldemort. Penelope and Marcus were meant to be lessons, to show you what might happen if you refuse. I cannot tell you what to do; I think all here know what decision I would recommend if you were to find yourself in such a position. Just remember what you have learned here, and think about what is important to you. I have spoken before about choosing between what is right and what is easy. I am not here to preach. But I hope that if we have taught you anything, it is how to make sound decisions, to weigh the consequences of your actions, and to make well-considered sacrifices when necessary.

"That said, I ask you all now to stand and remember your former classmates, Penelope Clearwater and Marcus Flint".

The students stood as one and raised their goblets. Even every last Slytherin was standing, in honour of Flint. The name rumbled through the hall, and some Ravenclaws who hadn't heard about Penelope and her family were crying quietly, while the Scottish girl at the Slytherin table put her hand on Malfoy's arm, her eyes wet. Harry looked at Ginny. She had been seen. Well, Harry thought. We already know she's got nerve. She asked me out. Perhaps it doesn't bother her that Draco has a girlfriend. He's not interested anyway, Harry thought. He looked at Ginny again. If Malfoy hurt her, he'd...

"Harry"!

He looked around, confused. Hermione pulled at his robes to get him to sit. Everyone else had sat down again. He stopped worrying about Malfoy and the Scottish girl and drank some pumpkin juice. They socialized at the table for a little while longer; in half an hour, the horseless carriages would take them to the train. Suddenly, Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and he looked up into the contorted face of Mad Eye Moody.

"Potter," he said gruffly. "A word before you go".

Harry nodded and rose, followed Moody to the entrance hall, where house elves were still moving students' trunks into carriages.

"Potter," he said again. "I didn't have a chance to give you my condolences on your cousin's death".

Harry hadn't expected this. "Oh. Um. Thank you." He knew he was being stupid and awkward, but he was caught totally off-guard. Moody seemed to be overlooking this, however.

"It's hard. Losing a mate at your age. I know. I think I mentioned that I finished school in 1915?"

"Yes".

“Well, there was a war going on, and I had had enough of magic for a while--or so I thought--so instead of looking for a job in the wizarding world, I signed up for the Muggle army. My best mate from home was going. He was a Muggle. I’m half muggle and half wizard. He knew from the time I got my Hogwarts letter that I was a wizard. I didn’t spill it before then; even though so many strange things had happened, I wasn’t completely sure I wasn’t a Squib until then. He never stopped being my friend. When he told me he was going into the army, at first we thought it would be Ireland. Pretty close by, blokes you’re fighting are also speaking English. Not too bad. Not great, but there you go. If you had to pick a war, he thought”--

Moody looked out the front doors. “But he was sent to the Dardanelles. Gallipoli, in Turkey. I got myself sent, too, so I could be by his side and protect him. We were both eighteen. I knew it wasn’t legal, of course, to be planning to help a muggle with magic, interfering in a muggle war. The Ministry would break my wand if they knew. But I wasn’t planning to try to win the war for England; just protect my friend from harm. In the end, it didn’t matter. I wasn’t prepared for the trench warfare, for the mustard gas, for the commanding officers sending mere lads over the top running into machine-gun fire with nothing but effing bayonets”...

He sighed and his magical eye rolled around to look at Harry. His normal eye was still fixed on the road to Hogsmeade. “There was nothing I could do for him. I carried his body back to the trenches, so his parents could bury him properly. I hated the idea of him being out there on the battlefield, carrion birds circling overhead...” Moody shuddered. Harry swallowed, to think of something so horrible it made Moody react this way. “The Anzacs were much worse off than we were.” He noted Harry’s puzzlement and explained, “That’s Australian and New Zealand troops. Horrible, horrible numbers of dead...”

“When I was back here in England I took his mum and dad some letters he’d written that never got posted. I didn’t exactly get off scot-free either. A month after he died, my leg was amputated in a field hospital. I was pretty broken up about my mate; didn’t much care about taking care of myself anymore. I’d cut my calf on a rusty piece of barbed wire, put a pain charm on it so it wouldn’t hurt. Turned out that was the worst possible thing I could have done. If I could have felt the pain I’d have known it was getting infected. Gangrene. No choice. It was amputated by a twenty-six year old muggle doctor with a saw he’d poured rubbing alcohol on. I had no anesthesia. So I didn’t lose my leg to dark wizards, as you might assume, but I did lose it to evil. Gallipoli is something I’ll never forget.” Harry remembered him talking about Gallipoli in his class. Worse than decimation, he’d said. He knew firsthand.

Harry swallowed, watching the last of the trunks float into the horseless carriages. “I’m glad,” he said throatily, “You can come back to teach. I’m glad you recovered from--from what happened last year”.

He nodded. His magical eye swiveled around to look at the road outside the door again. “Well, as I’ve just told you, I’ve been through worse. Not much worse, but worse. I’m afraid, Potter,” he put his hand on Harry’s shoulder again, “You aren’t out of the woods yet”.

Harry grimaced. “I know. Just when everything seemed to be improving--Dudley”.

“Well, you should have a summer that’s all right. You’ll be well looked-after”.

Harry frowned. “How do you know? I’ll just be with my old baby sitter”.

He brought both of his eyes to focus on Harry. “You don’t know?” He glanced into the Great Hall, then back at Harry. “Well, I don’t see the harm in telling you. The Headmaster’s having his brother check up on you. He doesn’t mind the muggle world, unlike many wizards. He’s better at blending in than some of us, too.” He smiled craggily at Harry. “In fact they call the Headmaster a muggle-lover, but his brother, well--he lives in the muggle world all the time. Hardly ever uses magic, except emergencies. Or like when he came here to teach in Flitwick’s place. That’s the real reason he’s got such a bad reputation. He’s got a philosophical problem with it. Doing magic, that is. Thinks it’s an unfair advantage we have over muggles”.

“But--he never said anything when he was teaching us. And he was really good, too”.

“It’s not that he can’t do magic. He’s perfectly competent. He knew it wasn’t his job to feed you propaganda. He’s a good man, Aberforth Dumbledore. That goat thing was just a cover his brother made up for him, complete with the rumour that he might be illiterate. To take the focus off the real issue. He goes along with the joke, too. But even some folks you’d think would be fairly tolerant of this sort of thing are scandalized by it.” Harry remembered Flitwick’s reaction to Aberforth teaching his classes; he remembered that McGonagall and Sprout were also not Aberforth supporters.

“So that’s it? He doesn’t use magic, and that’s why he’s”--

“Persona non grata. Yep. There’s some things some magical folk can’t contemplate, like marrying muggles or muggle-borns. There’s some who can’t stand the idea of walking around in muggle clothes, or going to muggle stores...but almost all magical folk can’t stomach the idea of a magical person who won’t use his magic, just on principle. It just rubs ‘em the wrong way”.

Harry looked at him shrewdly. “It doesn’t seem to bother you”.

“No. It doesn’t. You’re looking at someone who decided at eighteen to go to Turkey to fight in a war I didn’t understand because my best mate was going, and he was a muggle. I don’t hold anything against Aberforth Dumbledore. I like a man with principles, even when sticking to them makes his life harder than it has to be. He’s one of the few people I truly admire in this world, Potter. I won’t tell you who the others are. If I want to see you turn red, I’ll get your girlfriend out here to kiss you”.

He smiled again, and Harry felt himself redden anyway. The other students had started coming into the entrance hall from the Great Hall, and Harry extended his hand to the old Auror, who took it.

“Thank you, sir. It’s been a privilege”.

Moody nodded. “The pleasure’s been all mine, Potter. All mine.” He turned and hobbled up the marble stairs, one step a time, while a sea of students surrounded Harry. Soon he was swept down the steps and into a carriage by Ron and Hermione, Ginny and Malfoy following closely behind. He tried to look back, to see Dumbledore, but he could not. He thought about Aberforth and his self-imposed exile from the wizarding world.

We must choose between what is right and what is easy.

Aberforth Dumbledore, like his brother, had made that choice, and had accepted the consequences of it. Harry felt himself, like Moody, admiring the renegade wizard with all his heart. And now he knew what he’d meant when he said he’d see Harry soon. He smiled in anticipation. Perhaps this would be a good summer after all.

* * * * *

Ron had claimed a compartment for the five of them. They sat as they had on the trip down to London for the trial, Harry and Hermione on one side, Ron, Ginny and Draco Malfoy on the other. They all tried to keep things light. They played card games. They played with the three cats (Crookshanks, Mackenzie and Argent). They needled each other (Especially Ron and Malfoy--Ron swore he’d get back at Malfoy for that Passus Curse during the exhibition). They ate too many Chocolate Frogs and pumpkin pasties. And, as much as they professed to be annoyed with each other over various things, they all seemed to feel a dread at the impending separation that would come when they arrived at King’s Cross. Ron and Ginny would go back to the Burrow; Harry would go back to Surrey; Malfoy was being picked up by his former nanny; Hermione could go home and see her parents at last. But they wouldn’t be together.

As they neared London, Ginny was using her wand to heal some scratches Malfoy had received from Mackenzie. Harry was holding the black cat on his lap, rubbing her under the chin while she purred like a new car. Crookshanks slept on Hermione’s lap and Argent on Ron’s. Harry had tried to warn Malfoy about Mackenzie; not because Ginny’s cat was known to be vicious, but because Sandy had said, “A cat will scratch a dragon.” Possibly the least cryptic prediction she ever given Harry. He’d told Malfoy to be careful or he’d get scratched, and sure enough, he had. As a result, Harry was able to give Malfoy a smug I-told-you-so look, which he was rather enjoying.

While Ginny was still working on his hands, he looked at the four of them. “Well,” he said. “You may thank me, Gryffindors”.

They all frowned at him, Ginny included, as she finished putting the binding charms on his cat scratches. It really hadn’t taken Sandy to predict his getting scratched. He wasn’t at all a cat person.

“What for, Malfoy?” Ron wanted to know.

“I am why you won the House Cup”.

Harry’s jaw dropped a little; had he told Snape to do what he did?

Hermione made a face. "What did you do, break into McGonagall's office and get her to dock you a hundred house points?"

"No, but close. I took them away from my own housemates. Prefect's privilege".

Now all of their jaws had dropped open. "What?" Ron said.

Hermione added, "You didn't".

"What, Granger, you never took house points from anyone, in your house or out of it? Or you Potter"?

They shook their heads. He shook his head back at them, for a different reason. "You two had better toughen up. You probably saw someone doing something they should have been called on. I certainly--experienced enough." He sighed. "Ever since my dad's trial, most of the Slytherins have been such pricks...except for a couple of people. I expected some of that. But after a while, the shitty stunts they were pulling on me were getting tiresome. Turning my mattress into a bed of nails, taking my clothes before the house elves could get them and soaking them in itching potion, stealing my homework, transfiguring my texts into poisonous frogs--you name it. I got bloody tired of it. Every chance I got, every small infringement of the rules that I could catch someone in, I started taking away house points. I told them, all right, if they wanted Slytherin to lose the sodding House Cup, that was just fine with me. I'd take away house points until we were in negative numbers, if I had to. It took a while, but the harassment finally stopped. They figured out that I was serious. And Snape backed me up. Millicent Bulstrode did too. She even took some points away from people who were pulling stunts on me. I reckon Snape knew what he was doing making her a prefect. But there were still some things that happened where I never caught anyone"...

Ron actually looked concerned. "What are you going to do in September? You're just going to have to go back to Slytherin again".

"I'm going to owl some of the other Slytherin students this summer who I think were just going along to go along. Try to find out who's with me...What I need is a block of allies in Slytherin. I don't seriously think everyone is from dark wizard families. I know Bulstrode isn't. And take Mariah, for instance"...

Ginny frowned. "Mariah? Mariah Kirkner"?

"Yeah. She's in your year. You have Potions and Care of Magical Creatures with Slytherin, right? She's got kinky black hair, skinny, pale".

"Yes, I know what she looks like..." Ginny said absently, looking at him.

"Well, she's all right. Older brother works at the Ministry. Her dad's at Sweetbriar Publishing and her mum's on staff at Mungo's. She's going to help me owl people. Try to get a feel for what camp everyone's in".

Harry nodded. So that was her name. Now that he'd heard the name, he was sure he'd heard it before.

"She's a pureblood, but her parents are actually kind of ashamed of it, or something. Her mum was in Slytherin when she was in school, but her dad was in Ravenclaw, and so was her brother. She says her mum says the women in their families have always been devious and ambitious." He paused, looking at their impassive faces. "It's a joke".

They smiled feebly at him. Ginny's smile was feeblest of all. Harry remembered the times she'd been disturbed by Malfoy's attentions to Hermione; now she seemed equally disturbed about Mariah Kirkner.

"Well," Harry said to him, "Don't go overboard taking house points away from Slytherin next year. We're going to win the House Cup again, but it won't be by default".

"Oh really? How close was it this year"?

"Ten points".

"Want to know how many points I took from Slytherin? It was a hell of a lot more than ten. As I said, you may thank me".

They looked back and forth at each other, then said in unison, "THANK YOU!" before breaking up into laughter.

They chatted innocuously during the rest of the ride back to London, trying not to think about parting. As the train pulled into King's Cross, they all looked at each other wistfully. They'd been through so much together during the previous year, weathered so many changes in themselves and their relationships. If possible, they'd become even more important to each other. Harry thought fleetingly again of the wisdom of his having friends at all....but then he thought about not having friends. He remembered the young Tom Riddle, from the diary. A handsome and charming boy, bright and quick. But did he have friends? Not that Harry had seen, when he had entered the diary. It used to worry Harry that Percy was like that, so dedicated to being Head Boy, then a perfect Ministry lackey...but although he didn't have a slew of friends, he had his family, to which he was devoted. He'd had the love of Penelope Clearwater, and her parents as well, who had clearly been looking forward to welcoming him into the family. He worried about Percy now, but not because he thought he might become dark. Not anymore. He worried about Percy spiraling downward in despair, now that Penelope was gone. He had already asked Ron and Ginny to be especially nice to him over the summer, to not let him isolate himself too much and wallow. Yes, he would need to mourn, but he shouldn't cut himself off from his family. He needed them.

And of course, Harry realized, he needed his friends. As tempting as it was to cut them off and say that they'd be better without the danger of being his friends, he knew he couldn't do that. Even Draco Malfoy. Draco Malfoy, a friend, he thought in wonderment. But it seemed to have happened. He remembered the small eleven-year-old boy chatting him up in Madam Malkin's robe shop, not realizing that he was The Harry Potter. He remembered talking to him on his first train ride to Hogwarts, trying to warn him about associating with "The wrong sort" of people. Harry smiled to himself; now he was seeing Ron's sister. Perhaps he'd really been trying to make friends with Harry, and just didn't know how. He remembered him saying in Arthur Weasley's office that he'd never had a friend, not really. Like Tom Riddle. Like the young Severus Snape, supposed vampire.

Harry thought of dueling with Malfoy again, and shuddered; he was becoming a very powerful wizard, he even knew how to Apparate already (Which he was not supposed to do again for another year, when he would be of age and could apply for a proper license). He was glad that Ginny was such a good influence on him. He thought of the two of them behind Hagrid's hut again, how intense that had been, the way she had responded to his touch...He shook his head, to clear it. He hoped Malfoy wouldn't pressure her too much, wouldn't make her push him away. He also hoped she would continue to resist his advances...No, no. He tried yet again to clear his head. He had no business hoping that. He had Hermione and he wasn't Ginny's brother, not truly. She had plenty of brothers.

The train had come to a full stop. Then they were on the platform, having collected their trunks. They were standing about, staring at one another while a maelstrom of people swirled around them. Saying goodbye was so hard...Finally, Hermione put her arms around Ron, who reciprocated, and she kissed his cheek quickly.

"Have a good summer," she said with wet, shining eyes. He stepped back from her, nodding mutely.

Then he turned to Harry. Ron swallowed. "Bye, Harry. I--what I mean is"--

Harry nodded. "Yeah." And he stepped forward and, for the first time, hugged his best friend. He did it quickly, and when he stepped back, he could see the emotion on Ron's face. Ron was the best friend anyone could have, and Harry had spent the better part of the previous year lying to him...he never wanted to do that again. He knew that technically, Ron had forgiven him, but the memory of that deception would always be with them. And then there was the memory of things said and done in the Forbidden Forest, and the look on Ron's face during the duel that morning...Forgetting was not an option.

"Bye Malfoy," Ron said croakily. "Try not to be such a git next year".

Malfoy smirked. "Yeah. Having you for a role model probably made me damn annoying".

Ron laughed then, turning and dragging his trunk behind him as he walked toward the barrier. Argent rode on his shoulder, claws sunk in deeply, as he didn't have a carrier for her. He was shaking his head and still laughing. Will wonders never cease? Harry thought. Malfoy insults him, and Ron laughs. No wonder he forgave me; if he could forgive Malfoy, he could overlook just about anything, Harry thought.

There were hardly any people left. Harry put his hand out to Malfoy, who took it with no hesitation. Harry remembered shaking hands with him before the Quidditch match. That seemed a hundred years ago. Throwing him for a loop by using Ginny as the Seeker, then defending him afterward...they didn't need to say a word. Malfoy nodded at him and Harry nodded back. If we spoke, we'd just insult each other, Harry thought. It's better this way.

Ginny and Hermione had exchanged a hug while they shook hands, and now each boy turned to the girl next to him. Harry swallowed and looked down into her face, brushed a curl away from her brow. He could never have imagined this year ago, all of the things that had happened between them. She slid her arms around his neck and he held her closely, hesitating for a moment, looking over her shoulder at the few remaining people on the platform before lowering his mouth to hers and kissing her. He drank her in, holding her tightly, trying to imprint her on his memory for two months...He couldn't believe they would be apart for so long! It had never mattered before, in other summers. Now owl post just wouldn't be enough...

He opened his eyes a crack while kissing her; over her shoulder he could see that Malfoy had also enfolded Ginny in his arms. She grasped his upper arms as he held her waist; he didn't have to bend over, as he did with Hermione. Then he realized that Ginny was looking at him too, over Malfoy's shoulder, and he closed his eyes abruptly, but he ended the kiss by planting additional kisses on her cheeks and forehead. She gazed hungrily at him, as though she would scandalize everyone left on the platform by ripping off all of his clothes and attacking him. He caught his breath; there, that was it. That was the look in her eyes that he would miss...

They heard Sandy hissing. Harry was startled. Could he have heard correctly? He looked at Ginny and Malfoy. He didn't know what to make of what she'd said. Then he looked back at Hermione.

"Well, Harry? I asked you what she said".

"Oh, she just said--that friends would say goodbye." She smiled and nodded, kissed him again on the lips, briefly, then turned with her trunk and Crookshanks' carrier and walked toward the barrier. Malfoy also took his trunk and headed toward the barrier; they reached it at the same time, and Harry could see Malfoy's lips moving, then Hermione's, her face contorted sarcastically. They were at it again, he thought, smiling and shaking his head. But Hermione could give as good as she got, he knew.

He looked around the platform. Everyone else had gone. He and Ginny were the only ones left. He looked at her, and she looked back, and he could see that she wasn't the same little girl who had peered through cracks in doorways at him when she was eleven. She was a beautiful young woman, a powerful witch, and a good friend. He still started to shake when he remembered finding her in the Potions Dungeon, Malfoy apparently attacking her; that it turned out to be fake was immaterial. It didn't change the way he felt, seeing that.

He stepped toward her and she nodded, with a small smile, she put her arms around his neck and he put his around her back. They held each other closely, more an affirmation that they were there for each other than a hug. His face was buried in her hair and his throat felt tight.

"Gin, I just wanted you to know how scared I was--when we found you in the Potions Dungeon"...

She separated from him, reddening. "I know that was stupid, Harry. We just--we had to think of something that would really set Ron off." She paused and looked up at him. "Or you".

Harry gazed back at her, unable to get the dream Ginny out of his mind, his hands on her silky skin...He swallowed and whispered, "I was just so glad you were all right".

She leaned forward, kissing him quickly and lightly on the lips. "Thank you, Harry," she said softly. Harry stared at her. Even though Sandy had said, "A ram will kiss a lion," he still felt like he might have misunderstood what she meant. It reminded him of something...The lion will lie down with the lamb...and a little child shall lead them. He thought that was A lamb was just a young ram. He had some vague memory of the fragment of scripture from Christmas or Easter when he was young. Going to St. Bede's for the funeral must have jogged his memory.

He checked the rest of the platform; it was deserted. Everyone else had gone through the barrier. He looked at her. She was turning to go through, back to the muggle station. He watched her disappear; she didn't look back. He stood on the platform for what felt like a long time, gazing at the empty space where so many bodies had been jostling not too long ago. It was time; it was time to face his aunt and uncle. Time to get on with the business of living. He reached down for his trunk with his right hand, picked up Hedwig's cage with his left, and walked toward the barrier.

* * * * *

"Petunia!" Uncle Vernon's voice bellowed from their bathroom. "Where are the extra loo rolls"?

Harry smiled; some things never changed. Vernon Dursley had cut himself shaving again, and run out of toilet paper to put on the cuts. Although he knew his uncle probably wasn't comforted by having small nicks and cuts all over his face, Harry was. It was a constant.

Harry had just finished showering and shaving himself, in the bath that opened off the hall, between his bedroom and the guest room. He'd picked up an electric razor at MacTavish's when they'd been shopping there; he knew that to stay within the law, he should use neither his wand nor his Animagus training to take care of shaving while he wasn't in school. He still wondered why his uncle didn't use an electric, but he also knew that no well-meaning suggestion from Harry would ever be taken in the spirit intended.

He rubbed his face as he returned to his room, towel wrapped around his waist. It wasn't as smooth as when he used magic, but he wasn't covered in cuts, either. After he dressed, he put Sandy around his arm and went downstairs, humming. He planned to call Dick after breakfast, ask for a job. It was nice to feel that he might be really useful, and make some money as well, doing something he enjoyed. He tried to think of what wizarding jobs might take place out-of-door, for he'd decided that, when possible, he didn't want to work in cooped-up, enclosed spaces. Quidditch player was all that came to mind so far. Oh, well, he thought. There's time to consider all that.

He sat down at the table, in his usual spot. There were places laid for three of them; Dudley's side of the table was barely even looked as though they were avoiding putting the newspaper and toast rack and teapot there. No man's land.

Harry poured himself some orange juice from the pitcher on the table and reached for some toast and marmalade. He practically jumped out of his skin when his aunt spoke to him. She had her back to him, standing at the stove making her uncle's eggs.

"That Dick called," she said sharply. "Wants you to go to Seven Magnolia Crescent tomorrow morning at eight. Says he has a job for you. What good you'll be to him, I hardly know..." she added, putting a great deal of salt on Vernon's eggs. Well, he thought, that saved him from having to call Dick. Harry looked at her back. She was pretty damn constant too, he thought. He was glad she hadn't designated him a substitute for Dudley; he couldn't have taken it. The fussing would have been unbearable. He was used to this; this was far better.

"Do you want me to give the garden here a going-over today? Looks like there's a fair number of weeds. And that wild ivy's going to choke the climbing roses".

She made a noise like, "Hmmp!" Then she said, "If you like. If you haven't gotten so soft that a little real work will kill you..." Then she stopped and looked at Harry, horrified. Harry froze. He never thought about it much, but death really did crop up in everyday speech a great deal. He swallowed the bite of toast he'd been chewing, wondering what she was thinking. Pity it wasn't you instead of my Dudley, probably. It would be logical. It's what I would be thinking, he realized. Who wouldn't?

He nodded. "I've already been running this morning. I'm all set to go. Is the potting shed unlocked"?

She pointed mutely to the key on a nail by the door, still looking appalled that she'd used the turn of phrase she had. Harry felt that he should probably say or do something compassionate, pat her hand, at least, but instead he rose and moved toward the door to the garden, unhooking the shed key, leaving her standing there, letting Vernon's eggs burn.

Suddenly, she came to life again as her Dudley-substitute entered the kitchen. She smiled and laughed, turning off the flame under the eggs. Then she took some sausages from a pan where they'd been staying warm. She arranged them on a plate, put the plate on the table and pulled out the chair slightly.

A small Yorkshire terrier leapt upon the chair where Dudley used to sit and brought his front paws up onto the table, starting to nudge the sausages with his nose. After a couple of tries, he finally succeeded in getting one in his mouth, and he chewed it contentedly. Aunt Petunia cooed to him and patted him on the head while he chewed.

"There's my little Dunkirk! My little Dunky-wunky! What a good boy..." Aunt Marge had brought the terrier over the day after the funeral. She had thought Petunia could use the companionship. His aunt had taken to the small off-white dog right away, and he to her. Aunt Marge wasn't so bad, Harry thought, when she wasn't insulting people's parents...

She returned to the stove, preparing to dish up the burnt eggs to her husband. Harry could hear him descending the stairs. He'd already become accustomed to his wife putting Dunkirk first; he didn't question it. Harry actually thought that bit of consideration was rather touching. He never really thought of his aunt and uncle showing affection for each other.

(Although they must have, once, to have Dudley). The dog's sausages had been carefully heated so as not to be too hot for him, nor too cold, but just right. Vernon, on the other hand, could eat burnt eggs.

Dunkirk barked when Vernon entered and sat down at the table, taking his place opposite him. The dog barked again. Vernon smiled feebly at Dunkirk, looking a little nervous. Harry tried not to laugh. Dunkirk did not recognize Vernon as daddy, that much was clear.

Harry smiled at the cute little dog, then started to also pat him on the head, as his aunt had done. The dog turned his head and gave a growl low in his throat when he saw Harry's hand approaching. He pulled his hand back abruptly; he had thought the dog was just in a mood and hadn't gotten used to him when he'd tried that upon returning home, but now he was wondering whether he was possessed by the spirit of Dudley Dursley or something. Another possible constant, he thought. Or maybe--Sirius aside--I'm just more of a cat person. He watched the dog observing Vernon with what seemed to be suspicion. Clearly, Dunkirk was Aunt Petunia's puppy, and that was that. Harry opened the back door.

The garden was in half shade in the morning, until the sun passed over the house. In the shadow of the house it was cool and moist from the dew that still clung to the blades of grass and the leaves and flowers growing so profusely from the English spring Surrey had experienced. After getting a trowel and pail from the shed, he went to work first where it was warm and sunny, where the early morning dew had already evaporated. He knelt on the soft, springy grass, throwing uprooted weeds into the pail, the satisfaction of restoring order to the flower beds bringing him a sort of contented calm.

"Harry Potter," Sandy hissed at him suddenly.

He was momentarily startled. She'd been very quiet since he'd come back to Privet Drive from the station. "Yes, Sandy," he hissed back softly.

"Please put me on the ground".

Harry did as she asked and went back to work. He watched her slither around the roots of one of the rose bushes, then move on to the ivy, quickly disappearing among the dark green glossy leaves that served as ground cover before they rose up to cling to the wall of the house. Harry had a sudden thought.

"Sandy"?

"Yes, Harry Potter"?

"Do you want your freedom"?

There was a pause. "I have not been free"?

Harry frowned. "That's not quite what I meant"...

"Have you been keeping me prisoner"?

"Not exactly"...

"I was with you of my own volition, Harry Potter. But I think now...I think now I will live as I was meant to once more".

Harry swallowed, watching the last place where he'd seen her. The leaves under which she'd disappeared still vibrated. Sandy gone. He'd just offered her the chance to leave, but he hadn't thought she'd really consider it. He thought of all the times her predictions had changed his life; but it was possible that just being able to talk with her had been the most important thing to him. Perhaps he should have known that she wouldn't want to stay with him forever.

"Of course, Sandy. I understand".

"We each have a place where we are meant to be. This is mine".

He nodded, although of course, she couldn't see this. He wished he knew where he was meant to be. "I understand, Sandy," he said again, his throat tight.

"I know you do, Harry," she answered. He smiled through the beginnings of his tears. She had called him by just his first name. He would miss her a great deal.

"Will I see you here in the garden"?

"Possibly. And other gardens, perhaps. You will find other garden snakes, no doubt. I will tell of you to all of the snakes that I meet. When any one of them meets you, they will hear of the young wizard who is a Parselmouth, who can become a golden griffin, but who is not our enemy".

He nodded again. "I hope I see you again soon".

He waited for her response. And waited and waited.

"Sandy?" It sounded like English to him.

She was gone.

Harry tried not to cry, but it was difficult. He would encounter her again, he told himself. He would. He thought again about one of the last things she had said to him.

We each have a place where we are meant to be. This is mine.

Perhaps someday, Harry thought, I'll be able to say that as confidently as she did. But for now, he had the dark, moist earth under his fingers and the sun on his back and the smell of the garden in his nose...

That was enough.

~*~*~*~*~T H E~*~*~*~*~
~*~*~*~*~E N D~*~*~*~*~

I want to thank everyone who has been so supportive (and even not-so-supportive) during the past few months as I've unfurled this tale. This has been a wonderful learning experience. I've made new friends that already feel like old friends. I've seen the power of the world wide web in action. As new challenges present themselves to those of us who write fanfic, I am confident that we will support each other and continue to express ourselves artistically somehow. Art will find its way.

The reaction many of you have had to this fic has truly humbled me. I started writing this as my father was dying; it was wonderfully therapeutic for me. There were two ambitions he had which were never realized: being a writer and being an architect. These were his life-long regrets. As I prepare to continue with my architecture studies, I know that I do not wish to have similar regrets. I have written before, but I have never shown my work to anyone. Writing fanfic has given me the chance to test the waters, to show my work to hundreds of strangers and get feedback. Not every fic is for every reader, just as no one buys every book published. I have learned a great deal, and there is much I can use in original writing in the future, which I do plan to pursue.

In the meantime, I have benefitted from the self-discipline that has been imposed upon me by having so many people requesting more, more, after every chapter! Many times, a writer may toil in obscurity, wondering if anyone would care if he or she ever finished the opus upon which they slaved for years and years. You, my readers, have never left me in a doubt that you care, even when my cliffhangers drive you crazy!

As I continue with the sequel, I hope that many of you will come along for the ride. Some people have suggested that unless "ships" stay as they are now, they will not. Many have said that regardless of ships, they will. I hope that this story is about more than ships. It is billed as a romance, but there is a little more to it than that, I like to think. I have done some things that I know J.K. Rowling is never likely to do, but in the end (which is to say, my book for Year Seven) I plan to do something which is what I think she may do, when she is winding down the real series of books. At least, I hope it is what she will do. If things do turn out that way for Harry, I can smugly point to my fic and say, "Yes! I predicted it..." Or, when I am proved wrong, I can say, "Hey, it's only fanfic".

I am not sure of my plans for when the trilogy is completed. I have considered doing a series of prequels, but much may depend upon what is in The Order of the Phoenix. I have no doubt that Rowling will spur many of us in completely

different directions as far as our speculations for Harry are concerned; she constantly surprises with her inventiveness and wit, and those of us working in the Potter Universe can only benefit from the innovative twists and turns she is sure to include in the next book.

I have also started to collect some ideas for original fiction which will hopefully see the light of day some time in the future. I now know far more about my strengths and weaknesses as a writer, and I look forward to having that "Aha!" moment JKR did, when she first thought of Harry while riding on a train. I have a number of friends who are professional writers including my father-in-law. I feel like I will not flinch now from showing them my original work when the time comes. You all have increased my courage a thousand-fold! My husband has also been incredibly supportive of my monopolizing the computer at times he wished to use it. The children have not been good for much except pulling me away from the computer, but many times, that is even more important! They keep me grounded.

Special thank-yous to Ebony AKA AngieJ for bringing the fic to the attention of many, many folks in the fandom, and to Heidi Tandy for getting me involved in schnoogle.com. May your keyboards be blessed !

So, here is the final thank-you list for this fic, which comprises reviewers on ff.net and schnoogle and the HP_Fanfiction and HP_Psych lists. I hope to have the first chapter of Harry Potter and the Time of Good Intentions up at schnoogle.com and the HP_Psych yahoo list on Tuesday, September 18, 2001.

Thanks to everyone who read and reviewed! (If you wish, you may hit pagedown to go directly to the links for reviewing)

Aardvark, Ablackwell4, Ada Kensington, Adrienne, aedalena, Aira, Aislinn, Al, Ali, Alicia/Sue, Alistian Black, A.L. Milton, Alyssa, amadeus, Andi Sunrider, Amanda "Scary Girl" Mancini, Amanita Lestrangle, Amy, Amy Lee, AndroGyne, angel, Angel, Angel Fly, Angel Grl, Angel Star, AngieJ, Anna, Anne, Anne B, ANONYMOUS, aqua, Ariana Deralte, athena_arena, Audrey, AVK aka Anastasia, Ayla Pascal, Aylihael, aylla

Badtz Maru, Bandy, Becca the Evil, Ben, Betty Landers, beverly, blanche, Birungi Kawooya, Blanche Batey, boo6280, Borg, Bryn, Bruce, Bryce, buffipie, Bunny, Bunny Girl

caligirl, CaratGold, caro, caryl, Cassandra, Cassandra Mac, Cassandra the_charmed1, Casualty.of.Society, CATLOVE, Catriona Snape, Cheez, China Chick, ChinChilla, Chris cmactiger15, Christian Stub, Christina, ~Chupacabra~, ckdsweet, classica, cool_dominic ,2000Cr1Ms0n^D3v1L, Crystal, crystal drake, Crystal Music

Dalla, Danae Tripp, Danielle, Darice, Dark Sovereign Muse, Dark Sovereign: Dracona, darrsgurl, Darth Yoda, Debbie, de_lanely, Demiguise, Desert Hacker, The Destructive Blossom, Dickens, Dove, Dragonscale, Drake, DRI, Duckling, dude, Dumbledore, Dumbledore's Apprentice

elspeth, Elwing, Emma, Erica, Eternal Haven, Eve989,

Fallen Angel, Fallen*Angel, ff_serpent_9, FantasyGirl, Fatboy not slim, fleurelissa, Florence, Flourish, Flower of Egypt, Freda Potter, FringeElement, Funnygurl895

Gaheris, Gemini C, George and Fred, Gert, Gia, ~*Ginny*~, *~*GinnyPotter*~*, goethe, Golden Snidget, Grey Lady, Grace, Gryffn, Guess Who, Gunbunny Pisscat, Guy Fawkes, Gwen, gwyneth

ha, Hairy Potthead, Harms, Harry4ever#2, Harry Potter, heidi tandy, herm, hermyfan, Hermione A. Snape, Hon Rosie, hojoon_lee, howdiegirl

IckleRonniekins, iinhome, Indiana jones, **Ivy Lupin**, IxxgraceI

JackieRon, JELLYBEAN, Jen, jenelin, Jessica, Jheen, joidsthert, Jonathan Dupont, Jondar, Joshua Eide, Joshy, Josselyn, Joy, Julianna Black, Julianna Edwards, Juliette, Jun Jun

kaitlingirl2004, Kaiya, Kara, karei, Karen, Karen Ewing, Karyn, Kat, Katrina, kelly, Kelzery, Kim, Kris, Krissy, Kylana

Lady, Lady Lily, Lady Malfoy, LadyVoldemort, las brujas chismosas, Laterose Alida Meioh, lava, lazymeoo7, L.C., Laurin York, L-DOG, Lavender, Lena, Lifes a dream; we are dreaming, lightwarmth, Lila the cliffhanger hater, Li;l TK, L Vance, lilyoftheval5, Lindsey, Lissanne, LittleDare, Liz, Lizzy/Tygrestick, Lord of the Net, Love Gordon, Lucia, Lucky Woods, Lukie Robinson, lupingirl, Luna*star, Lynn raye_moon

Madhuri, magma, mapman_sp, Marie, mariella, maryng, Matthew Dawdy, Maya Kim, Mayqueen, Malfoy's Best Friend, Marie Antoinette, Marsha, mdx1, me, ~meg~, Megan, Meghan A., Michael M, Michlignsam, miDsuMMeRdrEaM913, migefoyhotmailcom, Mike (goldgryffn99), Mike M Madman, Mary Potter, Mimi, Minzzer, Misty Potter, MoMo, Moonshadow, Moon Warrior, Moriel, Morsus Crustum, Mustard.Girl, Mwalimu, Myst

Nabeeha, Nayia_Potter, Nellie, Nicola Pheidippides, Niki, No Name, No One, no need to know

Oi!, Padfoot Lover, ParvatiB, Peaches without cream, PennyLin, Peregrine_me, Persephone Malfoy, Person, Peter, petrie887, PEZ, phobiac, Phoenix Dirk, PhoenixTears, Phyllia, Pippin, Pipsqueak, pixipotter, PixyChick, Ponderer, pott fan., PotterLovingAsh, princess law, princessmelanie, pyrochilde

Quill, raj, rangerprincess, Ranma, RavenSeekerCho, raziell100, readbooks__172, Red Dragon, reethi, Regulas, renee, RiddleMeNot18, Rita Winston, Robert Hirsch, Rogue 15, Ron Weasley, Rosandra May, Rosemary, Rufus

Sabre, sad, SAD PANDA, Sage, Sailor Empress, Saiyagirl, Sam, Sandey, Sandra, Saqarava, Sara, Sara angelgirl, Satoshi, Sera598, Serene, Sandra Solaria Dees, Scarlett Longbottom, Serene, Shallon, Shannon, Sharte, Sheryll Townsend, Sierra, Simon Branford, sofie elizabeth, spacegirl, SparkleRain, sparky, Slytherin, Slytherin SecretAgentMa, Snowyangeltn, Snuffles, Stave Leonheart, stuew onsench, Suburban Cannibal, Super sayajin gotan, supergirl1024, Suzanne Wolfe, Sylph

Tazy Silverpen, tbegin2000, Tess, the great bumblebee, The Great Hermione Fan, TheDrunkenPirate, TheGreatOne8, The Jolly Dollar, The Maurderus minus one, Tidus, Tiff, tigger, Tina Alexander, Tippy, TommyNY01, Tracy, TrakkieM, Tribblelady, Trisana Moonstream Granger, Uncle Monkeyfish

Valkyrja, vmr, VyingQuill~, water_nymph, Wendigo, Zamnii, Zandith Owens, Zapper/Sarah, Zedd, Zenya, Zephyrjaid, ZeusDawdy, Zhen Lin, zsmile, Zoo and Zybenkizzashanta.

Whew! I think I got everyone. Forgive me if anyone was repeated; some folks have used more than one handle during duration of the fic and I tried to pick one, although in a couple of cases I may have put both (or all) of your handles (if that describes you.)

Coming September 18, 2001...

The sequel to Harry Potter and the Psychic Serpent...

Harry Potter and the Time of Good Intentions

or: The Last Temptation of Harry Potter(

Trelawney predicted that Harry would have to make a choice that could change the world as we know it...when Harry chooses and the world does change, does it change for the better? Can Harry change if back if he wants? Or is giving Harry exactly what he wants Voldemort's ultimate revenge?

The sequel will not be here at fanfiction.net...So if you want to read the sequel, I recommend that you sign up for the yahoo list (click below). You can select "Special Announcements" for your membership type, so that when a new chapter is uploaded, you will be notified, just as if you were receiving mail through the AuthorAlert system here. You can then go onto the website to read the chapter files. You don't have to opt for email and risk your mailbox filling up (but you can choose that if you like). You can read the posts on the website as well.

TOGI will also be on schnoogle.com (<http://www.schnoogle.com/authors/barb/>), the house for novel-length HP fanfic at FictionAlley.org.

Until next time...